

Penguin



Readers



JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

EXTREMELY
LOUD &
INCREDIBLY
CLOSE

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CHAPTER ONE

About me and my dad

Oskar Schell, September 2003

I like to **invent** things. For example, what if a **kettle** had a **spout** that opened and closed like a mouth, and it could sing or talk? Then our kettle could sing happy songs when it was making hot water. Or it could read a story in Dad's voice to help me fall asleep.

Another thing: there are lots of times when you need to escape quickly. But humans don't have their own wings, or not yet. So what about a very, very small **helicopter**? Or maybe a very small **parachute** with a motor. Then you would be able to fly away and be safe at any time.

I invent things to make myself feel better. Something else I do is to play my **tambourine**. For the last two years—since Dad died—I've had heavy boots. But playing the same sound again and again on my tambourine helps me, and makes me feel safe. One day, about a year after Dad died, I was playing it in my room when Ron came in and said he'd like to buy me a **drum set**. I really wanted a drum set, but I didn't want to say yes to him. He picked up my tambourine and started to shake it. I know he just wanted to be friendly, but it made me **incredibly** angry. "That's mine!" I told him, and I took it from him. What I really wanted to tell him was, "You're not my dad, and you never will be."

For my ninth birthday, which was last year, Grandma gave me a *National Geographic* magazine. She also bought me a white jacket (because I only wear white clothes), and she gave me Grandpa's camera. I asked, "Why didn't he take it with him when he left you?"

She said, "Maybe he wanted you to have it, Oskar."

I said, "But he left thirty years before I was born!"

Anyway, I read a really interesting thing in the magazine that Grandma gave me. It said that there are more people alive now than have died in all of human history. The number of dead people is getting bigger and bigger. So that gave me an idea. We should build **skyscrapers** for dead people that are built down, not up. They could be under the skyscrapers for living people that are built up. Then you could **bury** people 100 floors down, underground. There would be a dead world under the living world.

I also invented a new kind of skyscraper. It moves up and down while its elevator stays in the same place. If you want to go to the ninety-fifth floor, you just push the "95" button, and the ninety-fifth floor comes to you. It's extremely useful, and very safe. For example, imagine you're on the ninety-fifth floor and a plane **crashes** into a part of the building below you. The building will just take you quickly and easily to the ground.

On Sundays, Dad and I used to play a great game that was called "Search **Missions**." Sometimes the missions were

quite easy, and sometimes they were extremely difficult. For the last mission, which never finished, he gave me a map of Central Park. “What are the **clues**?” I asked.

Dad said, “There aren’t any clues. Not this time.”

“Oh! Then what do I do?” I asked. He **shrugged** his shoulders, like he didn’t know anything. I loved that.

I spent hours and hours walking around Central Park with Grandma, looking for clues. I took a photograph of every sign I saw. I read the information about each animal at the zoo. I decided to bring home everything I found to Dad: a coin, an old spoon, a pen, a pair of broken glasses. He was usually reading the *New York Times* at the kitchen table. He loved to read the newspaper and use a red pen to mark any mistakes he came across. Dad looked at everything I had found and said nothing.

I asked, “Have I found anything that’s right?” Dad shrugged his shoulders again. He marked one more thing in the newspaper, then went to the bathroom. I looked at the page.



There was a sentence that said, “We will not stop looking for our daughter until we find her.” There was a circle around “not stop looking.” It wasn’t a mistake! It was a message to me!

So I went back to the park for the next three nights. But the more I found, the less I understood. And then the Worst Day happened.

Tuesday September 11th 2001: the Worst Day

The night before the Worst Day, Dad put me to bed.

“Can you tell me a story?” I asked.

“Sure. If you promise not to ask lots of questions.”

“OK. Of course!” I said.

The moment before he started a story was my favorite part. We were very close to each other, and I felt calm and quiet.

“Long ago, New York City had a sixth borough.”

“Dad, what’s a borough?”

“That’s a question.”

“I know. But I won’t understand the story if I don’t know what a borough is.”

“It’s a place where people live, like a **neighborhood**. Or lots of neighborhoods together,” he explained.

“If there used to be a sixth borough, what are the five boroughs we know now?”

“Manhattan, where we live of course, then Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx. Anyway, the sixth borough was—”

“Dad, have I ever been—?”

He stared at me, then smiled. I stopped talking. He told

me the story of the sixth borough, and I listened carefully.

When he'd finished the story, he kissed my head, stood up, and left my room.

The next time I heard his voice was when I came home from school the following day, which was the Worst Day. We were let out of school early, because of what happened.

I look at my watch a lot, so I know that it was 10.18 a.m. when I got home. The apartment was empty and quiet. I walked to the kitchen and checked the phone messages.

Message One: Tuesday September 11th, 8.52 a.m.

Hello? Is anybody there? It's Dad. If you're there, answer the phone. Listen, something's happened. I'm OK. They want us to stay in here and wait for the firefighters. I'll call later when I know more. I'm OK, so don't worry. I'll call again soon.

There were four more messages from him.

Message Two: 9.12 a.m.

Message Three: 9.31 a.m.

Message Four: 9.46 a.m.

Message Five: 10.04 a.m.

I listened to them, and listened to them all again. Then, before I had time to think or feel, the phone started ringing.

It was 10.22.27 a.m.

I looked at the telephone number and saw that it was him.

I've only been in a **limousine** twice. The first time was two years ago, and it was terrible, because it was Dad's **funeral**. We were on our way to the **cemetery**. But I still loved the limousine. Mom let me sit next to the driver. I didn't want to sit in the back of the car with Mom and Grandma and think about the **coffin**—the empty coffin that didn't have my dad in it.

"What. Is. Your. Designation." I asked the driver.

"What?!" said the driver.

"He wants to know your name," Grandma said from the back seat. The man gave me his business card.

GERALD THOMPSON

Sunshine Limousine

Across the five New York boroughs

(212) 570-7249

"Hello. Gerald. I. Am. Oskar." I said.

"Why are you talking like that?" he asked.

"Oskar is a learning computer. He learns from contact with humans," I told him.

Gerald said, "O." and then he said "K." I wasn't sure if he liked me or not.

Mom was sitting in the back just staring out of the window. She looked very beautiful, but sad. It was difficult to talk to her after Dad died—she knew that I was closing the box of myself, and I knew that she didn't really love me.