

The Secret Room



STARTING SCHOOL RIGHT after Labor Day weekend closed off the summer. All the months of open time vanished into a teacher’s discussion question: “What did you do last summer?” And it didn’t add up to a lot. At least, not for me. My family never goes on vacations. Summer on the farm is work time, and even though I walk in the woods, swim at the pond, and escape sometimes to the old treehouse that my brothers built at the edge of one of our fields, there’s never much of anything to put into an essay. So the first weeks of school didn’t really count.

Luckily, my life changed after a month of eighth grade. In the first week of October, really the start of autumn, I helped to measure the foundation of Thea Warwick’s house.

It was a school assignment. Mrs. Labounty, who teaches math for all the middle schoolers, is really into hands-on learning, and every Friday she gives us a “project.” Mostly they’re things you do on your own, but sometimes she makes us work in groups, which as far as I’m concerned is about the worst thing a teacher can do. Leave me alone and I can always earn an A. But group and team

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projects—nobody wants to work with me really, so either I have to do the whole thing for the group and everyone gets an A from what I've done, which if you ask me is truly unfair, or else I stay quiet and let the group sink. Once last year I tried that, and the teacher gave everyone in the group a C, including me. And I am absolutely never a C student.

Anyway, I felt things might not be as bad as usual when Mrs. Labounty said, "Shawna Lee and Thea, you live close enough to do this one together." Thea's not so bad, really. New, and pretty smart, and thin of course. Everyone who moves here from out of state is thin, I've noticed. Last week Thea even stood in the lunch line with me, because we're the only two girls in grade eight who can do math in our heads, and it was square roots that week in class, which was especially cool because we both got it. So we practiced out loud while we waited in line.

Plus, Thea hasn't said anything about me being, well, fat.

So this afternoon, we needed to measure the foundation. The idea was to measure the outside of the house first, draw it, and then measure each of the rooms and map them. For extra credit, calculate the square footage taken up by the walls inside the house. Of course, that's the difference between what you get for the room sizes and what you get for the outside house size. I could write the equation, but who needed to? It was so simple. We didn't even discuss whether we'd do the extra credit part, we just knew, both of us, that because it was numbers, it would be fun.

The thing was, the numbers weren't coming out right. Not the extra credit part—that would come at the end. I mean, the numbers for the room sizes on the first floor weren't coming out to match the foundation we'd already drawn, which was the outside of the cellar walls. At least, we'd tried the best we could; a couple of rooms at Thea's house have been added on and in some places you can see where bits aren't original, sometimes even with cement blocks and stuff under them. We knew we should do the outside measurements over again and draw the add-ons more carefully. But because it was a rainy October

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day in Vermont, even at five o'clock the cold wet weather and dimness made measuring the outside again a real pain.

So we measured the inside of the cellar instead. Spiderwebs and dusty strings of spider silk made this very icky, frankly. I give Thea credit—she slapped any spiders she saw with the back of her notebook and kept hold of the measuring tape. I hate it when other girls scream and run and leave me looking like I'm not a real girl, just because I stand my ground and don't run away. That's not fair, either.

"Twenty-two feet, nine inches," Thea read off the tape, squinting in the light of a flashlight as she held the tape tight into the dim corner of the furnace area. "Mark it down for width." She put down the flashlight and reached up to twist her long, nearly black hair into a knot. She can do it without even an elastic.

I wrote down the numbers on my page. We could copy them over into her notebook, too, when we got upstairs. "Length?"

"Just a minute, let me climb up on the dresser so I can get around the water tank with the measuring tape." We'd need to get the length in five measurements and add them up. Thea's house used to be a stagecoach inn here in North Upton, and it's really, really long. The cellar is five rooms long. Really big rooms, honest.

I made a quick chart in my notebook. Room 1: twelve feet exactly. Room 2: ten feet four inches. We rounded off fractions of inches. Room 3 (half full of split wood for the living room woodstove): seventeen feet eight inches. Room 4: fifteen feet exactly. Room 5: ten feet six inches.

I changed all the feet into inches by multiplying by twelve, and added the total. "Seven hundred and seventy eight inches. What about the walls in between the rooms?"

Thea pushed her hair out of her eyes and squinted again, standing between rooms 4 and 5. "Five inches thick," she decided finally. "Each. So twenty inches for the four dividing walls."

"Umm. Wait a minute. Seven hundred and ninety-eight inches, then. Sixty-six feet and six inches. Six six six. Eeyou."

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“What is it?”

“Oh, you know, in the Bible. The number of the Beast is supposed to be six six six.” I could see from her face, though, she didn’t know what I was talking about. That’s the trouble with new people in town. My mother says none of them really know their Bible.

I told her I’d explain some other time. Bending over the notebook, I compared the numbers to the ones from the upstairs rooms, and groaned. “We’re almost five feet off. We have to do it over.”

I tugged the waistband of my jeans up in back and tucked my t-shirt back into the pants, pulling my sweatshirt down. Thea shook her head and pointed the flashlight down at my notebook page. “Add it again,” she suggested. “On the paper. You watched me measure it, we can’t be off by a whole five feet.” But on paper, we were. When we measured the second time, the numbers came out exactly the same way, five feet wrong.

That’s how we found the secret room, of course. The secret room at the north end of the cellar of the old North Upton Inn, with the boarded up entrance, the doorway so short we climbed into it with our heads bent down practically to our chests, and for a long moment I was afraid I’d be stuck in the doorway, my jeans dragging against the rough stonework and my sweatshirt getting absolutely filthy with more spiderwebs and dust.

I pushed on in, and in the beam from Thea’s flashlight, we both saw the numbers and the letters on the wall at the same moment.

“A code,” I breathed out, barely whispering.

“A code,” Thea agreed. At that moment, we both knew what we’d do next. Look for clues, and solve the code. Of course.