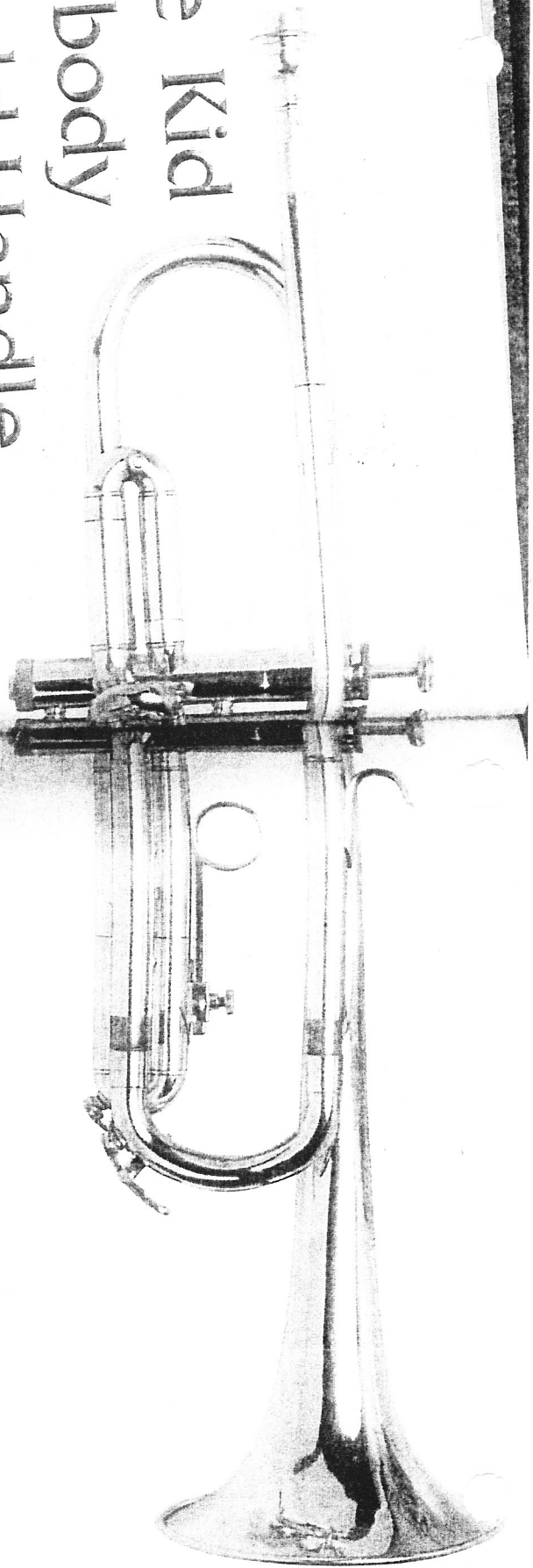


The Kid Nobody Could Handle

Kurt Vonnegut³

It was seven-thirty in the morning. Waddling, clanking, muddy machines were tearing a hill to pieces behind a restaurant, and trucks were hauling the pieces away. Inside the restaurant, dishes rattled on their shelves. Tables quaked, and a very kind fat man with a headful of music looked down at the giggling yolks of his breakfast eggs. His wife was visiting relatives out of town. He was on his own.

The kind fat man was George M. Helmholtz, a man of forty, head of the music department of Lincoln High School, and director of the band. Life had treated him well. Each year he dreamed the same big dream. He dreamed of leading as fine a band as there was on the face of the earth. And each year the dream came true.



It came true because Helmholtz was sure that a man couldn't have a better dream than his. Faced by this unnerving sureness, Kiwanians, Rotarians, and Lions paid for band uniforms that cost twice as much as their best suits, school administrators let Helmholtz raid the budget for expensive props, and youngsters played their hearts out for him. When youngsters had no talent, Helmholtz made them play on guts alone.

Everything was good about Helmholtz's life save his finances. He was so dazzled by his big dream that he was a child in the marketplace. Ten years before, he had

1. The *Kiwanians*, *Rotarians*, and *Lions* are members of the Kiwanis, Rotary, and Lions clubs, groups of business and professional people who work to do good things for a community.

sold the hill behind the restaurant to Bert Quinn, the restaurant owner, for one thousand dollars. It was now apparent, even to Helmholtz, that Helmholtz had been had.²

Quinn sat down in the booth with the bandmaster. He was a bachelor, a small, dark, humorless man. He wasn't a well man. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't stop working, he couldn't smile warmly. He had only two moods: one suspicious and self-pitying, the other arrogant and boastful. The first mood applied when he was losing money. The second mood applied when he was making it.

Quinn was in the arrogant and boastful mood when he sat down with Helmholtz.

2. [*been had*] The expression to be had means "to be cheated or deceived."

Vocabulary

unnering (un nur' ing) *adj.* causing nervousness or upset; disturbing
arrogant (ar' a gant) *adj.* full of self-importance; too proud

The Kid Nobody Could Handle

He sucked whistlingly on a toothpick, and talked of vision—his own.

"I wonder how many eyes saw the hill before I did?" said Quinn. "Thousands and thousands. I'll bet—and not one saw what I saw. How many eyes?"

"Mine, at least," said Helmholtz. All the hill had meant to him was a panting climb, free blackberries, taxes, and a place for hand picnics.

"You inherit the hill from your old man, and it's nothing but a pain in the neck to you," said Quinn. "So you figure you'll stick me with it."

"I didn't figure to stick you," Helmholtz protested. "The good Lord knows the price was more than fair."

"You say that now," said Quinn gleefully. "Sure, Helmholtz, you say that now. Now you see the shopping district's got to grow. Now you see what I saw."

"Yes," said Helmholtz. "Too late, too late." He looked around for some diversion, and saw a fifteen-year-old boy coming toward him, mopping the aisle between booths.

The boy was small but with tough, stringy muscles standing out on his neck and forearms. Childhood lingered in his features, but when he paused to rest, his fingers went hopefully to the silky beginnings of sideburns and a mustache. He mopped like a robot, jerkily, brainlessly, but took pains not to splash suds over the toes of his black boots.

"So what do I do when I get the hill?" said Quinn. "I tear it down, and it's like somebody pulled down a dam. All of a

sudden everybody wants to build a store where the hill was."

"Um," said Helmholtz. He smiled genially at the boy. The boy looked through him without a twitch of recognition.

"We all got something," said Quinn. "You got music; I got vision." And he smiled, for it was perfectly clear to both where the money lay. "Think big!" said Quinn. "Dream big! That's what vision is. Keep your eyes wider open than anybody else's."

"That boy," said Helmholtz. "I've seen him around school, but I never knew his name."

Quinn laughed cheerlessly. "Billy the Kid? The storm trooper? Rudolph Valentino? Flash Gordon?" He called the boy. . . . "Hey, Jim! Come here a minute."

Helmholtz was appalled to see that the boy's eyes were as expressionless as systems.

"This is my brother-in-law's kid by another marriage—before he married my sister," said Quinn. "His name's Jim Donnini, and he's from the south side of Chicago, and he's very tough."

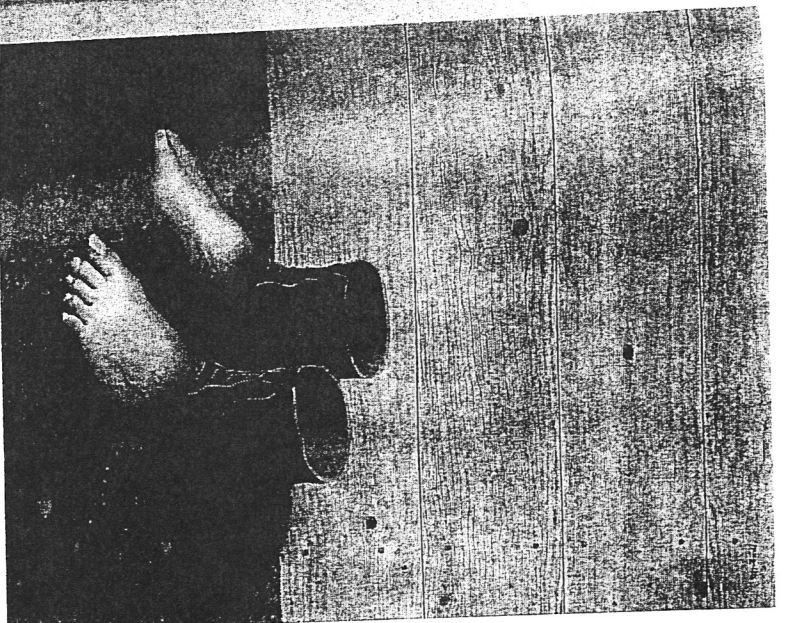
Jim Donnini's hands tightened on the mop handle.

"How do you do?" said Helmholtz. "Hi," said Jim empty.

"He's living with me now," said Quinn. "He's my baby now."

"You want a lift to school, Jim?"

3. *Billy the Kid* was a legendary Wild West gunslinger. A *storm trooper* was a member of a military organization in Nazi Germany known for its cruelty and savagery. *Rudolph Valentino* played the romantic hero in many early movies, and *Flash Gordon* is a comic book hero.



In Middle Rouge (The Red Model), 1955, René Magritte Viewing the paintings: How might these boots be a symbol for Jim?

"Yeah, he wants a lift to school," said Quinn. "See what you make of him. He won't talk to me." He turned to Jim. "Go on, kid, wash up and shave."

Robotlike, Jim marched away. "Where are his parents?"

"His mother's dead. His old man married my sister, walked out on her, and struck her with him. Then the court didn't like the way she was raising him, and put him in foster homes for a while. Then they decided to let him clear out of Chicago, so they struck me with him." He shook his head. "Life's a funny thing, Helmholtz."

"Not very funny, sometimes," said Helmholtz. He pushed his eggs away.

"Like some whole new race of people coming up," said Quinn wonderingly. "Nothing like the kids we got around here. Those boots, the black jacket—and he won't talk. He won't run around with the other kids. Won't study. I don't think he can even read and write very good."

"Does he like music at all? Or drawing? Or animals?" said Helmholtz. "Does he collect anything?"

"You know what he likes?" said Quinn. "He likes to polish those boots—get off by himself and polish those boots. And when he's really in heaven is when he can get off by himself, spread comic books all around him on the floor, polish his boots, and watch television." He smiled ruefully. "Yeah, he had a collection too. And I took it away from him and threw it in the river."

"Threw it in the river?" said Helmholtz. "Yeah," said Quinn. "Eight knives—some with blades as long as your hand."

Helmholtz paled. "Oh." A prickling sensation spread over the back of his neck. "This is a new problem at Lincoln High. I hardly know what to think about it." He swept spilled salt together in a neat little pile, just as he would have liked to sweep together his scattered thoughts. "It's a kind

4. *Ruefully* means "regretfully."

Vocabulary
diversion (di vur' zhan) *n.* something that draws the attention away; distraction
appalled (a pold' adf) *stoked*; horrified

of sickness, isn't it? That's the way to look at it?"

"Sick?" said Quinn. He slapped the table. "You can say that again!" He tapped his chest. "And Doctor Quinn is just the man to give him what's good for what ails him."

"What's that?" said Helmholtz.

"No more talk about the poor little sick boy," said Quinn grimly. "That's all he's heard from the social workers and all juvenile court, and God knows who all. From now on, he's the no-good bum of a man. I'll ride his tail till he straightens up and flies right or winds up in the can for life. One way or the other."

"I see," said Helmholtz.

Like listening to music?" said Helmholtz to Jim brightly, as they rode to school in Helmholtz's car.

Jim said nothing. He was stroking his mustache and sideburns, which he had not shaved off.

"Ever drum with the fingers or keep time with your feet?" said Helmholtz. He had noticed that Jim's boots were decorated with chains that had no function but to jingle as he walked.

Jim sighed with ennui.⁵

"Or whistle?" said Helmholtz. "If you do any of those things, it's just like picking up the keys to a whole new world—a world as beautiful as any world can be."

Jim gave a soft Bronx cheer.⁶

"There!" said Helmholtz. "You've illustrated the basic principle of the family of brass wind instruments. The glorious voice of every one of them starts with a buzz on the lips."

The seat springs of Helmholtz's old car creaked under Jim, as Jim shifted his weight. Helmholtz took this as a sign of interest, and he turned to smile in comradely fashion. But Jim had shifted his weight in order to get a cigarette from inside his tight leather jacket. Helmholtz was too upset to comment at once. It was only at the end of the ride, as he turned into the teachers' parking lot, that he thought of something to say.

"Sometimes," said Helmholtz, "I get so lonely and disgusted, I don't see how I can stand it. I feel like doing all kinds of crazy things, just for the heck of it—things that might even be bad for me."

Jim blew a smoke ring expertly.

"And then?" said Helmholtz. He snapped his fingers and honked his horn.

"And then, Jim, I remember I've got at least one tiny corner of the universe I can make just the way I want it! I can go to it and gloat over it until I'm brand-new and happy again."

"Aren't you the lucky one?" said Jim. He yawned.

"I am, for a fact," said Helmholtz. "My corner of the universe happens to be the air around my hand. I can fill it with music. Mr. Beecher, in zoology, has his butterflies. Mr. Trotman, in physics, has his pendulum and tuning forks. Making sure everybody has a corner like that is about the biggest job we teachers have. I—"

The car door opened and slammed, and Jim was gone. Helmholtz stamped out Jim's cigarette and buried it under the gravel of the parking lot.

Helmholtz's first class of the morning was C Band, where beginners thumped and wheezed and tooted as best they could and looked down the long, long, long road

through B Band to A Band, the Lincoln High School Ten Square Band, the finest band in the world.

Helmholtz stepped onto the podium and raised his baton. "You are better than you think," he said. "A-one, a-two, a-three." Down came the baton.

C Band set out in its quest for beauty—set out like a rusty switch engine, with valves stuck, pipes clogged, unions leaking, bearings dry.

Helmholtz was still smiling at the end of the hour, because he'd heard in his mind the music as it

was going to be someday. His throat was raw, for he had been singing with the band for the whole hour. He stepped into the hall for a drink from the fountain.

As he drank, he heard the jingling of chains. He looked up at Jim Donnini. Rivers

of students flowed between classrooms, pausing in friendly

eddies, flowing on again. Jim was alone. When he paused, it wasn't to greet anyone, but to polish the toes of his boots on his trousers legs. He had the air of a spy in a melodrama, missing nothing, liking nothing, looking forward to the great day when everything would be turned upside down.

"Hello, Jim," said Helmholtz. "Say, I was just thinking about you. We've got a lot of clubs and teams that meet after school. And that's a good way to get to know a lot of people."

Jim measured Helmholtz carefully with his eyes. "Maybe I don't want to know a lot of people," he said. "Ever think of that?" He set his feet down hard to make his chains jingle as he walked away.

When Helmholtz returned to the podium for a rehearsal of B Band, there was a note waiting for him, calling him to a special faculty meeting.

The meeting was about vandalism.

He had the air of a spy in a melodrama, missing nothing, liking nothing, looking forward to the great day when everything would be turned upside down.

Someone had broken into the school and wrecked the office of Mr. Crane, head of the English Department.

The poor man's treasures—books, diplomas, snapshots of England, the beginnings of eleven novels—had

been ripped and crumpled, mixed, dumped and trampled, and drenched with ink.

Helmholtz was sickened. He couldn't believe it. He couldn't bring himself to think about it. It didn't become real to him until late that night, in a dream. In the dream Helmholtz saw a boy with barracuda teeth, with claws like baling hooks. The monster climbed into a window of the high school and dropped to

Vocabulary

quest (kwɛst) *n.* a search made to achieve a goal

5. Ennui (en vweɪ) means "boredom."

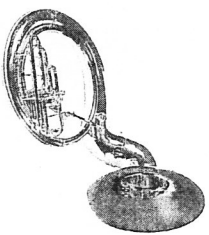
6. A Bronx cheer is an expression of scorn or ridicule, not of good will or good wishes.

7. Eddies are circular currents of wind or water. The students were stopping to socialize in small groups and then moving on.

the floor of the band rehearsal room. The monster clawed to shriek the heads of the biggest drum in the state. Helmholtz woke up howling. There was nothing to do but dress and go to school.

At two in the morning, Helmholtz creased the drum heads in the band rehearsal room, with the night watchman looking on. He rolled the drum back and forth on its cart, and he turned the light inside on and off, on and off. The drum was unharmed. The night watchman left to make his rounds.

The band's treasure house was safe. With the contentment of a miser counting his money,



Did You Know?

A *sousaphone* (soo' za fon), a large circular tuba with a wide bell that faces forward, is named for John Philip Sousa.

As he polished, he could hear the great horns roaring, could see them flashing in the sunlight, with the Stars and Stripes and the banner of Lincoln High going before.

"Yump-yump, tiddle-tiddle, yump-yump, tiddle-tiddle!" sang Helmholtz happily. "Yump-yump-yump, ra-a-a-a-a, yump-yump, yump-yump—boom!"

As he paused to choose the next number for his imaginary band to play, he heard a furtive noise in the chemistry

laboratory next door. Helmholtz sneaked into the hall, jerked open the laboratory door, and flashed on the lights. Jim Domini had a bottle of acid in either hand. He was splashing acid over the periodic table of the elements, over the blackboards covered with formulas, over the bust of Lavoisier.⁸ The scene was the most repulsive thing Helmholtz could have looked upon.

Jim smiled with thin bravado.

"Get out," said Helmholtz.

"What're you gonna do?" said Jim.

"Clean up. Save what I can," said Helmholtz dazedly. He picked up a wad of cotton waste and began wiping up the acid.

"You gonna call the cops?" said Jim.

"I—I don't know," said Helmholtz. "No thoughts come. If I'd caught you hurting the bass drum, I think I would have killed you with a single blow. But I wouldn't have had any intelligent thoughts about what you were—what you thought you were doing."

"It's about time this place got set on its ear," said Jim.

"Is it?" said Helmholtz. "That must be so, if one of our students wants to murder it."

"What good is it?" said Jim.

"Not much good, I guess," said Helmholtz. "It's just the best thing human beings ever managed to do." He was helpless, talking to himself. He had a bag of tricks for making boys behave like men—tricks that played on boyish fears

and dreams and loves. But here was a boy without fear, without dreams, without love. "If you smashed up all the schools," said Helmholtz, "we wouldn't have any hope left."

"What hope?" said Jim.

"The hope that everybody will be glad he's alive," said Helmholtz. "Even you."

"That's a laugh," said Jim. "All I ever got out of this dump was a hard time. So what're you gonna do?"

"I have to do something, don't I?" said Helmholtz.

"I don't care what you do," said Jim.

"I know," said Helmholtz. "I know." He marched Jim into his tiny office off the band rehearsal room. He dialed the telephone number of the principal's home. Numbly, he waited for the bell to get the old man from his bed.

Jim dusted his boots with a rag.

Helmholtz suddenly dropped the telephone into its cradle before the principal could answer. "Isn't there anything you care about but ripping, hacking, bending, reading, smashing, bashing?" he cried.

"Anything? Anything but those boots?"

"Go on! Call up whoever you're gonna call," said Jim.

Helmholtz opened a locker and took a trumpet from it. He thrust the trumpet into Jim's arms. "There!" he said, puffing with emotion. "There's my treasure. It's the dearest thing I own. I give it to you to smash. I won't move a muscle to stop you. You can have the added pleasure of watching my heart break while you do it."

Jim looked at him oddly. He laid down the trumpet.

"Go on!" said Helmholtz. "If the world has treated you so badly, it deserves to have the trumpet smashed!"

"I—" said Jim. Helmholtz grabbed his belt, put a foot behind him, and dumped him on the floor.

Helmholtz pulled Jim's boots off and threw them into a corner. "There!" said Helmholtz savagely. He jerked the boy to his feet again and thrust the trumpet into his arms once more.

Jim Domini was barefoot now. He had lost his socks with his boots. The boy looked down. The feet that had once seemed big black clubs were narrow as chicken wings now—bony and blue, and not quite clean.

The boy shivered, then quaked. Each quake seemed to shake something loose inside, until, at last, there was no boy left. No boy at all. Jim's head lolled, as though he waited only for death.

Helmholtz was overwhelmed by remorse. He threw his arms around the boy. "Jim! Jim—listen to me, boy!"

Jim stopped quaking.

"You know what you've got there—the trumpet?" said Helmholtz. "You know what's special about it?"

Jim only sighed.

"It belonged to John Philip Sousa!" said Helmholtz. He rocked and shook Jim gently, trying to bring him back to life. "I'll trade it to you, Jim—for your boots. It's yours, Jim! John Philip Sousa's trumpet is yours! It's worth hundreds of dollars, Jim—thousands!"

Jim laid his head on Helmholtz's breast.

"It's better than boots, Jim," said Helmholtz. "You can learn to play it.

Vocabulary

furtive (fur' tiv) *adj.* secret; shifty; shy
bravado (bra va' do) *n.* a false show of bravery; pretended courage

Vocabulary

remorse (ri mors') *n.* a deep, painful feeling of guilt or sorrow for wrongdoing

You're somebody, Jim. You're the boy with John Philip Sousa's trumpet!"

Helmholtz released Jim slowly, sure the boy would topple. Jim didn't fall. He stood alone. The trumpet was still in his arms.

"I'll take you home, Jim," said Helmholtz. "Be a good boy and I won't say a word about tonight. Polish your trumpet, and learn to be a good boy."

"Can I have my boots?" said Jim dully. "No," said Helmholtz. "I don't think they're good for you."

He drove Jim home. He opened the car windows and the air seemed to refresh the boy. He let him out at Quinn's restaurant. The soft pats of Jim's bare feet on the sidewalk echoed down the empty street. He climbed through a window, and into his bedroom behind the kitchen. And all was still.

The next morning the waddling, clanking, muddy machines were making the vision of Bert Quinn come true. They were smoothing off the place where the hill had been behind the restaurant. They were making it as level as a billiard table.

Helmholtz sat in a booth again. Quinn joined him again. Jim mopped again. Jim kept his eyes down, refusing to notice Helmholtz. And he didn't seem to care when a surf of suds broke over the toes of his small and narrow brown Oxfords.

"Eating out two mornings in a row?" said Quinn. "Something wrong at home?"

"My wife's still out of town," said Helmholtz.

"While the cat's away—" said Quinn. He winked.

"When the cat's away," said Helmholtz, "this mouse gets lonesome."

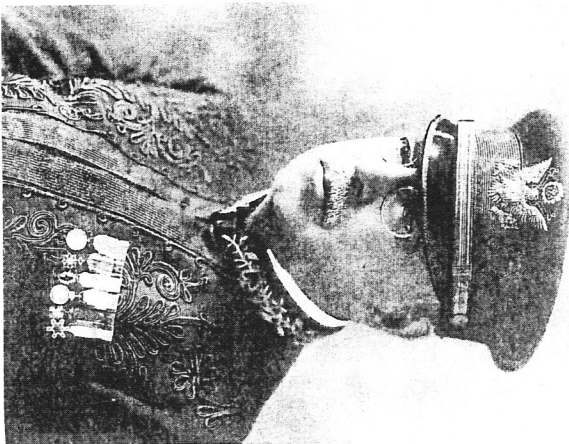
Quinn leaned forward. "Is that what got you out of bed in the middle of the night,

Helmholtz? Loneliness?" He jerked his head at Jim. "Kid! Go get Mr. Helmholtz his horn."

Jim raised his head, and Helmholtz saw that his eyes were oysterlike again. He marched away to get the trumpet.

Quinn now showed that he was excited and angry. "You take away his boots and give him a horn, and I'm not supposed to get curious?" he said. "I'm not supposed to start asking questions? I'm not supposed to find out you caught him taking the school apart? You'd made a lousy crook, Helmholtz. You'd leave your haton, sheet music, and your driver's license at the scene of the crime."

"I don't think about hiding clues," said Helmholtz. "I just do what I do. I was going to tell you."



John Philip Sousa

Quinn's feet danced and his shoes squeaked like mice. "Yes?" he said. "Well, I've got some news for you too."

"What is that?" said Helmholtz uneasily. "It's all over with Jim and me," said Quinn. "Last night was the payoff. I'm sending him back where he came from."

"To another string of foster homes?" said Helmholtz weakly.

"Whatever the experts figure out to do with a kid like that?" Quinn sat back, exhaled noisily, and went limp with relief.

"You can't," said Helmholtz.

"I can," said Quinn. "That will be the end of him," said Helmholtz. "He can't stand to be thrown away like that one more time."

"He can't feel anything," said Quinn. "I can't help him; I can't hurt him. Nobody can. There isn't a nerve in him."

"A bundle of scar tissue," said Helmholtz.

The bundle of scar tissue returned with the trumpet. Impassively,⁹ he laid it on the table in front of Helmholtz.

Helmholtz forced a smile. "It's yours, Jim," he said. "I gave it to you."

"Take it while you got the chance," Helmholtz said Quinn. "He doesn't want it. All he'll do is swap it for a knife or a pack of cigarettes."

"He doesn't know what it is, yet," said Helmholtz. "It takes a while to find out."

"Is it any good?" said Quinn.

"Any good?" said Helmholtz, not believing his ears. "Any good?" He didn't see how anyone could look at the instrument and not be warmed and dazzled by it. "Any good?" he murmured. "It belonged to John Philip Sousa."

Quinn blinked stupidly. "Who?" Helmholtz's hands fluttered on the tabletop like the wings of a dying bird. "Who was John Philip Sousa?"

he piped. No more words came. The subject was too big for a tired man to cover. The dying bird expired and lay still.

After a long silence, Helmholtz picked up the trumpet. He kissed the cold mouthpiece and pumped the valves in a dream of a brilliant *cadenza*.¹⁰ Over the bell of the instrument, Helmholtz saw Jim Donnini's face, seemingly floating in space—all but deaf and blind. Now Helmholtz saw the futility of men and their treasures. He had thought that his greatest treasure, the trumpet, could buy a soul for Jim. The trumpet was worthless.

Deliberately, Helmholtz hammered the trumpet against the table edge. He bent it around a coat tree. He handed the wreck to Quinn.

"Ya busted it," said Quinn, amazed. "Why'dja do that? What's that prove?"

9. To do something *impassively* is to do it without showing any emotion.

10. A *cadenza* is a difficult musical solo near the end of a musical composition.

Vocabulary
futility (fu tū' a tē) *n.* uselessness; hopelessness

Responding to Literature

PERSONAL RESPONSE

How did you react to George M. Helmholtz's repeated efforts to get through to Jim?
 What, in your opinion, might Helmholtz have done differently?

Analyzing Literature

RECALL

1. What do Helmholtz and Quinn say about their earlier business deal?
2. What is Helmholtz's big dream? When does it come true?
3. Name two or three ways Helmholtz tries to reach Jim.
4. What makes Jim's eyes fill "with pity and alarm"?

INTERPRET

5. What does their discussion of a business deal tell you about Helmholtz and Quinn?
6. What makes Helmholtz a successful teacher?
7. What do you learn about Helmholtz from the way he treats Jim?
8. The author writes that Helmholtz "had got a message through" to Jim. What is the message?

EVALUATE AND CONNECT

9. Does Helmholtz live up to his idea that "our aim is to make the world more beautiful than it was when we came into it"? Explain your answer.
10. Theme Connection Compare Quinn's and Helmholtz's ways of responding to Jim. Explain how each man is important in Jim's life.

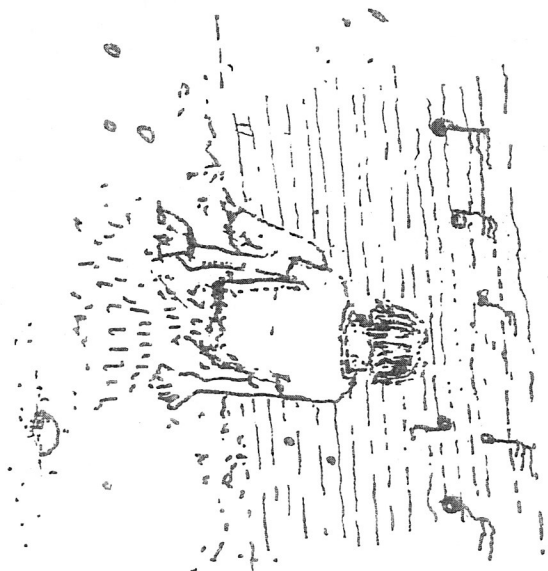
LITERARY ELEMENTS

Dialogue

Dialogue is conversation between two or more characters. Dialogue reveals the personality of a character through the spoken words and descriptions of facial expressions and body language. Good dialogue sounds natural, like an overheard conversation. It can contain slang, sentence fragments, and contractions because that's how people talk.

1. What information about Quinn and Helmholtz is presented in their dialogue about the hill at the beginning of the story?
2. Find an example of natural dialogue from Helmholtz, from Quinn, and from Jim. What does each character's way of speaking reveal about his personality?

See Literary Terms Handbook, p. R3.



Drawing Music, 1997. Ian Van Tran. Ink on paper, 4 3/4 x 5 3/8 in. Collection of the artist.
 Viewing the art: If you were Jim, what message might this drawing have for you?

"—I don't know," said Helmholtz. A terrible blasphemy¹¹ rumbled deep in him, like the warning of a volcano. And then, irresistibly, out it came. "Life is no damn good!" said Helmholtz. His face twisted as he fought back tears and shame.

Helmholtz, the mountain that walked like a man, was falling apart. Jim Donnini's eyes filled with pity and alarm. They came alive. They became human. Helmholtz had got a message through. Quinn looked at Jim, and something like hope flickered for the first time in his bitterly lonely old face.

Two weeks later, a new semester began at Lincoln High. In the band rehearsal room, the members of C Band were waiting for their leader—were waiting for their desires as musicians to unfold.

Helmholtz stepped onto the podium, and rattled his baton against his music stand. "The Voices of Spring," he said. "Everybody hear that? The Voices of Spring?"

There were rustling sounds as the musicians put the music on their stands. In the pregnant silence¹² that followed their readiness, Helmholtz glanced at Jim Donnini, who sat on the last seat of the worst trumpet section of the worst band in school.

11. A *blasphemy* is an expression of scorn for anything considered sacred.
 12. A *pregnant silence* is one filled with importance or meaning.

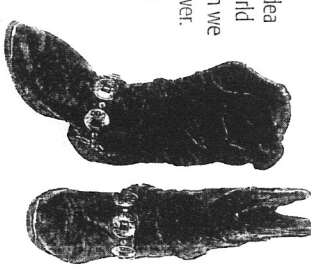
His trumpet, John Philip Sousa's trumpet, George M. Helmholtz's trumpet, had been repaired.

"Think of it this way," said Helmholtz. "Our aim is to make the world more beautiful than it was when we came into it. It can be done. You can do it."

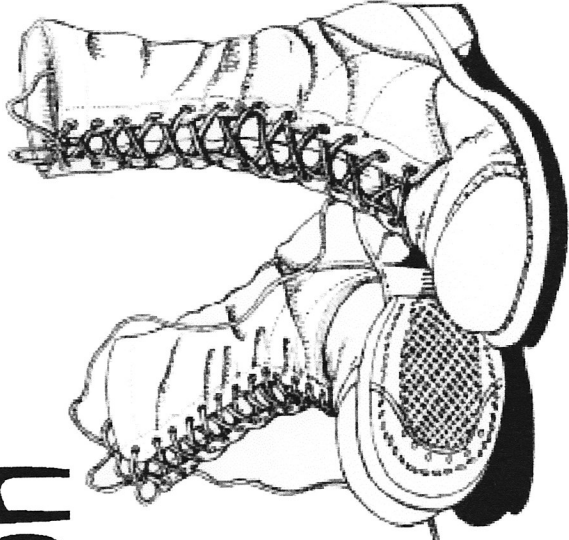
A small cry of despair came from Jim Donnini. It was meant to be private, but it pierced every ear with its poignancy.¹³

"How?" said Jim.
 "Love yourself," said Helmholtz, "and make your instrument sing about it. A-one, a-two, a-three." Down came his baton.

13. Here, *poignancy* (poin' yan se) means "sharply felt emotion or distress."



Characterization and Symbolism



The characters of Helholtz and Jim are a lot like the symbols of the trumpet and the boots.

- 1--Which one symbolizes the trumpet?
- 2--Which one symbolizes the boots?
- 3--How is the character like their symbols?

① Comparison between "The Kid Nobody Could Handle" and "Thank you, Ma'am"

Setting Comparison

1- muggings happen more frequently in a large city
 - people in small towns know everything about each other
 - Jim's behavior, attitude, actions stick out like a sore thumb

- Jim would not have been a significant character if the setting had been in a large city

2- Roger been arrested: no one would've try to help
 boy - kids committing violent crimes seems more menacing
 that in previous decades due to recent events
 - Jim been arrested... same
 - problems of the boys would've been compounded by entering juvenile justice system - probably never have reached the boys

Symbol Comparison

blue suede shoes

to Roger
 an attempt to gain acceptance from others

to Mrs. Jones
 a way to teach the boy to trust & change his ways through unconditional acceptance

black combat-like boots

to Jim
 a brick wall built to block out emotions

to Helmholtz
 the dark rigid past that destroyed Jim's emotions: a way to break the destructive cycle perpetuated by family, foster care, & Quinn

"waiting in another person's shoes" meaning to each story

"Thank..." Both "The boy..."

- an understanding of having no one to care for them physically, emotionally takes a negative toll on actions, motivations, behavior; emotions
- by opening up yourself - allow you to feel empathy; help him/her

What, if anything, do shoes have in symbolic value in the lives of young people now?
 Columbine ~ combat black boots

Character Comparison

- Mrs. Jones
- begins with physical restraint
 - chastisement
 - motherly tones
 - advice
 - giving \$

Helmholtz

- trying to break ice
- covering crime
- giving own treasured item
- take away boots
- destroy trumpet
- constantly trying to
- reach emotional level

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"The Kid Nobody Could Handle" Kurt Vonnegut

Literary Terms:

Characterization direct / indirect

round character

flat character

static character

dynamic character

idiom

setting

symbolism

simile

metaphor

foreshadow

hyperbole

imagery

theme

1- What type of character is Helmholtz? Characterize him.

- round / dynamic

- kind, motivated, rash, caring, forgiving, people clever

determined

2- Interpret "child in a marketplace."

- not practical ~ impulsive

- a definite dreamer that makes him gullible and

easily taken advantage of by others

3- How does the dialogue between Quin & Helmholtz

enhance the characterization of Quin?

- flat / static character

- arrogant, boastful, critical

- runs scam in Helmholtz's face

4-How do Vonnegut characterize Jim?
-round/dynamic
-cannot express much emotion
-robotic does everything expressionless & without thinking

-cares only about black boots (some connection to father?)
-what characteristics does Vonnegut choose to emphasize in describing Jim?
-robot like - jerky-brainlessly
-Flash Gordon
-eyes were as expressionless as oysters

5- Compare the dreams of Quin & Helmholtz. Pay particular attention to the differences.
-emphatically
-money acquisition at the expense of others most of the time
-achievement of his students and himself
-look at world
-look at choice
-eyes?

-Helmholtz is an idealist
-devaluated & deeply disturbed by Jim's lack of expressed emotion that is a result of his life being systematically destroyed by family dysfunction & foster care & finally Quin's obvious disdain & indifference
-Why is Helmholtz "raped" by Jim's expressionless eyes?
-Helmholtz is an idealist
-devaluated & deeply disturbed by Jim's lack of expressed emotion that is a result of his life being systematically destroyed by family dysfunction & foster care & finally Quin's obvious disdain & indifference

4-How do Vonnegut characterize Jim?
-round/dynamic
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7- Discuss the differences between Quinns & Helmholtz's view of where POTENTIAL actually lay.

Helmholtz
- in people no matter how hard it is to reach him/her
- in unrealized dreams
- how are the different personalities of Quinn & Helmholtz reflected in their dialogue and attitudes toward Jim?

8- How are the different personalities of Quinn & Helmholtz reflected in their dialogue and attitudes toward Jim?

Quinn
- ~~sees~~ fragmented tone thoughtless
- Jim: his problems
- sees strict discipline
- reinforcing the lack of emotion in Jim as the only prospect to solve his problems

Helmholtz
- syntax clear: expresses his education background
- consider Jim's problems on a personal level as well as a victim of a larger social issue, i.e. negative affects of foster care & dysfunctional families
- believes music the ultimate cure for Jim's problems

Which character has the correct solution for Jim's problems? What do you think the real solution for his problems might be?

- neither Quinn nor Helmholtz have a true solution
- though love - showing Jim that someone truly cares

9-What can you infer about Helmholtz's character that he drives an older car?

-indifference to money & material possessions

-rather spend money on music

-has a limited income because he's a teacher

10-List as many examples of grandiose dreams as possible.

-Quinn's plans for the bill purchased from Helmholtz

-Helmholtz to have the best band

-Helmholtz of reaching Jim & making a difference in the young man's life

11-What does the word choice used in describing the Q band ~~reveal~~ reveal about the student's abilities?

-rusty switch engine - valves stuck, pipes clogged, unions tearing, bearings dry

-they're pretty awful but Helmholtz sees only the potential in them & hears the band they will be

12-What is Helmholtz's reaction to the class period?

13-What does the dialogue between Jim & Helmholtz at the water fountain reveal about the boy's character?

-he harbors an immense amount of anger

-almost afraid to get close to people after his previous experience

14-Analyze the quote, "There was nothing to do but dress up and go to school." What does that reveal about his character?

-deeply disturbed by the dream

-loves his music / treasures & willing to check

in the middle of the night to check

15- What does the dialogue between Jim & Helmholtz reveal about the teacher's emotions upon discovering the vandalism? -extreme anger

-appalled and amazed at the pent up anger & lack of remorse for his act

-still maintains control of emotions, tone of voice, chooses words carefully but frustration revealed in tones

16- How does the dialogue between Jim & Helmholtz coupled with Vonnegut's word choice & character description of Jim define about the boy's problem?

-Helmholtz's optimism comes through strong when stating it's "the best thing" people can do

-reveals the lack of fear, dreams, & love to be Jim's primary problem so what Helmholtz says has NO affect on Jim

17- why does Helmholtz give Jim the trumpet?

-Helmholtz is trying desperately to find something that Jim cares about by giving him his prized possession

18- why doesn't Jim smash the trumpet?

-the sacrifice made by Helmholtz cuts through the scars and touches Jim somehow

19- why does Helmholtz take Jim's boots away?

-it's the only thing Jim cares about

20- what is the effect of the abrupt act on Jim?

-Jim almost instantly becomes vulnerable, childlike, dependent, a rush of emotions almost floods the boy

-he reveals his vulnerability emotionally by his physical break down and dependence on Helmholtz

21- Has Helmholtz touched something in Jim? Is Jim devastated by the loss of the boat? Both?

- Various answers based on individual interpretation

22- Vonnegut began the story with same imagery that occurs after the shift on page 154. Why does Vonnegut choose to repeat the image of the struggling machines at this point?

- this image seems to be associated with Quin's destructive approach to life = the acquisition of wealth

- reinforces Quin's destructive discipline as an approach to solve Jim's problem

23- Why does Quin fail to call Jim by his name?

- Quin does not see Jim as a person - no respect / no caring

24- Which character's approach to solve Jim's problems do you agree with, Quin or Helmholtz? Why?

- various answers

25- What, in your opinion, does Jim need, strict discipline or love? Why?

- various answers

26- Where does the change in Jim take place? Why does he change? Who else sees the change? What does Helmholtz lose that makes the change in Jim?

- pg 156 Smashing the treasured trumpet

- Jim expresses pity = alarm ~ begins to feel emotions

- again - ice broken

- Quin, the one who sees only the negative side of Jim sees hope for the boy

- destroys his optimism symbolically by destroying trumpet

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27- The ending seems to be a little vague. What do you think Verneget is trying to prove about the characters of Jim & Helmholtz? Explain

-the boys seem better off

-Jim in touch with emotions : trying to make positive changes

-Helmholtz's optimism restored like the trumpet

28- What does Helmholtz gain by helping Jim & others?

-maintains optimistic view of world & life & other people

29- What is the reward of his giving, optimistic nature?

- feel needed : like he made a difference

“The Kid Nobody Could Handle”
Kurt Vonnegut
Short Answer Question Responses

1. Does Helmholtz live up to his idea that “our aim is to make the world more beautiful than it was when we came into it”? Explain your answer and provide evidence from the text.

2. What causes the change in the character of Jim by the end of the story? Explain your answer and provide evidence from the text.

“The Kid Nobody Could Handle”
Kurt Vonnegut

Questions:

1. What type of character is Helmholtz?
2. What does “child in a market place” mean?
3. How does the dialogue between Quinn and Helmholtz enhance the characterization of Quinn?
4. How does Vonnegut characterize Jim?
5. What characteristics does Vonnegut choose to emphasize in describing Jim?
6. Compare the dreams of Quinn and Helmholtz? Pay close attention to the specific differences.
7. Why is Helmholtz appalled by Jim’s expressionless eyes?
8. What are the differences between the Quinn’s and Helmholtz’s potential point of view lay with the conflict?
9. How are the personalities of Quinn and Helmholtz reflected in their dialogue and attitudes toward Jim?
10. Which character has the correct solution for Jim’s problems?
11. What do you think the real solution for this problem may be?
12. What can you infer about Helmholtz’s character that he drives an older car?
13. What does the diction or word choice used in describing the C band reveal about the students’ abilities?
14. What is Helmholtz’s reaction to the C band class period?
15. What does “There was nothing to do but dress up and go to school” say about the character?
16. What does the dialogue between Jim and Helmholtz reveal about the teacher’s emotions upon discovering the vandalism?
17. How does the dialogue between Jim and Helmholtz coupled with Vonnegut’s diction and character description of Jim define about the boy’s problems?
18. Why doesn’t Jim smash the trumpet?
19. Why does Helmholtz take away Jim’s boots?
20. What is the effect of this abrupt act on Jim?
21. Has Helmholtz tapped into something with Jim?
22. Why does Vonnegut choose to repeat the image of the destructive construction equipment?
23. Why does Quinn fail to call Jim by his name?
24. Which character’s approach to solve Jim’s problems do you agree with and why?
25. What, in your opinion, does Jim need?
26. Where does the change in Jim take place?
27. What do you think Vonnegut is trying to prove about the characters of Jim and Helmholtz with the vague ending?

“The Kid Nobody Could Handle”
Kurt Vonnegut
Short Answer Question Responses

1. Does Helmholtz live up to his idea that “our aim is to make the world more beautiful than it was when we came into it”? Explain your answer and provide evidence from the text.

Helmholtz lives up to his idea of making the world a better place by helping Jim when others wouldn't and accepting the boy for what he is. Someone saving the world one person at a time is "just the best thing human beings ever managed to do" because they unconsciously make a difference for one person. "It takes a while to find out that you're a somebody" after believing quite nothing for so long. Helmholtz makes this difference in Jim by teaching him to live himself and change his whole world.

2. What causes the change in the character of Jim by the end of the story? Explain your answer and provide evidence from the text.

Helmholtz brings about a drastic change in Jim's character by being that person to care about him and accept him as he is. This caring, loving adult provided positive attention to a boy who "can't feel anything" and got Jim to drop the walls he had built around his heart. Helmholtz knew "Jim was alone" and needed a tough-love role model to break the "mouse" out of his "love-some" trap. Through understanding reasoning he reached the boy to grow up and make the right choices for himself.

Answer = question pieces
Conclusions
Evidence