



R O B E R T
C O R M I E R

TUNES
FOR
BEARS
TO
DANCE
TO



The old man came out of the crazy house every morning shortly before eight o'clock and walked down the graveled path to the gate, carrying a small leather bag that swung like a pendulum from his right hand. His moustache was a wedge of frost on his upper lip.

The boy, whose name was Henry, watched him from the third-floor piazza that overlooked the street. He was curious about where the old man went every day and would have followed him except for the cast on his knee. The cast would be removed in a week or so and he tried to be patient in the meantime, watching the comings and goings of the neighborhood. The most interesting thing he saw was the old man. Why did he live in the crazy house and why did they let him out every day if he was crazy?

“You shouldn’t call it a crazy house,” his mother said. “It’s an institution for the insane.”

That was worse than calling it a crazy house, Henry thought. Anyway, the old man did not look either crazy or insane. The boy saw him only for a few moments as he came and went, but he looked normal enough. In the late afternoon when the old man returned from wherever he went, his steps were slower, spiderwebs had appeared around his eyes, and his shoulders drooped although his cheeks were still smooth, like stones worn away by years of rain.

Henry hobbled up to the gate of the crazy house once in a while and looked at the people strolling the grounds. They looked normal, too, like the people he saw every day in the neighborhood.

The boy himself did not feel normal. He had never learned to use the crutches properly in the five weeks he had worn the cast. He tripped over them all the time. He was not coordinated or athletic, like his brother, Eddie, and walked awkwardly with the crutches, which is why he seldom left the piazza.

Eddie would have mastered the crutches in no time at all. He would have swung down the street, calling out to everyone, and everyone would have smiled back. Henry tried not to think about Eddie but that was impossible, of course. Although Eddie had been dead almost a year—eleven months and three days, to be exact—he was still a presence in the lives of Henry and his mother and father. Some-

times Henry felt guilty because he could go, oh, three or four hours without thinking of Eddie, but his mother and father seemed to be thinking of him every minute of the day, walking wearily and sorrowfully through the hours, seldom talking except when necessary. His father, in fact, was swallowed up in his sorrow. Sometimes, Henry could not stand the silence in the tenement and went out on the piazza. Once he thought of jumping over the banister and plunging to the pavement below but knew that would only bring more sorrow to his parents.

He was impatient for the cast to be removed so that he could return to his job as the bender for Mr. Hairston at the Corner Market. Mr. Hairston had a back problem and found it hard to bend over. Henry did the bending for him. Picked up whatever fell on the floor. Reached for merchandise on the lower shelves to fill the customers' orders. He also had other duties. Helped unload the boxes and crates that arrived from the wholesalers. Stocked the shelves. Put up potatoes, fifteen pounds to a peck, in the cellar, then carried them upstairs to the produce section. Mr. Hairston was proud of his produce. Fresh lettuce and carrots and spinach and such extras as parsnips and mushrooms, all of them in neat display at the rear of the store.

Henry worked at the store every day after school and on Saturday mornings. Until, that is, he broke his kneecap, tripping, then falling down the bottom steps of the three-decker just as school ended in

ROBERT CORMIER

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After his brother's death, Henry moves with his parents to a new town, where he meets and befriends Mr. Levine, an elderly survivor of the Holocaust who spends his days carving a replica of his childhood village.

Enter Mr. Hairston, who holds power over Henry's life. He is a man of glittering promises, but he exacts a terrible price from Henry that involves the boy's friendship with Mr. Levine.

All Henry has to do is . . .

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