Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

Jonathan Safran Foer comes from an intellectual, Jewish family; his mother's parents were Holocaust survivors. After graduating from Princeton, Foer traveled to Ukraine to research his family's roots. Foer incorporated this journey into his thesis from Princeton to write his first novel, *Everything is Illuminated*, which weaves historical fiction with autobiography in two parallel but interconnected plots. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is Foer's second novel, and he expands upon his method of braided storylines by adding visual materials and complex narration. Since *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Foer has written in a wide variety of genres. His third book, *Eating Animals*, is a nonfiction treatise about factory farming and slaughterhouses in which he explores his own vegetarianism. Foer experiments with forms throughout his work: his novel *Tree of Codes*, is a cross between a story and a sculpture: he removed letters and words from Polish author Bruno Schulz's book *The Street of Crocodiles* to create a new story. He has also written an opera libretto and edited many books, from *The Future Dictionary of America* to a new translation of the Jewish religious text the Haggadah.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is set in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001: hijackers crashed airplanes into the Twin Towers, causing over 2500 deaths around the site. The Dresden firebombing of 1945, at the end of World War II, also provides a touchstone traumatic event for the novel: the British and Americans dropped nearly 4000 tons of bombs on the city of Dresden, killing nearly 25,000 people. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is also part of the historical conversation of the difficulty of creating art that responds to an event as traumatic as 9/11 or the Dresden bombing. Several works of literature written soon after 9/11 attempted to confront this event's atrocities, but authors struggled to come up with an adequate representation of the trauma in words—the inability to write about the event represented, many authors felt, the failure of language itself. Similarly, writers just after World War II and the Holocaust struggled to represent the horrors. "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," declared German philosopher Theodor Adorno. The Romanian poet Paul Celan also expressed the difficulty of using language to express the unspeakably horrible: language "gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it." Jonathan Safran Foer verbalizes the difficulty of working through trauma by embodying this struggle in his nine-year-old protagonist.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close is best read alongside other modern and contemporary works of realist fiction that have a strong, quirky, compelling protagonist—especially novels written from the perspective of a precocious kid. These novels usually follow the narrator on some sort of quest, through which the protagonist himself also grows up. The most iconic twentieth example of a novel in this type of voice is J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), also a deeply symbolic novel about a boy traveling around New York City and mourning a family member's death. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* (2003) is written from the point of view of a boy with Asperger's disease, a form of high-functioning autism in which people are often extremely precocious but find difficulty navigating their way around day-to-day interactions without elaborate rituals and patterns. Many reviewers of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* diagnose Oskar with Asperger's disease because of his verbal precocity and strange personal quirks. Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, set near New York, also has a protagonist named Oscar/Oskar; more importantly, Diaz's novel, like Foer's, uses a parallel narrative between the protagonist in the present and his family's history. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* can also be read alongside imaginative retellings of World War II stories, especially books such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) that weave together plots from different time periods. Although Junot Diaz and Kurt Vonnegut include fantasy in their fictional worlds, whereas Jonathan Safran Foer's novel is more realistic, Foer uses many recurring symbols and carefully plotted elements that draw from the structures of legend and superstition.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*
- **When Written:** mid-2000s
- **Where Written:** Brooklyn, New York
- **When Published:** 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary Realism
- **Setting:** New York, New York
- **Climax:** The solution to the mystery of the key
- **Point of View:** Oskar, Grandpa, Grandma

EXTRA CREDIT

Family Matters. Both of Foer's brothers have literary careers: his older brother, Franklin, was an editor of the magazine *The New Republic*, and his younger brother, Joshua, is a freelance journalist and author of the bestselling book *Moonwalking with Einstein*.

Answer: This Jeopardy! Champion is Oskar Schell. In 2010, twelve-year-old Thomas Horn won over $30,000 on the game show Jeopardy! during Kids Week. Based on his performance in the quiz show, he was cast as Oskar Schell in the 2011 film adaptation of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Oskar Schell is a nine-year-old boy grieving the loss of his Dad, Thomas Schell, who died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Oskar is a very precocious boy: he's extremely intelligent and curious, making up all sorts of esoteric inventions, but he also is scared and traumatized. Oskar feels incredibly guilty because his Dad left five **phone** messages on the morning of September 11, but he hasn't told anyone about them; more importantly, he hasn't told anyone that he was actually in the apartment for the final time that Dad called, but he was too afraid to pick up the phone. Oskar, who was never as close with his Mom as with his Dad, is growing even farther away from her. He has a loving and loyal relationship with his Grandma, but he's still lonely and sad.

Oskar finds a **key** in his Dad's closet; the key is in an envelope marked "Black." Oskar decides to track down every person with the last name "Black" in New York City to try and figure out what the key unlocks. One of the people Oskar contacts happens to live in Oskar's apartment building. Even though this Mr. Black hasn't left his apartment for twenty-four years, he accompanies Oskar on his expedition.

Oskar's expedition takes him to every corner of New York City. He must conquer many of his fears: he rides the subway, eats non-vegan food, crosses bridges, and entrusts himself to the mercy of strangers. When Oskar and Mr. Black travel to the top of the Empire State Building to meet Ruth Black, whose husband had been dead for many years, and who hasn't left the top of the Empire State Building ever since. Mr. Black quits the expedition after that, which makes Oskar feel just as lonely and abandoned as when he'd begun.

The novel also has a parallel storyline about Oskar's grandparents. Grandpa, who is also named Thomas Schell, was in Dresden, Germany, during World War II, when the city was firebombed. Practically all the people most important to Grandpa––Grandpa's lover, Anna, his unborn son, and his parents––were killed in the explosion. The trauma and aftermath caused Grandpa to lose his ability to speak. He has "YES" and "NO" tattooed on his hands, and he carries around a daybook, on which he writes notes to communicate. Several of the chapters are in the form of **letters** written by Grandpa to his "unborn son": this "son" could either be Oskar's Dad or the child that Anna, his lover, was pregnant with when she died in Dresden.

After the firebombing of Dresden, Grandpa moves to New York, where he meets Grandma. He recognizes her from Germany: Grandma is Anna's sister. Grandpa can't speak at this point, but they communicate through gestures and the daybook. Grandma poses nude for Grandpa, who is a sculptor, but the sculpture just ends up looking like Anna. Despite the fact that Grandpa's still in love with Anna, he and Grandma marry. They designate certain areas of the apartment as "Nothing" and "Something" and concoct elaborate rules that limit their contact with each other. Nevertheless, Grandma gets pregnant, breaking their rules. Before Dad is born, Grandpa leaves Grandma and flies back to Dresden.

On September 11, Grandpa sees the bombing on television, and he reads Dad's name in the obituaries. Grandpa immediately gets on a plane to Manhattan, even though he hasn't been to the United States in forty years. He **phones** Grandma, even though he can't talk, then leaves her **notes**; eventually, she lets him move back into the apartment, though only into the guest room.

In addition to the **letters** from Grandpa, Jonathan Safran Foer includes a long letter from Grandma to Oskar, spread across several chapters. Grandma is writing to Oskar about her past. Throughout the novel, it's not quite clear why Grandma is sending Oskar such a long letter, since she lives in the next building over, and they see each other every day. But at the end of the novel, the letter finally reveals that Grandma and Grandpa are now living in the airport: she has convinced him to stay with her in this limbo land instead of flying away following the events of Oskar's quest.

The two stories—the expedition and the grandparents' history––converge when Oskar meets "the renter"—that is, Grandpa—and Oskar tells him the entire story about Dad and the search for the lock that the **key** opens. Oskar also checks the phone messages for the first time in eight months and discovers a message from Abby Black, the second Black he'd visited. She says that her husband, William, knows what the key is for. The message cuts off halfway. When Oskar visits Abby, he learns why the message cuts off in the middle—that's when Mom picked up the phone, and Abby told her everything. Mom has been monitoring the expedition the entire time, it appears. (So has Grandpa, actually.) Oskar goes to William's office and gives him the key, which William says is for his dad's safety deposit box. William offers to let Oskar come with him when he opens the box, but Oskar refuses.

On the second anniversary of Dad's death, Oskar and Grandpa go to the cemetery to dig up Dad's empty coffin. Grandpa

buries the unsent **letters** addressed to his son into the grave.

Jonathan Safran Foer's style of storytelling is visual as well as narrative. When characters take photographs or describe images, these often appear in the body of the chapter. In the letters from Grandpa often appear excerpts from Grandpa's daybook. The novel ends with Oskar's flipbook of a man falling from the building, but in reverse order, so the man appears to be falling up.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Oskar Schell – Oskar is the nine-year-old protagonist of the novel: he's extremely precocious and incredibly imaginative, but he has a lot of fears, worries, anxieties, and guilt. As he walks around New York, Oskar carries a tambourine, which he shakes to try and calm himself. Oskar is also insatiably curious, and—as his business card, which has about twenty different occupations listed shows—he has a huge range of interests, from making jewelry to **physics** to archaeology to the Beatles. Oskar keeps a binder of *Stuff That Happened to Me* that's filled with plenty of stuff that didn't happen to him—images of tennis players and astronauts, for example—but provides him with a fossil record of his imagination. Unlike Grandpa's meticulous photographs of the apartment, Oskar's book is a sort of photo album of his mind. Oskar uses external cues to help him process his emotions. Oskar describes his grief not as being sad but as "having heavy boots," which allows him to have a way of expressing an indescribable emotion. The plot of the novel centers around Oskar's expedition to figure out the purpose of the **key** that he finds in Dad's closet, but this journey is really about Oskar finding closure after his Dad's death on 9/11 and to help him deal with his own survivor's guilt. Oskar has an enormous set of rituals and rules by which he organizes his life—he only wears white, won't go on public transportation, is vegan, hates heights, avoids bridges—and the expedition also allows and forces Oskar to face his rational fears by tackling his irrational ones.

Grandpa – Thomas Schell, Sr. is Oskar's grandfather, who also is one of the narrators of the novel: several of the chapters present a series of **letters** that Grandpa has written to his son but never sent. (Many of these letters could either be to Anna's unborn child or to Oskar's Dad, who is also named Thomas Schell.) Grandpa is a sculptor, and he's sensitive and artistic. He survived the firebombing of Dresden, but as a result, has a tremendous amount of post-traumatic stress disorder and survivor's guilt: Grandpa's lover, Anna, and their unborn child died in the firebombing, along with Grandpa's parents and hundreds of others. Due to the aftereffects of this trauma, Grandpa loses the ability to speak. He has YES and NO tattooed on his hands and relies on gestures and notes in blank books, which he refers to as his "daybooks," to communicate. Grandpa comes to New York and runs into Grandma, Anna's sister; they marry, though Grandpa is still in love with Anna and mourning her loss, and they set up an elaborate system of rules for themselves, designating areas of the apartment as "Something" and "Nothing." When Grandma gets pregnant, breaking one of their rules, Grandpa leaves her and goes back to Germany. Forty years later, he returns to New York, and eventually, Grandma lets him stay in her apartment. Oskar only knows Grandpa as "the renter." Oskar and "the renter" dig up Dad's grave, and Grandpa buries his unsent letters inside Dad's coffin. At the end of the novel, Grandpa goes to the airport, presumably to run away again, but Grandma follows him and convinces him to live in the airport with her.

Grandma – Grandma raised Dad as a single mother, since Grandpa left her before Dad was born. Grandma has a special bond and very loving relationship with Oskar. She is always available on the walkie-talkie whenever he wants to speak with her, even when it's the middle of the night. Oskar trusts that his Grandma will always be there for him, and vice versa: when he was little, Oskar hid from Grandma, which freaked her out, and ever since, they have developed a ritual of responding "I'm OK" when the other person says his or her name—it's like their own private game of Marco-Polo. But even though Oskar is very close with Grandma, he actually doesn't know many details about her personal life; for example, when the renter comes to live with her, Oskar isn't allowed to meet him or learn that he's his Grandpa. Grandma is also a narrator of the novel. All of her chapters are entitled "My Feelings," and they're all segments of a letter that she's writing to Oskar from the airport. The chapters don't reveal why Grandma's at the airport until the end of the novel, when the reader learns that she's followed Grandpa there and has convinced him to live with her there, in a place where everyone else is either coming or going, but they are the only ones staying. In the letter, Grandma reveals many more details her life than she'd ever told Oskar in person. Grandma often describes the same events that Grandpa narrates, but she provides a different version. For example, Grandpa thinks that Grandma never realized that the whole biography she typed of her life on the typewriter is entirely blank: he thinks that the typewriter ribbon hadn't been replaced, but her eyes are so bad that she'd never noticed. Grandma, however, says that she's perfectly aware that the pages are blank, since she only typed spaces. Grandma tells Oskar that it's always necessary to tell people that you love them, since you never know what will be your last chance to do so.

Dad – Thomas Schell, Jr., Oskar's father, never appears in the novel, since it takes place after he died, but he provides its emotional center, and his death precipitates the novel's main storylines. Dad didn't work in the World Trade Center—he was a jeweler, and he was visiting the towers for a meeting, which

just happened to be on the morning of September 11. For Oskar, the public grief of the city becomes enmeshed with the painful, private grief of Dad's death. Oskar feels like he has to choose between loyalty to his father's memory or being able to be there for his Mom in the present. Other characters in the novel are also rocked by Dad's death: Mom and Grandma, of course, are also in grief, but his death has larger ripple effects, too. When Grandpa sees the name "Thomas Schell" in the obituaries, he immediately boards a plane to Manhattan from Dresden, though he hasn't been back for forty years. Even though Dad is dead, we do get to hear his voice. Oskar preserves the **phone** messages that Dad left on September 11, playing them to himself and, eventually, to Grandpa. Dad's voice is also embedded in the structure of the novel like a voicemail. In the eleventh chapter of the novel (which may or not be coincidental, given the significance of "11" in this novel focused around 9/11), in a flashback, Dad tells Oskar the story of the "Sixth Borough," which turns out to be a fable to help Oskar deal with loss and grief. Oskar is overwhelmed with guilt and grief, not only because he didn't tell anyone about the **phone** messages, but, more importantly, because he heard his Dad make his final phone call but he didn't pick up the phone. When Oskar finds the mysterious **key** in Dad's closet, he takes the key as a sign and starts an elaborate expedition, just like the kind of expeditions his Dad used to send him on around the city. Finding out what the key unlocks becomes Oskar's way of both holding onto his Dad's memory and trying to help assuage his guilt at the loss. The expedition also allows Oskar to connect with others who are in pain when he learns about the difficulties they have faced in their lives and how they experience love and loss.

Mom – Oskar's Mom, a lawyer, has a different type of relationship with Oskar than he had had with his Dad: Oskar's Dad sent him around the city on expeditions, and they had lots of special rituals with each other, but, in contrast, Oskar and his Mom don't really have their own secret codes and inside jokes. Mom tries to fill some of the void that Dad left—she offers to check the *New York Times* for typos with Oskar, just like he and Dad used to do—but it's not the same. Oskar is also mad at Mom because she has started seeing a new boyfriend, Ron; Oskar thinks that she's not properly grieving. For most of the novel, Mom seems as though she's an absentee parent: she never asks Oskar where he's going, and never acts concerned when he's out for hours and hours at a time by himself. Even Oskar wonders at her apparent lack of concern about his whereabouts—and though it's helpful in terms of his quest, he seems a little disappointed that she doesn't seem to care where he is. Unbeknownst to Oskar, his Mom knows about his whole journey to find the **key** from nearly the very beginning of his quest, and she's been one step ahead of him the entire time. She called all the Blacks ahead of time to let them know that Oskar was coming, which is why so many of them seemed so suspiciously prepared to see him. Mom also makes sure that Oskar goes to therapy and convinces Dr. Fein not to hospitalize him, but rather to allow him to work through his grief in his own way. Even though Mom seems like she's removed and out of touch for most of the novel, it turns out that Mom does indeed loves Oskar deeply and that she has been very present in his life the entire time—she's just been behind the scenes, watching out for him. Mom loves Oskar so much that she can let him figure out life his own way, without her interference.

Mr. Black – Mr. A. Black's first name is never given, even though he's the Black that Oskar becomes the closest with on his quest. Mr. Black lives a few floors above Oskar, and even though he hasn't left his apartment for twenty-four years, he decides he's going to accompany Oskar on the rest of Oskar's expedition. Mr. Black says that he was born on January 1, 1900, which makes him over a century old; everything he says ends in an exclamation point, because he shouts everything. Mr. Black used to be a war correspondent, and his apartment is stuffed with fascinating memorabilia. The bed in the apartment is made out of a tree—his wife kept tripping over the tree root, so Mr. Black cut it down and made it into a bed—and Mr. Black has put a nail into it every day since his wife died. There are so many nails in the tree now that the keys on Oskar's neck float gently towards the bed, magnetically compelled. Mr. Black keeps a biographical index of "significant people"; every name has one word after it in description, and that word is usually "war" or "money." Mr. Black becomes smitten with Ruth Black, whom he and Oskar meet on top of the Empire State Building, but after they visit her, Mr. Black quits their expedition. When Oskar returns to Mr. Black's apartment, Mr. Black is gone, and his possessions are about to be cleared out. Oskar finds his own name in Mr. Black's biographical index with "son" as his description.

Abby Black – Abby Black lives in Brooklyn, in the narrowest townhouse in the city. Abby is one of the first Blacks that Oskar visits, but, as it turns out, she holds the key to the mystery of the **key**: her husband, William Black (much farther down the alphabet) knows about the key and has been searching for it. She left a **phone** message for Oskar after he came to visit her, but he doesn't hear it until eight months later. The message cuts off in the middle because Oskar's Mom picked up the phone, which is how Mom figured out about the expedition.

William Black – William Black, Abby's husband, is the "Black" of the envelope that the key was inside; or, to be more precise, William's father was the "Black" of the envelope, because the key opens his father's safety deposit box. When William's father was dying, he wrote letters to all of his friends and acquaintances. The letter he wrote to William says that there's a key to the father's safety deposit box inside a blue vase, but before William had read the letter, he sold that blue vase in an estate sale to Oskar's Dad. William had searched for Oskar's Dad, but since it was right after September 11, the search went nowhere. William had a complicated relationship with his

father and never got to say goodbye, so finding the key helps provide some closure for him.

Ruth Black – Ruth lives on top of the Empire State Building: she's a tour guide for the observation deck, but she never leaves, preferring instead to sleep in the storage room. Mr. Black is smitten with Ruth, and wants to date her, but Ruth tells him that she will never leave the Empire State Building. Ruth's husband used to beam up signals that Ruth could see from the observation deck. Ruth is the final Black on the expedition that Mr. Black meets—after this encounter, Mr. Black tells Oskar that he's finished. Ruth's choice to live on top of the Empire State Building is similar to Grandpa's and Grandma's decision to remain in the airport at the end of the novel.

Jimmy Snyder – Jimmy Snyder is the annoying boy in Oskar's class who teases him. Jimmy plays Hamlet in their class play, and he makes fun of Grandma, who he says laughs at the wrong parts. Oskar imagines himself standing up to Jimmy and humiliating him, but instead, he keeps quiet. Jimmy also torments Oskar when Oskar gives a presentation about the bombing of Japan in World War II. Jimmy is Oskar's antithesis in every way: Oskar is curious, hyper-verbal, and very sensitive, but Jimmy spends all his energy making raunchy jokes and being a bully.

Dr. Fein – Dr. Fein is Oskar's therapist. Dr. Fein tries to play some mind games with Oskar to draw forth his subconscious, but Oskar in turn tries to out-clever Dr. Fein, which creates a sort of spy-versus-spy atmosphere. Dr. Fein thinks that Oskar should be hospitalized, probably because he is inflicting bruises on himself, but Mom—who has arranged for this therapy in the first place––convinces Dr. Fein to trust Oskar.

Ron – Ron is Mom's boyfriend, whom she met in a grief support therapy group. Oskar initially dislikes the idea of Mom being with Ron, since it seems like she's not grieving properly after Dad's death. However, when Oskar finally learns a bit more about Ron—that Ron has lost his wife and daughter in a car accident—he softens towards him.

Georgia Black – Georgia lives on Staten Island, which means that Oskar has to face his fear of boats and take the ferry to her house. Georgia's whole house is devoted to her husband, even though he's still alive. Georgia is the first of the Blacks whom Grandpa meets while Grandpa is following Oskar; that's how he starts to learn about Oskar's journey, and how he learns that Oskar's Mom is also tracking her son's whereabouts.

Simon Goldberg – Simon Goldberg was the Jewish friend of Anna and Grandma's father. During World War II, their father hid Simon Goldberg in the family's shed-turned-library in an effort to protect his friend from the Nazis. Goldberg does eventually get caught and sent to a concentration camp, but it's unclear whether or not he dies. Grandpa sees a man whom he thinks is Simon Goldberg in a bookstore in Manhattan; the man gives Grandpa a hug.

Gerald – Gerald, the limousine driver, takes Oskar, Mom, and Grandma to Dad's funeral. He gives Oskar his card, which is presumably how Oskar knows how to call him to drive himself and Grandpa to dig up Dad's coffin. On the drive to Dad's funeral, Gerald seems taciturn and gruff, not responding to Oskar's jokes and conversation. However, on the drive to the cemetery, Gerald is much friendlier and sympathetic. He even helps dig up the dirt above Dad's coffin when Oskar and Grandpa can't do it.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Anna – Anna was Grandma's sister and Grandpa's first love. Anna died in the Dresden firebombing, along with her and Grandpa's unborn son. Grandpa is still in love with Anna, even though he marries Grandma: when Grandma poses nude for him, his sculpture still turns out looking like Anna.

Stan – Stan the doorman functions primarily in the story to deliver Oskar **letters** periodically. But Stan, like Oskar's Mom, silently watches and knows a lot more about Oskar's life than he lets on, and he cares deeply about Oskar's well-being.

Abe Black – A Black who lives in Coney Island. He gets Oskar to go on the Cyclone roller coaster with him.

Aaron Black – A Black who lives in Queens. He is apparently ill and hooked up to medical devices, and so can't come down to see Oskar.

Ada Black – A Black who is the 467th richest person in the world. Oskar is surprised when she seems to know that he lives on the upper west side.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MORTALITY AND THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

The intersection of national tragedy and individual grief is at the center of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. On the morning of September 11, 2001, Oskar Schell's Dad, Thomas Schell, died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Dad's death sets the main plot in motion, but concerns about mortality appear on many layers throughout the novel. Oskar's Grandpa was in Dresden in 1945 during the firebombing that killed hundreds of thousands of people, including his pregnant wife, Anna, and their unborn child. Oskar is also aware of mortality in a different way through his relationship with his Grandma. Grandma is old and somewhat infirm, and her death is always on the horizon, even

if it's not directly a part of Oskar's life yet.

Mortality and how to deal with the fact of death is a major part of the novel. We're all going to die, but we don't know when or where. Death is a natural fact of life, but sometimes, death comes through unnatural, unexpected, and brutal forces. Concerns with mortality occur figuratively and literally throughout the novel. Oskar takes part in his school's production of *Hamlet*, a play that is deeply concerned with mortality. And Oskar is one of the few, if not the only, kid in the show to pay attention to the existential crisis at the heart of the play. Just like the melancholy Prince of Denmark, Oskar is preoccupied with existential concerns. If we are all going to die, what are we supposed to do while we're here? What's the purpose of life?

But Jonathan Safran Foer deals with the potentially overwhelming despair of mortality by describing the quirks and fascinating aspects of everyone's lives in sharp, vivid detail throughout the novel. Even though mortality and tragedy lies at the heart of the novel, the structure of the book celebrates the strangeness and richness of daily life. Oskar's quest to find the owner of the mysterious key he finds in Dads possessions opens him to the vast array of different people all living widely varied and completely different types of lives around the city: we all are going to die, and tragedy shapes the plot of the novel, but life can take an infinite variety of wonderful forms.

PUZZLES AND CLEVERNESS

Puzzles offer a comforting alternative to disasters that don't make sense: puzzles suggest that life has answers, and that even the scariest situations will have a solution in the end. Puzzles might seem like a light-hearted pastime, but Oskar takes puzzles extremely seriously. When Oskar discovers the key in his Dad's room, he turns it from a random object into a quest. The key is in a little envelope labeled "Black," and Oskar decides that the he's going to discover who Black is by tracking down everyone in New York with that last name. Oskar's self-assigned mission to unlock the mystery of the key becomes an elaborate journey that takes him around every corner of every borough of New York.

Oskar's clearly a very precocious kid: he has an enormous vocabulary, and he proofreads the New York Times to relax. Puzzles have always been the way Oskar deals with sensory overload, or things that might be too complicated for him to grasp fully on his own. Oskar's Dad used to send Oskar on elaborate "Reconnaissance Missions" throughout the city, turning the potentially overwhelming landscape of New York into a treasure hunt. The puzzle also becomes a tribute to Oskar's Dad, or, in a type of irrational thinking, a way of keeping his Dad alive: if Oskar can believe that his Dad set him up on this quest, then his Dad still remains a part of his life.

The form of the plot is a lot like a puzzle. Even though the main narrator is nine-year-old Oskar, Foer includes several letters and notebook entries written by other characters. Oskar's Grandpa writes letters to his son, who is either Oskar's Dad or the unborn baby who died at Dresden. Figuring out what's going on with the story of these other characters creates mini-quests within the main quest of the book (that is, to find out the mystery of the key). And there are puzzles within these other sub-plots. One of the letters from Oskar's grandfather to Oskar's dad is covered with red ink: Grammatical and spelling mistakes get circled, but lots of random and not-so-random words (like "love" and "father") are also circled. The editing marks make the letter into a puzzle: the circles and underlines make it seem like there's a hidden message that the reader has to decipher, even if the code is difficult to crack.

The style of the book is also puzzle-like. Jonathan Safran Foer sticks photographs and images directly into the book, like a rebus puzzle. For example, there are photos of things like doorknobs, keys, paper airplanes, Hamlet, and Stephen Hawking that crop up in the middle of the story. Many of the images seem like they're meant to be from Oskar's binder, which he calls "Stuff That Happened to Me," even though most of the things in it only "happened" to Oskar in his mind, or by association.

TRAUMA AND GUILT

Trauma and guilt are very closely connected throughout *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Throughout the novel, several characters demonstrate what psychologists call survivor's guilt, which is when people who survive a traumatic event think they've done something wrong and feel guilty simply because they are still alive. National trauma is deeply connected to individual trauma throughout the novel. The major national trauma of September 11 becomes intertwined with the major personal trauma of Dad's death. Oskar and his family have to deal with both the huge, public tragedy of 9/1l and their own individual disaster that shakes them to the core. Oskar feels incredibly guilty about the phone messages that Dad left on the morning of September 11, 2001. Oskar hides the answering machine tape with his Dad's voice because he is too ashamed to admit to his Mom that heard his Dad but didn't pick up. Oskar continues to obsess over his Dad, and his quest to find out who "Black" is becomes his way of trying to cope with the guilt that going through such a traumatic experience has produced.

Oskar's Grandpa is also tremendously affected by trauma and guilt. After the Dresden firebombing, Grandpa eventually stops talking: his pregnant wife, Anna, had died in the bombing, and he has such tremendous survivor's guilt that he becomes unable to speak. Grandpa married Anna's sister, who is Oskar's Grandma, after the war, but when Grandma became pregnant with Oskar's Dad, Grandpa left her, adding yet another layer to his feelings of guilt. But even though Grandpa doesn't speak out

loud, he still communicates. He has the words YES and NO tattooed on his hands, and he writes notes when he needs to say something more complicated. Grandpa also writes long letters to his son (either his unborn son who died in the Dresden firebombing that he himself survived, or Oskar's Dad who he abandoned), even though he never mails them.

Many of the feelings of guilt that trauma produces become resolved indirectly through the novel, rather than directly. Oskar does not ever get to say a proper goodbye to his Dad, but the key provides closure for William Black, who has been attempting to process his own father's death. Grandpa does not get to reconnect with his son, but he connects with family when he moves in with Grandma. Guilt connects everyone in the novel, and though characters might not be able to help themselves directly, they can each help each other. Tragedies might not have a direct solution, but by many indirect routes, the guilt can become bearable. Building community is presented as a way to deal with trauma and guilt: things that are crippling to bear alone can become manageable if there are others around to help spread the load around, if not lessen it.

SUPERSTITION AND RITUAL

Oskar maintains a long catalog of rituals that regulate his behavior. Oskar's time, in some ways, is remarkably unstructured throughout the novel—he spend his days alone, wandering around the city—he constructs very specific rules for himself that he abides by rigidly, even when they don't seem to make much sense. For example, Oskar refuses to get onto public transportation, preferring to walk everywhere, even if it takes hours. Every time he meets one of the Blacks, he has a cup of coffee. Oskar's a vegan, and very particular about what he will and will not consume.

Oskar also meets several other people with strange rituals. Mr. Black hasn't left his apartment for twenty-four years before accompanying Oskar on his journey. Ruth Black lives at the top of the Empire State Building and never comes down to ground level. Oskar and his Grandma have several private rituals with each other. For example, whenever one says the other's name, the other one says "I'm OK," as though they're playing a version of the game "Marco Polo."

But a lot of Oskar's personal growth comes when he can break out of his rituals and realize that his world will still function. Oskar clings to superstitions because he feels afraid to enter the overly vast world without their support, but when he has to step outside his routine, or when he sees others break their well-established rituals, he becomes more able to push his own limits.

Rituals in the novel are both crippling and liberating. Oskar's rituals sometimes help him move forward with his life: without creating elaborate rules for himself, and building an expedition out of a single word, he might never have been able to begin to process his grief. But if rituals become so deeply set in stone, they can stop someone from ever doing anything different, or from moving past the event that precipitated these ritual behaviors. Routines can be coping mechanisms that provide stability in a chaotic world, but the real strength of a ritual comes when someone can let it go.

LOVE AND FAMILY

Even though guilt and fear often seem like the main emotions in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, all the characters who revolve in and out of Oskar's life have very strong connections to people they love: love, more than anything else, drives people to do what they do. Death also plays a powerful role in love, since one of the most powerful types of love in the novel is for people who have died. Oskar's love for his Dad propels him on his quest around New York City. Grandpa loves Anna, his first wife, so deeply that he can no longer speak after she dies.

Oskar's Dad and Oskar's Grandma are both very close with Oskar, and Oskar feels as though he can be completely himself around them, rather than having to hide his intelligence or his quirks. Oskar is extremely verbally precocious and asks sharp, often bizarre existential questions, but rather than ignoring these queries or trying to quash Oskar's quirky curiosity, Dad and Grandma both understand how Oskar functions and speak to him in his language. Dad plays games with Oskar and pushes him intellectually (of course, we only really see their relationship through Oskar's memory). Grandma takes all of Oskar's strange habits and mannerisms very seriously, rather than calling him ridiculous, and they develop routines together.

Mom, on the other hand, doesn't quite have the same rapport with Oskar as Dad and Grandma do. While Mom loves Oskar, she can't enter into his world in the same way. Mom doesn't seem to play a very active role throughout most of the book, since she doesn't accompany Oskar on his quest throughout the city, and she doesn't seem to be someone in whom Oskar can confide or with whom Oskar has long conversations. However, at the end of the novel, Oskar finds out that his Mom has been behind the scenes of his entire quest. She found out that he was visiting every person named Black in New York, and she called them ahead of time to alert them to her son's movements.

Love binds people together, but family is an even deeper tie. Grandpa and Grandma also have a relationship that develops, eventually, into a very different kind of love than passion or desire. Although Grandpa left Grandma angrily when she became pregnant, because that broke the terms of their initial relationship, they eventually begin to forgive each other when he returns to her house as a renter. William Black, the Black who owned the key, had a very complicated relationship with his father, but when Oskar presents him with the key, which turns out to be to Black's father's safe deposit box, the key

unlocks a wellspring of emotion. (Even though the key doesn't do much literal unlocking, it does a lot of symbolic and emotional unlocking throughout the novel.)

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Oskar is an extremely verbally precocious nine-year-old––he and Dad used to comb the New York Times for typos as a relaxing evening activity. Oskar is a hyper-verbal narrator who tells us everything that's on his mind, and he has an enormous vocabulary. Oskar thinks about words all the time; in the first chapter, for example, he squints at a map, connects dots to see "FRAGILE," and discusses every single association he has with the word "fragile," as though he were writing his own private dictionary definition. Oskar also has his own private codes for things: "wearing heavy boots," for example, is his way of describing fear and sadness. Oskar clings to the belief that everything can be solved through puzzles and expeditions: that if he just interprets something correctly, or if he just finds one more clue, one more word, that will provide some sort of answers or closure to the gaping hole that the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers left both on New York City and in his own life.

If Oskar uses an overabundance of words and digressions, then Oskar's Grandpa has the opposite problem: he doesn't speak out loud at all. Oskar's Grandpa loses his ability to speak after the trauma of seeing his loved ones die in the Dresden firebombing during World War II. He has "YES" and "NO" tattooed on his hands, and he write brief notes in a daybook to communicate anything more complicated. Even though Grandpa can't speak out loud, however, he does write several long letters about his past. It's never clear exactly to whom these letters are written—either Oskar's Dad or Grandpa's unborn child who died in Dresden—but they were never sent, and never read by their intended audience.

The most meaningful communication in the novel, even though the novel is so loaded with verbal fireworks, is wordless. Oskar's Mom is silently following his journey: unbeknownst to either Oskar or the reader, she knows exactly what he's doing and alerts each person that he is on his way. Grandpa cares tremendously about his family, but never speaks out loud. Even Oskar, for all of his verbal precocity, learns that love is deeper than language. The novel ends with images, not words. Jonathan Safran Foer presents the reader with a backwards flipbook of a man falling out of the World Trade Center: instead of going down, the man appears to be falling up. This wordless, upside-down, tragic, yet expectant image provides more closure than words could convey: even though the flipbook is traumatic and terrifying, there's also a tremendous amount of hope that the reader can't help but feel when we see the man flying upwards.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

KEYS

The key that drives the plot of the novel is the one that Oskar finds inside the envelope labeled "Black" in the blue vase in Dad's closet. This key forms the basis for Oskar's expedition around New York. As Oskar travels around the city, meeting every person with the last name "Black" in alphabetical order by first name, he must overcome several of his fears—traveling across bridges, riding the subway—and learns about others' lives by pursuing his own quest. Ultimately, what's behind the lock that the key unlocks isn't the point; rather, the main function of the key is the personal growth it allows Oskar to achieve, since it gives Oskar a sense of purposefulness in the face of events that seem chaotic and uncontrollable. Other keys also open and close both literal and metaphorical doors in the novel. Grandma has kept Grandpa's key to the apartment for forty years. She gives it to him when he returns, but Grandpa eventually buries the key in Dad's coffin, along with all letters to his unborn son. Oskar wears the key from the vase over his heart, tied to his apartment key: his Dad is always the driving force of the quest, but the quest ultimately leads him back to his family. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, Oskar has had the power to return home all along.

DOORKNOBS

Throughout the novel, Jonathan Safran Foer occasionally inserts photographs of doorknobs into the text. Grandpa took meticulous photographs of everything in his apartment, including doorknobs, so the collection of doorknobs comes in part from Grandpa's trove of photographs. During the firebombing of Dresden, Grandpa burned his hand on a metal doorknob, which was all that was left of his home. The recurring photographs of doorknobs burn this visual motif throughout the novel like a scar. Throughout the novel, characters frequently stand on thresholds, both literal and metaphorical. Oskar has to meet every person named Black on his list by approaching his or her front door. When Oskar's grandfather moves back into the apartment, he is relegated to the guest room. The doorknob also shows a lock, reminding the reader visually throughout the novel that Oskar is searching for the right lock that matches his mysterious key.

TELEPHONES

Telephones and answering machines are a crucial form of both communication and

miscommunication in the novel: though people use the telephone to connect and to relay information, often, the telephone can become a source of missed connections. Oskar hides the telephone on which Dad had left the five voice messages from September 11, 2001. Those five messages form the final link that Oskar has to his Dad's voice. Oskar confesses that he was in the apartment when the phone rang the fifth time, and although he listened to the machine record the message, he was too afraid to pick up the phone. When Grandpa returns to America just before September 11, he cannot speak, but nevertheless calls Grandma; he tries to press the numbers on the telephone to communicate in some combination of Morse code and alphabetic transcription, but all that Grandma can hear is beeps, and on the page is a seemingly random block of numbers. Abby Black left Oskar a message that would have allowed Oskar to finish his expedition eight months before he does, but Oskar didn't listen to the message until eight months after she left it. However, telephones also work to connect people. Mom made the connection with Abby and found out about Oskar's whole quest because she picked up the phone halfway through Abby's voicemail. Oskar's missed connection allowed Mom to make a connection with Oskar's expedition. Oskar and his grandmother speak via walkie-talkie, a rudimentary telephone. The lovers in the story of the Sixth Borough communicate through tin-can telephone for as long as possible, and the boy stores the girl's voice in a tin can like an answering machine.

LETTERS, NOTES, AND NOTEBOOKS

Letters and writing are important aspects of both the novel's content and its structure. The sections of the novel that Grandpa narrates are letters to his son. Grandma writes letters to Oskar. The letters that Grandpa writes also appear in the novel: Oskar finds empty envelopes of these letters in Grandma's apartment, and Grandpa brings the letters to bury in Dad's empty coffin. The one letter of Grandpa's that Dad read is circled in red pen: the edits are both grammatical mistakes and emotional missteps (like the phrase "I love you," which Oskar's Dad treats like a factual error). William Black's father also writes letters to others, but unlike Grandpa's letters, William Black's father's letters reach their intended recipients. Oskar also writes letters to celebrities and receives responses from several; some are form letters, some are individualized, and he eventually receives a personalized response from Stephen Hawking. Grandpa, further, only "speaks" through written notes, since he has lost his ability to talk. These blank books have collected around the apartment like a fossil record: all of his words, in a sense, are recorded just like Dad's last words on the answering machine. Letters and written words seem, at first, to be a more permanent way of preserving speech, but they also provide opportunities for missed connections. Grandpa's letters were never read by the people to whom he wrote: Anna's child, his unborn son, died with Anna in the Dresden firebombing, and Dad didn't get to see most of Grandpa's letters to him before Dad died.

SCIENCE, MATHEMATICS, AND INVENTION

Oskar is obsessed with scientific ideas and objects: he loves Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, he names his cat Buckminster (after the inventor Buckminster Fuller), and he is constantly "inventing" new ways to improve things. Many of these "inventions" are modifications that might have saved his Dad from dying, or to mitigate the effect of his loss; for example, Oskar imagines a "birdseed shirt" so that humans, who don't have wings, can make a quick escape (the birds will latch onto the shirt, presumably, giving the wearer a ride). Oskar is an atheist, but he believes fervently in science as an absolute, true force that organizes the world. Oskar charts many aspects of his world very precisely: he makes frequent lists and keeps track of statistics for everything, like the amount of dust his apartment generates in a year (112 pounds). Science offers both Oskar and other characters in the novel something concrete to hold onto in the midst of chaos. Science and math create factual certainties where emotions might be very shaky and uncertain; listing facts about the world becomes a comforting ritual and a way to organize reality into concrete, discrete blocks, even if the facts aren't comforting in and of themselves.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner Books edition of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* published in 2006.

> Isn't it so weird how the number of dead people is increasing even though the earth stays the same size, so that one day there isn't going to be room to bury anyone anymore?

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

One of the ways that Oskar deals with the trauma of the Twin Towers' collapse and of his father's death is by

constructing elaborate scenarios in his head and asking impossible but scientifically structured questions about the world. Oskar's narration is essentially constructed as an unfiltered running commentary of everything that Oskar is contemplating at a particular time, and his mind jumps among many different subjects, from the ever-increasing number of dead people to the white blazer that his grandmother gave him for his birthday.

Oskar's narration is filled with direct questions, as though he is carrying on a conversation with someone. Much of the novel is about various forms of communication and direct address, both successful and failed. Oskar asks questions to the people around him, but many of his questions are internal. Oskar used to ask his dad these types of existential queries: they range from the silly to the serious, and the worries have varying levels of grounding in reality, but they always reveal something deeper going on in his mind. The musing about the number of corpses crowding the world shows Oskar's simultaneous fascination with and fear of death. Oskar does not know how to reckon with the fact that death looms larger in his world at the moment than life, and he wonders how to create the mental as well as physical space necessary to heal. The question also reveals his claustrophobic tendencies, as well as his desire to quantify and categorize everything. Oskar feels safer when he can think about the world scientifically, rather than through overwhelming emotions.

❝ I spent all day walking around the park, looking for something that might tell me something, but the problem was that I didn't know what I was looking for…But that's how tricky Dad could be. There was nothing, which would have been unfortunate, unless nothing was a clue. Was nothing a clue?

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Dad used to send Oskar on "Expeditions" around New York City, which helped Oskar cope with some of his fears and explore the world outside the apartment. Oskar's father teaches Oskar how to come out of his shell and find his way in the world. Dad made the world a structured place for Oskar, something that could be navigated with a plan, rather than an infinite chaos without purpose or meaning. Oskar's Dad's Expeditions seem like elaborate, meaningless games, but they enable Oskar to function in the world, rather than becoming overwhelmed by everything. The Expeditions also help Oskar and his father bond, because these puzzles and clues give them a shared language through which they can communicate. By seeing the world as a puzzle with possible solutions, instead of a chasm, Oskar also has the sense that his dad has never really left him, and that by following anything that seems like a potential clue, Oskar can eventually find his father again. Dad's "Expeditions" give Oskar the inspiration to take the key in the closet as a clue that sets him on a new quest.

❝ "Well, what I get is why we do exist? I don't mean how, but why." I watched the fireflies of his thoughts orbit his head. He said, "We exist because we exist." "*What the?*" "We could imagine all sorts of universes like this one, but this is the one that happened."

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The conversation about parallel universes foreshadows the ending of the book, in which Oskar tries to rewind time and image a world in which a different outcome happened than the events of September 11. By switching only a few small decisions, Oskar envisions a world in which his Dad is still alive and everything is just as it had been before. However, even though Oskar tries to turn to another idea of reality as a comfort, he has to learn how to accept things as they are.

But accepting things as they are doesn't mean that we have to stop telling stories. The "fireflies" foreshadow the story of the Sixth Borough, which Oskar alludes to in this first chapter but does not appear in the novel in full until much later. In this fable, eventually the only source of light in the Sixth Borough comes from fireflies kept in jars. The Sixth Borough represents another imaginary universe, a long-lost, Atlantis-like world that becomes a shared mythic space between Oskar and his father. Stories about alternate realities can, paradoxically, help us live in our own universe.

There were four more messages from him: one at 9:12, one at 9:31, one at 9:46, and one at 10:04. I listened to them, and listened to them again, and then before I had time to figure out what to do, or even what to think or feel, the phone started ringing.
It was 10:26:47.
I looked at the caller ID and saw that it was him.

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Not only is Oskar obsessed with puzzles and believes that his dad has left him a treasure hunt to solve, Jonathan Safran Foer constructs the novel itself to be like a puzzle, placing enigmatic pieces of information throughout the book that only get fully explained as the novel progresses. Oskar jumps back and forth in time as he narrates the events of the morning of September 11, and since he does not name the precise date at first, the reader has to figure out from the context exactly what event Oskar is talking about. Oskar says that Dad has left five messages, but at this point, he presents one of these messages in full. The reader also does not yet know whether or not Oskar will pick up the phone when his father starts calling at 10:26 AM, since this is where the chapter ends. Just like Oskar, who is frozen in indecision and shock when he sees his father's name on the caller ID after listening to so many messages, the reader gets the sensation of being frozen by being left in suspense at the end of the chapter.

The fact that Dad left messages on the answering machine on September 11, and the fact that Oskar came home in time to hear them, are secrets that Oskar keeps locked inside himself throughout the novel. Oskar hangs onto these phone messages from his father, and they become one of the forces driving his quest over the course of the book.

Chapter 2 Quotes

I haven't always been silent, I used to talk and talk and talk and talk, I couldn't keep my mouth shut, the silence overtook me like a cancer.

Related Characters: Grandpa (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, which is the first sentence of Grandpa's letter to his son, Oskar's father, Grandpa explains that he used to talk incessantly. Now, post-traumatic stress disorder has made Grandpa unable to speak, so he has to write to communicate anything that he wants to say. Grandpa has been writing this letter for many decades, but after September 11, he will never be able to give it to Oskar's father. However, he cannot stop attempting to reach out. Everything that he has been unable to say aloud has built up within him, and he feels compelled to try and say everything.

Even though Grandpa can no longer speak, he has an infinite amount that he wants to express. Grandpa writes in long, run-on sentences with phrases connected by commas, which creates a sensation of urgency, as if he is trying to atone for his many years of silence. Throughout the novel, characters have a lot of difficulty communicating with each other effectively. Sometimes, too many words might not express anything at all, whereas a gesture or a look can say everything that needs to be said. Talking all the time can prove to be more of a defense mechanism than a method of true communication. In the past, even though Grandpa talked all the time, he failed to listen, and therefore to communicate emotions.

And maybe you could rate the people you knew by how much you loved them, so if the device of the person in the ambulance detected the device of the person he loved the most, or the person who loved him the most, and the person in the ambulance was really badly hurt, and might even die, the ambulance could flash GOODBYE! I LOVE YOU! GOODBYE! I LOVE YOU!

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

The devices that Oskar imagines are often whimsical and seem tangential, but they typically represent something

that is deeply important to Oskar's subconscious mind. In the case of the ambulance siren that blasts an important message from the person dying inside, the invention represents an idealized version of the messages that Oskar's father left on the answering machine on September 11. Oskar feels incredibly guilty both that his father left these messages and that Oskar didn't pick up the phone when he had the final opportunity to speak to his father. Oskar is preoccupied with getting closure for his father's death, and he wishes that his father had left a very clear message saying goodbye, rather than a series of messages asking if anyone were there to pick up the phone. Oskar knows that he could not have done anything to stop his father's death, but he still feels guilty because the final words from his father were so unresolved. An ambulance siren that blasts canned but unambiguous messages to loved ones would help those left behind feel more at peace and able to move forward, rather than being trapped in an emotional limbo land.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ When I was exactly halfway across the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, I thought about how a millimeter behind me was Manhattan and a millimeter in front of me was Queens. So what's the name of the parts of New York—exactly half through the Midtown Tunnel, exactly halfway over the Brooklyn Bridge, the exact middle of the Staten Island Ferry when it's exactly halfway between Manhattan and Staten Island—that aren't in any borough?

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Here Oskar again shows his tendency towards whimsical scientific questions and the ritualized ordering of spaces, through which he tries to make sense of emotional issues.At this point in the novel, Jonathan Safran Foer also inserts a picture of several bridge girders in a lattice pattern, and through them, one can see part of the New York skyline, though, of course, missing the Twin Towers.

On the one hand, there are several layers of supporting structures holding the bridges up, which makes the "connective tissue" between the boroughs seem very strong. However, since the bridges are all in lattice structures, the viewer can also see through the gaps between the beams, which makes the reader aware of the empty spaces as well. Throughout the novel, in all of the various plots, Foer emphasizes that there must be a balance of positive and negative space, between something and nothing, in order to create true, lasting stability. The space in the middle of every borough, on the one hand, could be thought of as a kind of a black hole, a void that belongs to no one and thus has a terrifying power to destroy those who enter. On the other hand, the space could belong to everyone, so rather than sucking people into no man's land dangerously, it could be a trusting space supported by all.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ We took the blueprint of our apartment from the hallway closet and taped it to the inside of the front door, with an orange and a green marker we separated Something from Nothing. "This is Something," we decided. "This is Nothing." "Something." "Nothing." "Something." "Nothing." "Nothing." "Nothing." Everything was forever fixed, there would only be peace and happiness, it wasn't until last night, our last night together, that the inevitable question finally arose, I told her, "Something," by covering her face with my hands and then lifting them like a marriage veil. "We must be." But I knew, in the most protected part of my heart, the truth.

Related Characters: Grandpa, Grandma (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Anna's death in the Dresden firebombing deeply traumatized both Grandma and Grandpa, as Anna was Grandma's sister and Grandpa's first wife. Grandma and Grandpa marry each other with the hope that they will help each other move forward with their lives, but instead, they end up creating elaborate systems of avoiding both themselves and each other rather than processing their emotions. Anna's death brings Grandpa and Grandma together initially, but the shared grief proves to be too much for them to process, and the grief corrodes their relationship and separates them. Anna's death also foreshadows Dad's death as a traumatic experience that deeply affects the whole family, and compels the family to

have to figure out how to communicate with each other. The map of Something and Nothing areas is also reminiscent of Oskar's quest around New York. Each apartment that Oskar enters on his quest has some sort of secret within it, just like Grandma and Grandpa's apartment.

Although Grandpa doesn't say so explicitly, the final place that Grandma and Grandpa make as "Something" or "Nothing" is most likely their bed. The description of Grandpa lifting his hands like a "marriage veil" strongly hints that they are discussing their marriage bed and, therefore, whether or not they will continue to sleep together, even though they are drifting apart. They claim that they will, but Grandpa has already written earlier in the chapter that he has decided to leave Grandma.

❝ I have so much to tell you, the problem isn't that I'm running out of time, I'm running out of room, this book is filling up, there couldn't be enough pages, I looked around the apartment this morning for one last time and there was writing everywhere, filling the walls and mirrors, I'd rolled up the rugs so I could write on the floor, I'd written on the walls and around the bottles of wine we were given but never drank, I wear only short sleeves, even when it's cold, because my arms are books, too. But there's too much to express. I'm sorry.

Related Characters: Grandpa (speaker), Grandma

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

The idea of Grandpa running out of room to write things down echoes Oskar's question in the beginning of the novel about what will happen when the number of dead people in the world outpaces the amount of room available to contain all the bodies. Because Grandpa is writing to his unborn son, he is not afraid of running out of time, but rather running out of space. Ironically, however, he does not ultimately run out of space but instead out of time. The letter to Oskar's father continues for forty years, but before Oskar's father gets to read it, he is killed on September 11.

Grandpa expresses his desperate need to convey as much information as possible to assuage his guilt at leaving his pregnant wife and never meeting his unborn child. However, the only emotion he really needs to say is "I'm sorry." These two words carry a huge, rich emotional truth, and the rest of Grandpa's information is more for Grandpa's sake than the letter's addressee. Grandpa needs to feel cleansed by purging all his traumatic history, and the letter represents a way for him to put down for posterity all the things that Grandpa can no longer say out loud. Grandpa has psychologically lost his ability to speak due to post-traumatic stress disorder, and this combined with his guilt of abandonment compel him to try and atone for the past by recording as much as possible.

❝ I felt, that night, on that stage, under that skull, incredibly close to everything in the universe, but also extremely alone. I wondered, for the first time in my life, if life was worth all the work it took to live. What exactly made it worth it? What's so horrible about being dead forever, and not feeling anything, and not even dreaming? What's so great about feeling and dreaming?

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

In his school's production of *Hamlet*, Oskar portrays Yorick, the dead jester whose skull gets exhumed in the final act of the play. Playing the role of a dead character is both funny and morbid, given Oskar's fascination with death and obsession with the death of his father throughout the novel. Oskar is precocious and hyper-verbal, as his narration demonstrates, yet a great deal of his brilliance stays inside his own imagination. The reader gets to see what he is thinking about, but the outside world doesn't get access to Oskar's mind. For Hamlet, Yorick's "infinite jest" can now only exist in the imagination, since Yorick is dead. Oskar can only recall his father in memory, rather than interacting with him in real life.

Beyond the character of Yorick, there are several parallel themes between *Hamlet* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Just like Hamlet, Oskar is haunted by the ghost of his father. Oskar is angry at his mother for beginning a relationship with another man soon after his dad died. Oskar's meditations about feeling and dreaming echo Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, in which Hamlet wonders aloud whether it is worth it to live or die—"to sleep, perchance to dream," as Oskar almost says here.

But still, it gave me heavy, heavy boots. Dad wasn't a Great Man, not like Winston Churchill, whoever he was. Dad was just someone who ran a family jewelry business. Just an ordinary dad. But I wished so much, then, that he *had* been Great. I wished he'd been famous, famous like a movie star, which is what he deserved. I wished Mr. Black had written about him, and risked his life to tell the world about him, and had reminders of him around his apartment.

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Mr. Black, Dad

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, "heavy boots" are a personal metaphor for the sadness and guilt that Oskar undergoes, primarily due to the trauma of his father's death and the events that unfold from that. Oskar spends a great deal of the novel walking around New York City to process his trauma, and he expresses his psychological burdens physically. The phrase "heavy boots" refers to both sadness and guilt for Oskar. "Heavy boots" is also subtly reminiscent of World War II, as the phrase could potentially evoke the army, or people marching through concentration camps in chains. Oskar is likely not aware of this association, but throughout the novel, the parallel trauma to September 11 is the Dresden bombing, and "heavy boots" calls to mind images of war prisoners and war as well as personal guilt and the feeling of "heaviness" that comes with depression or grief.

Oskar wishes that Mr. Black somehow magically had a card about his father, since this would prove that Dad had planted the key as a clue for Oskar to trace around New York City. Oskar's description of the writing that he wants to see about his father is, however, a description of the very novel that the reader is reading.

Then, out of nowhere, a flock of birds flew by the window, extremely fast and incredibly close. Maybe twenty of them. Maybe more. But they also seemed like just one bird, because somehow they all knew exactly what to do.

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

The description of the flock of birds recalls the title of the book, although with the word "fast" instead of "loud," because Oskar sees the birds, rather than hearing them. The birds are symbolic, but they do not represent one single thing. Like many of the enigmatic clues and images throughout the novel, the birds have several layers of significance. At this point in the novel, Foer inserts a blurry picture of several birds flying past, apparently going very fast, as though they are falling. The image of the birds resembles the flipbook at the very end of the novel that depicts a person who appears to be falling up into one of the Twin Towers. On the other hand, the birds represent freedom. Unlike Oskar, who feels tethered to the ground with his "heavy boots," the birds can take off, seemingly able to escape guilt and difficult emotions to begin a new life.

He took a picture of every doorknob in the apartment. Every one. As if the world and its future depended on each doorknob. As if we would be thinking about doorknobs should we ever actually need to use the pictures of them.

Related Characters: Grandma (speaker), Grandpa

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In her letter to Oskar, Grandma writes that she wants to communicate with Grandpa, but when she tries to hold open a door, both metaphorically and physically, he is more interested in his memories and in obsessively creating an archive, rather than trying to move forward. Instead of actually living in his life, Grandpa devotes his time to making a record of the spaces around him. Doorknobs are particularly important to Grandpa, since a doorknob burned him in the Dresden firebombing, and therefore they hold an extremely significant symbolic place in his mind.

Doorknobs represent thresholds throughout the novel. A door can provide an entrance and open an avenue of communication. For Oskar, each person with the last name Black lives behind another mysterious doorknob, and every doorknob opens into a new world. Each doorknob is also an opportunity to try the key that Oskar carries around with

him all the time, as he carries the hope that each door could be a potential solution to his quest. However, a door can also be used as a wall to close out the world and shut people out. Jonathan Safran Foer includes several of these pictures of doorknobs, which make the reader feel like he or she is also the intended recipient of these letters, since we get to experience not only reading about them, but also see the actual artifacts. Some of the doorknobs pictured are locked, suggesting the effect of closing off from the world. However, the locked doorknob also entails that there is a key that will open it, so there is still hope.

❝ I went to the guest room and pretended to write. I hit the space bar again and again and again. My life story was spaces.

Related Characters: Grandma (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

The fact that Grandma has been deliberately typing spaces over and over, unbeknownst to Grandpa, symbolizes the fundamental gap between them. Grandpa is heartbroken when he sees Grandma's sheaf of blank papers, since he thinks that she believes she has been typing actual words the whole time. Grandpa lies to Grandma to protect her feelings, and Grandma lets Grandpa lie, because, to her understanding, this lie is more palatable than the truth, which is that Grandma is typing a blank autobiography because she believes that her life is a blank. Grandma has married her dead sister's lover, she cannot communicate with him, and her family is gone, so she thinks that her life is now just an empty space. However, an empty space can be filled. Grandma's letter to Oskar has several spaces between every sentence, and there are many line breaks, yet because she has a message to convey to Oskar, she is starting to have words to put in between the spaces.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ I adjusted the string so the keys—one to the apartment, one to I-didn't-know-what—rested against my heart, which was nice, except the only thing was that it felt too cold sometimes, so I put a Band-Aid on that part of my chest, and the keys rested on that.

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

The fact that Oskar keeps the key over a Band-Aid over his heart is very symbolic for several reasons. Although Oskar claims that the Band-Aid is to protect his skin when the key bumps against it, symbolically, the Band-Aid suggests that Oskar is trying to heal his broken heart, which broke on "the worst day," that is, September 11. Oskar keeps the key on his chest for the practical reason that he knows it will be safe and he knows he can keep track of it, but symbolically, carrying the key right over his heart shows how precious this object is to him. Not only is the key the engine that drives the quest to find the right Black and unlock the box, the key also represents Oskar trying to come to terms with himself and figuring out how to unlock the secrets he has kept locked inside himself. Carrying the key is creating a physical wound on Oskar's chest, but carrying the locked-up secrets is creating an even deeper psychological wound inside Oskar's heart.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ A millimeter at a time, the Sixth Borough receded from New York…The eight bridges between Manhattan and the Sixth Borough strained and finally crumbled, one at a time, into the water. The tunnels were pulled too thin to hold anything at all. The phone and electrical lines snapped…those fireflies in glass jars, which had once been used merely for decorative purposes during the festivals of the leap, were now found in every room of every home, taking the place of artificial light.

Related Characters: Dad (speaker), Oskar Schell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

Oskar's Dad tells Oskar a fable about a mythical Sixth Borough of New York City. In the first chapter of the novel, Oskar describes the scene in which Dad tells him the story, but only now does the reader get to read the full story, which emphasizes the puzzle-like structure of the novel

itself. The story of the Sixth Borough is very close to the center of the novel itself, which demonstrates its symbolic significance in all the various relationships and plot lines that unfold. Dad tells the story to Oskar to help Oskar process the fact that change might be sad, and we might fight to stop negative change, but ultimately, sometimes, we have to let go. When Dad tells Oskar this fable, Oskar doesn't yet know that he will have to apply it to his relationship with his father, but the story of the Sixth Borough symbolically helps him move forward.

The fable of the Sixth Borough also resonates with the areas of Grandma and Grandpa's apartment that are designated as Something versus Nothing. Although Grandma and Grandpa try to hold the ties between them and to keep their relationship together, their shared grief proves to be too strong a force, and it pulls them apart. Just like the tunnels and electric wires in the fable, the lines of communication between Grandma and Grandpa cannot hold.

> By the time the park found its current resting place, every single one of the children had fallen asleep, and the park was a mosaic of their dreams.

Related Characters: Dad (speaker), Oskar Schell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

In the fable of the Sixth Borough, the children ultimately have the power to help New York move forward from the loss of a borough. Rather than simply having an empty space in the heart of the city, the citizens save Central Park before the Sixth Borough floats completely away, tethering it in Manhattan. Children are allowed to lie down on the park when it's being floated into the city, and the children are the ones who keep the soul of the Sixth Borough alive. The children bring beauty and spirit into the story, which helps give Oskar a sense of purpose. Oskar often feels small and powerless, which makes him frustrated and frightened, but turning the children into almost magical creatures helps him to regain a sense of purpose and power. Dreams, here, are not fantasies that will never come to pass, but peaceful reconciliations with reality.

In addition to the fable holding personal significance for Oskar and his family, in the larger context of the novel, the fable is meant to demonstrate how all of New York might be able to heal after September 11. Oskar's own personal trauma is one individual example of the thousands and thousands of similar stories unfolding across the city.

> I lowered the volume until it was silent.
> The same pictures over and over.
> Planes going into buildings.
> Bodies falling.

Related Characters: Grandma (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

On September 11, Grandma watched the same image unfold over and over, and to replicate that experience for the reader, Jonathan Safran Foer repeats the phrases "Planes going into buildings" and "Bodies falling" several times, on two consecutive pages. The parallel list construction ultimately creates the effect of two towers of text. Towers get built on the page just as Grandma watches them get destroyed, over and over, in real life. Although they are gone in reality, they are burned into her imagination. Similarly, although the reader does not yet know this, the doorknob from Dresden is burned into Grandpa's memory, and he finds himself seeing this image repeated over and over. Though something might be gone in reality, the image and the imagination can make it happen again over and over, for better or for worse.

The same image of bodies falling from the towers appears at the end of the novel. However, instead of repeating the action that Grandma saw over and over, the novel presents a flipbook with an alternate reality of a person falling up, rather than down. This is an unrealistic reordering of events, and while it does depict a glimmer of hope, ultimately, everybody must move forward with the reality of what actually happened.

> I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying…There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his.

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Grandpa, Dad

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, invention and telling stories have been a source of comfort and security for Oskar. However, in the quest to come to terms with his father's death, Oskar is frustrated by his fruitless obsession with imagined scenarios, and he wants the truth to set him free. He fixates on his father's mode of death because it provides a concrete clue that gives him focus and purpose, rather than the depressing concept of seeing everything as a meaningless void. Oskar gets the idea to dig up his father's coffin, which makes Oskar's role in *Hamlet* as the dead skull of Yorick all the more symbolically, if morbidly, appropriate.

Oskar is speaking to a man whom he calls "the renter," since he only knows him as the man who is staying with Grandma. Unbeknownst to Oskar, however, "the renter" is actually Oskar's grandfather, and although he thinks he is entrusting his story with a stranger, he is instead confiding to his father's father, which is about the closest to his father that he can get in real life.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ I was in Dresden's train station when I lost everything for the second time.

Related Characters: Grandpa (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, the Dresden firebombing during World War II is the trauma that serves as the parallel precursor to the trauma of September 11. Grandpa and Grandma both lost a beloved person in their lives: Anna, Grandma's sister and Grandpa's lover. Being in the Dresden train station is also a parallel setting to the airport where Grandma and Grandpa reveal they have been throughout the entire novel. Both train stations and airports are points of transportations, empty spaces where people are coming and going. On the one hand, just like the space between the boroughs that could seem like a gaping void, train stations and airports belong nowhere and are a kind of black hole. On the other hand, these places have infinite potential, and any number of universes could unfold from them.

Even though the statement that one has lost everything a second time is very depressing, it also contains hope within it. To have lost everything twice means that even if someone loses everything once, that person can create a new life. Losing everything twice is, in some ways, doubly sad, yet if a life was rebuilt once, it can be built again.

❝ There won't be enough pages in this book for me to tell you what I need to tell you, I could write smaller, I could slice the pages down their edges to make two pages, I could write over my own writing, but then what?

Related Characters: Grandpa (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

Grandpa continues to write his letter, and Foer represents this writing visually in the novel by making the font smaller and smaller, so that the words crowd on the page until they blend together into an illegible black square. Infinite stories are crammed into a finite space, which makes everything disappear into itself. The visual image of trying to cram in as much writing as possible in one book, even writing over previous writing, creates a visual echo of journals by people in the Holocaust. Writers such as Anne Frank often lacked access to blank paper, so they had to resort to cramped script and to writing over their own words.

This desire to cram everything into the book also gives another layer of meaning to the book's title. The writing is a visual representation of being extremely loud and incredibly close, and there is so much writing on the page that the reader feels very overwhelmed and unable to absorb any of the information presented. Grandpa feels terribly guilty that he has not been able to communicate with his son and his wife, and to try and assuage his sensations of guilt, he wants to keep reaching out his line of communication, even though continuing to push information through won't bring back the person who is supposed to be on the other end of the line.

Chapter 15 Quotes

OSKAR SCHELL: SON

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Mr. Black

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

Foer not only writes about what many of Mr. Black's business cards or index cards (which contain brief biographical information about people he considers "significant") say and look like, but he also places an image of these cards directly into the novel. Mr. Black's card describing Oskar resembles in size and shape the business cards that Oskar makes for himself. Oskar's business card also begins with his name, but underneath it he has packed many descriptions, including inventor, jewelry designer, percussionist, and amateur archaeologist. Throughout the novel, Oskar takes all the roles he describes himself as having and many more. Mr. Black does not have a comprehensively detailed description on every card, but rather, exactly the opposite. He has a vast library of people in his card catalog, and all of them are distilled to one essential description. Oskar may, indeed, do many things and have many traits—but being a son is Oskar's primary motivation, and being a son is a very complex, layered job that gets at the root of everything Oskar does. Oskar spends the majority of the novel on a quest to discover the mystery of the key in his closet, which is a quest designed to bring him closer to his dead father. But being a son is also about being there for his mother, who is still alive, yet is mostly silent in the background for much of the novel. Even though Oskar concentrates explicitly on looking for clues about his father, it is his mother who is there for him, and whom he has to be there for in the present.

He needed me, and I couldn't pick up. I just couldn't pick up. I just couldn't. *Are you there?* He asked eleven times. I know, because I've counted. It's one more than I can count on my fingers....Sometimes I think he knew I was there. Maybe he kept saying it to give me time to get brave enough to pick it up.

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Dad, William Black

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

When Oskar gives William Black the key from the vase, Oskar symbolically unlocks the secret that he has been carrying inside him throughout his entire quest. Oskar confesses to William that his father had called their family's phone right until the moment that the Twin Towers came down. By telling William his secret as well as giving William the actual key, the key has fulfilled its purpose in the novel, both physically and symbolically.

As it turns out, Oskar had the answer to the mystery of the key for nearly the entirety of his quest, but he didn't know it. Abby Black had left Oskar a message on the answering machine, but Oskar had been too traumatized to listen, because he was haunted by the guilt of his father's voice on that same answering machine. But Oskar's mom had heard Abby's message, and, unbeknownst to Oskar, had been calling every person named Black in the city and preparing him or her for Oskar's visit. When Oskar gives away the physical key, he not only relieves himself of his burden, but he also unlocks the closed door between himself and his relationship with his mother.

Here is the point of everything I have been trying to tell you, Oskar.
It's always necessary.
I love you,
Grandma

Related Characters: Grandma (speaker), Oskar Schell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Oskar's grandmother has been writing a long letter to Oskar to try and tell him about her past and her relationship with Oskar's grandfather, which is very difficult for her to talk about. This quote is the ending of the letter. Oskar's grandmother and grandfather have finally reunited, and they are sitting across from each other in the airport, typing on their respective typewriters. Part of the reason that Oskar has been so obsessed with searching for clues about his father is that he wants to find some

closure and so that he can feel at peace with their relationship. Oskar never got to say goodbye before his father died, a fact which haunts Oskar—and this lack of clarity and closure plagues many relationships throughout the novel. Oskar's grandmother and grandfather have a very troubled relationship in part because they cease being able to communicate with each other, and there are so many walls between them.

Oskar's grandmother doesn't want to repeat the mistakes of the past, and so she makes sure to communicate everything that she can to Oskar, or everything that she feels like she hasn't previously been able to say, in this letter. "It's always necessary" refers, in context, to the fact that she wished she had been able to say "I love you" to her sister. Grandma is determined not to make that mistake with Oskar. Rather than assume that there will always be more time in the future to say what she really means, Grandma takes the time now to express her feelings in the present. Grandma is trying to reassure Oskar and provide closure so that he and she both don't obsessively try to rewind time.

> I'd have said "Dad?" backwards, which would have sounded the same as "Dad" forward.
> He would have told me the story of the Sixth Borough, from the voice in the can at the end to the beginning, from "I love you" to "Once upon a time..."
> We would have been safe.

Related Characters: Oskar Schell (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

The last words of the novel express the desired fulfillment of many of Oskar's deepest wishes. Oskar longs to turn back time and reverse the course of history so that his father wouldn't have had to die on September 11. By rewinding and telling the story backwards, Oskar wants to take control over uncontrollable events so that history can unfold in a different direction. But these final words also express the fact that Oskar's wishes can't be fulfilled. The quotation is in the subjunctive mood, rather than the indicative, which demonstrates that Oskar is presenting a wish rather than a fact. Throughout the novel, Oskar has learned that we can't actually go back and reverse the course of history. Even though the book ends in a fantasy description of what Oskar wishes the world could be like, the reader knows that we have to move forward in reality.

Although these are the last words in the book, they are not the book's ending. The book concludes with several photographs of a person falling from the Twin Towers, but arranged in reverse order, so that if the reader flips through them, the person appears to be falling up instead of down. This reversal of the familiar image shows the tension between fantasy and the poignant reality that all characters struggle with throughout the novel. Even though they wish they could reverse time and space in certain key moments, and even though they replay events in their minds, they have to figure out some way of moving forward in order to heal.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1, "WHAT THE?"

The novel launches right into Oskar's mind: the reader jumps from idea to idea to idea, without getting introduced to what's going on. In rapid-fire succession, Oskar gives several ideas for new **inventions** or improvements on the world: for example, he describes a teakettle that sings melodies, an anus that can talk, microphones that broadcast heartbeats, and a birdseed shirt, among other things.

Oskar is extremely precocious: his brain is always going a million miles a minute, and he has an incredibly sharp vocabulary. Some of his "inventions" seem random, but just like a dream, they're often showing a subconscious solution to something that can't be solved. That birdseed shirt presents a solution to save people falling (or jumping) out of a building—like the people who died in the 9/11 attacks.

Oskar describes his first jujitsu class, which is also his last jujitsu class, as kicking his sensei's privates isn't something that particularly interests Oskar. When Oskar describes playing tambourine, he mentions for the first time that his Dad has died.

Oskar jumps around a lot from topic to topic, but emotionally, underneath this pyrotechnic, spinning surface of ideas, he's trying to come to grips with one big thing: his Dad's death.

Thinking about his tambourine and his Dad's death makes Oskar free associate about death in general: he ruminates about all the dead people throughout history, and about building underground skyscrapers for the dead.

Oskar feels safer dealing with death as an abstract, scientific concept, one that he can collect statistics about and imagine things about, rather than facing his emotions about Dad's death.

Oskar describes the limousine ride to the cemetery for his Dad's funeral. He chatters at Gerald, the limousine driver, telling nerdy puns and jokes that fail to crack Gerald's smile. Mom and Grandma are in the limo with Oskar as well, though they are being much quieter than Oskar: Mom is squeezing something in her purse, and Grandma knits white mittens. Gerald gives Oskar his card.

Oskar seems like he doesn't quite get the gravity of what's going on as they drive out to Dad's funeral: while he talks at rapid-fire speed and cracks jokes, Mom and Grandma can barely speak, overwhelmed by grief. But there is also a sense that perhaps Oskar's non-stop activity is his way of showing grief.

Mom asks Oskar why Oskar has given a spare set of **keys** to the mailwoman; though Oskar is afraid that Mom doesn't love him anymore, she reassures him that she loves him more than ever.

Although Oskar seems like he's cheerful on the surface, he's deeply insecure and fragile; he's scared of losing the loved ones he has left.

Oskar briefly mentions the second time that he was in a limo—when he and "the renter" (that is, Oskar's Grandpa) went to dig up Dad's coffin—and then talks about the "Reconnaissance Expeditions" that he and his Dad used to do on Sundays. For the last, unfinished Expedition, Dad gave Oskar a map of Central Park as his only clue. The more objects Oskar found and brought back from the park, the less he understood about the quest, but the more determined he became to find a clue in everything.

Dad used to send Oskar around the city to help Oskar break through some of his fears and encourage him to explore the world outside his apartment. Dad's "Expeditions" often don't seem to have any actual purpose. They're like Rube Goldberg inventions: highly intricately plotted ways of searching for nothing. The Expeditions are about the journey, not the end.

Oskar eventually arranged all the random objects and connects the dots to spell "FRAGILE," which makes Oskar free-associate about all of the various meanings and significances of that word.

Since the objects Oskar finds on expeditions don't mean anything intrinsically, they act like a Rorschach blot: Oskar sees into them what he's subconsciously thinking about.

Oskar then begins to describe the **letters** he began to write after "the worst day" (that is, September 11, 2001). Oskar writes his first letter to **Stephen Hawking**, who sends a form letter in reply. Oskar is so delighted with the form letter that he insists on laminating it.

Many characters throughout the novel write letters, either to one person or to many people: Grandpa writes letters to his son (or both of his sons); as a child, Grandma wrote letters to everyone she knew; William Black's father wrote letters to acquaintances to say goodbye. Oskar, like these others, writes letters to connect to people, but also because in a sense they are safe, as he is writing to people he doesn't know: their isn't any connection back.

Oskar describes the last story that his Dad ever told him, about New York City's sixth borough, but he doesn't tell the full story. Then, Oskar discusses the last time he heard his Dad's voice, which was on the answering machine. Dad left five messages: one at 8:52 AM, one at 9:12 AM, at 9:31 AM, 9:46 AM, and 10:04 AM. Oskar listened to the messages on that day—that is, September 11—and then, at 10:26:47, the **phone** began to ring; the caller ID said that it was his Dad.

Jonathan Safran Foer often plants seeds of future events many chapters earlier: we get the before and after of Dad's story about the Sixth Borough, but we have to wait until later to hear the story itself. Similarly, we also hear about Dad's phone messages without knowing what they said. The novel builds like a puzzle, rather than moving in a strictly linear fashion.

CHAPTER 2, "WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE (5/21/63)"

This chapter is set in 1963, so Oskar must no longer be the narrator. (The reader doesn't know it yet, but the narrator is Oskar's Grandpa.) The chapter is written in the form of a **letter** that begins, "To my unborn child." The narrator tells the reader about losing his ability to speak: he loses words one by one, starting with the word "Anna"; the last word he was able to speak aloud was "I."

Jonathan Safran Foer doesn't tell the reader who's writing this letter, but soon, enough details come together to show that it's Grandpa. Grandpa has a very different style of narration than Oskar. Grandpa writes in very long sentences, separated by commas, and doesn't break his writing into paragraphs, whereas Oskar constantly jumps from idea to idea.

To communicate, Grandpa has the word "YES" tattooed on his left palm and "NO" tattooed on his right. He carries a blank book to fill with all the things he couldn't say aloud, and by the end of the day, he had usually run out of pages.

Grandpa's post-traumatic stress disorder after Dresden has left him unable to speak, but that doesn't mean he doesn't understand and can't communicate. One aspect of language has failed him, but he can still find some ways to communicate.

Then, the reader is presented with several examples of pages from these blank books: each page has only one word or phrase on it, such as "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got," "I'm not sure, but it's late," or "Ha ha ha!". The **letter** resumes after a few of these blank pages, and Grandpa describes the hundreds of stacks of these **daybooks** that have accumulated all over his apartment. Jonathan Safran Foer, the author, also includes a photograph of a **doorknob** here.

Instead of just writing about something, Jonathan Safran Foer often breaks the narration to insert an actual example of the thing described. The blank spaces around the phrases create a different effect than just reading about them: the reader gets the direct experience of the books, rather than those books filtered through the language of description.

When Grandpa met the mother of the "unborn son," he had already lost the ability to speak. They discuss loss and canned tuna––or, rather, the woman speaks, and Grandpa shrugs and responds through gestures and some brief written **notes**.

By the time Grandpa has met Grandma, he's already become his traumatized, silent self. He can communicate, and he can even joke, but he can't engage in real back-and-forth conversation.

The woman (Grandma) asks the writer of the letter (Grandpa) why he doesn't speak, and the narrator writes, "I don't speak. I'm so sorry." The woman writes on the final blank page of the **daybook**, "Please marry me". (Jonathan Safran Foer puts this page right into the book itself.)

Writing in Grandpa's notebook is as intimate an action as kissing him: the notebook is how he communicates with the world, and Grandma connects with him by inscribing herself into his life.

Grandpa flips back to several phrases in the **daybook**–– "Ha ha ha!" and "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got" and "I'm not sure but it's late"––but the woman will not budge. He thinks about everything he has lost in his life, flips back slowly through the notebook, and places her finger on a page that says, "Help" (which Foer inserts into the chapter).

Despite the fact that they can't communicate in a typical way, Grandpa and Grandma connect with each other and forge a bond through single words and gestures. Grandma and Grandpa both need each other's help.

CHAPTER 3, "GOOGOLPLEX"

Oskar is the narrator of this chapter. He describes the bracelet he made for Mom after Dad's death, in which he converted Dad's last voice message into Morse code and depicted it in different-colored beads. Oskar is upset that Mom has been spending time with Ron, her new boyfriend, but he buries his anger and instead makes Morse code jewelry out of his Dad's messages.

Oskar attempts both to assuage his own guilt and connect with his Mom through the bracelet. There's no way she would ever know how to decode the beads, or even that they're trying to convey a message at all. The novel is full of such messages, expressions of love either never delivered or impossible to understand. The message preserved here is more for Oskar's own benefit: he's trying to preserve his Dad's voice, and this is another way of doing so, like keeping the phone in his closet. He's also trying to keep his dad connected to his mom, as he is angry at her growing connection to another man.

Since his Dad's death, Oskar has had trouble with several triggering things, like showers, crossing suspension bridges, and being around Arab people (even though, he clarifies, he's not racist).

The public tragedy of the September 11 attacks and Oskar's individual grief for his Dad have become woven together in Oskar's mind.

One night, he rummages around Dad's closet and tries to pull down a blue glass vase he's never seen before. The vase breaks, but when no one comes to chastise him, Oskar, out of relief and guilt, gives himself a bruise. When he starts to clean up, he finds a little envelope with a fat, short **key** inside the vase that Oskar's never seen. He tries all the locks in the apartment, but it isn't for any of them.

Oskar frequently bruises himself when he feels guilty or embarrassed or ashamed: it's his way of punishing himself physically when he feels like he has done something wrong emotionally. Throughout the novel, many secrets are kept inside containers in closets or boxes—the key, the phone messages, etc.

The next morning, Oskar fakes sick—the first lie he has to tell, he reports—and goes to the locksmith to ask about the **key**. The locksmith says that it looks like it's for a lockbox, probably a safe-deposit box.

Oskar convinces himself that all his lies are to protect his Mom and preserve the integrity of the expedition; ironically, his Mom soon finds out exactly what he's doing.

When Oskar returns home, Stan, the doorman, gives him mail: a form **letter** from Ringo Starr with a signed T-shirt. (The T-shirt isn't white, though, so Oskar can't wear it: one of his rules is to only wear white clothes.) Oskar laminates the letter and puts it on his wall.

Oskar doesn't seem to care when he receives a form letter instead of a personalized response: he's searching for any kind of reply to try and help fill the void that his Dad has left.

Oskar calculates that there are 162 million locks in New York City, and it would take him three seconds to open each lock, but there is a baby born in New York every fifty seconds, so that if all he ever did were open locks, he's still be falling behind by .333 locks every second.

At first, discovering what the key might unlock seems as impossible to Oskar as finding closure after his Dad's death: he could search and search for his entire life, but he might never be able to find an answer that might assuage his guilt.

Oskar retrieves the envelope that the **key** had been in and sees the word "Black" written on the back. His Dad's handwriting looks weird, as though it were written hastily. He Googles "Black" and puts some of the image results, like a shark attacking a girl and a soldier getting his head cut off in Iraq, into his binder of *Stuff That Happened To Me*.

But the envelope with the key that has the word "Black" gives Oskar a rejuvenated sense of purpose, since it seems like a message from his Dad, as though Dad were giving him another clue on his expedition.

The next day, Oskar fakes being sick again to his Mom so that he can skip school. They chat and Mom tells him that he sounds just like Dad, but Oskar says that it doesn't make him feel good when she says he sounds just like Dad, so instead, she rubs his head quietly.

Oskar's Mom tries to connect with Oskar and bond with him through their shared loss, but Oskar isn't ready to let her in yet; instead, he still bristles when his Mom brings up his Dad. It's harder for Oskar to discuss the raw trauma with someone so close to him than to talk about it with strangers.

Oskar goes to the art supply store because he wants to ask them about colors. The employee thinks that it's interesting that "Black" is written in red pen. The employee shows Oskar a pad of paper near the pen display, on which people have tried out the different colored pens. Jonathan Safran Foer inserts four pages of this pad into the book, with the whole array of colors and handwritings depicted.

When Oskar examines the pads of paper in the art store, Jonathan Safran Foer recreates that experience for the reader, so that the reader can continue on the expedition along with Oskar.

Oskar notices that one of the pages has his Dad's name, "Thomas Schell," on it. (The name is written in red ink on the last page of the colored handwriting that is inserted into the chapter.) He looks through all the tester pads throughout the store and sees that his name was everywhere: according to Oskar, "It was as if he was planning on making the biggest art project in history." But Dad died over a year ago, and the employee tells Oskar that she's ninety percent sure the display pads have not been sitting out that long.

If the reader was looking closely, he or she might have seen "Thomas Schell" before Oskar points it out—but if not, it's almost impossible not to flip back and look for it, and then to look at the other pages for clues. Jonathan Safran Foer turns the experience of reading into something akin to going on one of Oskar's expeditions. In this case, the reality of the situation becomes clear in hindsight: it is Grandpa who has been writing his own name, testing out pens in the store.

Back at home, Oskar discovers 472 people in New York with the name "Black," living at 216 different addresses. He writes a **letter** to his French teacher, pretending to be from Mom, to say that Oskar will no longer be going to French lessons, although the teacher will still be paid; that way, Oskar will have Saturdays and Sundays free to go around the city and ask all the people named Black about the **key**, which, he calculates, will take him eight months.

Oskar decides that "Black" must be a last name, allowing him to narrow down his search drastically, from hundreds of billions of locks to 216 addresses. Meanwhile, the lies escalate: rather than tell his Mom what he's up to, Oskar decides that he has to protect her and that he will do the search on his own.

Trying to fall asleep, Oskar flips through pictures in his *Stuff That Happened to Me* binder, and Jonathan Safran Foer includes the pictures in the chapter: a wall of **keys**, **Stephen Hawking**, Hamlet, a blueprint of a paper airplane, two turtles making love, a box of gems, a man falling from a building, Manhattan with Central Park removed, a blurry close-up of the falling man, "Purple" written in green ink, a tennis player celebrating a win, fingerprints, early human-like primates, and an astronaut.

Oskar's binder is stuffed with stuff that didn't actually happen to him: it's more like a fossil record of his imagination than a transcription of what he encounters in the world. Many of the images represent stuff that he's thinking about, or stuff that's important to him symbolically, or ideas that he has, but, ironically, very few of the images in the binder represent things that actually happened in Oskar's daily life.

Oskar listens to Dad's **phone** messages again. He keeps the phone inside his closet—he didn't want his mother to find it, so he's hidden the old phone and bought a new one.

Oskar still feels, even if the feeling is irrational, responsible for Dad's death because he didn't pick up the phone, and he feels too guilty to talk to Mom about it.

Oskar's Grandma lives in the building just across from him, so he can see it through the window. He radios her on his **walkie-talkie** and asks why she's awake at 4:12 AM. She says that the renter is running some errands. Even though the renter had been living with Grandma since Dad died, Oskar hasn't met this mysterious renter.

Grandpa and Oskar both have insomnia, but the real reason they stay in touch at all hours of the day is that they're both afraid of being abandoned again. Grandma even keeps the walkie-talkie on at all hours of the day or night so that she'll never miss a message from Oskar.

Oskar and Grandma talk for a bit over the **walkie-talkies**, as they do very often. Oskar tells Grandma that he misses Dad. He asks her why Grandpa wanted to leave, and imagines a device that would flash out of ambulances to tell everyone if the person inside was going to be okay. Grandma says Grandpa had to leave, but she doesn't say why.

Grandma is one of Oskar's primary sources of love and support, yet she doesn't talk to him very much about his past; instead, she remains focused on what's going on in the present, as though she's trying to erase the past.

Oskar puts the **key** from the vase on the string around his neck, next to his apartment key, and makes lists and conjugates French verbs, trying to fall asleep.

The key from Dad's closet and Oskar's apartment key rest over his heart, and they keep him tethered to his home and his family.

CHAPTER 4, "MY FEELINGS"

Another narrator speaks in this chapter, which is also in the form of a **letter**; it's dated "12 September 2003" and addressed "Dear Oskar." The writer of the letter is an old woman (Grandma), writing from the airport and talking about her childhood. She writes that as a child, their house received a letter from a man in a Turkish labor camp, but most of the details had been blocked out by a censor. She never told her parents about the letter.

Grandma's writing style is different from either Grandpa's or Oskar's: she writes in short, direct, clipped sentences that move in a fairly linear fashion from thought to thought. Grandpa, in contrast, writes in very long sentences that twist around each other, and Oskar constantly flits from idea to idea.

The writer (Grandma) says that she asks everyone she knows to write her a **letter**: her father, an inmate in the penitentiary, her piano teacher, her friend Mary, her grandmother. She ends up with over a hundred letters.

Letters are crucial to all the protagonists. Oskar writes letters to every celebrity that he is interested in, and Grandpa writes a letter every day to his unborn son; Grandma, in contrast, gets people to write letters to her.

Seven years later, when she had only been in America for two months, Grandma meets a man who used to date her sister, Anna; she had caught the two of them kissing in the shed behind the house. Now, the man no longer talks. The woman tells the story of spending the afternoon together, but in her version, she does not write "Please marry me," instead, he asks her, through hand motions and writing, if she would pose for him so that he can sculpt her.

Grandma's story of how she and Grandpa met and married is different than Grandpa's version. Grandpa had written that Grandma proposed to him right away, but Grandma adds another layer, writing that first, Grandpa asked to sculpt her. One person's perspective may not be the entire truth.

Grandma goes to Grandpa's apartment every day so that he can sculpt her. The apartment is filled with animals, except for one clean corner. She poses for him nude. As he progresses, the sculpture looks more and more like Anna.

Like Noah's Ark, Grandpa's apartment is filled with animals, as though he's created his own isolated little world safe from any traumatic events outside.

One day, they end up making love, and Grandma looks at the unfinished sculpture of her sister. After they make love, they go to the café where they met, and then, she writes, "Please marry me" on the next blank page of his book. He writes, "No children," and she agrees. The next day, they are married.

Grandpa doesn't want to have children because he doesn't want to experience the pain of loss again: if he doesn't have more connections, he will have less to lose, and therefore experience less pain.

CHAPTER 5, "THE ONLY ANIMAL"

Oskar is the narrator in this chapter. Oskar remembers reading the first chapter of **A Brief History of Time** when Dad was alive, and they discuss doing something relatively insignificant: even though it might seem miniscule in the scope of the universe, it's still something. In this spirit, Oskar decides to meet all the Blacks alphabetically, from Aaron to Zyna.

Oskar needs some sort of logical explanation for Dad's death, and the only way that makes sense for him is to turn the key in Dad's closet into the start of a new expedition. The journey helps anchor Oskar and gives him a sense of purpose, even if the rules he sets for himself are irrational.

Oskar puts together a field kit, including a flash light, ChapStick, his **cell phone**, iodine pills, and the script of *Hamlet*. It takes Oskar three hours and forty-one minutes to walk to Queens, where Aaron Black lives. There's a photograph of a suspension bridge inserted here. Oskar won't take public transportation, and even though walking over bridges also makes him panicky, public transportation is worse.

Throughout the novel, it becomes more and more appropriate that Oskar is performing in Hamlet*: Oskar is trying to cope with the death of his father, just as Hamlet is trying to cope with the death of his father. The bridge symbolically represents the beginning of Oskar's odyssey: he is crossing many boundaries, both physical and emotional, on his expedition.*

Oskar makes it to Queens and buzzes for A. Black. Oskar asks the man who answers if he knows Thomas Schell. The man says "no" and soon gets off the buzzer. Oskar starts to cry, but then rings the buzzer again and tells the man that his Dad is dead. The man says that if Oskar comes up, he'll look at the **key**, but since he's hooked up to several machines, he can't come down. Oskar is scared to go up to the ninth floor, where the man lives, so he leaves his card under the apartment building door and goes away.

Oskar is stuck at the bottom of the stairs, but the first man named Black is stuck at the top: even though he's walked for nearly four hours to come to the first stop on his expedition, he doesn't even get to meet the person he's been seeking. But just getting to this house provides Oskar with motivation to continue: as he'll learn many times throughout this expedition, it's about the journey, not the end.

Oskar walks for two hours and twenty-three minutes to get to Abby Black's house on Bedford Street. A sign above the door says that it's the narrowest house in New York and that Edna Saint Vincent Millay once lived there. (There's a photograph of the house in the chapter.) Oskar knocks, and Abby Black, a beautiful woman who looks very sad, answers. Abby says she's in the middle of something, but Oskar lies and tells her that he's diabetic and needs sugar, and she lets him in. He makes a mental vow to donate his allowance to a fund for diabetes.

Oskar loves statistics, records, and unique details; the fact that Abby's house is the "narrowest house in the world" seems like a clue on one of Dad's Expeditions for Oskar, as does the Edna Saint Vincent Millay reference. As Oskar continues his expedition, everything begins to seem like a potential clue—even though it's still unclear exactly what resolution the solution will bring.

A man calls from the other room, but Abby doesn't pay attention. When Oskar finds a bit of dust in the kitchen, Abby gets embarrassed, causing Oskar to launch into **statistics** about the amount of dust his apartment had produced in a year (112 pounds). Abby puts out the cup of coffee Oskar had requested and a bowl of strawberries.

Much later in the novel, Oskar discovers the key role that the man calling from the other room will play in his quest; however, here, Oskar is determined to focus the efforts of his expedition on talking to Abby.

Oskar compliments Abby on a photograph of an elephant hanging on the wall, causing him to launch into a long discussion of random elephant facts. Oskar gets close to the picture and takes a photograph of its eye with his camera, and there's a photograph of a close-up elephant's eye inserted in the chapter.

Oskar seemingly has an encyclopedic memory: he can, and has, memorized all the facts and figures he can about all sort of seemingly random topics. The close-up photograph of the elephant's eye symbolizes all the emotions lurking just underneath *Oskar's pyrotechnic display of facts.*

Abby begins to cry. Her husband continues to yell, and she continues to ignore him. Oskar tells her that's he's twelve, because "I wanted to be old enough for her to love me." He asks again if Abby knew his Dad, Thomas Schell, and again, she says no. When he shows her the **key**, she also says that she doesn't know anything about that.

Oskar is not only searching for the key: he's searching for attention, connection, protection, and love. Part of the point of Oskar's expedition is to find out more about his Dad, to stay connected to his Dad, but also, part of the point is to feel his own sense of purpose.

Oskar invites Abby to the fall play his class is putting on, *Hamlet*, which will be performed in twelve weeks' time, and she says she'll try to come. He also asks if he can kiss her, but she refuses. She does let him take a picture of her, but not of her face, so he takes a picture of the back of her head. The photograph is inserted in the text. Oskar give her his business card, which is also printed in the chapter; it has many occupations from "inventor" and "jewelry designer" to "amateur astronomer."

When Abby says that she'll try to come to the play, Oskar takes her at her word, but it seems as though she's just brushing Oskar off politely with a noncommittal little lie. Oskar's business card, with all its many occupations and specialties listed, shows every fantasy about himself: his "occupations" are the preoccupations of his imagination.

Oskar goes over to Grandma's apartment when he gets home. She's just been crying. She tells Oskar she was talking to the renter.

Grandma doesn't tell Oskar that "the renter" is actually his grandfather.

Oskar remembers that Grandma used to take care of him when he was a baby. Once, he made her panic because he was hiding from her. Ever since, whenever one of them says the other's name, the other person has to say, "I'm OK."

Oskar and Grandma have both had a loved one leave them—Oskar's Dad, Grandma's husband—and the Marco-Polo ritual of saying "I'm OK" after the other person says his or her name is a routine to reassure the other person's presence.

After Dad died, Oskar explains to the reader, Oskar and his Mom went to Oskar's Dad's storage facility, where Oskar found the old **walkie-talkies** that they had had to monitor Oskar as a baby. Oskar gave one to his Grandma, and now they talk on them all the time; in fact, she's usually waiting on the other end for him. There's a photograph of Grandma's apartment window in the chapter.

Oskar found it difficult to throw away anything from Dad's storage unit, even long-discarded and unused objects. He repurposed the method that Mom and Dad had had to look after him as a baby as a means of communication for himself and Grandma to look after each other.

Oskar remembers how his Grandma knits him white clothes and finds special things for him. She gave Oskar a stamp collection when he mentions that he was considering starting one, but he yelled at her when she says she'd gotten rid of the plate block. They spend time together constantly, but Oskar still doesn't know about her past.

Grandma tries to connect with Oskar by giving him things that make him feel special and loved; however, Oskar sometimes doesn't realize that a gift is not about the gift itself, but about the gift-giver's intentions.

That night, Oskar stays up designing jewelry, and he can't stop thinking about his Dad's storage facility. He can't sleep, so he goes to Mom's room and watches her sleep. He wakes her up and asks what the storage facility was called, hoping for something with the word "Black," but instead, she tells him that it's "Store-a-Lot."

Oskar has begun to reach a stage of hyper-awareness in his expedition when everything seems like it could be interrelated. Reminiscing about Grandma and about Dad's storage unit make him scour his mind for another hint: rather than delving deep into his emotions, he thinks of the puzzle he's concocted.

CHAPTER 6, "WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE (5/21/63)"

This **letter** has the same date as the letter from Chapter 2, and it's by the same narrator—that is, Grandpa—writing to his son. The letter begins with a long, stream-of-consciousness description of the many rules that the writer and his wife (Grandma) follow in their marriage, from never talking about the past to changing the sheets every morning. In the middle of the list of rules, which range from mundane and logical to trivial to absurd, the narrator slips in the phrase, "I'm leaving her today."

In Grandpa's stream-of-consciousness style of writing, sometimes the most important parts of the sentence get buried deep in the middle of lots of other material that isn't as relevant, just the way in which Grandpa buries his emotions deep inside his silence.

Grandpa writes that he thought he and Grandma could have had a beautiful reunion, although they had hardly known each other in Dresden, but it didn't work. He describes the "Nothing Places" in their apartment, which are designated zones in which one person is allowed to disappear while the other person doesn't look. Soon, the apartment becomes more Nothing than Something. They designate every area of the apartment as "Something" and "Nothing," and they try to pretend that this will make them happy, but he knows that their marriage is falling apart.

The "rules" that he and Grandma make up for their marriage are an elaborate system of not facing their emotions and avoiding embracing each other's company. Rather than confronting the hard truth of moving on from the past and living a new life together, Grandpa is still traumatized by losing Anna in the Dresden firebombing and he designates safe places in the apartment to counteract his memories of the world burning around him.

Grandpa says that he's writing from the airport to his unborn son, thinking about Anna. He says that his father knew Anna's father. When they met for the first time, they were teenagers, and the narrator was immediately in love. He walks to her house the next day, filled with self-consciousness, but she's not home. There's a photograph of a **doorknob** in the chapter.

The photograph of the doorknob here represents the comical missed connection of when Grandpa was attempting to court Anna as a teenager. However, doorknobs throughout the novel also symbolize Grandpa's trauma and PTSD after Dresden, and thresholds in general, the points at which doors can be opened or not opened, at which connections can be made or not made.

Day after day, Grandpa walked to Anna's house, but she's never home. As it turns out, she was never home because she had been walking to his house at the same time every day, and never finding him at home, because he had been coming to see her.

Grandpa and Anna are like characters in an O. Henry short story, who are each so busy doing something for the other person that they miss what the other person is doing for them.

There's a piece of paper from Grandpa's **daybook** inserted—"Do you know what time it is?—and the narration returns to the present. He thinks about Grandma at home, writing her whole life story on a typewriter. She protests that her eyes are bad, but nevertheless, he convinces her to do it, and she writes diligently for years.

When Grandpa has to write a question in his daybook, the story is interrupted, because he has to stop writing about the past in order to communicate now. Asking about the time also jolts Grandpa's mind to the present day and his current relationship.

One spring, Grandma pulls him into the guest room and shows him a stack of paper, which she tells him is called "My Life." The stack of pages is completely blank: years ago, he had pulled the ribbon from the typewriter and hadn't replaced it, and her eyes were so bad that she'd never noticed. Jonathan Safran Foer includes a few blank sheets in the chapter. Grandpa can't bear to tell Grandma that the pages are all blank, so he tells her that it's wonderful.

Grandpa thinks that he's completely ruined Grandma's life story—both the written version and, by extension, the real one. He blames himself for her blank manuscript, and the fact that she's been able to preserve nothing on the page, although she's been typing for years. Grandpa doesn't want Grandma to be crushed by the prospect of having spent years and years in vain, and so here is another example in the novel of one character protecting another by lying to them.

After another piece of paper from Grandpa's **daybook** that reads "Do you know what time it is?", the narrator reminisces about the first time that he and Anna made love. It was in her father's shed, which he'd converted into a library. In the yard nearby, Anna's father meets them. Anna introduces Grandpa to Simon Goldberg, her father's friend, and Grandpa tells Goldberg that he is trying to be a sculptor. Anna's father and Goldberg talk about the war, and Anna and Grandpa go into the library and make love.

When Grandpa interrupts his own story to ask what time it is, the time of the narrative in his mind shifts, and Grandpa returns to the past and his relationship with Anna. The conversation between Anna's father and Simon Goldberg represents all the turmoil of World War II and the Holocaust, but Grandpa and Anna live in their own little private world.

There is another sheet from Grandpa's **daybook** that reads "Do you know what time it is?", and the narration returns to the near present, when Grandpa is reading Grandma's life story and pretending to laugh or to cry in front of her, when in reality, the pages are just blank.

The narrative again switches to the present when Grandpa asks for the time. Grandpa pretends Grandma has written something, even though the pages are blank, because he feels so guilty: he thinks that it's his fault and he doesn't want to confess the truth, much as Oskar doesn't want to admit the truth about his own sense of guilt for his father's death.

Grandpa writes that he's sorry for everything—sorry for the marriage, sorry for being about to leave Grandma, sorry about Anna, sorry he'll never get to see his son. In the chapter, there is another photograph of a **doorknob**. Grandpa writes that he will rip these pages out, put them in the mailbox, and address the envelope to "My Unborn Son." There are a few more pages from the **daybook** with one sentence apiece on them, ending with, "You're going to catch a cold."

The photograph of the doorknob again symbolizes Grandpa's trauma and his memories of Anna, his unborn child, and all he lost in the firebombing. The pages from the daybook show Grandpa's side of a conversation, but the reader doesn't yet know to whom he's speaking, so the phrases that are preserved seem like somewhat indecipherable messages.

CHAPTER 7, HEAVIER BOOTS

Oskar narrates this chapter. Twelve weekends after visiting Abby Black, Oskar's class has its first performance of *Hamlet*, in which he plays Yorick (the skull). Several of the Blacks whom he's met in the previous weeks are in the audience for opening night; Mom and Grandma come, too. For the following performances, only Grandma comes, and she embarrasses Oskar by laughing and crying at the wrong parts. Oskar pretends to laugh along when his classmate Jimmy Snyder, who plays Hamlet, makes fun of her, but on the inside, he's ashamed.

Many of the Blacks that Oskar has visited came to support him in the play, which shows Mom's help behind the scenes—after all, he'd only mentioned the play to Abby, so how would everyone know to come? The Blacks are an unlikely support group for Oskar. In the play, Oskar is Yorick, a skull who functions primarily as a philosophical symbol. Oskar takes the opportunity of being a live person playing the role of a dead one as his chance to observe everyone on stage as well as the audience: it's his own play within the play.

Oskar imagines an elaborate alternate version of the play in which Yorick wreaks his revenge on Hamlet / Jimmy Snyder, and the audience cheers; in reality, he stays silent.

But acting in the play also gives Oskar the opportunity to stage alternate versions of his life that don't actually happen, which helps him cope with embarrassment and anger.

Twelve weeks earlier, Oskar had gone to visit Abe Black in Coney Island. He took a cab to get there, but only has enough to cover about a tenth of the cab fare, and he promises to mail the cabbie the money.

New York City seems to operate a little differently for Oskar than for most people. He doesn't realize the consequences of his actions, or make sensible choices based on his resources; instead, his passion and fear drive him, and yet his openness and need seem to influence other people to do things or accept things they otherwise wouldn't.

Abe convinces Oskar to ride the Cyclone with him, even though Oskar is terrified. There's a photograph of the Cyclone in the chapter, depicting a car about to ricochet down a hill in the track.

Abe helps Oskar start to come out of his shell, helping him face his fears. Oskar's entire expedition is an emotional roller coaster, which the photograph of the Cyclone symbolizes: as Oskar digs further into the quest, it escalates.

Abe drives Oskar to Ada Black's apartment in Manhattan. Ada tells Oskar that she is the "467th-richest person in the world." Oskar asks her if she feels guilty about having so much money. She retorts that the Upper West Side isn't free, and when Oskar asks her how she knows he lives on the Upper West Side, she doesn't reply.

Ada knows about Oskar because Oskar's Mom has found out about the expedition at this point. Unbeknownst to Oskar, Mom calls all the Blacks before Oskar visits to tell them about him. Oskar is lying to Mom to protect her; Mom is letting him lie to her in order to protect him.

Oskar tells the maid, Gail, that her uniform is beautiful, but when Gail leaves, Ada tells Oskar that he has made Gail uncomfortable with his compliments. Oskar shows her the **key**, but she hasn't seen it before. He gives her his card and she pays for a cab to take him home, where he has received a thank-you **note** from the American Diabetes Foundation.

The letter from the American Diabetes Foundation proves that Oskar followed through on his promise to himself to make a donation to the Foundation after lying and telling Abby Black that he had diabetes. The note provides a sort of closure for this particular lie—Oskar has paid (literally) for his sins and received forgiveness.

The next Black lives just one floor above Oskar, in 6A. Stan, the doorman, tells Oskar that he's never seen anyone go in and out of that apartment—just deliveries and trash. Oskar goes up to this apartment, and Mr. Black invites him in. Mr. Black speaks very loudly, and every sentence he says ends in an exclamation point. For example, he tells Oskar, "I was born on January 1, 1900! I lived every day of the twentieth century!"

In the type of coincidence that one couldn't make up (though, of course, it's all made up), Oskar's next Black lives just the floor above. The solution to many problems throughout the book seems to be right in one's own backyard. Running away isn't a cure-all—you can't make everything go away just by pretending it doesn't exist. But hiding in one place isn't the answer either.

Mr. Black, who is quite talkative, tells Oskar facts about his life rapid-fire (all ending in exclamation points). Oskar is mesmerized. He thinks Mr. Black's hands look like a skeleton's hands, and a photograph of a skeleton's bony hand is included. Mr. Black's apartment is filled with memorabilia from the various wars with which he's been involved as a reporter.

In many ways, Mr. Black is like a really old Oskar: he's always associating and connecting seemingly random ideas. Death is always on Oskar's mind, subconsciously if not consciously: when he sees Mr. Black, he has a visceral sensation of Mr. Black's mortality.

Mr. Black shows Oskar his biographical index: thousands of cards with one word and a one-word biography. For example: "Tom Cruise: money!"; "Eli Weisel: war!" ;"Mick Jagger: money!" The card for himself reads: "A.R. Black: ~~WAR~~ HUSBAND". Oskar asks if Mr. Black has a card for Thomas Schell, but he doesn't have one, which gives Oskar "heavy, heavy boots."

Mr. Black's biographical index is similar in many way to Oskar's binder of "Stuff That Happened to Me": both of them track things and people that they might have only encountered in imagination, or by reading, or secondhand, and include them in a catalog of daily life. The fact that Oskar's Dad is not in the index makes Oskar feel guilty and afraid that Oskar himself will forget his Dad. It is a record of Dad's absence, which Oskar can't face.

Oskar goes to the bathroom and surreptitiously tries the **key** on several keyholes in the apartment, but none work. Mr. Black has an amazing bed made out of tree parts. He made it for himself and his wife out of a tree in Central Park, he tells Oskar, when he decided to give up war reporting and stay at home. Every night since his wife died, Mr. Black has hammered a nail into the tree bed: there are eight thousand six hundred twenty-nine nails in the bed, which makes it so heavy that it needs a column on the floor below to support it.

Just as Central Park is the heart of Manhattan, Central Park is central to Mr. Black's memory of his wife and stands at the core of Oskar's relationship with Dad. This tree also recalls the Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon, two lovers from Greek myth who eventually grow into an intertwined tree, as well as to Odysseus and Penelope, whose bed is likewise made from a tree. Yet where the Baucis and Philemon myth involves eternal togetherness, and Odysseus's story is one of successfully returning to his wife and their bed, this bed has to symbolize the inevitable alone-ness of life. The nails are also similar to Oskar's Grandpa's daybooks, which Grandma kept stored in the grandfather clock.

Oskar's **key** is reaching toward the bed: there are so many nails that they are exerting a magnetic pull on the key, and it floats a little bit off his chest.

The key over Oskar's heart is symbolic of love, and the fact that the key itself is reaching out to Mr. Black symbolizes Oskar's own emotions.

Oskar finds out that Mr. Black hasn't left the apartment for twenty-four years, which makes him sad, because Mr. Black must be so lonely. Oskar asks Mr. Black to join him on his search. Oskar explains his mission, and Mr. Black is silent, but it turns out that that's just because Mr. Black has closed his eyes and turned off his hearing aids.

By helping Mr. Black leave his apartment for the first time since his wife's death, Oskar is also helping himself escape some of the guilt that has kept him locked inside his own head: by helping Mr. Black open up, Oskar is helping himself open up, too.

Oskar turns on the hearing aids for him. A flock of birds flies by the window, "extremely fast and incredibly close"; there's a photograph of blurry birds spanning two pages. The hearing aids work, and Mr. Black starts to cry.

This flock of birds is symbolic, but it doesn't have one specific meaning. The birds that fly too close are reminiscent of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers, but they also represent freedom.

That night, Oskar and his Mom fight as Oskar's Mom is tucking him into bed. Mom tells him that Dad's spirit is in his coffin, but Oskar curses at her. Oskar blames his Mom for Dad's death, and Mom starts crying. I don

Oskar blames Mom for Dad's death, but really, he blames himself. He needs to have some sort of reason and logic to hold onto, even if the logic is completely illogical, because ineffable chaos is terrifying.

Oskar and Mom start to make up, but the fight escalates when Oskar says that she can't miss Dad when she is with Ron now. He yells that if he could have chosen, he would have chosen her to die instead of Dad.

Even though she loves Oskar, and even though she tries hard to connect with him, Mom will never be close with Oskar in the same way that Dad was, and both of them know this cruel truth.

Oskar tries to take it back, but Mom is hurt. Eventually, he falls asleep on the floor, and when he wakes up, Mom is pulling off his shirt to get him into pajamas, so he knows that she has to see the forty-one self-inflicted bruises on his chest. He wonders why she doesn't say anything about all the bruises.

In addition to his bruises serving as a way for Oskar to assuage his own guilt, they also serve as a cry for attention and for help. Oskar, at least subconsciously, is hurting himself in part so that others will take care of him, and he feels abandoned when Mom appears not to notice the bruises, even though she does: after all, she makes sure that he's in therapy, and she's been following him in secret through his expedition and making sure each Black is prepared for his visit.

CHAPTER 8, "MY FEELINGS"

The narrator of this chapter is Grandma, writing a **letter** to Oskar from the airport (continued from the previous "My Feelings" chapter, Chapter 4). They are announcing flights, says Grandma, but "They do not matter to us, because we are not going anywhere."

It's still unclear why Grandma is in the airport, but it's very symbolic: she is surrounding herself indirectly with memories of her son's death, and she's finding a home and anchor in a place where no one else remains permanently.

Grandma discusses the beginning of her marriage with Grandpa. Grandpa took pictures of every detail in their apartment, including the **doorknobs**. Grandpa used to go to the airport after work. At first, he would bring Grandma American magazines, but even when she stopped asking for that, she still gave him permission to go.

Instead of devoting himself to enjoying his life in his home, Grandpa was obsessed with creating a record of it so that if anything happened to it, he would still have a preserved version. Grandpa was burned by a metal doorknob in the Dresden firebombing, which fuels his particular obsession with doorknobs.

In their first Halloween in the apartment, Grandma didn't understand what she was supposed to do when a child dressed up as a ghost came to the door. The ghost tells Grandma to give her candy, but Grandma instead puts two one-hundred-dollar bills in an envelope and pays the ghost to go away.

Grandma is grappling with her own trauma and grief from World War II, and she has to adjust to life in America, where certain rituals can be lighthearted celebrations, not symbolically laden with doom.

Grandma says that when she was in the guest room supposedly typing her life story, she was actually just hitting the space bar over and over again, because, as she says, "My life story was spaces."

Grandpa thought that Grandma didn't realize she had typed a sheaf of blank pages as her life story, but Grandma reveals that she knew what she was doing the whole time: her life story, as she typed it, was actually intended to be entirely blank. Her family is gone; she has married the lover of her sister: it is a blank. Also, once again, the novel makes clear the misunderstandings possible between people. Grandpa all this time has been trying to protect Grandma from the knowledge of her blank manuscript, and she presumably has been letting him lie to her in order to protect him form the knowledge of her blankness.

Grandma feels a hole inside her and realizes that she needs a child. She writes in Grandpa's **daybook** to tell him that she is pregnant, which means that she has broken the rule they had set (that is, to have no children.) When Grandma says goodbye to Grandpa that day, as he is leaving for the airport on his usual routine, she picks up his suitcase and it feels heavy, which is how she knows he is leaving her.

Grandma tells Grandpa that she is pregnant in the same way that she tells him she wants to marry him: not by speaking out loud, but by writing in his notebook, a more permanent record than speech. But having a child is too much for Grandpa to handle—he is not emotionally ready for the weight of another being, for the possibility of more loss.

Grandma follows Grandpa to the airport, but he tells her that she has to go home. Even though the situation is fraught and they're both upset, Grandpa makes a few small jokes. But then he starts to cry, which makes the **daybook** wet with his tears. Grandma says that she's not angry with him. When she asks why he's leaving, Grandpa writes that it's because he does not know how to live.

Writing might be more trustworthy than speech, but actions always speak louder than words: Grandma's true communication of her love is seen through her action of following Grandpa to the airport, and Grandpa's true communication of his feelings is through his tears.

In the airport, talking to Grandpa, Grandma has several memories of her family as she is trying to convince Grandpa to stay. Grandma remembers when Anna taught her what it felt like to kiss and to be in love. She remembers her father wanting to save her family and the world, but not being able to. She remembers her mother teaching her to put on makeup. The morning of the Dresden firebombing, she had started to write back to the man in the Turkish labor camp, but the **letter** lay unfinished on her desk.

Grandma, just like Grandpa, experiences intense mourning for the past, and trying to convince Grandpa to stay as he's straining to leave also makes her remember many painful memories from Dresden. The firebombing ruptured her life, and she doesn't want Grandpa to leave her too.

Grandpa keeps pointing at "Broken and confused" and "Nothing" in the **daybook** and Grandma points at "Don't cry" and "Something." Finally, she convinces him to return home. They pawn some of their jewelry. The next morning, Grandpa packs again and goes to the airport, but this time, he doesn't come back.

Grandma convinces Grandpa to return home with her, but not for long: he can't face the idea of starting a new life in America, because the grief of losing Anna and his unborn son in Dresden is still too raw. Overcome with guilt and trauma, Grandpa leaves – he protects himself from connection by leaving all connection behind.

Grandma feels the baby (that is, Dad) kick in her belly, and she releases all the animals from the apartment: they leave and don't come back.

Grandma releases Grandpa symbolically from her life by letting his animals go free.

CHAPTER 9, "HAPPINESS, HAPPINESS"

The chapter begins with an interview of a Hiroshima survivor. Oskar is playing the recording for his classmates at school. The woman in the interview describes her daughter dying in her arms; there are maggots in the daughter's wounds, and the daughter's skin is peeling off. The daughter died in the mother's arms, saying that she didn't want to die.

The woman holding her dying daughter in her arms in the aftermath of Hiroshima parallels Grandpa's searching for Anna and his parents in the Dresden firebombing. The woman with the dying child in her arms also symbolically recreates the famous image of Mary holding the dead body of Christ when Christ was crucified.

After the recording, the girls in Oskar's class are crying, and the boys are making barfing noises. Oskar explains **scientific** aspects of the explosion, such as the fact that scientists could determine where the explosion came from by tracing shadows from objects in its path. Jimmy Snyder asks Oskar why he's so weird.

When Oskar narrates events in a hyper-scientific, associative fashion within the novel, the reader becomes accustomed to this style. Unlike Dad, Grandma, Mr. Black, or the other adults in the novel who are kind to Oskar, Oskar's classmates don't understand him, and instead of trying to communicate with him, they make fun of him.

Oskar explains that dark things burn more than lighter things, because dark absorbs light; in a chess match, only the white pieces and white squares remained, for example, and characters on a page of writing were burned out. Oskar has had the effect replicated by die-cutting the first page of **A Brief History of Time** in Japanese translation.

The image of specific letters and shapes disappearing while others remain is reminiscent of Oskar searching for missing puzzle pieces in his expeditions, as well as his search to find the lock that the key fits into: to cope with terrifying events, Oskar turns the chaos into clues, the not understandable into the understandable.

Jimmy Snyder asks Oskar who **Buckminster** is, and when Oskar says, "Buckminster is my pussy," the kids crack up. There's a photograph of a cat leaping through space in the chapter. Later that week, Jimmy continues to tease Oskar by making really raunchy jokes. Oskar gets a **letter** from the cab driver who'd driven him to Coney Island, thanking him for sending the $76.50 he owed him (though the cab driver does mention that Oskar hadn't sent a tip).

The kids in Oskar's class could live on a different planet in terms of their similarities to Oskar: while Oskar sees the world as an encyclopedic puzzle, Jimmy Snyder's primary concern is making fun of Oskar, rather than listening to anything that Oskar is trying to communicate. The letter from the cab driver shows that even though Oskar might lie sometimes (for instance, he doesn't tell Mom about where he's going), he doesn't break promises. It also shows Oskar's lack of worldly knowledge, leaving out the tip.

That weekend, he and Mr. Black (from the apartment upstairs) continue the search. They take the train to the Bronx, which makes Oskar very panicky, though he manages to get through it. When they get to Agnes Black's building, it turns out that she doesn't live there anymore. The Spanish woman who now lives there explains to Mr. Black in Spanish that the woman who used to live there had been a waitress at Windows on the World, the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Center. Oskar wonders if she could have served Dad coffee on the morning that Dad died.

When Mr. Black joins Oskar on the expedition, he makes Oskar do things that Oskar is afraid to do on his own, like take the subway—but Oskar is also making Mr. Black do things he hasn't done in decades, namely, leave his house and interact with other people in the world. Both Oskar and Mr. Black are expanding each other's horizons.

Oskar and Mr. Black leave, but Oskar makes Mr. Black turn around after three blocks to ask the Spanish woman if Agnes had had kids. She hadn't. On the way back to the subway, they buy tamales, which isn't something that Oskar would normally do.

Oskar is searching for some form of connection to every person that he meets on his expedition. Normally, Oskar is very regimented about his food, but Mr. Black opens him to new experiences.

They meet Albert Black and Alice Black, but neither one of them knows about the **key**. Oskar asks Alice if he can kiss her. Oskar receives a **letter** from Gary Franklin, a researcher, telling him to send his resume to apply for a position. There's a photograph of a set of doors.

Oskar asks several of the women he meets—Abby, Alice, etc.—to kiss him. He seems to be searching for a mother figure more than a romantic interest; most importantly, throughout his whole expedition, he's looking for people with whom he connects.

Allen Black is a doorman for a building on Central Park South. Oskar helps him set up an email account. As Oskar is leaving, Allen says, "Good luck, Oskar," but Oskar doesn't remember having told the man his name. At home, he has received a **letter** from **Jane Goodall.** Oskar puts a Band-Aid on the part of his chest that the **keys** rest against, because sometimes the keys get cold against his heart.

Allen seems to know who Oskar is even before Oskar tells him, which is the first inkling that the reader has that something might be up and that Oskar might not be as alone in his quest as he thinks he is. As Oskar meets more people, he also continues to receive replies from the famous people to whom he's reached out, suggesting that his world is continuing to expand. The cold of the keys against his chest suggests the pain that is also a part of love and connection.

On Tuesday, Oskar has an appointment with his therapist, Dr. Fein. Dr. Fein asks Oskar about Oskar's emotions, and Oskar describes emotions in detail, telling him that he feels too much, and that his insides don't match up with his outsides. Dr. Fein asks Oskar if he's noticed hairs on his scrotum, and suggests that some of his feelings might be due to puberty. Oskar rejects this statement, saying that he feels the way he does because his Dad died a horrible death.

Dr. Fein tries to find simple solutions to all of Oskar's complex emotions, suggesting that his feelings might have their roots in his puberty and growing older. Oskar doesn't want to assuage his feelings through therapy—he feels as though he has to solve the problem of his Dad's death in his own way, not through commonplace answers.

That night, Oskar listens to one of Dad's messages again—the one left at 9:46 AM—and waits for Saturday, so that he can continue the search.

Oskar's primary focus in life is his expedition, trying to assuage his guilt for his Dad's death.

CHAPTER 10, "WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE (4/12/78)"

This **letter**, by Oskar's Grandpa, has red pen circles around many words and phrases, as though someone had gone through and edited it. Many of the circled items are misspellings, like "bourgois" or "actreses," but some of the things circled aren't grammatical mistakes at all, including such phrases as "my child" and "your mother is writing in the Nothing guest room." Most of the **letter** is written in very long sentences, separated by commas, and it's all one paragraph.

This is the one letter that Grandpa ever mailed and that Dad ever received, and the version of it that the reader sees has been read, presumably by Dad, and marked up. The phrases circled that aren't grammatical errors appear to be marked because they're emotionally, if not factually wrong.

Grandpa is writing to his son from the spot where Anna and Grandma's father's shed used to stand. Grandpa has written a **letter** to his son every day, he writes. He recalls the homes he used to imagine for himself and Anna, right before the Dresden bombings. Grandpa realizes that Anna's father had been hiding Simon Goldberg, a Jewish friend, in the shed. Grandpa remembers that Goldberg was reading Ovid's "Metamorphosis," which he spells "Metamorphosis" instead of "Metamorphoses"—the word is circled in red pen.

Grandpa could either be writing to the unborn child who died with Anna in Dresden or to Dad, since Anna's father is the same as Grandma's father, and thus "your mother's father's shed" would be the same for both. Misspelling Ovid's Metamorphoses as Metamorphosis recalls, if unintentionally, Kafka's famous short story, "The Metamorphosis," in which the protagonist turns into a giant cockroach.

The last time that Grandpa saw Anna, she told him that she was pregnant. That night, the bombs fell on Dresden, and everything was burned. After the first raid, Grandpa leaves the shelter where he and his parents had taken refuge and searches everywhere for Anna, but he can't find her. During the second raid, he has to run from shelter to shelter, because the cellars are burning, and the city is getting more and more crowded with bombings. Grandpa burns his hand on a doorknob. There's a photograph of a **doorknob** inserted into the chapter.

The doorknob is a symbol of Grandpa's trauma from the Dresden firebombing. Since Grandpa burned his hand on a doorknob, doorknobs immediately remind him of the horror of that night, and of his inability to find Anna or his parents. Whenever the doorknob appears in the text, it's both an illustration of the scene and a sign that Grandpa is thinking about Dresden and is still traumatized.

Grandpa goes to the zoo, where he has to shoot all the animals that had escaped. People are dying gory deaths all around him—he sees people with their feet trapped in molten asphalt, for example. Grandpa gets taken to a hospital, where he is bandaged and his life is saved. After he is released, he searches everywhere for his parents, for Anna, and "for you" (although the "you" is circled in red). Grandpa doesn't find any of them, although he does find his typewriter.

Grandpa's forced shooting of the animals helps to explain why he keeps so many animals in his apartment in New York: it's his effort to try and somehow make up for the zoo animals he killed during the firebombing. Even though Grandpa loses his family, his typewriter is saved, giving him a medium through which he can preserve his memories and his grief.

Grandpa remembers that after Anna had told him she was pregnant, her father gave Grandpa a **letter** from Simon Goldberg, who had been sent to a concentration camp. The letter says that Grandpa had made a strong impression on Goldberg.

If Grandpa made a strong impression on Simon Goldberg, the opposite is also true: Grandpa admires Goldberg and hopes his disappearance does not indicate his death.

Grandpa writes that he knows that he will not be able to send the **letter** he has just written, no matter how hard he tries. He signs it, "I love you, Your father," which is also circled in red pen.

Dad never knew his father, so it's hard for him to believe the words "I love you" or "Your father"; hence, he circles them in red, because they seem like errors to him. Just as Oskar lost his father, Dad experienced his own father as an absence.

CHAPTER 11, "THE SIXTH BOROUGH"

In the first chapter of the novel, Oskar alludes to his Dad telling him the story of the Sixth Borough, and this chapter depicts the scene in which Dad tells Oskar this story.

Perhaps it's just coincidence that Dad doesn't tell his story until Chapter 11, but the coincidence of Chapter 11 and 9/11 seems hard to ignore.

Dad tells Oskar that the Sixth Borough was an island separated from Manhattan by a thin body of water, whose narrowest crossing equaled the world's long jump record. Every year, the long jumper made the leap, and there is a huge party. The children of New York float jars of fireflies in the river to illuminate the jumper's leap. For the few moments that the jumper was suspended the air, Dad says, every New Yorker felt as though he or she could fly.

In the story of the Sixth Borough, Dad turns New York into a private fable for himself and Oskar. The story of the long jumper leaping across the river in celebration every year suggests both danger and trust: the Sixth Borough is at once a mythical spot and a safe place, both close to and separated from New York. It is not quite connected.

One year, the jumper's big toe skimmed the surface of the river, and people realize that the island was beginning to drift away from Manhattan little by little. The bridges began to strain, the tunnels were pulled thin, and electrical wires snapped. The people of New York tried to save it by chaining it down or magnetizing it, but nothing worked: the island wanted to go.

But the Sixth Borough, like Never-Never Land or other spots that seem too perfect to last, cannot last forever. The Sixth Borough is symbolic of the inevitable passage of time: just as all children must grow up, and just as everyone must die, the Sixth Borough cannot be chained down.

People have to communicate from the Sixth Borough to Manhattan through cans attached with string. One boy ties together the strings from many miscellaneous items––a yo-yo, a talking doll, twine, a pearl necklace, clothesline, a harp, a tea bag, a tennis racket—to tell a girl that he loves her, and she said "I love you" in return. He closed the can into which she had spoken and stored it in his closet.

The message that the boy stores in the tin can in his closet foreshadows the key that Dad has in the vase in his closet, which Oskar takes to be a hidden message. The voice in the tin can also foreshadows Dad's voice messages from 9/11, which Oskar keeps in his closet. Preserving a message that can never be listened to, but always will be known about, also foreshadows Grandpa's decision to bury the letters to his son in Dad's coffin.

Central Park used to be in the Sixth Borough, but it was decided by New York City referendum that the park had to be saved, so the residents of Manhattan put hooks into the park and pull it into Manhattan. Children were allowed to lie on the park as it was being moved. Fireworks erupted, the Philharmonic played, and the children of New York were pulled "into Manhattan and into adulthood," Dad says. By the time the park had found its resting place, the children had fallen asleep, and "the park was a mosaic of their dreams."

Although the Sixth Borough itself has to leave, Central Park symbolically becomes just like that tin can with "I love you" buried inside: even if nobody knows it, the park becomes a way for the city to keep its cherished memories close to its heart, just as Oskar carries both the key from Dad's closet and the apartment key close to his heart.

Dad tells Oskar there are lots of clues in Central Park to its mysterious origin, like its strange fossil record and incongruous pH. There's also a tree in the park with two names carved in it that are not in the census. All the Sixth Borough's documents floated away, however, so there's no way to prove if those named belonged to residents of the Sixth Borough or not.

The fable of the Sixth Borough becomes Dad's and Oskar's way of having their own private world within the city: they share a secret knowledge and a special bond that no one else knows about.

Dad says that there's a gigantic hole in the middle of the Sixth Borough where Central Park used to be, so as the island floats across the planet, it frames whatever is underneath it. The island is completely frozen now, he tells Oskar.

The relationship between the Sixth Borough and Central Park is just like that of a lock and key: the Sixth Borough has a hole in the middle exactly the sixe of Central Park, and it is traveling all around the world, but the missing piece is right back at home the whole time.

Oskar asks Dad if any of the things that he dug up from Central Park were actually from the Sixth Borough, and Dad shrugs his shoulders.

Dad refuses to admit outright that the story of the Sixth Borough is a myth, allowing Oskar to believe—even if only slightly—that it might be true. And within this refusal is the idea, also, that such stories are true even if they are myths. That they contain truths and create connections that are real, that can't simply be shrugged away as fiction. To an extent, Jonathan Safran Foer is making a claim here about the truth, the reality, of Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close.

CHAPTER 12, "MY FEELINGS"

Grandma narrates this chapter, and she's writing to Oskar. She describes where she was when the plane hit the World Trade Center: she was knitting Oskar a white scarf, and she watched the coverage on the news, where a father was being interviewed about his missing girl.

Grandma and Grandpa both watched the terrorist attack on television, but several thousand miles apart. The father searching for his daughter recalls Grandpa searching for Anna during the Dresden firebombing.

Oskar's Mom calls, asking if Grandma has heard from Dad; neither of them has. Mom tells Grandma that she loves her. Grandma goes over to Oskar's apartment, and although she knows he's there, she can't find him at first. Finally, she lies on Oskar's bed and hears him breathing beneath her. He had been released from school immediately, he tells her, and he had walked straight home. She joins him under the bed, and they lie there together until Mom returns home.

The image on the television of the father searching for his daughter prompts Grandma to go over to Oskar's apartment; although Oskar doesn't reveal himself to her immediately, she knows that he is there. The bed they hide under is reminiscent of the bomb shelters during Dresden, as though the apartment building could fall around them.

Mom comes home and asks if Oskar's Dad had called. Oskar says no, and also says no when Mom asks if there had been any messages on the **phone**. Grandma keeps knitting the scarf longer and longer all afternoon. Mom makes posters with Dad's face and takes a rolling suitcase filled with them downtown to hang all around.

The white scarf Grandma knits is symbolic of her worry about Dad as well as her love for Oskar. Mom's suitcase filled with posters of Dad's face recalls the suitcase that Grandpa fills with the letters to his unborn son: both sets of papers are necessary for the creator to try and hang on to someone who is gone, but both forms of communication prove futile in the end.

While Mom is gone, Grandma waits with Oskar. When Oskar falls asleep, Grandma turns on the television but puts it on silent. The same pictures reel over and over: bodies falling, planes going into buildings, buildings falling.

The silent images of bodies falling and planes crashing into the building creates a verbal flip book in the chapter: the images go on loop in both the reader's head and Grandma's mind. These images are parallel to the ones Grandpa watches in Germany on the television screens.

Grandma writes about Dad's funeral sometime later, in which they buried Dad's empty coffin. That night, Oskar walks Grandma to her front door, and the doorman gives her a **letter** that a person had just left for her. Grandma asks Oskar to read the letter, and it says, "I'm sorry." Grandma had scrubbed away all Grandpa's writing after he had left her, but with these two words, she knows that he has returned.

When Grandma loses Thomas Schell, Jr., Thomas Schell, Sr., returns to her life: on the very night that they bury Dad, Grandpa comes back as though he has been resurrected.

CHAPTER 13, "ALIVE AND ALONE"

After six and a half months of searching for the **key** together, Mr. Black tells Oskar that he is finished, which makes Oskar feel incredibly lonely. Oskar goes up to Grandma's apartment, but Grandma isn't there. It's the first time that Oskar has been in Grandma's apartment without her. He begins to search around and finds a drawer filled with envelopes organized chronologically and mailed from Dresden. There's a **letter** from every day from May 31, 1963 to "the worst day" (that is, September 11, 2001). Some are addressed "To my unborn child" and some "To my child." Oskar starts opening the envelopes, and all of them are empty.

When Mr. Black leaves the expedition, Oskar is right back where he started, yet it feels so different: when he didn't know there was an option besides searching alone, he didn't realize he was lacking anything. But now, he feels like he's lost something he didn't know he was going to need. When Oskar goes to Grandma's house, searching for some companionship, he instead finds empty envelopes where there should be letters, and again feels a loss for something he didn't know existed. Again and again the novel creates powerful images of attempted but failed communication (a state that the novel seems to suggest is the natural state of all people, who are always failing to communicate with others in some way), and yet these failures do manage to communicate at least a form of love.

Oskar hears a sound coming from the guest room and realizes that it must be the renter. An old man (Grandpa, although Oskar doesn't know it yet) opens the guest room door. The man brings out a **notebook** and writes on the first page, "I don't speak." When Oskar asks who he is, the old man writes that his name is Thomas, just like Oskar's Dad. Oskar gives the old man his card.

When Oskar meets Grandpa, Grandpa doesn't tell him how they're related: perhaps to spare both of them the pain of both connection and loss. Oskar realizes that the renter has the same first name as Dad, thus linking them in his mind but he doesn't make the immediate assumption that they are related.

Oskar stands in the hall, and Grandpa stands in the room: "The door was open, but it felt like there was an invisible door between us." The old man shows Oskar the YES and NO tattooed on his hands. Eventually, Oskar goes into the guest room.

The door that Oskar feels between himself and the renter gives another significance to the images of the doorknobs in the text. When Oskar crosses the threshold into the guest room, they begin to connect.

Oskar decides to tell the old man—that is, Grandpa—the whole story of his expedition, starting with the broken vase and going through all of the Blacks. Fo Black, who lives in Chinatown, has "I♥NY" stickers and signs all over everything; Fo says that he thought "ny" meant "you." Oskar talks about Georgia Black, in Staten Island, whose house is a museum of her husband's life, though her husband is still alive: the house was filled with his memorabilia and photographs, but there is nothing about her. There's a photograph of the Staten Island Ferry in the chapter: Oskar had been very scared to travel on the ferry. Oskar describes some of the other Blacks, including Nancy Black, a barista, and Ray Black, who is behind bars, so Oskar writes him a **letter**.

Even though Oskar doesn't know who the renter is, he is ready to accept him as a father figure: his relationship with Mr. Black as well as his ability to open up to other people throughout the course of his expedition has given him the ability to share his story and unlock some of his feelings to the renter. Crossing the Staten Island Ferry represents another one of Oskar's fears that he had to conquer to continue on his quest. Oskar's desire to find the lock to fit the key overrides his smaller anxieties.

Then, Oskar describes Ruth Black, whose address is the eighty-sixth floor of the Empire State Building. Oskar is very panicky to get on the elevator, but Mr. Black just says that that that's okay, so Oskar has nothing to argue against, and eventually, he makes it up. When they're on the observation deck, Oskar imagines a plane flying into the building, just below them. But eventually, he looks at the different views of New York through the binoculars: "It's like New York is a miniature replica of New York." There's a picture of the binoculars with shadows in the glass of the other people on the observation deck.

At the beginning of the chapter, Oskar says that Mr. Black has quit the quest, but he doesn't tell us why until he tells Grandpa the story. Many of the important events of the novel occur in this way: the consequence is told, but the why and how is not revealed until much later. Here, Jonathan Safran Foer frames the flashback of Ruth on the Empire State Building within the story of the expedition as Oskar relays it to the renter, not at the same time as Oskar is living it.

Oskar has no idea who Ruth might be, but he has a hunch when he sees an old woman holding a clipboard. He asks her for her name, and it's Ruth. Ruth gives Oskar and Mr. Black a tour, recounting the history of the Empire State Building: she describes its architecture, gives **statistics** about its structure, and tells them several cultural facts about the building. When the official tour ends, Ruth gives them an extended history—she knows practically everything there is to know about the Empire State Building.

Just as Mr. Black has been living an extremely full life, even though he's been in his apartment for decades, Ruth has been living an extremely full life, even though she's been in exactly the same space for decades. Ruth knows about every nook and cranny of the Empire State Building, just as Mr. Black knows every story behind the many mementoes that fill his apartment.

Mr. Black gets down on his knees and asks Ruth on a date. She says that she stays in the building always: she has lived in a storage room up there since her husband died. Her husband, one day, had found a spotlight in a store and occasionally beamed it across the skyline of New York so that you could see it from the Empire State Building; there's a photograph of this effect in the chapter. When her husband died, Ruth came to the observation deck to look for him, and then could never bear to go home. Mr. Black says that that's okay—he'll come up to the observation deck to spend the afternoon with her.

Ruth Black, just like Mr. Black, has stayed in one place because she is still waiting for her husband, even though he's dead: she doesn't want to emerge into the real world, where she might feel his loss more profoundly. Magical thinking is a key component of how many characters in the novel relate to the dead: Mr. Black nails a nail every day to a tree to commemorate his wife's death; Oskar keeps his Dad's voice on the answering machine in his closet; Grandpa writes letters to his unborn son.

When Mr. Black and Oskar return home, Mr. Black tells Oskar that he's finished searching. Oskar screams an obscenity at him—or, at least, imagines himself doing that—and runs to Grandma's apartment, where he is now. "I've been searching for six months, and I don't know a single thing I didn't know six months ago," Oskar tells the renter (Grandpa).

Mr. Black has finished searching because he's found something: Ruth, who he plans to visit every afternoon. Oskar frequently expresses his most violent emotions in imagination, rather than in reality: though he is mad enough to scream an obscenity in thought to Mr. Black, he bottles that up inside, like one of his many bruises, and silently holds the pain.

Oskar, surprising himself, runs home and gets the **phone** with Dad's messages on it. Oskar plays them for Grandpa. Grandpa suggests (by writing) that maybe Dad had seen somebody inside and ran in to save that person. Oskar wonders if his Dad died on the roof, in a meeting for the family jewelry business. Grandpa asks what Oskar thinks about his grandpa; "I don't think about him," replies Oskar.

Oskar usually plans every step he takes far in advance, but his desire to show Grandpa the answering machine surprises himself: it is as though he is finally ready to help lessen his own burden of guilt by letting others help carry some of the load. Grandpa tries to hint obliquely at his identity by asking Oskar about his grandfather, but Oskar doesn't pick up the hint.

Oskar says that he wants to know how Dad died so he can stop inventing how he died. Oskar says he has found videos of the falling bodies, and he wonders if his Dad could have been one of them. Oskar asks Grandpa to try talking. Grandpa puts his fingers on his throat, and they flutter, but no sound comes out; he points to the phrase "I'm sorry" in his **daybook**. Oskar takes a photograph of Grandpa's hands with Grandpa's camera (Oskar knows that the camera is Grandpa's, because he's been using it throughout his expedition, but he doesn't know he's taking a picture of Grandpa.) The photograph is in the chapter, spread across two pages, one for each hand.

Oskar thinks that if he knows how his Dad dies, he can assuage some of his guilt, because he can stop imagining the worst: it's worse to not know what happened and constantly have to live in limbo than to know and to be able to deal with hard, scientific facts. The photograph of Grandpa's hands spreads across both pages of the novel, giving equal weight to each hand: YES and NO appear to be simultaneously true, creating both the sensations of certainty and uncertainty.

Grandpa writes Oskar a **note** asking Oskar not to tell Grandma that they'd met. Grandpa also writes that if Oskar ever needs him, he should throw pebbles at the guest room window.

Grandpa doesn't want to cross the line—both literally and metaphorically—into Grandma's territory: he wants to proceed carefully and do what she has permitted him to do, rather than overstep rules by having too close a relationship with Oskar.

Oskar tries to sleep, but keeps inventing different ideas, like frozen planes and skyscrapers with moving parts so that they could even have holes in the middle for planes to fly through. Then, he has the idea to dig up Dad's coffin.

The image of a skyscraper with a hole in the middle for a plane to fly through, in addition to presenting a fantastical solution to reverse-engineer Dad's death, also echoes the image of the Sixth Borough floating through the ocean with a hole in the center, and to Oskar who feels he has a hole, the absence of his father, in his heart.

CHAPTER 14, "WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE (9/11/03)"

The chapter opens with a few pages from Grandpa's **daybook**, which are phrases he had written to Oskar in the previous chapter: "I don't speak, I'm sorry"; "My name is Thomas"; "I'm still sorry". There's a photograph of a **doorknob** in the chapter. Grandpa writes to Dad about how he is about to go meet Oskar to dig up Dad's coffin.

The one-sided conversation that gets preserved in the daybook because Grandpa writes rather than speaks emphasize the guilt and anxiety lying underneath the entire conversation: Grandpa's entire message to Oskar can be summed up in telling him his name and that he's "sorry."

Grandpa tells the story about his arrival in New York, a few days after September 11, 2001. Grandpa gives a **note** to Grandma's doorman, and she stands with her palms against the window that night. He continues to send notes asking if she wants to see him again, and she continues to give ambiguous responses, such as "Don't go away." Grandpa throws an apple at the window, anticipating that the window will shatter, but the window is open and the apple goes into the apartment. The doorman gives Grandpa a **key**, but the door is open when he goes up. Grandma tells him that he can only go into the guest room.

Grandma doesn't invite Grandpa back into her life actively, but she doesn't turn him away; her ambiguity is its own kind of silence, and he must do the emotional work to come back in. When Grandpa gets the key to go up to the apartment, however, it turns out that Grandma is already ready for him. He doesn't have to turn the doorknob that might remind him of his trauma (doorknobs trigger his PTSD); rather, he can step right over the threshold.

Grandpa writes about getting off the plane soon after September 11, 2001. He writes in his **daybook** to the customs agent that he is there "to mourn," then crosses out "mourn" and writes "try to live." The guards wonder why he has so many suitcases. Grandpa opens one, and it is filled with papers; he writes that they are **letters** to his dead son that he was unable to send to him while the son was alive.

Grandpa brings all the letters he's written to his son but never sent—and now, it's too late to send them either to his son who died in Dresden or to Dad, who died on September 11, so Grandpa carries these letters as a reminder of what he has lost, what he has failed to communicate, and in the hopes of communicating somehow.

Grandpa calls Grandma on a pay **phone**, and when she answers, he tries to communicate with her by pressing the numbers on the phone. Grandma says that all she hears is beeps and hangs up. Grandpa tries spelling out words by pressing the numbers that correspond with each **letter** (love is "5, 6, 8, 3" for example). He then gives about two and a half pages of numbers, with exclamation points and question marks apparently dividing them into phrases, but they're not translated into anything legible.

The phone offers the promise of connection between people, but for both Dad and Grandpa, the phone becomes a source of missed connections. Dad left voice messages on the morning of 9/11 when no one picked up the phone. Grandpa connects with Grandma, but he cannot talk, and when he tries to communicate through pushing the buttons to represent letters, all he transmits is gibberish.

Grandpa was in a Dresden train station on September 11, 2001, "when I lost everything for the second time." He passes an electronics store with a grid of televisions, all showing the same images of the buildings, except for one television showing a nature program of a lion eating a flamingo. During the following days and weeks, Grandpa follows the list of the dead; one day, he sees his son's name, which is also his own name: Thomas Schell, with the phrase, "He leaves behind a wife and a son." Almost without thinking, Grandpa gets on a plane and goes to Manhattan.

That one lion eating a flamingo in the corner of the display represents the natural order of the world amidst such unnatural chaos: although the lion's murder appears more visceral and brutal in the image, the terrorist attack is the unnatural, jarring, abnormal event that appears so calm on the rest of the screens. Grandpa sees his own name in the obituaries, which makes it seem for a moment as though he is the one that has been killed.

Grandma lets Grandpa live in the guest room. He finds his **daybooks** from before he had left: they are in the body of the grandfather clock. He finds many more memories and photographs. Gradually, Grandma visits him, and although the visits aren't exactly friendly, they start to get longer. Eventually, Grandpa asks Grandma to pose so that he can sculpt her, and she agrees. He hasn't made any sculptures for forty years, he tells her. The scene becomes erotic.

Saving Grandpa's daybooks in a clock symbolically suggests the wish to freeze and preserve time: Grandpa's daybooks represent a record of all the things he said to people every day, and by saving them like a time capsule in the clock, Grandma preserves the past. Gradually, time heals all wounds, and Grandma and Grandpa are closer now, despite their forty years apart, than they ever have been.

The writing throughout the chapter is getting smaller and smaller, because there will never enough pages in the book for Grandpa to tell the whole story, he writes. Grandpa asks Grandma if he can meet Oskar, but she says no; however, she shows him how he can see Oskar through the **keyhole** in the coat closet.

Grandpa wants to put everything that has happened to him down on paper, but he knows that there isn't enough paper in the world to replicate and preserve someone's life completely: for that, you have to rely on other people to carry on the memory. There is no perfect or total way to communicate. There is instead the imperfectness of love and memory and human interaction.

One day, Grandma tells Grandpa about Dad—who is, she says, "Not our son, my son." Grandma gave Dad the only **letter** that Grandpa had ever sent and tells Grandpa that Dad had been obsessed with it. Grandpa says that Dad found him once; Dad pretended to be a journalist doing a story about Dresden survivors.

Even though Grandma and Grandpa have grown closer now, there are some wounds that can't be healed: Grandpa can't retroactively become a father figure for Dad, because he was absent for Dad's whole life. Dad did go to meet Grandpa, but they never revealed their identities to each other—they each lied to the other about knowing who the other was, connecting without actually touching, almost connecting.

Grandpa spends most of his time walking around the city, and then he begins to follow Oskar. When Oskar starts going on his expedition, Grandpa follows him; he makes a map of where they had gone, but the map doesn't seem to make any sense. Grandpa goes up to house, on Staten Island—probably Georgia Black's house—and knocks on the door after Oskar and Mr. Black leave; the woman tells him that she's just gotten off the **phone** with Oskar's mother and wonders why Grandpa doesn't know about the **key**.

As Oskar goes around New York searching for his Dad, Grandpa follows Oskar at a distance: he's connecting with his grandson from afar as his grandson connects with his Dad from afar. When Grandpa finally approaches one of the Blacks, Georgia, to try and figure out what's going on, Georgia lets on that Grandpa isn't the only one following Oskar on his quest: though Oskar might think he's alone, he's got a whole invisible support system behind him.

Grandpa goes to a bookstore on the Upper West Side and sees a man whom he thinks is Simon Goldberg. The man gives him a hug and walks away. The writing is getting closer and closer together on the page, and Grandpa writes that he wants an infinitely blank book.

Whether or not the man in the bookstore is actually Simon Goldberg, the encounter provides Grandpa some sense of closure. In Germany, Grandpa had always seen Simon surrounded by books and reading; the man in the same setting allows Grandpa to think that Simon has survived the Holocaust.

One day, Grandpa writes, when Oskar and the old man (Mr. Black) go into the Empire State Building, Grandpa waits for them in the street. The old man later grabs Grandpa by the collar, asks why he's been following them around, and tells him to leave. Grandpa writes that he is Oskar's grandfather, and that Oskar doesn't know he's following them.

As it turns out, Mr. Black's quitting of the expedition after the Empire State Building might have another reason behind it besides Ruth: when Mr. Black finds out that Grandpa has been following them, Mr. Black feels like his role has become void. Oskar doesn't need two caring old men monitoring him, after all, and Mr. Black isn't his Grandpa.

Grandpa returns to the point in the story when Oskar meets Grandpa, only knowing him as "the renter." That night, Grandma and Grandpa make love. Later, Oskar throws pebbles at the window. Grandpa goes outside, and Oskar tells Grandpa about his idea to dig up Dad's grave. The text gets too close to read, eventually crowding into a black square.

Grandpa is writing more and more, as though he will never be finished writing because his life is fuller than what he can preserve on the page. He writes over his own writing, creating an indecipherable black square: cramming everything in means that nothing makes sense.

CHAPTER 15, "A SIMPLE SOLUTION TO AN IMPOSSIBLE PROBLEM"

The day after "the renter" (Grandpa) and Oskar dig up Dad's grave, Oskar goes to Mr. Black's apartment to tell him what happened, but an unfamiliar woman answers and tells him that she's selling the apartment, and she doesn't know what happened to the owner. The woman tells Oskar that contractors and garbage men are about to take everything out of the apartment.

It's unclear exactly what happened to Mr. Black, but all signs suggest that he has died, since realtors and contractors are unceremoniously getting rid of all the layers and layers of stuff in his apartment. Though, perhaps, he too has moved permanently into the Empire State Building to be with Ruth.

Oskar goes to the index of biographies Mr. Black kept and takes out Mr. Black's card. He looks in the S-file—he can't help it—and finds "Oskar Shell: Son". Oskar wishes he had known that he wasn't going to see Mr. Black again. Oskar kept searching for the Blacks after Mr. Black left, but it wasn't the same: he no longer felt like he was moving in the direction of finding out more about Dad.

The first time Oskar had looked in Mr. Black's biographical index, he was disappointed not to find an entry for his father; now, he's surprised to find an entry for himself. Oskar's business card lists at least a dozen identities, but the single word "Son" on Mr. Black's card for him encapsulates them all. He was a son to his Dad, and he was also a kind of son to Mr. Black.

The last Black Oskar visited was Peter, in Harlem. Peter was sitting on the stoop when Oskar arrived, holding his baby, who is also named Peter. The two Peters make Oskar wonder why he isn't named Thomas, and why the renter is named Thomas.

The man named Peter with his son, also Peter, mirrors Oskar's Grandpa, Thomas, and his Dad, Thomas. Oskar starts, subconsciously at least, wondering if there could be any deeper relationship between the renter and his family.

When Oskar comes home that night, he looks at the **telephone** (the new one, not the old one with his Dad's messages on it). He hasn't listened to any messages on the new phone. But now, he presses the Play button, and he hears Abby Black, saying that she might be able to help Oskar with the **key**. The message had been waiting for Oskar for eight months, but Oskar hasn't heard it, because he had been too scared to handle the phone or listen to messages.

Oskar's been too traumatized by the phone since his father called on 9/11 and Oskar didn't pick up, even when he heard his Dad speaking. However, as it turns out, there's been a message waiting for him in the phone this entire time, and it's the key to solving the mystery of the key. Here is another missed connection, but suddenly the connection is made.

Oskar tells Mom that he's going out, and Mom doesn't protest, even when Oskar says he'll be out really late. Oskar takes the subway to Abby Black's house. There's a photograph of the house in the chapter; it's the same photograph as from the first time Oskar visited Abby. The door is open a little, as though Abby knew that he was coming.

Mom's apparent nonchalance about Oskar's late-night journey out, as well as the fact that Abby's door is already open, hint that Mom might know more than she lets on. When Oskar first visited Abby, he walked the whole way; through his expedition, he's overcome his fear of the subway.

Abby says that her husband knows about the **key**, but on the day when Oskar had visited eight months ago, she couldn't tell Oskar about it, because she was having a fight with her husband and wanted to hurt him. Abby tells Oskar that her husband has been looking for Oskar, and says that her husband can explain everything.

If Oskar had asked to meet the husband eight months ago, his expedition would have been over. However, as it turned out, finding the expedition to find the key's purpose developed into a journey of self-discovery and growth for Oskar. The attempt to connect with his Dad made him connect with many others.

Oskar asks Abby why her message on the answering machine had cut off in the middle, and Abby says that Oskar's Mom picked up, and she told her the whole story: about Oskar coming to visit, about the **key**, about Oskar's mission. All of a sudden, everything makes sense. That's why Mom never seemed concerned when he went out without explanation, and that's why it seemed like all the Blacks knew that Oskar was coming: Mom knew what was happening the whole time. "My search was a play that Mom had written, and she knew the ending when I was at the beginning," thinks Oskar.

The cut-off message has stayed on the answering machine for eight months, even though Mom picked up halfway through, heard Abby's story, and found out about the expedition. Why did she leave the message on the machine? Mom seems to be leaving this message as a clue for Oskar: this is her way of helping him find his own way on the search. Oskar feels betrayed that Mom knew everything the entire time, but in way by stepping back—a terribly difficult thing to do for a parent—Mom allowed Oskar the space he needed to move forward while still protecting him.

Oskar goes to Abby Black's husband's office. The husband, William Black, works on foreign markets, which is why he's at work on a Sunday night. Oskar asks William if he recognizes Dad's name, but William says he doesn't. Oskar describes his first visit to Abby Black, eight months ago, when a man was yelling at Abby. William was the man yelling. There's a photograph of the back of a man's head.

William's work as a stockbroker takes Oskar full circle to the work done in the World Trade Center. The photograph of William Black's head mirrors the photo that Oskar took of the back of Abby's head: a portrait of the couple, but without faces.

Oskar shows William the **key**. William asks Oskar if he found it in a blue vase. William says that he's spent two years trying to find this key. It's the key to a safe-deposit box, William tells Oskar: William had found it in his own dad's closet after his dad had died, in a tall blue vase.

Oskar wasn't the only one looking for his Dad: William Black, a complete stranger, was trying to find Oskar's Dad so that he could reconnect with his own father.

William says that his father died two years ago, fairly suddenly: he went to the doctor for a checkup and the doctor told him that he had two more months to live. William wanted to get rid of all his dad's things, so he had an estate sale. His dad, he said, had spent the last two months of his life writing **letters** to all his friends and acquaintances to say his goodbyes.

William's father is another character in the novel who writes or receives letters to connect with people: when William's father knows he is dying, he writes letters to everyone he knows to share a memory or leave a piece of himself with them.

William goes through his father's Rolodex and talks to everyone about the **letters** that his father had sent to each of them: all the letters were different and personal. His father had written him a letter, too, but William couldn't read it for a few weeks. When he finally did read it, it was very matter-of-fact, more of a business document than a letter. At the end of the letter, William's father wrote that he left him a **key** in a blue vase to his safe-deposit box, but by that point, William had already sold all of his father's belongings—and he had sold the vase to Dad.

William's father's Rolodex sounds similar to Mr. Black's biographical index—both function as a record of the people in these characters' lives, both major and minor---except that Mr. Black's index contains lots of celebrities that Mr. Black never met personally. William had been distant from his father, and the letter from his father just opens up another missed connection, since it directs William to a key that he'd accidentally sold.

William says that Dad had come to the sale on the way home from work and that Dad was planning to give the vase as an anniversary gift to Mom. Oskar wishes that William could remember every tiny detail about Dad. William tried for a long time to find Oskar's Dad; he even put up posters about it, but since it was the week of September 11, there were posters everywhere. Oskar tells William that Mom put up posters looking for Dad, too, and tells William that Dad died in September 11.

Oskar is soaking in everything he can learn about his own Dad from William's story about William's reconnection with his father: the important parts, to Oskar, are the parts in which his Dad's memory is captured through details. William was searching for Oskar's Dad to reconnect with his own father at the same time that Oskar's Mom was searching for Dad: they both put up posters, but the pieces of paper could do nothing to bring back the dead.

William invites Oskar to go with him to the bank to open the box, but Oskar declines: he's very curious about what's inside, but he doesn't want to get confused.

After searching for the key for eight months, Oskar realizes that he doesn't actually need to see what it opens: the real solution has been the people he's met along the way.

Oskar tells William that his Dad had left five messages on the answering machine on the morning of September 11, but then he tells William something he's never told anyone: that his Dad called at 10:26, when Oskar was home. Dad asked "Are you there?" eleven times; the message lasts until 10:28, when the building came down.

Oskar uses the occasion of finding out what the key unlocks to unlock, symbolically, the secret he's carried around inside him: that he heard his Dad but didn't pick up the phone. The key, therefore, has served its purpose.

Oskar asks William if he forgives him for not being able to tell anyone about the **phone** call, and William says that he does. Oskar gives him the **key**.

Oskar needs forgiveness to feel closure: the quest is not about what the key unlocks, but about being able to forgive himself.

That night, Oskar meets the renter (Grandpa, that is) under the streetlamp to discuss the details of their plan to dig up Dad's coffin: somehow, they're much better at concocting these plans than actually carrying them out. Oskar tells Grandpa that he found the lock to the **key**. Oskar says that he wishes he hadn't found the lock because now he can't look for it. Oskar and Grandpa agree to dig up Dad's grave on the second anniversary of Dad's death.

Oskar and Grandpa have planned and schemed and plotted, but—like Hamlet—they find that it's psychologically easier to delay, rather than to act. But finally, once Oskar has found the lock for the key, he finds the momentum to go through the plan of digging up the coffin.

Grandpa gives Oskar a **letter**. It's from **Stephen Hawking**, who thanks Oskar for all the letters that he's sent over the past two years and invites him to visit for a few days in Cambridge. Oskar had asked in a letter, "What if I never stop inventing?" and Hawking replies, "Maybe you're not inventing at all."

Oskar has received several form letters from Stephen Hawking, but this is the first sing that there's ever been someone else on other end, listening and caring for him. Oskar's note to Hawking implies Oskar's worry that he will never be able to escape his frenzied need to "invent" his way out of his guilt and sadness at his father's death. Hawking's response seems to suggest that perhaps what Oskar is actually doing is just expressing his love.

CHAPTER 16, "MY FEELINGS"

Grandma, the narrator, describes the day when Grandpa comes in in the middle of the night with dirt on his pants. Grandpa doesn't tell her what happened; instead, he says that he wants to get her some magazines from the airport. She tells him to bring a suitcase, supposedly to carry lots of magazines, but so that really he can bring his things with him.

Grandpa's actions speak louder than words; that is, Grandma understands more from his non-verbal communication than the words that he says. "Getting magazines from the airport" is his excuse to take himself to the airport with a suitcase so that he can leave, as he did when Grandma was pregnant with Dad.

Grandma remembers the day her father died, trapped under the ceiling, but she can't remember his last words to her: she told him that she had to leave, but she doesn't recall what he said in reply. In her dream about it, she says, the tears go up his cheeks and return to his eyes.

Both Oskar and Grandma fantasize about reversing the laws of physics so that events wind backwards into themselves and things can reset to normal, as though tragedies had never happened.

Grandma puts the typewriter and paper into a suitcase. She writes a **note**, tapes it to the window, and takes a cab to follow Grandpa to the international terminal at the airport, where he is sitting and asking people what time it is.

The story line of the letter that Grandma has been writing throughout the novel and the story line through the letters Grandpa has been writing converge: Grandma sees Grandpa asking for the time, so she meets him as he is writing the latest letter of his presented in the novel.

Grandpa tells Grandma that Anna had been pregnant, but Grandma knew the whole time. Grandpa also tells Grandma that he has been seeing Oskar, but Grandma knows that, too. Grandpa says that last night, he and Oskar dug up Dad's grave, and Grandpa buried the **letters** he wrote, along with the **key** to Grandma's apartment, in the grave.

Grandpa kept his relationship with Oskar secret because he didn't want to become too intimately involved in the family, and he had kept Anna's pregnancy secret to protect Grandma from even deeper sadness—but, as it turns out, he didn't need to protect Grandma, because she knew both secrets the whole time and was strong enough to deal with them.

Everyone around them in the airport is coming or going. Grandma suggests that they stay in the airport forever: "Not coming or going. Not something or nothing. Not yes or no." Grandma describes a dream she has had of Noah's Ark, but in reverse: the rain going into the clouds and the animals descending the ramp, two by two.

Grandma's dream of reversing Noah's Ark suggests her desire to reverse the past. The image of bringing the animals back recalls the first time Grandpa left her, forty years ago, when she released all his animals from the apartment; this time, she wants to re-start and keep Grandpa with her.

Grandma writes that she is typing this very **letter** sitting across from Grandpa at a table at the airport. When she is typing the letter to Oskar, Grandma writes, she is choosing Oskar over Grandpa, because she can't see Grandpa's face. She finishes describing the dream, which goes back to Genesis: God said let there be light, Grandma writes, and there was darkness.

Now, the reader finally knows why Grandma is in the airport, as she wrote in the first chapter that is from her point of view: she and Grandpa are suspended in this limbo of not choosing, of remaining between the past (represented by flying back home to Dresden) and the present (returning to New York).

Grandma describes the last night that she spent with Anna. She regrets never telling Anna how much she loved her: she thought that it was always unnecessary to say, because they slept in the same bed every night. But, writes Grandma, it's always necessary. She ends the **letter** by telling Oskar that she loves him.

Just as the one letter Dad did receive from Grandpa ends with Grandpa telling him that he loves him, Grandma ends her letter to Oskar by expressing her love, which is her way of saying goodbye without leaving Oskar wracked with guilt and worry that he had done something to send her away. And it is a signal that all of the communication in the novel, failed and partial as it is, are in fact expressions of love.

CHAPTER 17, "BEAUTIFUL AND TRUE"

During dinner with Mom and Ron, Oskar finds out that Ron's wife and daughter had died in a car accident. Ron and Mom met in a support group for people who had lost family. Oskar didn't know that Mom had been going to this group.

Ron isn't just a quick replacement for Dad, it turns out—Mom met Ron because she was suffering so much from Dad's loss that she went to a support group. So Dad is at the center of Ron and Mom's relationship, just as Ron's lost family is at the center of his relationship with Mom. And, of course, form this they have forged a new relationship, as well.

Oskar has packed a backpack and gathered all his supplies together to dig up the coffin. At 11:50 PM, Oskar sneaks out of the house to meet Grandpa, and at exactly midnight, Gerald, the limousine driver who had driven Oskar to Dad's funeral, arrives. During the drive, Oskar figures out that he can open the sunroof; he stands partway out of the car and takes pictures of the stars; Gerald warns him when a bridge or tunnel is coming up so that he won't get decapitated. There's a photograph of the starry sky in the chapter.

Oskar repeats the journey to Dad's gravesite that he took in the first chapter, when Gerald drove Oskar, Mom, and Grandma to the cemetery. This time, Oskar is also obsessed with looking at the stars—he seems to have conquered any fear of traveling after all his exploration through the city. The peacefulness and quietness of the night sky suggests an order and safe respite from the turbulence of life on Earth.

At the cemetery, it takes twenty minutes just to find Dad's grave. Oskar and Grandpa start digging, but after an hour, they've barely gotten anywhere. The flashlight runs out of batteries, and Oskar calls Gerald to tell him to get more. They shovel in the dark. When Gerald returns with the batteries, Gerald helps them shovel, which makes it go much more quickly. It's 2:56 AM, exactly two hours after arriving at the cemetery, when the shovel touches the coffin.

Oskar imagines that he'll be able to dig up his Dad's grave quickly, perhaps because of the ease with which Yorick's skull appeared in Hamlet, but dredging up the past appears to be trickier than Oskar had imagined. Gerald had seemed remote and distant when they had buried Dad, but now, Oskar and Grandpa rely on the kindness of this relative stranger to help them reach the coffin.

Oskar is surprised that the coffin is wet and cracked in a few places. The lid just rests on top: it's not nailed shut. Oskar opens the coffin and is surprised, although he knows he shouldn't be, at how empty it is. Even though Oskar and Grandpa had gone over all the details, they hadn't discussed until the day before what they would do when they opened the coffin. Oskar says that they will fill it, but he can't decide with what. Grandpa brings suitcases filled with **letters** to his unborn son to put into the coffin.

Oskar knows rationally that his Dad will not be in the coffin, but he can't help but hope—even though the hope is completely irrational—that Dad might somehow appear there, or, at least, that Dad might have left him a clue of some sort. By filling the coffin with the letters to his son, Grandpa gives closure to the ritual: he has, in some way, finally delivered these letters, and now their messages will be preserved, like the "I love you" in the tin can from the story of the Sixth Borough, or Dad's voice on the answering machine.

It's 4:12 AM when Oskar returns home. Mom is on the sofa, awake, but doesn't ask Oskar where he's been. Oskar can't sleep. He goes into the living room and starts crying. Mom hugs him. Oskar promises to get better soon, to be normal and happy, and Mom says that it's okay.

Mom has been following Oskar's expedition from afar the entire time, and this night is no exception: she knows, without him having to tell her, that his journey has been necessary.

Mom says that Dad had called her from the World Trade Center on the day that he died. Dad told her that he was on the street, out of the building, even though he wasn't. Oskar cries, and Mom carries him to bed. Oskar tells her that it's okay if she falls in love again, but she says that she never will. He hears her crying.

Oskar had tried to protect his Mom this whole time from the fact that Dad had called on September 11, but it turned out that Mom had also had a message from Dad on that day that she had never told Oskar about, and in that message Dad also had tried to protect Mom from the truth. All of these lies, however misguided, are expressions of love and the desire to protect a loved one.

Oskar gets out his binder of *Stuff That Happened to Me*, which is full. He finds the pictures of the falling body. He rips the pages out of the book and reverses the order so that the last one is first and the first is last, creating a little flipbook so that it looks like the man is falling up through the sky.

Oskar's flipbook now represents not anything that happened to him in reality, but his imagination's desire: the "Stuff That Happened To Me" is in fact a log of Oskar's fantasies, not his reality.

Oskar imagines what it would be like if time worked like that: if the man had gone back into the window, and Dad would have left his messages backward until the machine was empty, and the plane would have flown backwards to Boston. "I'd have said 'Dad?' backward, which would have sounded the same as 'Dad' forward," says Oskar. He would have told Oskar the story of the Sixth borough backwards, from "I love you" to "Once upon a time." "We would have been safe," says Oskar. The book ends with a flipbook of pictures of the man falling up through the sky.

The images at the end of the book that imagine the body falling up into the sky rather than down out of the building present the same dream of revising history that Grandma has when she dreams about the animals going back onto Noah's Ark or Genesis happening in reverse: it might be more comforting to try and reverse-engineer the past, since hindsight is twenty-twenty, but inevitably, everyone must face the truth, and all that anyone can do is continue to live and love each other as deeply as possible in the present.

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