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CHAPTER ONE
A FEW OOMPAHS NEVER HURT ANYONE

A very strange noise was in the air. Sometimes it sounded like a racing car going round a bend.

"Beeeeeaaaeeeooooouuuu . . ."

Then, quite without warning, the noise would toot and trumpet like an elephant losing its temper.

"Toooot . . . trumptrumptrump . . . Toootoooooot."

There would be moments when an old steam engine seemed to have arrived in the town.

"Chuhhachuhhauchuhhachuff."

Occasionally, there would be a series of quieter sounds like those rude noises your grandfather makes after eating too much Sunday dinner.

"Pht . . . pht . . . phwwwwwt."

And then suddenly the racing car, the elephant, the steam engine and your grandfather would return – together.

"Beeeaaaa . . . trumptrump . . . chuhhachuff . . . pht."

The noise seemed to be loudest around Rylett Road. There the birds had flown out of the trees in alarm and parents brought their children in from the garden and rang one another to find out what was going on.

"Is it an animal?" asked Mrs Jones. "It sounds like it might be in pain."

"Maybe it's a new kind of burglar alarm," said Mr Edberg. "It would certainly scare me away."

All the neighbours agreed. Something had to be done about the strange and terrible noise.

At 15 Rylett Road, Cuthbert Harris, father of Peter (who was known to all

his friends as "Podge') sat in his favourite armchair, reading the paper.

"The lad's music lesson's going well, Mother," he said loudly to his wife Mary, who sat opposite him.

"Half past five," said Mrs Harris.

"Me too," said Mr Harris. He patted both ears. "And buying these earplugs for us both was an excellent idea of mine. We can't hear a thing."

Mrs Harris nodded. "Chicken pie and beans," she said.

Just then, a man with long white hair and wild staring eyes tottered unsteadily into the room.



"C-c-can't take it any more," he muttered.

Mr Harris took out his earplugs. "Finished Peter's lesson already, Mr Jericho?" he asked. "My, doesn't time fly when there's lovely music in the air?"

"Lovely music? *Lovely*?" Mr Jericho, the music teacher, put his hands to his head. "That son of yours is playing notes that have never been invented."

"Oh yes, he's talented all right." Mr Harris chuckled. "I knew the trombone would be his instrument. I do love a brass band. It's the oompahs that get me every time."

"We'll see you next Tuesday then, Mr Jericho," said Mrs Harris, taking out her earplugs.

"I don't think you will," said Mr Jericho. "Peter's a nice enough lad but, between you and me, he hasn't got a musical bone in that rather large body of his. Maybe you could encourage him

to do something quieter – read books, or go for walks. Very long walks, if possible."

"Now, Mr Jericho—"

But before Mr Harris could finish his sentence, the music teacher was backing towards the door. "Don't bother to pay me," he said with a little wave of his hand. "My freedom from this house will be reward enough."

And he was gone.

"How very strange," said Mrs Harris.

"No backbone, these musicians." Mr Harris sniffed contemptuously. "I bet he plays the violin."

"Maybe you should have let Peter play the guitar," said Mrs Harris nervously. "That was what he had his heart set on."

"Guitar?" Cuthbert Harris shuddered with disgust. "And we all know where that leads. Long hair and inappropriate behaviour, that's where. No, a brass

band is what I like. It's the sound of life, of progress. A manly sound. You can't go wrong in this world when you play the trombone, that's what I always say."

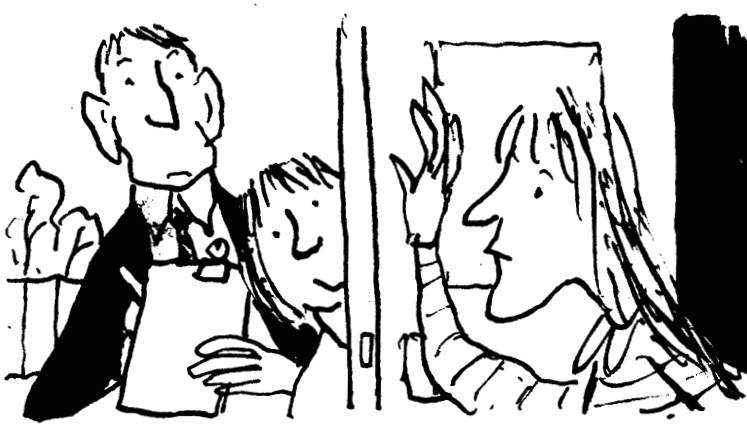
The doorbell rang.

"That'll be Mr Jericho," said Mr Harris. "I knew he'd change his mind."

But when Mrs Harris opened the front door, it was her neighbours Mrs Jones and Mr Edberg who were there.

"We're collecting names for a petition," said Mrs Jones. "It's about this terrible noise we've been hearing. We want the police to investigate."

"Noise? Police?" said Mrs Harris faintly.



"Will you sign the petition, Mary?" asked Mr Edberg. "Everyone else in the street has."

Glancing nervously over her shoulder, Mrs Harris signed.

When she returned to the sitting room, she sat down thoughtfully.

"Cuthbert, there's a bit of a problem with Peter and his trombone," she said. "There's a petition about it."

"Petition?" said Mr Harris.

"By the neighbours," said Mrs Harris. "About the noise."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Mr Harris. "A few oompahs never hurt anyone."

"They mentioned the police."

Mr Harris sighed. "I'll talk to the lad," he said.

"Now don't hurt his feelings, Cuthbert," said Mrs Harris. "You know how sensitive he can be."

"Trust me," said Mr Harris. "I'm a dad."

*

A few moments later, Mr Harris stood in the middle of Podge's room.

"There's a problem with that trombone, son," he said. "The problem is that you're completely useless at playing it."

Podge looked up from the bed. "But—"

"Mr Jericho says you haven't got a musical bone in your body. The neighbours are revolting, too. They've said that if you blow into that thing once more" – he nodded in the direction of the trombone on Podge's bed – "it'll be a matter for the police."

"I like music," said Podge quietly.

"The problem is music doesn't like you," said his father. He picked up the trombone. "I'll look after that. It's caused quite enough trouble already."

With the trombone under his arm, Mr Harris left the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

He stood on the landing outside, and smiled. Yes. He thought he had handled that rather well.

Alone and trombone-less, Podge reached for his mobile phone and rang his best friend Jack Beddows.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," said Jack.

"Kickabout?" said Podge.

"Cool," said Jack.

Five minutes later, in the local park, Podge stood watching Jack bouncing a football on his foot.

"I suppose I should have guessed there was a problem with my music when my parents bought earplugs," he said.

"It's not a great sign," Jack agreed. "I wanted my mum to buy me a drum set. 'She said I had to practise first. 'Practise?' I said. 'Er, on what exactly?' 'The table,' she said. 'The table!'"

Jack booted the football high in the air. It came to rest in some bushes near the entrance to the park. As they walked towards it, Podge and Jack heard the sound of music. They crouched in the bushes and peered through the railings.

On the pavement across the street, a woman was standing in front of an upturned hat. She was playing what looked like a very small guitar.

Although she was dressed rather oddly – a battered straw hat, dark glasses and ripped three-quarter length jeans – there was something familiar about the black nail varnish on her fingernails.

Jack and Podge looked at one another as the same thought occurred to both of them.

Ms Wiz? Playing music?