

The No-Talent Kid

Kurt Vonnegut

It was autumn, and the leaves outside Lincoln High School were turning the same rusty color as the bare brick walls in the band rehearsal room. George M. Helmholtz, head of the music department and director of the band, was ringed by folding chairs and instrument cases, and on each chair sat a very young man, nervously prepared to blow through something or, in the case of the percussion section, to hit something, the instant Mr. Helmholtz lowered his white baton.

Mr. Helmholtz, a man of forty, who believed that his great belly was a sign of health, strength, and dignity, smiled angelically, as though he were about to release the most exquisite sounds ever heard by human beings. Down came his baton.

Bloooooomp! went the big sousaphones.

Blat! Blat! echoed the French horns, and the plodding, shrieking, querulous waltz was begun.

Mr. Helmholtz's expression did not change as the brasses lost their places, as the woodwinds' nerve failed and they became inaudible rather than have their mistakes heard, while the percussion section sounded like the Battle of Cettysburg.

A-a-a-a-ta-ta, a-a-a-a-a, ta-ta-ta-ta!" In a loud tenor, Mr. Helmholtz sang the first-comet part when the first cornetist, florid and perspiring, gave up and slouched in his chair, his instrument in his lap.

"Saxophones, let me hear you," called Mr. Helmholtz. "Good!"

This was the C Band, and for the C Band, the performance was good. It couldn't have been more polished for the fifth session of the School year. Most of the youngsters were just starting out as bandsmen, and in the years ahead of them they would acquire artistry enough to move into the B Band, which met the next hour. And finally the best of them would gain positions in the pride of the city, the Lincoln High School Ten Square Band.

The football team lost half its games and the basketball team lost two thirds of theirs, but the band, in the ten years Mr. Helmholtz had been running it, had been second to none until the past June. It had been the first in the state to use flag twirlers, the first to use choral as well as instrumental numbers, the first to use triple-tonguing extensively, the first to march in breathtaking double time, the first to put a light in its bass drum. Lincoln High School awarded letter sweaters to the members of the A Band, and the sweaters were deeply respected, and properly so. The band had won every statewide high School band competition for ten years-save the showdown in June.

While members of the C Band dropped out of the waltz, one by one, as though mustard gas were coming out of the ventilation, Mr. Helmholtz continued to smile and wave his baton for the survivors, and to brood inwardly over the defeat his band had sustained in June, when Johnstown High School had won with a secret weapon, a bass drum seven feet in diameter. The judges, who were not musicians but politicians, had had eyes and ears for nothing but this Eighth Wonder of the World, and since then Mr. Helmholtz had thought of little else. But the School budget was already lopsided with band expenses. When the School board had given him the last special appropriation he'd begged so desperately-money to wire the plumes of the bandsmen's hats with flashlight bulbs and batteries for night games-the board had made him swear like a habitual drunkard that, so help him Cod, this was the last time.

Only two members of the C Band were playing now, a clarinetist and a snare drummer, both playing loudly, proudly, confidently, and all wrong. Mr. Helmholtz, coming out of his wistful dream of a bass drum bigger than the one that had beaten

him, administered the coup de grâce to the waltz by clattering his stick against his music stand. All righty, all righty," he said cheerily, and he nodded his congratulations to the two who had persevered to the bitter end.

Walter Plummer, the clarinetist, responded gravely, like a concert -soloist receiving an ovation led by the director of a symphony orchestra. He was small, but with a thick chest developed in summers spent at the bottom of swimming pools, and he could hold a note longer than anyone in the A Band, much longer, but that was all he could do. He drew back his tired, reddened lips, showing the two large front teeth that gave him the look of a squirrel, adjusted his reed, limbered his fingers, and awaited the next challenge to his virtuosity.

This would be Plummer's third year in the C Band, Mr. Helmholtz thought, with a mixture of pity and fear. Nothing could shake Plummer's determination to earn the right to wear one of the sacred letters of the A Band, so far, terribly far away.

Mr. Helmholtz had tried to tell Plummer how misplaced his ambitions were, to recommend other fields for his great lungs and enthusiasm, where pitch would be unimportant. But Plummer was in love, not with music, but with the letter sweaters. Being as tone-deaf as boiled cabbage, he could detect nothing in his own playing about which to be discouraged.

"Remember," said Mr. Helmholtz to the C Band, "Friday is challenge day, so be on your toes. The chairs you have now were assigned arbitrarily. On challenge day it'll be up to you to prove which chair you really deserve." He avoided the narrowed, confident eyes of Plummer, who had taken the first clarinetist's chair without consulting the seating plan posted on the bulletin board. Challenge day occurred every two weeks, and on that day any bandsman could challenge anyone ahead of him to a contest for his position, with Mr. Helmholtz as judge.

Plummer's hand was raised, its fingers snapping.

"Yes, Plummer?" said Mr. Helmholtz. He had come to dread challenge day because of Plummer. He had come to think of it as Plummer's day. Plummer never challenged anybody in the C Band or even the B Band, but stormed the organization at the very top, challenging, as was unfortunately the privilege of all, only members of the A Band. The waste of the A Band's time was troubling enough, but infinitely more painful for Mr. Helmholtz were Plummer's looks of stunned disbelief when he heard Mr. Helmholtz's decision that he hadn't outplayed the men he'd challenged.

"Mr. Helmholtz," said Plummer, "I'd like to come to A Band session that day."

"All right-if you feel up to it." Plummer always felt up to it, and it would have been more of a surprise if Plummer had announced that he wouldn't be at the A Band session.

"I'd like to challenge Flamer"

The rustling of sheet music and clicking of instrument case latches stopped. Flamer was the first clarinetist in the A Band, a genius whom not even members of the A Band would have had the gall to challenge.

Mr. Helmholtz cleared his throat. "I admire your spirit, Plummer, but isn't that rather ambitious for the first of the year? Perhaps you should start out with, say, challenging Ed Delaney." Delaney held down the last chair in the B Band.

"You don't understand," said Plummer. "You haven't noticed I have a new clarinet."

"Hmm? Oh-well, so you do."

Plummer stroked the satin-black barrel of the instrument as though it were King Arthur's sword, giving magical powers to whoever possessed it. "It's as good as Flamer's," said Plummer. "Better, even."

There was a warning in his voice, telling Mr. Helmholtz that the days of discrimination were over, that nobody in his right mind would dare to hold back a man with an instrument like this.

"Um," said Mr. Helmholtz. "Well, we'll see, we'll see."

After practice, he was forced into close quarters with Plummer again in the crowded hallway. Plummer was talking darkly to a wide-eyed freshman bandsman.

"Know why the band lost to Johnstown High last June?" asked Plummer, seemingly ignorant of the fact that he was back-to-back with Mr. Helmholtz. "Because they stopped running the band on the merit system. Keep your eyes open on Friday."

Mr. George M. Helmholtz lived in a world of music, and even the throbbing of his headache came to him musically, if painfully, as the deep throated boom of a bass drum seven feet in diameter. It was late afternoon on the first challenge day of the new school year. He was sitting in his living room, his eyes covered, awaiting another sort of thump—the impact of the evening paper, hurled against the clapboards of the front of the house by Water Plummer, the delivery boy.

As Mr. Helmholtz was telling himself that he would rather not have his newspaper on challenge day, since Plummer came with it, the paper was delivered with a crash.

"Plummer!" he cried.

"Yes, sir?" said Plummer from the sidewalk.

Mr. Helmholtz shuffled to the door in his carpet slippers. "Please, my boy," he said, "can't we be friends?"

"Sure—why not?" said Plummer. "Let bygones be bygones, is what I say." He gave a bitter imitation of an amiable chuckle. "Water over the dam. It's been two hours now since you stuck the knife in me."

Mr. Helmholtz sighed. "Have you got a moment? It's time we had a talk, my boy."

Plummer hid his papers under the shrubbery, and walked in. Mr. Helmholtz gestured at the most comfortable chair in the room, the one in which he'd been sitting. Plummer chose to sit on the edge of a hard one with a straight back instead.

"My boy," said the bandmaster, "Cod made all kinds of people: some who can run fast, some who can write wonderful stories, some who can paint pictures, some who can sell anything, some who can make beautiful music. But He didn't make anybody who could do everything well. Part of the growing-up process is finding out what we can do well and what we can't do well." He patted Plummer's shoulder. "The last part, finding out what we can't do, is what hurts most about growing up. But everybody has to face it, and then go in search of his true self."

Plummer's head was sinking lower and lower on his chest, and Mr. Helmholtz hastily pointed out a silver lining. "For instance, Flamer could never run a business like a paper route, keeping records, getting new customers. He hasn't that kind of a mind, and couldn't do that sort of thing if his life depended on it."

"You've got a point," said Plummer with unexpected brightness. "A guy's got to be awful one-sided to be as good at one thing as Flamer is. I think it's more worthwhile to try to be better rounded. No, Flamer beat me fair and square today, and I don't want you to think I'm a bad sport about that. It isn't that that gets me."

"That's mature of you," said Mr. Helmholtz. "But what I was trying to point out to you was that we've all got weak points, and—"

Plummer waved him to silence. "You don't have to explain to me, Mr. Helmholtz. With a job as big as you've got, it'd be a miracle if you did the whole thing right."

"Now, hold on, Plummer!" said Mr. Helmholtz.

"AB I'm asking is that you look at it from my point of view," said Plummer. "No sooner'd I come back from challenging A Band material, no sooner'd I come back from playing my heart out, than you turned those C Band kids loose on me. You and I know

we were just giving 'em the feel of challenge days, and that I was all played out. But did you tell them that? Heck, no, you didn't, Mr. Helmholtz, and those kids all think they can play better than me. That's all I'm sore about, Mr. Helmholtz. They think it means something, me in the last chair of the C Band."

"Plummer," said Mr. Helmholtz, "I have been trying to tell you something as kindly as possible, but the only way to get it across to you is to tell it to you straight."

"Go ahead and quash criticism," said Plummer, standing. "Quash?"

"Quash," said Plummer with finality. He headed for the door. "I'm probably ruining my chances for getting into the A Band by speaking out

like this, Mr. Helmholtz, but frankly, it's incidents like what happened to me today that lost you the band competition last June."

"It was a seven-foot bass drum!"

"Well, get one for Lincoln High and see how you make out then.»

"I'd give my right arm for one!" said Mr. Helmholtz, forgetting the point at issue and remembering his all-consuming dream.

Plummer paused on the threshold. "One like the Knights of Kandahar use in their parades?"

"That's the ticket!" Mr. Helmholtz imagined the Knights of Kandahar's huge drum, the showpiece of every local parade. He tried to think of it with the Lincoln High School black panther painted on it. "Yes, sir!" When the bandmaster returned to earth, Plummer was astride his bicycle.

Mr. Helmholtz started to shout after Plummer, to bring him back and tell him bluntly that he didn't have the remotest chance of getting out of C Band ever, that he would never be able to understand that the mission of a band wasn't simply to make noises but to make special kinds of noises. But Plummer was off and away.

Temporarily relieved until next challenge day, Mr. Helmholtz sat down to enjoy his paper, to read that the treasurer of the Knights of Kandahar, a respected citizen, had disappeared with the organization's funds, leaving behind and unpaid the Knights' bills for the past year and a half. "We'll pay a hundred cents on the dollar, if we have to sell everything but the Sacred Mace," the Sublime Chamberlain of the Inner Shrine had said.

Mr. Helmholtz didn't know any of the people involved, and he yawned and turned to the funnies. He gasped, turned to the front page again. He looked up a number in the phone book and dialed.

"Zum-zum-zum-zum," went the busy signal in his ear. He dropped the telephone into its cradle. Hundreds of people, he thought, must be trying to get in touch with the Sublime Chamberlain of the Inner Shrine of the Knights of Kandahar at this moment. He looked up at his flaking ceiling in prayer. But none of them, he prayed, was after a bargain in a cart-borne bass drum.

He dialed again and again, and always got the busy signal. He walked out on his porch to relieve some of the tension building up in him. He would be the only one bidding on the drum, he told himself, and he could name his price. Good Lord! If he offered fifty dollars for it, he could probably have it! He'd put up his own money, and get the school to pay him back in three years, when the plumes with the electric lights in them were paid for in full.

He was laughing like a department store Santa Claus, when his gaze dropped from heaven to his lawn and he espied Plummer's undelivered newspapers lying beneath the shrubbery.

He went inside and called the Sublime Chamberlain again, with the same results. He then called Plummer's home to let him know where the papers were mislaid. But that line was busy, too.

He dialed alternately the Plummers' number and the Sublime Chamberlain's number for fifteen minutes before getting a ringing signal. "Yes?" said Mrs. Plummer.

"This is Mr. Helmholtz, Mrs. Plummer. Is Walter three?"

"He was here a minute ago, telephoning, but he just went out of here like a shot."

"Looking for his papers? He left them under my spirea."

"He did? Heavens, I have no idea where he was going. He didn't say anything about his papers, but I thought I overheard something about selling his clarinet." She sighed, and then laughed. "Having money of their own makes them awfully independent. He never tells me anything."

"Well, you tell him I think maybe it's for the best, his selling his clarinet. And tell him where his papers are."

It was unexpected good news that Plummer had at last seen the light about his musical career. The bandmaster now called the Sublime Chamberlain's home again for more good news. He got through this time, but was disappointed to learn that the man had just left on some sort of lodge business.

For years, Mr. Helmholtz had managed to smile and keep his wits about him in C Band practice sessions. But on the day after his fruitless efforts to find out anything about the Knights of Kandahar's bass drum, his defenses were down, and the poisonous music penetrated to the roots of his soul. "No, no, no!" he cried in pain. He threw his white baton against the

brick wall. The springy stick bounded off the bricks and fell into an empty folding chair at the rear of the clarinet section-Plummer's empty chair. As Mr. Helmholtz retrieved the baton, he found himself unexpectedly moved by the symbol of the empty chair. No one else, he realized, no matter how untalented, could fill the last chair in the organization as well as Plummer had. Mr. Helmholtz looked up to find many of the bandsmen contemplating the chair with him, as though they, too, sensed that something great, in a fantastic way, had disappeared, and that life would be a good bit duller on account of that.

During the ten minutes between the C Band and B Band sessions, Mr. Helmholtz hurried to his office and again tried to get in touch with the Sublime Chamberlain of the Knights of Kandahar. No luck! "Lord knows where he's off to now," Mr. Helmholtz was told. "He was in for just a second, but went right out again. I gave him your name, so I expect he'll call you when he gets a minute. You're the drum gentleman, aren't you?" "That's right-the drum gentleman."

The buzzers in the hall were sounding, marking the beginning of another class period. Mr. Helmholtz wanted to stay by the phone until he'd caught the Sublime Chamberlain and closed the deal, but the B Band was waiting-and after that it would be the A Band.

An inspiration came to him. He called Western Union and sent a telegram to the man, offering fifty dollars for the drum and requesting a reply collect.

But no reply came during B Band practice. Nor had one come by the halfway point of the A Band session. The bandsmen, a sensitive, highstrung lot, knew immediately that their director was on edge about something, and the rehearsal went badly. Mr. Helmholtz stopped a march in the middle because somebody outside was shaking the large double doors at one end of the rehearsal room.

"All right, all right, let's wait until the racket dies down so we can hear ourselves," Mr. Helmholtz said.

At that moment, a student messenger handed him a telegram. Mr. Helmholtz tore open the envelope, and this is what he read:

DRUM SOLD STOP COULD YOU USE A STUFFED CAMEL ON WHEELS STOP

The wooden doors opened with a shriek of rusty hinges. A snappy autumn gust showered the band with leaves. Plummer stood in the great opening, winded and perspiring, harnessed to a drum as big as a harvest moon!

"I know this isn't challenge day," said Plummer, "but I thought you might make an exception in my case."

He walked in with splendid dignity, the huge apparatus grumbling along behind him. Mr. Helmholtz rushed to meet him. He crushed Plummer's right hand between both of his. "Plummer, boy! You got it for us. Good boy! I'll pay you whatever you paid for it," he cried, and in his joy he added rashly, "And a nice little profit besides. Good boy!"

"See it?" said Plummer. "I'll give it to you when I graduate. All I want to do is play it in the A Band as long as I'm here."

"But Plummer," said Mr. Helmholtz, "you don't know anything about drums."

"I'll practice hard," said Plummer. He backed his instrument into an aisle between the tubas and the trombones, toward the percussion section, where the amazed musicians were hastily making room.

"Now, just a minute," said Mr. Helmholtz, chuckling as though Plummer were joking, and knowing full well he wasn't. "There's more to drum playing than just lambasting the thing whenever you take a notion to, you know. It takes years to be a drummer."

"Well," said Plummer, "the quicker I get at it, the quicker I'll get good." "What I meant was that I'm afraid you won't be quite ready for the A Band for a little while."

Plummer stopped his backing. "How long?" he asked.

"Oh, sometime in your senior year, perhaps. Meanwhile, you could let the band have your drum to use until you're ready"

Mr. Helmholtz's skin began to itch all over as Plummer stared at him coldly. "Until hell freezes over?" Plummer said at last.

Mr. Helmholtz sighed. "I'm afraid that's about right." He shook his head. "It's what I tried to tell you yesterday afternoon: Nobody can do everything well, and we've all got to face up to our limitations. You're a fine boy, Plummer, but you'll never be a musician-not in a million years. The only thing to do is what we all have to do now and then: smile, shrug, and say, 'Well, that's just one of those things that's not for me.'"

Tears formed on the rims of Plummer's eyes. He walked slowly toward the doorway, with the drum tagging after him. He paused on the doorsill for one more wistful look at the A Band that would never have a chair for him. He smiled feebly and shrugged.

"Some people have eight-foot drums," he said, "and others don't, and that's just the way life is. You're a fine man, Mr. Helmholtz, but you'll never get this drum in a million years, because I'm going to give it to my mother for a coffee table."

"Plummer!" cried Mr. Helmholtz. His plaintive voice was drowned out by the rumble and rattle of the big drum as it followed its small master down the school's concrete driveway.

Mr. Helmholtz ran after him. Plummer and his drum had stopped at an intersection to wait for a light to change. Mr. Helmholtz caught him there and seized his arm. "We've got to have that drum," he panted. "How much do you want?"

"Smile," said Plummer. "Shrug! That's what I did." Plummer did it again. "See? So I can't get into the A Band, so you can't have the drum. Who cares? All part of the growing-up process."

"The situations aren't the same!" said Mr. Helmholtz. "Not at all the same!"

"You're right," said Plummer. "I'm growing up, and you're not."

The light changed, and Plummer left Mr. Helmholtz on the corner, stunned.

Mr. Helmholtz had to run after him again. "Plummer," he wheedled, "you'll never be able to play it well."

"Rub it in," said Plummer.

"But look at what a swell job you're doing of pulling it," said Mr. Helmholtz.

"Rub it in," Plummer repeated.

"No, no, no," said Mr. Helmholtz. "Not at all. If the school gets that drum, whoever's pulling it will be as crucial and valued a member of the A Band as the first-chair clarinet. What if it capsized?"

"He'd win a band letter if it didn't capsize?" said Plummer. And Mr. Helmholtz said this: "I don't see why not."