



Eleven-year-old Cobber Stern
(real name Jacob) has too much time on
his hands – and no one to spend it with.



His dad is a workaholic, and his best friend
quit the soccer team to go to Hebrew School.
And Papa-Ben, Cobber's usually-reliable great-
grandfather, has been acting strangely too.

Equipped with only a Ouija board and a
handful of magic tricks, Cobber feels he must
face all his problems alone. But, through the
magic of friendship, family, and tradition,
Cobber discovers that some things are
better done together.





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Note to Readers

Calling Cobber is set in 2000, exactly one year before the 9/11 attacks on America. It was a simpler time in many ways. The most common way to get internet access was through a frustrating dial-up telephone connection. People found home phones “busy” for a long time whenever people used the internet in those days. Cell phones were available, but they were bulky and not “smart.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, CDs (compact discs) were popular, along with their disk-shaped personal music players and “boomboxes,” which blared the music for everyone to hear. Recently, the silver plastic circles on which music has been recorded have become relics of the past.

YouTube was not invented until 2005, so Cobber would not have been able to learn magic tricks by watching videos, as you can today.

As you read, see if you can discover other ways times were different in the year 2000.

Chapter 1

“Okay, then. I’m going,” Dad yelled from downstairs. “If you need anything, just call my cell.”

Cobber tried to imagine dialing the number and saying simply, *Dad, could you come home now?* But he doubted his father would understand. “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” he’d say, annoyed. “Who do you think I’m doing all this work for?”

Now he listened for Dad’s footsteps scuffing across the vinyl, the slam of the back door, the whirl of the garage door opening and closing again. That creepy all-alone feeling settled over the house. It had been that way ever since Mom died six years ago, even when a babysitter had been there. His father had a way of sucking every normal sound out the door with him. Only strange creaks and groans remained.

Cobber snapped his shade down so his own reflection in the window wouldn’t startle him. He stared at the telephone on his desk, wishing it would ring. His best friend, Boolkie, had promised to call after he’d finished helping out at

Calling Cobber

Nate's Place, his parents' downstairs deli. Cobber looked at his watch. Seven-thirty already. He'd call any minute now.

One by one, Cobber re-sharpened the three pencils he always laid neatly side by side on his desk. One for now. One for what if. One for just in case. Even though kids teased him, he did it at school, too. Somehow—he didn't know why—those perfectly sharpened pencils helped him feel better. They were something he could control. He placed them next to the middle-school talent show flyer, debating whether to throw it away or consider doing his magic act. He'd never before thought of performing in public. Teaching himself magic was his secret way of keeping connected to Mom, to something they both loved watching and had shared together. So, how could he stand up there in front of all those kids and parents? Surely everyone would remember what had happened in third grade. Three years wasn't *that* long ago.

The embarrassing memory surfaced without warning. Cobber walking to the front of the classroom, feeling his breakfast in his throat. Setting his diorama of a Hochunk Native American village on a low table in the front of the room. Licking his lips, breath quickening. Trying not to glance at his note cards. But when he looked up, twenty-seven pairs of eyes bored into his brain, paralyzing him. He swallowed hard, again and again. Bile rose, refusing to be swallowed. And then, all at once, the awfulness—spewing strawberry Pop-Tart and orange juice all over the table and his project. The funhouse-mirror laughing, the teacher's

face pulled into a prune. He couldn't run, couldn't move. If only the floor had cracked open and devoured him whole!

Cobber shook free of the memory, focused on the present. No, there was no way he'd be able to perform his magic act, as much as he might be tempted. Then again, what kind of magician never wants to have an audience? How weird was that? Weird-weird, Boolkie would say.

Cobber wondered what he going to do until Boolkie called, until Dad got home. He could do what he wasn't supposed to do—try to contact Mom's spirit using her childhood game board that he'd tucked away in his closet. Or he could work on his new pencil-up-the-nose-and-out-the-ear magic trick in front of the mirror. That guy in the mirror—now *he* was the best audience! Cobber had just picked up a pencil, when the phone rang. "Hey, Boolkie—"

"Hallo? Hallo? Yacobe, can you hear me?"

"Papa-Ben? Is that you?" He felt a stab of guilt that he hadn't gone by to visit his great-grandfather lately. After Mom died, Dad's grandfather, Ben Kuper, had moved from New York City to Lake Tilton, Wisconsin, to be near them.

"Of course it is me. Who else would it be?"

"Ummm, Boolkie? Doing one of his imitations?"

Papa-Ben laughed. "Yes, well, I can assure you it is not Boolkie. So, how are you, Yacobe? Everything is fine at school, yes? You are reading those one thousand pages like you are supposed to?"

Cobber hesitated, not wanting to lie.

"Next time you come over, you will read to me, eh?"

Calling Cobber

“Okay, if you really want me to.”

“So, is Larry there?”

“No, he went out to drop off a contract and get us some dinner.”

“Ah, my grandson, the provider. The fisherman.”

Cobber grunted, shook his head. They’d tried fishing a few times. Father-and-son bonding, Dad had called it. But they’d never caught anything. “Not hardly,” Cobber said. “More like McDonald’s or Taco Bell.”

“What kind of dinner is that for a growing boy? And so late, too,” Papa-Ben said. “You should come eat with me at the center. Have a square meal on a round plate, eh?”

“Good one, Papa-Ben. I wish I could.”

“Well. I will talk to Larry. Maybe we can arrange it. You have him call me, eh?”

“Is ... is everything okay?” Cobber asked.

“Oh sure. Fine. Just some little business thing. He is a good boy. He will take care of it.”

Cobber grinned at Papa-Ben’s calling his father a “good boy.” Like Dad was a kid *his* age, even though he was forty-one. “Okay, I’ll tell him. And I’ll be by to see you soon. With Boolkie, all right?”

“Very good. I shall ask the ladies to make more cookies.”

After Cobber hung up, he decided magic practice could wait. The talent show wasn’t until late October, if he even decided to enter. Instead, he unzipped his backpack and took out his math homework. He loved all this fraction stuff. Mr. Kennard could give him five, seven, ten

worksheets, and Cobber wouldn't care. Time flew when he looked at numbers. Unlike words. He was just finishing the last page when the phone rang again.

"Hallo, Yacobe, it is you?"

"Papa-Ben, what's wrong?"

"Psych!" Boolkie's distinctive snorty laugh gave him away. "Can't tell us apart, can you?"

Cobber clicked his tongue. "What took you so long to call?"

"Man, it was crazy busy! I can't believe it. Mondays are usually dead."

"Guess it's a good thing we didn't stop by."

"Your dad gone again?"

"Yep. Hey. Did you get your new cleats yet?"

"Um ..." Boolkie hesitated. "About soccer, man."

"Yeah?"

"I, um, I've gotta quit the team."

"Really?" A wave of relief washed through Cobber. Now he could quit, too. No more pretending he loved playing. Loved sitting on the bench, really. All that pressure. Pass it! Score! Defend the goal! No matter what position he tried, he always seemed to be letting someone down.

"You're not mad?"

"Mad? Why would I be mad? So, why are you quitting, anyway?"

"Well, that's the thing. See ..." Boolkie's voice trailed off. "It's just that ..."

"Jeez, spit it out, will you?"

Calling Cobber

"It's just that, well, I'm ... I'm starting Hebrew school."

"Hebrew school?" Cobber blurted. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, really."

"Don't tell me you're getting bar mitzvah'd! We promised we wouldn't. That it just wasn't *us*. We shook on it. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. But you don't know how it is around here, now that Eli is having *his*—my parents acting so proud and everything. I caved, man. I couldn't help it. I'm sorry. I really am."

Cobber said nothing. What happened to all that talk two years ago about a bar mitzvah being stupid, a waste of money—and definitely *not* something they wanted to do? He tried to imagine Boolkie standing up there on the bimah, in charge of the whole service, celebrating being a Jewish man at thirteen. Ha! Some man, breaking a promise to his best friend.

"Come on, Cobber. Say something."

"I can't believe you're doing this. I should break a promise to you and see how *you* like it."

"Oh, man. It's not like that."

"Well, that's how it feels."

"I'm sorry." Boolkie sighed. "Look, it's just Tuesdays and Thursdays, is all. No biggie."

"You're gonna be in with all the little kids, you know, starting so late."

"Yeah, well. Maybe I can catch up. Or get a tutor. It's not like *you* couldn't come, too."