

Harrison Bergeron – Pre-Intermediate Level Story

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal in every way. Nobody was more clever than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or faster than anybody else. All this was because of two things. The first was the 211th, 212th, and 213th changes to the Constitution. The second was the never ending work of H-G men, agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. The month of April for example, still made people angry by not being Spring. And it was in that sticky month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen year-old son, Harrison, away.

At first they were very sad, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel's mind was normal, which meant she couldn't think about anything for more than a short time. And George, who was very clever, had a small mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. Every twenty seconds or so, a government radio station would send a signal to it which played a sharp noise. This was to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears in Hazel's eyes. However, she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.

A loud sound was played in George's ear radio. His thoughts disappeared in the pain.

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

"Huh" said George.

"That dance... it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yes," 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 had to wear heavy belts and had handicap bags chained to their necks, so that they could not dance too well. And they wore masks so that no one, seeing a pretty face, would feel ugly. George was starting to think that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another loud noise in his ear radio broke up his thoughts.

George closed his eyes in pain. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw this. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

"Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with something hard," said George.

"I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds," said Hazel. "All the things they think up."

"Um," said George.

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. As a matter of fact, Hazel looked a lot like the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. "If I was Diana Moon Glampers," said Hazel, "I'd have bells on Sunday, just bells... because Sunday is the day for church."

"I could think, if it was just bells," said George.

"Well, maybe make them really loud," said Hazel. "I think I'd make a good Handicapper General."

"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 his son, Harrison, who was far from normal and now in prison. But a sound like many big guns in his head stopped that.

"Boy!" said Hazel, "that was a good one, wasn't it?"

It was such a good one that George's face was white and he had tears in the corners of his red eyes. Two out of the eight ballerinas had fallen to the studio floor and were holding their heads.

"All of a sudden you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you lay down on the sofa so you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows." She was talking about the forty-seven pound bag of small metal balls which was chained to 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 held the bag in his hands. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me."

"You have looked so tired lately," 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 the balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and a two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that fair."

"If you could just take a few out when you came home from work," said Hazel. "I mean... you don't compete with anybody at home. You just sit around."

"If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people would also get away with it. 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 breaking the law, 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 given her one. A loud bell was ringing in his head.

"I expect that it'd go to pieces," said Hazel.

"What would?" said George, not understanding her meaning.

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

"Who knows?" said George.

The television program suddenly stopped for a news announcement. It wasn't clear at first as to what the announcement was about. The news reader, like all news readers, had a serious speaking problem. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the reader tried to say, "Ladies and Gentlemen."

He finally gave up and handed the announcement to a ballerina to read.

"That's all right," Hazel said of the news reader, "he tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get an increase in pay for trying so hard."

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said the ballerina, reading the announcement. She must have been very beautiful, because the mask she wore was very ugly. It was also easy to see that she was the best of all the dancers. Her handicap bags were as big as those

worn by two hundred pound men.

She had to stop and say sorry for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. It was far too warm and song like. "Excuse me," she said, and she began again, making her voice totally uncompetitive.

"Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen," she said, "has just escaped from prison. He was held there because it was thought that he wanted to change the government. He is a very clever and very strong. He also has not been handicapped enough and is very dangerous."

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was shown on the screen... upside down, then from the side, upside down again, then right side up. In the picture, the wall behind him was marked to show how tall the person is. The top of his head was on the seven foot mark.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was frightening. Nobody had ever had to carry heavier handicaps. He had become stronger than the things designed to make him uncompetitive faster than the H-G men could think them up. Unlike other people, his mental handicap was not a little ear radio but a huge set of headphones. And he had to wear glasses that were designed to not only make sure that he could not see well, but also to give him terrible headaches.

Pieces of metal were hung all over him. Normally, the handicaps given to strong people were placed evenly around their body. But not for Harrison. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds more than other men. To make up for his good looks, he was forced to wear a red rubber ball over his nose. He also had to cover some of his even white teeth with black caps.

"If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not - I'll say it again, do not - try to speak with him."

There was the sound of a door being torn from a wall.

Screams came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to the music 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 loud music. "My God," said George, "that must be Harrison!"

The thought disappeared from his mind as he heard the sound of a car crashing in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living Harrison filled the screen. He stood in the center of the studio. The handle of the broken studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, musicians, and studio staff were down on their knees before him, expecting to die.

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

"Even as I stand here" he shouted, "unable to move freely, sickened... I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!"

Harrison tore the chains that tied his handicaps to him like they were not there. The handicaps fell loudly to the floor. He threw his headphones and glasses against the wall. He took off his rubber ball nose and stood there... tall, powerful and handsome.

"I shall now choose my Queen!" he said, looking down on the people on their knees. "Let the first woman who is brave enough to be my wife stand and meet her husband!"

A moment passed, and then a ballerina stood up.

Harrison took the handicap radio from her ear, and carefully broke off her handicap belt and bag. Last of all he took off her mask.

She was very beautiful.

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

The musicians got back into their chairs, and Harrison took off their handicaps, too.

"Play your best," he told them, "and I'll make you leaders among my government."

The music began. It was the usual music required by H-G men at first... cheap, silly, false. Harrison lifted two musicians from their chairs and waved them about in the air as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He put them back into their chairs. The music began again and was much better.

Harrison and his Queen listened carefully to the music for a while, as though trying to make their hearts beat in time with it.

They stood on their toes.

Harrison lifted the girl off the floor, letting her experience the feeling of flying that

would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of power and beauty, they jumped into the air!

In addition to not following the laws of the government, Harrison did not follow the laws of nature.

They went round and round and up and down. The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each jump brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became clear that they planned to kiss the ceiling. They kissed it. And then, through love and the power of their minds, they remained up in air inches below the ceiling. There, 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 gun. She fired twice, and the King and the Queen were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers pointed the gun at the musicians, and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons' television stopped working.

Hazel turned to say something about it to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

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

"Yes," she said.

"What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something very 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. There was the sound of a gun in his head, and he

closed his eyes in pain.

"Wow! I could see that was a good one," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Wow!" said Hazel, "I could see that one was a good one."