**Summary chapter by chapter**

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| WHAT THE!  Oskar, his mother and his grandmother are in a limousine on their way to the cemetery to bury Oskar’s father, Thomas Schell jr. Thomas died in the 9/11 attacks. His body has never been found, so the coffin they are going to bury is empty. While they are travelling to the cemetery, Oskar invents all sorts of things to keep his mind of what is really happening: the burial of this father. He also remembers the game he and his father used to play: Reconnaissance Expedition. This was some sort of a quest in which Oskar would have to find things, based on the clues his father gave him. The night before 9/11, his father tells him a story about the Sixth Borough. New York used to have 6, not 5 boroughs.  On 9/11, Oskar gets home from school early because schools had been closed due to the attack on New York. While walking home, he believes everything is fine, because his parents work in midtown and his grandmother doesn’t work. So none of his family members should be anywhere near the World Trade Centre.  When he gets home, he listens to the messages on the answer phone: there are five  messages from his father: one at 8.52 am., one at 9.12 am, one at 9.31 am, one at 9.46 am and one at 10.04 am. Oskar listens to the messages, not knowing what to do. While he is standing next to the phone, it is ringing again: it is his dad calling at 10.22.27 am.    WHY I’M NOT WHERE YOU ARE 5/21/63  Oskar’s grandfather, Thomas Schell sr., has written a letter to his unborn child (Thomas jr.) in which he tries to explain why he has left his wife (grandma) while she was pregnant. The letter was written on the 21May 1963. Grandpa explains why he lost the will to talk. After the bombing of Dresden (Germany) and the death of his girlfriend Anna, he slowly lost the power to speak. First he lost the word ‘Anna, then all the words that sounded like ‘Anna’ and finally he lost the last word ’I’. To be able to communicate with the people around him, grandpa wrote everything he wanted to say down in a daybook and had ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ tattooed on his hands.  He also explains how he met Oskar’s Grandma, Thomas Schell jr.’s mother. They met at the Columbian Bakery on Broadway where he is drinking coffee. She sits right next to him and talks to him, although he doesn’t talk back.    GOOGOLPLEX (googol = a one with one hundred zeros after it)  Oskar explains how he made a bracelet for his mother out of the last voice message his father left on the answering machine. He used Morse-code and different sizes of beads. His mother really liked it, and he made jewellery out of the other messages as well. He is afraid that his Mom is already forgetting his Dad, because she is seeing Ron, or so he thinks. Ron is a good friend of his Mom, but Oskar doesn’t like him very much.  One night, he enters his Dad’s closet and he looks around. He feels in the pockets of trousers, looks in the bin and wonders why his Dad’s tuxedo is hanging over the chair. Oskar also notices a blue vase on the highest shelf and wonders what it is doing up there. He tries to reach it, but it falls to the floor and breaks in many pieces. In the middle of all that glass, he discovers a little envelope. Inside the envelope there is a key. Oskar wonders what it is doing there.  The next day, Oskar tells his mother that he is ill and doesn’t want to go to school. That was the first lie he ever told anyone. He sneaks out and goes to the locksmith in the hope that he could tell him more about the key. He discovers it probably belongs to a lockbox. While searching on the internet he discovers that there are probably 162 million lockboxes in New York. Believing that his father has left the key as a quest, Oskar decides to look at the clues again and discovers that the name ‘Black’ was written on the envelope with a red marker. The next day, Oskar pretends to be ill again and goes to the art supply store to ask the lady what she knows about the colour black. She points out that it is weird that black was written in red and shows Oskar the pads of paper that are next to the pencil display: people either write the name of the colour they are using or they write their own name. So Oskar figures out Black was someone’s name. Back home, Oskar does some research and finds out that there are 471 people in New York who are called ‘Black’. He decides that he is going to visit them all and ask them what they know about the key. Since most of them are families, there are 216 addresses he needs to visit.    MY FEELINGS  Grandma writes Oskar a letter from the airport. It is 12 September 2003. In the letter she tells Oskar about her past. About how she received a letter from a prisoner in 1936 and how she decided to analyse his handwriting in the hope to learn more about him. She got everyone in her family and all her friends to write her a letter and she compared all the handwritings. But this didn’t help her in getting to know the prisoner.  Then she writes about how she met Grandpa in New York and how she recognised him as her sister’s boyfriend but he doesn’t admit it. She allows him to make a sculpture of her and soon discovers he is making a sculpture of Anna, not of her. Finally, Grandma asks him to marry her.    THE ONLY ANIMAL  Oskar explains that he has decided to go through the list of names alphabetically, instead of doing his research in geographical zones. Because public transportation makes Oskar panicky, he walks everywhere, even if it takes him over 3 hours to get somewhere. The first peron he visits is Aaron Black. Sadly, Aaron doesn’t know anything about the key. The second person he visits is Abby Black. She doesn’t know his father Thomas Schell jr. and has never seen the key before. But for some reason Oskar doesn’t believe her.    WHY I’M NOT WHERE YOU ARE 5/21/63  The letter Oskar’s grandfather is writing to his unborn child is continued in this chapter. Grandpa explains how he and Grandma organise their lives around rules and aren’t close to one another. They never see each other naked, never sleep in the same bed twice, always sit on the same side of the table next to each other facing the window. He also explains the ‘Nothing Places’ (marked of spaces in a room) in which one had complete privacy. The opposite of Nothing was something: water, the hallway, a doorknob.  In Grandpa’s letter, written while he was at the airport waiting for his flight to leave, he also writes about how he met Anna back in Dresden during World War II. He writes about the first time they made love  Grandpa also remembers how he gave Grandma a typewriter, so she could write her own life story. After a couple of months, Grandma’ story is finished and she shows it to Grandpa, who only sees blank pages.  His letter ends with him explaining that he packed his suitcase and went to the airport where he wrote the letter and bought a ticket to Dresden. But Grandma knew he was leaving her and had also travelled to the airport to try and stop him from leaving, but he left anyway.    HEAVIER BOOTS  Twelve weeks have passed since Oskar began to visit all the ‘Blacks’ in New York. Oskar’s performance of Hamlet starts. At the first performance quite a lot of the Blacks he has visited show up to see his play. He is really happy about this. His Mum and Grandma are there as well. But fewer and fewer people come to see him perform and for the last performance only his Grandma shows up.  When Oskar went to visit Abe Black, he took a cab, but he didn’t have enough money with him to pay the fare. So he promises to sent the cabdriver the money. Together with Abe, Oskar goes on a rollercoaster ride. Sadly Abe doesn’t know anything about the key or Oskar’s father, but Abe does give Oskar a lift into town to where Ada Black lives. Somehow Abe seemed to have known that Oskar needed to get into town. Strangely enough, Ada Black, a very rich person, just happens to know where Oskar lives.  The next person Oskar visits is his upstairs neighbour, Mr. A.R. Black. Mr. Black hasn’t left he house after his wife died 24 years ago. Mr. Black even turned of his hearing aid so that he wouldn’t hear the noises from outside. With Oskar’s help, Mr. Black turns the hearing aid back on. Mr. Black has a biographical index with card for everyone who might need a reference one day. On the card, Mr. Black writes the name of the person and a one-word biography. For instance: ‘Tom Cruise: money’, ‘Rem Koolhaas: architecture’, ‘Stephen Hawking: astrophysics’, ‘Mohammed Atta: war’. Oskar is sad about this, because his Dad doesn’t have a card, but his Dad’s killer does.  Oskar convinces Mr. Black to join him in his search and get out of the house.    MY FEELINGS  Grandma’s letter to Oskar is continued. Grandma explains that she and Grandpa needed each other, they tried to help each other. Grandma is sad about the fact that Grandpa took pictures of everything in the house, even the doorknobs, but he never took a picture of her. Grandma tells about how she is writing her life story on the type writer: she just hits the space bar because her life story was one big space. Grandma thinks she could make her life better if she had a child, so she gets pregnant. But she hides this from Grandpa. But she couldn’t hide it forever, so one night Grandma tells Grandpa she is pregnant. Grandpa leaves her the following day. Grandma knew this because the suitcase which he carried was heavier than normal. Grandma follows Grandpa to the airport and watches him writing in his day book (Grandpa is writing the letter to his unborn child, see chapters WHY I’M NOT WHERE YOU ARE 5/21/63). When Grandpa is at the front of the line to buy a ticket to Dresden, Grandma approaches him. In the end, he comes back home, but the next day he leaves again for the airport. Grandma doesn’t dare to lift his suitcase but she suspects that he is leaving her. Grandpa never returns from the airport and Grandma sets all the animals free.    HAPPINESS, HAPPINESS  In this chapter Oskar gives a presentation to his class about the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima in which he shows a documentary of a mother who describes her search for her missing daughter. The class thinks Oskar is weird and laugh at him. On Saturday Oskar feels very happy because he is hopefully going to get closer to the lock. Oskar and Mr Black visit some other Blacks to find out more about the key. Mr Black convinces Oskar to take the underground. They visit Agnes Black, Albert Black, Alice Black and Allen Black. Somehow, Allen Black knows Oskar’s name beforehand. Arnold Black tells them he can’t help them, without being asked anything. Oskar thinks this is very strange.    WHY I’M NOT WHERE YOU ARE 4/12/78  Grandpa writes another letter to his child. Grandpa is in Dresden. Grandpa writes about Anna and the attack on Dresden, in which he lost Anna and his family, and how he had to kill the animals in the zoo.    THE SIXTH BOROUGH  The night before 0/11, Oskar’s Dad told Oskar a bedtime story called ‘The Sixth Borough’. New York used to have a sixth borough. This borough was on an island and it slowly floated further and further away from the main land, until it disappeared from view. Central Park used to rest in the center of the Sixth Borough, but when people discovered that the Sixth Borough was slowly disappearing, they decided to save the park by digging it up and moving it to Manhattan.    MY FEELINGS  Grandma is still writing her letter to Oskar. She now tells about when she heard about 9/11. She saw the second plane hit the tower, but Grandma wasn’t worried because Thomas jr was at the store. Then Mom called and she told Grandma that she was worried: Thomas jr had had a meeting in one of the towers and she hadn’t heard from him yet. Grandma explains how she went across the road to look after Oskar and that she finally found him hiding beneath his bed. Grandma decides to lie next to Oskar under the bed so she doesn’t feel alone. Grandma has a feeling that her son has died. When Oskar’s mother gets home, Oskar tells her that there were no messages on the answering machine.  On the day of the funeral, Grandma gets a message from Grandpa: he is back. She hadn’t heard anything from him since he left, but every day she had received an empty envelope from him.    ALIVE AND ALONE  After searching for six and a half months, Mr Black decides he has had enough. After a very depressing day, Oskar decides to visit his Grandma, but she isn’t home. But the renter is home and he finally meets him. Somehow, Oskar ends up telling the whole story about the key to the renter. Oskar describes all the people he has met so far and what they had told him. Nobody knew anything about the key. He even lets the renter hear the messages his Dad left on the answering machine. When Oskar is lying in bed, he decides he is going to dig up his father’s empty coffin.    WHY I’M NOT WHERE YOU ARE 9/11/03  Although Thomas jr. had died two years ago, which Grandpa knows, he has decided to write one final letter to his son, Thomas jr.. Grandpa explains how he had reading the paper that his son had died and that he had decided to go back to New York to mourn and try to live again. He finally gets in touch with Grandma and she allows him to live in the guest room. Grandpa writes about what happened to him once he had left Grandma. Thomas jr, even managed to track down his father in Dresden, but they never really talked. He also admits that he has been following Oskar around when Oskar went to visit all the Blacks in New York. Mr Black discovers that Grandpa is following them around and Mr Black decides he has had enough.    A SIMPLE SOLUTION TO AN IMPOSSIBLE PROBLEM  The day after Oskar and the renter (Grandpa) have dug up the coffin, Oskar discovers that Mr Black had gone. He also discovers that Abby Black has left him a message (which was cut off) on the answering machine, eight months before. Because Oskar was afraid of the answering machine, he had never listened to any of the messages on it, so thet’s why he didn’t know Abby had left him a message. Oskar immediately goes to visit Abby to find out more. Abby explains that her ex-husband knows more about the key. Oskar also discovers that when Abby had called him 8 months ago, his Mom had picked up the phone. All these months his Mom had known what he had been up to and she had called every Black in New York to tell them he was going to visit them. That was why people knew his name or address, without him ever telling them. Her ex-husband is William Black and Oskar visits him. William has been looking for the blue vase with the key in it for over two years. William had sold the vase to Oskar’s Dad two years before. Oskar’s Dad had said it was an anniversary present for his wife and that they were going out for dinner. The night after William had sold the vase, he discovered there was a key in it that opened a box at the bank.    MY FEELINGS  Grandma writes the final part of her letter to Oskar. Grandpa had just come back from digging up the coffin of his son and decides he wants to go to the airport to get magazines for Grandma. She is sure he is leaving her again. Just like last time Grandma follows Grandpa to the airport. They decide to live there.    BEAUTIFUL AND TRUE  Oskar describes how he and Grandpa, together with Gerald, the driver of the limousine, dig up his father’s coffin and fill it with all the letter Grandpa ever wrote to his son. When Oskar gets home is Mom is waiting for him. She doesn’t ask any questions and isn’t angry. Oskar discovers that his Dad had called his Mom the day he died, after the building had been hit. Together they cry. At the end of the book, Oskar wonders whether the Falling Man is his father. He puts the pictures in the reverse order, so it looks like the man is floating upwards. He imagines that time goes backwards and thinks ‘We would have been safe.’ |