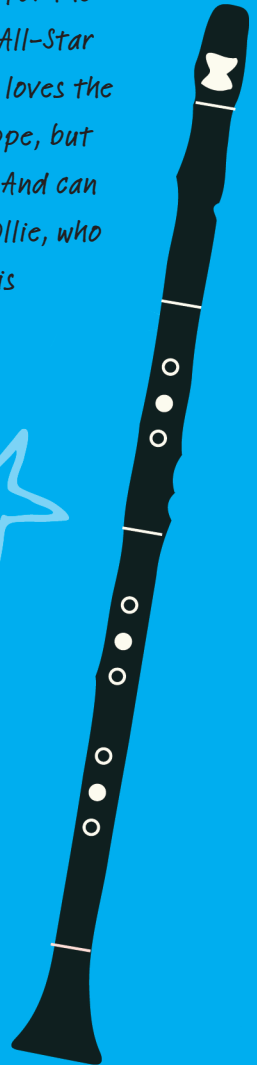




Eleven-year-old Benny Feldman ruined the Sunday school play for everyone when he was in first grade, and Jason has never let him forget it. He hasn't been able to face going on stage since.

But this year, Benny impulsively signed up for the school talent contest to perform with his All-Star Klezmer Band—which doesn't even exist! He loves the traditional klezmer music of Eastern Europe, but how will he find other players to join him? And can he do that without losing his best friend, Ollie, who was always there to defend him in his feud with Jason?



Benny Feldman's ♪ All-Star ♪ Klezmer Band

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Ms. Krumholtz’s voice jolted eleven-year-old Benny Feldman from his early-morning fog. The sixth-grade class in Room 610 settled down as she read the morning announcements: “Bring in your cans for the winter food drive. Let’s beat those seventh-graders this year! Don’t forget that Monday is our field trip to the Geary Potato Chip Factory. Your personal essays are due next week—absolutely no extensions!”

It looked like the start of another typical day at Sieberling School. And that was okay with Benny. Typical was predictable. Typical meant he might be able to make it through the next seven hours without drawing unwanted attention.

Ms. Krumholtz’s final piece of news made Benny’s heart race like a metronome stuck on warp speed. “I almost forgot. The school talent show will be happening in March. The sign-up sheet will be posted on the bulletin board next to the library.”

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So much for typical, Benny thought.

The class erupted into chatter. Amanda Grayson, who sat to Benny's right, squealed with delight. She had been twirling batons since the age of two. At least once an hour she mentioned a video of her performance at the Regional Junior Majorette Competition. Flipping her purple marker in the air, she caught it behind her back without looking, spun it between her fingers, and turned to Benny.

"97,838 views," Amanda said, monitoring the video's popularity on her phone. "Are you going to be in the talent show this year? Of course, that would mean you *have* some kind of talent."

Does she have to say that to me every year?

In fifth grade Amanda had won second place with her "Star-Spangled Salute to the Presidents."

"Wait until you see my new routine," she said. "So what's your answer? Are you going to be in the talent show or not?"

Benny's face turned crimson and his palms began sweating. He started to reply but then shrugged and buried his face in his science book, pretending to be fascinated by the properties of sedimentary rocks.

To Benny's left, Jason Conroy bragged about his new electric guitar. "It's a Gibson Flying V with a wicked psychedelic design on the front," he said, cradling a notebook and pretending to strum it while his left hand moved up and down an imaginary fretboard. He glared at Benny, who froze like a startled deer in Jason's blue-eyed

headlights. Dropping his head, Benny stared at a diagram of the water cycle.

“Remember how my band rocked the house last year?” Jason said. “I’ll be sure to save you a seat in the front row next to all my other *adoring fans*. You’re coming to the talent show, right?”

Benny nodded and returned to his textbook.

Avoiding the talent show was not an option. Sam, Benny’s nine-year-old brother, snagged third place last year with his juggling act. The crowd gave him a standing ovation for keeping two apples and a banana in the air for three minutes while hopping on one foot. Now in fourth grade, Sam had been working on adding a kiwi to his routine.

Benny’s parents would never allow him to skip the show unless he was sick. Really sick. Head-in-the-toilet sick. He started practicing fake coughs when the bell rang.



In the art room, Benny concentrated on molding a lump of clay into a menorah. If he finished it on time—and if it *looked* like a menorah—he planned to give it to his parents for Hanukkah, which was a couple of weeks away. Right now the clay resembled a nine-tentacled sea creature ill-equipped to hold a shamash candle. His best friend, Ollie Broadleaf, kneaded his clay into a nutcracker. He was easily the most talented artist in the school.

“You really are a master at sculpting,” Benny said. “Seriously, that looks just like the figurines at the mall gift shop. You’re the class Michelangelo.”

“Thanks, your octopus is pretty great, too,” Ollie said.

Benny laughed. “It’s supposed to be a menorah. You know, the special candleholder used during Hanukkah.”

“Well, that’s the most exceptional Hanukkah octopus I’ve ever seen.”

“I guess sculpting isn’t my thing.”

From the far end of the long table, Jason perked up his ears. “So what *is* your thing?” he asked. The room went silent. All eyes bored into Benny.

Here we go again.

Jason repeated the question, his voice rising. “You heard me. What *is* your thing? What can you actually *do*?”

Benny’s eyes watered behind his thick black-rimmed glasses. His throat tightened as the class awaited his response. He said nothing.

“Mind your own business!” Ollie shouted. Benny bowed his head and aimlessly poked at his misshapen project.



For the rest of the school day, Benny relived Jason’s taunts. When the final bell rang, he looked forward to the solitude of his room at home.

Passing by the library on his way out of school, Benny glanced at the talent show sign-up sheet. Rappers, poets,

comedians, actors, gymnasts, and ballet dancers filled the lines. At the top, his food-juggling brother had scrawled "Sam Feldman's Flying Fruits." Below that in slanted letters was Jason's band, "The Neanderthal Four," followed by "Amanda Grayson's Twirling Tribute to the Fifty States."

Benny stared at the last few empty lines and reached for a black felt-tip marker in his back pocket.

"Hurry up!" a girl shouted. "Are you just going to stand there? My bus leaves in five minutes."

This is an awful idea. A monumental mistake. A disaster of catastrophic proportions, Benny told himself. He began to put the marker away when a familiar voice made him stop cold.

"Don't worry, folks. Benny can't do anything—other than be the Amazing Exploding Grape."

It was Jason. He had given Benny this nickname in first grade. Over time the name had faded until Benny thought it had disappeared. But everything had changed last year. Now Benny couldn't go a day without someone bringing back the name that wouldn't go away.

Hearing Jason in the crowded hallway and the laughter that followed pushed Benny over the edge. *That's it! No more! I will not be watching you from the front row. And I will not let your band win this year!*

In one swift motion Benny uncapped the marker and wrote in capital letters: BENNY FELDMAN'S ALL-STAR KLEZMER BAND.

Stepping back, he stared in disbelief. He had broken

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his number-one rule for how to survive school: Blend into the background.

What have I done? Benny thought. *What have I done?*