

**HARRISON BERGERON** by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1961)

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. 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 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 fully 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.

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 far 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 what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas. A buzzer sounded in George's head, and 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.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good - no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked so that no one, seeing a graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel bad about themselves. George was thinking that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself, 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 jealous.

"Um," said George.

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. "If I was Diana Moon Glampers, I'd have chimes on Sunday - just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion."

"I could still 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."

"As good as anybody else," said George.

"Who knows better than I do what normal is?" said Hazel.

"Right," said George. He began to think about Harrison, his abnormal son who was now in jail, but the sound of 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.

"All of a sudden you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so 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 locked 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," said Hazel. "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag and take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I take 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 sit around."

"If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people would 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.

"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 apart," said Hazel.

"What would?" said George blankly.

"Society," said Hazel uncertainly. "Wasn't that what you just said?"

"Who knows?" said George.

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 had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, the announcer tried to say, "Ladies and Gentlemen." He finally gave up and handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

"That's all right," Hazel said, "he tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard."

"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. It was a warm, timeless melody. "Excuse me," she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

"Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen," she said in a squawk, "has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of trying to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous."

A photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen. The picture showed the full length of Harrison. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever worn heavier handicaps. He had outgrown them faster than the H-G men could think them up.

Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, Harrison wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles not only made him half blind, but also gave him thunderous headaches. Scrap metal was hung all over him. He looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three-hundred extra 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 snuggle caps.

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

Then, there was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries 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, for many times his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. "My God," said George, "that must be Harrison!"

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of a car accident in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen instead.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood in the center of the studio. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered on their knees, expecting to die.

"I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

"Even as I stand here," he bellowed, "crippled, hobbled, sickened - I am greater than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!"

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper. His scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the lock that secured his head harness. It snapped like celery.

Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall. He flung away his rubber ball nose, revealing a man that would have awed God.

"I shall now select my Empress!" he said, looking down on the cowering people. "Let the first woman who rises to her feet claim her mate and her throne!"

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow. Harrison plucked the handicaps from her body and removed her mask. She was blindingly beautiful.

"Now," said Harrison, taking her hand, "shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!" he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. "Play your best," he told them.

The music began. It was normal at first - cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, and waved them like batons as he sang the music that he wanted them to play. He slammed them back into their chairs, and when the music began again, it was much improved.

Harrison and his Empress listened to the music for a while. Then, they shifted their weights to their toes. Harrison placed his big hands on the girl's tiny waist, and in an explosion of joy and grace, they sprang into the air!

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun. They leaped like deer on the moon. They remained suspended in air, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons' television burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up, and then he sat down again. "You been crying," he said to Hazel.

"Yup," she said.

"What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something real sad on television."

"What was it?" he said.

"It's all kind of mixed up in my mind," said Hazel.

"Forget sad things," said George.

"I always do," said Hazel.

"That's my girl," said George. He winced. There was the sound of a rivetting gun in his head.

"Gee, I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Gee," said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy."