

“Harrison Bergeron”

by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

(1) THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal in every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of the agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

(2) It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about. On the television screen were ballerinas.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

“That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did,” said Hazel.

“Huh?” said George.

“That dance—it was nice,” said Hazel.

(3) “Yup,” said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good—no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sash weights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

“Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer,” said George.

“I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds,” said Hazel, a little envious. “All the things they think up.”

“Um,” said George.

(4) “Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?” said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. “If I was Diana Moon Glampers,” said Hazel, “I'd have chimes on Sunday—just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion.”

“I could think, if it was just chimes,” said George.

“Well—maybe make 'em real loud,” said Hazel. “I think I'd make a good Handicapper General.”

“Good as anybody else,” said George.

“Who knows better'n I do what normal is?” said Hazel.

“Right,” said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that.

“Boy!” said Hazel, “that was a doozy, wasn't it?”

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor, holding their temples.

(5) “All of a sudden you look so tired,” said Hazel. “Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so's you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch.” She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around George's neck. “Go on and rest the bag for a little while,” she said. “I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while.”

George weighed the bag with his hands. “I don’t mind it,” he said. “I don’t notice it any more. It’s just a part of me.”

“You been so tired lately—kind of wore out,” said Hazel. “If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few.”

“Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out,” said George. “I don’t call that a bargain.”

“If you could just take a few out when you came home from work,” said Hazel. “I mean—you don’t compete with anybody around here. You just set around.”

“If I tried to get away with it,” said George, “then other people’d get away with it and pretty soon we’d be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

“I’d hate it,” said Hazel.

(6) “There you are,” said George. “The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?”

If Hazel hadn’t been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn’t have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head.

“Reckon it’d fall all apart,” said Hazel.

“What would?” said George blankly.

“Society,” said Hazel uncertainly. “Wasn’t that what you just said?”

“Who knows?” said George.

(7) The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn’t clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, “Ladies and gentlemen—” He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

“That’s all right,” Hazel said of the announcer, “he tried. That’s the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard.”

(8) “Ladies and gentlemen” said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred-pound men.

And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody. “Excuse me—” she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive. “Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen,” she said in a grackle squawk, “has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous.”

(9) A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen—upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison’s appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever borne heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides. Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

“If you see this boy,” said the ballerina, “do not, I repeat, do not try to reason with him.”

(10) There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges. Screams and barking cries of consternation came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to

the tune of an earthquake.

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have—for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. “My God—” said George, “that must be Harrison!”