

Chapter 1



We Are Sealed in the House

I lived with my grandmother for the first nine years of my life. We lived in a townhouse in the middle of Manhattan. It was four stories tall, but very skinny. It always reminded me of a thin person in brown clothes, standing on the street corner with his hands in his pants pockets.

When I was about four years old, my grandmother used a welding torch to seal off the basement door in the kitchen. I remember her kneeling and holding the bright blue spear of flame to the crack under the door. The doorframe and the door were both metal, and the flame melted them together. My grandmother wore a pair of flowered oven mittens and a facemask with darkened glass to protect her eyes. She couldn't kneel on a rug because the rug might have caught on fire, so she had to kneel on the hard kitchen tile, which must have hurt her knees.



Grandma

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When she was done she turned off the flame and took off the mask, and her fine white hair came loose and drifted around her head like a halo. Then she got up carefully from the floor, massaging her knees, and sat in a kitchen chair.

“That’s done me in for the day, Billy,” she said. She looked tired but satisfied with her work, and she chuckled as she looked at the door. She had welded the crack entirely around the door, melted the hinges so that they could not open, and melted a stack of silver dollars over the place where the keyhole was.

“Grandma,” I said, “how come we shouldn’t go down into the basement?”

“It’s not to keep us from going down, Love,” she said.

“Then what’s it for?” I said.

“You’re too young to know about that,” she said. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“I’m four years old!” I said.

My grandmother laughed good-naturedly. She was a wonderful grandmother, always laughing and hopping around in her slippers and bathrobe. She was a short woman with wrinkly, spotty skin, but underneath her skin she had very strong muscles. She had stubby fingers that looked like ten old dried-up orange kumquats stuck to the palms of her hands.

About a year later she nailed shut the trap door

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leading into the attic. She stood on a stepladder and I handed the nails up to her, one by one. When she was done hammering she got down from the ladder and brushed the dust from her hands.

“*Nothing* will be able to get in now, Grandma,” I said. I was five years old.

“That’s precisely right,” she said, putting her hand on my head and smiling.

A year after that, she nailed shut the street door of our house.

First she took the enormous, old-fashioned clothes cabinet that was standing in the corner of her bedroom and lay it on the floor, face down. Then she pried off the wooden back of the cabinet with the claw end of a hammer. She carried this large piece of wood down the stairs. I had to help her by walking in front and warning her about the steps and turns in the staircase, because she couldn’t see while carrying such a large sheet of wood.

She propped the sheet of wood against the inside of our front door and nailed it to the doorframe. It was a very thick piece of wood, so it was a very sturdy way to block up the door. If anybody opened the front door of our house from the outside, they would see only a blank piece of oak facing them with a brass clothes hook in the middle of it.

“But Grandma,” I said, “how will we eat? How will

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we get our food, or anything?” I was six years old now.

“Don’t you worry about that,” she said to me in a muffled voice; she was holding three nails in her mouth. She pointed to the wall beside the door to remind me about the letterbox.

Most houses have a letterbox in the door. Our house had a letterbox in the wall just beside the door. It had a big slot, so that pretty big packages could get through. Even a four-inch-thick package could fit. But when I looked at it, I saw that my grandmother had locked it with a new padlock, so that we would have to open it with a key to let anything in. Not even a very small bug could have crawled through around the edges.

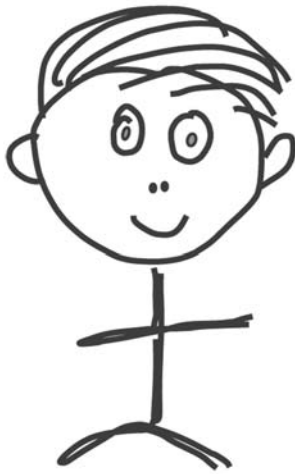
“Can’t we get out at all?” I said.

“It’s better not to, Love,” she said. “We’ll do fine.”

“But . . . Grandma?” I said, completely baffled, looking up at her and spreading out my skinny arms. “How will we get anything, if we can’t go out shopping?”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, chuckling. “We’ll order through the Internet. What century do you think we live in here?”

Later that evening, while we were sitting in the kitchen over a spaghetti dinner, I asked her anxiously what kind of awful thing was going to get us if we didn’t have all the doors sealed off. She looked at me thoughtfully for a long time before answering.



Me

Chapter 2



My Grandmother Explains

We were sitting on opposite sides of the tiny kitchen table, my grandmother in a chair with lots of cushions and pillows and a hand-knitted blanket pulled around her, and me in a chair that was slightly too tall for me so that my feet didn't quite reach the floor.

The kitchen was full of the delicious, rich smell of my grandmother's cooking. She had boiled a huge pot of spaghetti and cooked another huge pot of sauce. It was a thick, red sauce made from tomato paste and ground pork and tennis balls.

You may think that this recipe sounds crazy, but there was a reason for it. My grandmother was a very rational person, and there was always a reason for everything she did. You have to understand that, if you want to understand the story that I am telling you. She always put tennis balls into the sauce. After they were first put in, the tennis balls would float on top.

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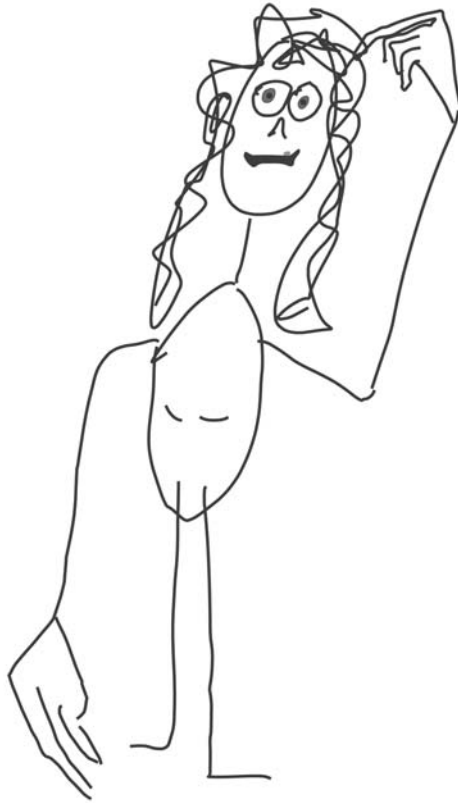
But after hours and hours of slow cooking and stirring, when the tennis balls sank out of sight—when she poked the last one down with a spoon and it didn't come floating back up again—then the sauce was ready to eat. We didn't eat the tennis balls, of course. She said that she had tried other kinds of balls, but they never worked as well as tennis balls. The cabinets over the kitchen sink were full of tubes and tubes of vacuum-packed tennis balls.

On this particular evening, after we had finished our spaghetti, she patted her mouth with her napkin and looked at me for a long time, thoughtfully. "Billy," she said to me, putting the napkin back on the table, "we live in a dangerous world. Far more dangerous than anyone usually admits. Don't you believe what you see in the news."

I never watched the news, so I didn't mind being told to mistrust it.

"Do you know what happened to your mother?" she said.

"You never told me, Grandma," I said. We never talked about my mother. I knew what she looked like: a picture of her stood in a small frame on my Grandmother's dressing table. In the picture she had blonde curly hair and a thin, pretty face. Her eyes looked friendly because of the slight wrinkles at the corners, but they were also very piercing as if all her



My Mother in Deep Thought

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intelligence were shooting out of her eyes and focusing on whatever she was looking at. That is almost all I knew about my mother. As far as I could remember, I had always lived with my Grandmother. My mother didn't mean much to me yet, and I almost never thought about her.

"She was a wonderful person," my grandmother said. "But she took risks. Terrible risks."

"What happened to her?" I said.

"She was killed," my grandmother said, "by a wooly mammoth."

"Grandma!" I said. "That's impossible!"

"I'm telling you, it's true."

"You're playing a joke on me! Wooly mammoths died out millions of years ago. And they ate plants, anyway."

"Very smart," she said, but she was not smiling. She looked serious. "A bull usually only eats plants, but it can still kill you. All it has to do is stick you with its horns, or step on you."

"But Grandma, a bull isn't extinct. A person could get killed by a bull, but not by a wooly mammoth."

"Don't be so sure," she said. "Your mother was a paleontologist. She used to study dinosaur bones. Now, this is what happened. About ten years ago, some workmen were digging out the basement of a new building, right around here. They had huge ma-