HUGO

FICTION

Music for Benny Bergen

At 1:15 justine closes her book. the teacher nods and justine gets up from her desk and leaves the room, closing the door quietly behind her. The hallway is deserted. Only a few muffled sounds leak through from the classrooms. Her music is already in her knapsack and she remembers to take her jacket from the hook on the wall, because after, when it's over, she won't be coming back here. She will be going home with her parents today instead of on the school bus.

Outside, the air has a sharp, watery smell. This morning her father kept looking restlessly at the sky when he came in from the barn. Now clouds have gathered in the west, dark navy ones with sinister white edges. Gulls, gleaming white against this darkness, swoop down to the ground, grabbing up scraps.

Cutting across the school grounds, Justine walks down the first base line. If she could be anything she wanted, she'd be a baseball player. Shortstop would be her preference, or maybe third base, where you need fast reflexes and a good arm.

Every night after supper she and Jake stand on the gravel driveway and take turns pitching overhand until it's too dark to see. Or they throw fly balls and grounders, heaving the ball to second and third, on their knees, sidearm, from any contorted position, to put out players who underestimated their speed and accuracy. And sometimes there's someone sneaking home from third and they have to try and make the play at home plate as well. Baseball's a game of strategy, Mr. Mills tells the Junior High boys team, according to Jake, who reports to Justine at the end of the day. You have to think ahead, you have to know what your next play will be. Jake's the only Grade 6 kid to make the team. Next year, in Grade 8, Justine will have Mr. Mills for phys ed. She's looking forward to it. She'll be the best girl player he ever had.

BY RUTH KRAHN ILLUSTRATION BY HUGO DUBÓN

At the edge of the school field she empties her lunch bag, breaking the sandwiches into pieces and throwing them hard, overhand, at the gulls already diving. She didn't eat breakfast either; she made the rest eat—Natasha, Sarah and Eddie. Not Jake. Jake was in the barn helping with chores. She was bossy and impatient, thinking ahead to this afternoon.

The birds quarrel raucously over the sandwiches, but she doesn't stop to watch. After going through the ditch she is on the road, and from there it is only a short walk to the church. Splats of rain land on her hands and face and on her neck where her hair has been tied back. A few cars are already angle-parked near the church. Keeping her distance, she follows two women, carrying bouquets of lilacs, up the front steps.

Inside, the church is dark, because of the storm clouds gathered in the sky. Large, bushy bunches of lilacs, thick as a hedge, have been carefully grouped around the pulpit at the front. Justine can smell the lilacs from where she is standing, just inside the back doors. Then someone flicks on the lights, and she knows she has to go through with it. She walks up the aisle and over to the piano, where she removes the music from her knapsack. She is not to play anything sentimental, no *Shall We Gather by the River*, nothing like that. And definitely not *Safe in the Arms of Jesus*. So she was told by the mother of the boy who died.

They met at the church on Monday during the noon hour, the mother and Justine, so that she could give Justine the music she wanted played at the funeral today, which is Wednesday. The accident happened last Friday around suppertime. Justine knew the boy because she had babysat him a few times. Benny Bergen, four years old, dead. It was hard to believe.

Maybe the mother couldn't believe it either. Her eyes looked haunted but her voice was firm, as she matter-of-factly laid out the order of the service, showing Justine what to play when. She wondered if Justine had a copy of Largo, by Handel, she—the mother—couldn't find hers.

"Everything else is here," she continued, her voice almost brisk. "Hymnbook numbers for the congregational songs and lots of Bach chorales, easy ones."

Then she wanted to know how Justine felt about learning a new piece for the funeral (saying funeral as if it were any old word) and began rummaging through her thick pile of music again, not waiting for a reply. She had taken a choral piece by Mendelssohn, she said, and written out a simplified piano version last night when she couldn't sleep. She sat down at the piano to demonstrate how it should be played.

"Do you see?" she said, her voice catching just once as she began to play the opening bars, with great tenderness, her eyes closed.

"I think so," said Justine.

"Don't worry if you miss notes," the mother continued, "as long as you get the feel of it. Play it fairly lightly, three four ONE two three four DA da da da…about that speed, and maybe as if you were singing it. Yes, that should help."

Justine intended to play through her music before the funeral started. But when she turns around, she sees people already filing silently into the pews, though there is still half an hour to go. So she stays sitting at the piano, her hands folded in her lap, waiting, listening to the discreet coughs and whispers behind her. There are the voluptuous flowers to look at and the windows with their strange wavy light and the people in dark, sober dress moving now into pews across the aisle.

At exactly 10 to 2, as instructed, she begins to play.

When she hears the congregation rise to their feet behind her, she knows that the Bergen family is making its way down the aisle towards the front pew. The first hymn is announced, *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee*, and Justine plays a snappy introduction, the way she and her father practised at home. But the singing is sluggish, not joyful, and maintaining the tempo is a battle. Through it all she can hear old Mrs. Thiessen's piercing soprano that reminds her of the gulls diving for food. Then her father's tenor voice reaches her; he's singing the melody, trying to help her keep the hymn from dragging.

When she sits down in the pew, Justine sees the coffin, just sitting there on the floor near the lilacs, a rectangular wooden box that looks left over from something, set down and forgotten or abandoned. A box you could fill up with toys or blankets or farm tools, a box you could hide in. How insignificant it looks, how small, maybe even small enough for one person to carry. Maybe the father carried it in, carried Benny in his arms one last time. His arms would have been strong and tireless, he would have carried Benny forever and ever.

The dead boy's aunt has climbed the steps to the pulpit and is reading a poem about a leaf, her voice trembling dangerously. When she is done the choir comes to the front, milling around until Justine's father positions them. Usually they sit in the choir loft but not today, everything is different today. Justine plays an introduction, trying to

read the tempo from her father's arm motions. It is an old children's tune, requested by the mother. Her father pleads with the choir to enunciate the words, *Ow*, he mouths, just before they sing *Aus dem Himmel ferne*. He wills the sopranos to get all the way up to high G, *higher*, *higher*, the perspiration gleaming on his forehead.

As the choir retreats, the minister prepares to speak. When his sonorous voice begins, Justine does not hear the words, because she has learned over the years to tune him out. She used to hate when he spoke on Sunday mornings, the way he cried and stabbed the air with his finger, threatening them with hellfire unless they repented. Now she doesn't care what he says.

When he is finished speaking, it is time for her Mendelssohn music. *As if you're singing it*, the mother said. Justine tries to play the way the mother did, making the melody sing. Outside, the rain has started, a blur of sound against the windows that seems, briefly, to be part of the music. Right in the middle of the piece she remembers that Benny's favourite song was *Three Blind Mice*. She had to sing it over and over for him.

The accident happened last Friday around suppertime. Justine knew the boy because she had babysat him.

After that an uncle speaks about Benny's energy and joyfulness, and how much he loved music. He points at the ceiling and says Benny is up there now, in heaven, with Jesus. Benny Bergen, the name so little and innocent it makes Justine feel out of breath. She wants it to be over now, to not hear any more about him. She wants to get away from all the words and the sad melodies, and the terrible lilac scent, which seems to have got stronger in the last few minutes, settling in a cloud around her.

Then the final congregational song is announced and she knows it is almost over.

Justine does not go to the cemetery; she stays at the church and reads *Girl of the Limberlost* in one of the Sunday school rooms, listening to the soft up-and-down voices of the women in the kitchen, as they prepare the funeral lunch. Once she hears them talking about her. Someone says, "That girl should be in school, she's far too young to be playing at a funeral, just because she takes lessons from Ann's sister." And someone else says, "What, and have Mary *Janzen* at the piano? You know how the Bergens are about music." This is followed by a long silence.

When everyone is back from the cemetery, Justine goes along the wall until she comes to the table where her parents are sitting. She's the only kid here, except for a few Bergen relatives. After the minister says grace, her mother picks up the nearest sandwich platter and passes it to Justine, who passes it on without taking anything.

"Come on," says her mother finally, impatient with Justine's listlessness. "That's the third plate I've passed you. Are you sick?"

"No," says Justine, leaning away from her mother's ham breath. "I'm not hungry."

"Well try these then. Devilled egg. You'll like them."

"I said, I'm not hungry."

"Now I've heard everything," says her mother, looking away.

Finally they can go home. Aunt Agatha is catching a ride with them. The car sinks as she gets in the back seat with Justine.

"I don't see why they can't cover those sandwiches ahead of time," says Aunt Agatha, her voice sour. "They sit on those trays for hours, no wonder they're stale. You wonder what goes on in peoples' minds, honestly."

When nobody answers, she continues, "Did you see how they were curling up at the edges? Even the *ham* was curling up. It's shameful."

"Dad, can you close your window?" says Justine.

Her father pays no attention.

"*Saran* wrap," says Aunt Agatha. "That's all it would take. Am I right?"

Justine's mother makes an assenting sound.

"People drove from *Chilliwack*, for crying out loud," says Aunt Agatha. "Not to mention all those people from the college."

"I never saw George Harder," says Justine's father.

"They were there," says Justine's mother. "They sat on the other side. That Tina Harder's lost a lot of weight. I couldn't believe it was her at first."

Justine stares at the rain running in curvy little rivers down the window. Barely is one river gone when another one starts. It's like someone crying who can't stop. She can see the lake through the rain, the grey line of it. Right now the whole world is grey—the sky, the fields, the trees, the road, the ditches, the rivers running slanted down the window. Even the car interior is grey. Where is something not grey? Finally she sees a fleck of evil red polish on her fingernail. Benny curled up in the high white clouds as if he's asleep, she imagines that, him filling the whole east sky, the part above the lake. She draws a cloud around where he is, on the sweaty window.

The mother came to Justine after the funeral and thanked her gravely.

"You played beautifully," she said. "As soon as you started I knew I made the right decision."

Justine stood almost at attention, her hands fisted at her sides, looking up at the mother's calm, haggard face. She could think of nothing to say.

After supper, which is leftovers and later than usual, Jake comes over to where Justine is finishing up the dishes and starts punching his fist into the pocket of his baseball glove. Usually that's all it takes for her to grab her glove.

Justine looks at him coldly, "What?"

He stops his punching motion, surprised.

"Get Eddie," she says, relenting enough to speak. "I have to practise."

After he's gone she wanders through the living room, pausing by the piano. But practising seems pointless. What would she even play? Anyway Sarah's there with her dolls, lined up on the couch, singing to them in a sickeningly babyish way. Natasha's already in bed, not that Justine wants anything to do with her either. There is actually nothing she wants to do. Her stomach hurts from not eating. The house is ugly. What ugly curtains they have, with that zigzag pattern, hideous. Even from here she can see a dead fly on the sill, and the furniture, every single piece, is shabby.

She finds her mother outside, returning from the chicken coop. Her mother looks harassed.

"Good," she says when she sees Justine. "I can use your help. See if the towels are dry enough to take off the line."

Justine steps into a pair of her father's rubber boots and clomps out to the wash line, letting the clothesbasket drag behind her.

"They're still wet," she yells across the yard.

"Bring them in anyway," says her mother. "There's more rain on the way."

Justine takes her time, dumping towels into the basket without folding. The sound of the ball smacking a glove echoes in the trees. She could change her mind, she could go join Eddie and Jake right this minute if she wanted. A towel falls on the ground and she retrieves it with her foot. Hoisting the basket up and balancing it on her head, she walks towards the house, her hands ready to grab if it starts tipping. In the kitchen she lets it down awkwardly and half the towels spill on the floor.

"Sarah?" she calls.

"What?"

"Mom says for you to fold the towels."

Upstairs, in her room, Justine lies down on the bed and stares up at the ceiling, tries to find a pattern in the wallpaper. She even tries humming a song or two. *Three blind mice…He maketh me to rest in green pastures…she cut off their tails with a carving knife…children of the heavenly Father*…. But nothing helps. If she could do it over she'd play *Three Blind Mice*.

But she knows she wouldn't.

Finally she gets up and goes over to the mirror and looks closely at herself. How does she look? Angry, that's how. She smiles to see if it makes her look more normal, then just stares hard at herself for as long as she can without blinking.

"For he shall give his angels charge over thee," she tells her reflection in a barely audible voice. Waits. Repeats it, more forcefully this time.

"Hell," she says in her ordinary voice, then checks that no one is standing in the doorway, although she would have heard if anyone came up the stairs. "Friggin' angels. Damn angels. Hell. Go to hell."

Stares some more.

"Benny Bergen," she says softly, "Age four years and seven months. Loved to bang on the piano. Once he took a toy truck and hit every single key and I let him."

None of it's any good. What's the point? He's dead.

Her eyes look black in this light, two small black marbles. She blinks without meaning to, shifts her position.

Justine stood almost at attention, her hands fisted at her sides, looking up at the mother's calm, haggard face.

Once more, matter-of-factly this time, almost cheerfully. "Benny Bergen," she says, still staring at herself, "age four years and seven months, died." She pronounces the consonants distinctly. "He died on Friday, May 25, 1962. The big wheel of the tractor ran right over him. And today he was buried in a pine box built by his uncle and that's it. Maybe God's angels will protect him and maybe not, but if you protect anyone, God, protect Benny, please, amen, the end."

And as an afterthought, "And make there be music in heaven."

After this she goes downstairs to the kitchen and cuts herself two thick slices of bread and smears them with butter and jam. She sees the towels, neatly folded on a chair. Her father is at the table, studying a hymn book, his hair wild against the gloomy outside light. Her mother is standing at the sink cleaning eggs, wiping each one carefully. Natasha's in bed, Sarah's walking around humming to herself. Everyone's accounted for, even Jake and Eddie, because Justine can hear them through the open window.

Her knapsack, lumpy with homework and music, hangs undisturbed from a kitchen chair, but she turns away from it and goes over to the darkening window. Balancing on one foot she eats the first piece of bread, then shifts her weight to the other foot for the second piece, looking outside the whole time, as if at her brothers, but seeing mainly herself reflected, her small pale face with black caragana bushes blooming up around it.

Ruth Krahn has published short fiction in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Grain*, *Event*, *Dandelion*, *Alberta Bound*, *Alberta ReBound* and *Boundless Alberta*. She lives in Edmonton.