

# What the Trumpet Taught Me



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Kim Moore

smith|doorstop

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*I get along without you very well  
Of course I do  
Except perhaps in spring  
But I should never think of spring  
For that would surely break my heart in two*

'I Get Along Without You Very Well,  
Hoagy Carmichael

*O trumpeter, methinks I am myself the instrument thou playest,  
Thou melt'st my heart, my brain – thou movest, drawest,  
changest them at will...*

'The Mystic Trumpeter,' Walt Whitman

*For my twin sister, Jody*



I'M TEN YEARS OLD when my teacher asks the class who would like to play a brass instrument. Because I'm the sort of child who volunteers for everything, my hand shoots into the air. And though I believe I'm never chosen, this time my teacher picks me, along with my twin sister and two other children in the class. I don't even know what a brass instrument is, but I know I want to be chosen.

In our school, everyone knows what recorders and violins are. We have a school orchestra, led by a teacher called Mrs M. If you show promise on the recorder, eventually Mrs M invites you to change to the violin. Mrs M writes letters above the musical notes for the recorders, but the violin players have to learn to read music. When she offers me the violin, I refuse. I know the violin sounds terrible. I blame the instrument rather than the children wielding the bow.

Mrs M has short dark hair and huge spectacles. She writes out parts so we can accompany the whole school in hymn practice. Every morning we line up in front of the piano to practise together. Mrs M's voice is harsh and nasal. She can cut through twenty squeaking recorders and out-of-tune violins without even standing up from her piano stool. We play as the rest of the school sing along, using books held together with tape along the spines. Hymns like 'When A Knight Won His Spurs' – my favourite because the words feel like a poem, or 'He's Got The Whole World In His Hands', which I hated because it was repetitive and dull.



THERE'S A PHOTOGRAPH of me and my twin sister, taken the first day we brought a brass instrument home. I'm standing and holding a euphonium that's clearly too big for me. I think this must have belonged to our school – probably an instrument found in the back of a cupboard and forgotten about.

I'm balancing on one leg, with my other foot on the sofa and supporting the euphonium with my knee. My sister is sitting down, looking grumpy, her leg stretched out and her foot about to kick me, or perhaps push me away. She was probably angry at having to share, having to wait, something that as twins we were always forced to do, and resented deeply. I look happy and pleased with myself – I'm smiling around the large mouthpiece, peering from behind the bell, although I can't remember any of this. If it wasn't for the photo, I wouldn't even know I'd ever taken a euphonium home, that any of this happened.

Although writing this now, I suddenly start to doubt whether it was me holding the instrument at all. Maybe it was my sister, and I was the one doing the kicking, disgruntled and irritated by her happiness. I haven't seen the photo for years – I don't even know if it exists in its physical form so I can't check the truth, and my sister doesn't remember anything about the moment it was taken.



MY PARENTS TAKE US to a brass band, recommended by my new brass teacher, Mr P, as a place we can get an instrument for free. I ask for a cornet, after watching a young girl playing one with a pearl-like sheen. My sister is given a tenor horn. The conductor, who says we can call him by his first name, W, tells us to join in with the rehearsal, though we cannot read music. I'm told to sit next to a girl with a fox-like face.

I don't understand why the music in front of me has numbers above each note, rather than letters. I don't understand that the numbers correspond to the valves I should be pressing down. I don't even know they are called valves. I'm happily playing along, pressing the valves whenever I feel like it. I don't know a conductor can hear one person playing a wrong note, even when there are thirty other people playing. Eventually, when I find this out, it seems as if it's a



superpower, and one I'll never possess.

W is an elderly man with bone-white hair. He waves his arms, urging us onward. Although it doesn't seem as if anybody is looking at him, or noticing what he's doing, I understand he is important, that the weather of the room starts and finishes with him.



I STAY BEHIND after junior band rehearsal to listen to the senior band. They play the theme tune to *Rocky*. I don't know it's the theme tune to *Rocky*. I think it's the most profound and beautiful thing I've ever heard. I have goosebumps on my arms, although it's not the staccato fanfare of the cornets at the beginning, but the entrance of the lower brass that makes my heart lurch. At some point in the piece, it feels like the music 'turns'. It's at this point I understand what yearning means, although I don't have a name for it, this feeling, this longing. Later, I understand this was a key change. But this is 1992. I'm eleven years old and falling in love.

