

The Horn Blower

The town of — was located about 25 miles from the city of — . The town was comfortably middle class but not wealthy. Each day, the professionals — engineers, lawyers, businessmen — commuted by train to the city. Many of the inhabitants, however, worked locally — as teachers, police, members of the water department and postal department, etc. The town was on one side of a steep ridge above a narrow valley that was only wide enough for a two-lane parkway, a creek and two pairs of railroad tracks. On the hill on the other side of the valley was a large cemetery where a number of famous persons were buried. Beyond the cemetery was a wooded slope and then, at the top of the ridge on that side, the county's minimum-security prison, a facility that had been founded some 20 years earlier as part of the brief wave of interest among penologists in making prisons more more oriented toward rehabilitation. Cultivated fields surrounded the prison buildings, and the inmates worked these fields during spring, summer and fall. The food they raised went to feed themselves and the staff; the remainder was given to other county institutions. There were also shops inside the prison where inmates could learn and practice carpentry, masonry, auto repair and other trades. The penologists' hopes had been justified insofar as there had been no significant problems at the prison since its founding.

Among the employees of the prison was a young man in his twenties named Bill. He worked in the laundry maintaining the machinery and making sure that the inmates had whatever they needed in the way of supplies so that they could do their job.

The young man found the work remarkably satisfying — the first time in his life that he felt that way about a job. He had never gone to college, and had worked at a variety of low-end jobs, including parking lot attendant and night watchman. Then, on the chance recommendation of a friend of his, he had applied for and got the job in the prison laundry. At first he was merely folding laundry and pushing wheeled baskets around, but he soon revealed a definite mechanical gift, since he was quickly able to repair a few minor problems with the machinery. And so he was promoted to the equipment maintenance position.

Bill was in love with a girl named Nelly whom he had known since high school. They wanted to get married but as yet he hadn't saved enough money. Also, she had to stay home to take care of her elderly mother. So he and Nelly were only engaged. As far as he was concerned, being with Nelly, as fiancée or as wife, was all he really wanted in the world.

Nelly's house (really her mother's, of course) was on the side of the ridge above the valley. So steep was the ground in back of the house that the house was supported on thick, square, dark-wood pillars. Below, through the bushes and clumps of trees, one could see the roofs of houses, sheds, garages at the base of the ridge,

One of the tasks that Bill had was to sound the horn at noon to notify the inmates and staff that it was time for lunch. Two deep blasts, the second at a lower pitch than the first repeated half a dozen times. Nelly, who was typically washing the breakfast dishes at noon, her mother never waking up until after ten, always waited for sound of the horn. The kitchen was at the back of the house, and she could look out the large window above the sink and see the prison in the far distance at the other side of the valley.

In order to express his love for Nelly, Bill told her that, when he blew the horn, he didn't just press a button and release it, but he kept his finger on it throughout each blast, and by moving his finger tip was able to make the pitch change very subtly, but in a way that the sound became a love-song that only he, and he hoped she, could hear. She was never able to hear the variation in pitch, but because she loved him she said she did, and she told him how happy it made her each day as she washed the breakfast dishes.

Then one day there was a riot at the prison — the first time since the prison had been founded.

To this day, no one is sure of the cause. But it was centered in the laundry, and for a while it was violent. Bill tried to convince the prisoners that there were better ways to get what they wanted, that there would surely be severe punishments for what they were doing, but they were in no mood to listen. One of the inmates, furious at this intrusion by a member of the staff, threw a monkey wrench at him. It struck him in the head. By the time the ambulance reached the hospital, he was already dead.

Nelly heard the news of the riot on her radio. She was immediately beside herself with worry that the one fatality that was reported might be Bill. The next morning, Bill's parents called her and told her that her worst fears were confirmed.

She took to her bed and didn't get up for several weeks except to tend to the minimum duties her mother required. After a few days, work at the prison resumed, and with it the noontime horn announcing lunch. As she lay in bed, thinking of the man she had loved and with whom she had set her heart on spending her life, she remembered what he had told her about the melody in the notes of the horn. She knew that someone else was pressing the button, but as she listened, she gradually began hearing that the pitch in each sound of the horn really did change, and that for the first time, she could make out a melody. She tested her perception of it, singing a few notes of it at first hesitatingly, then more confidently each successive day. When one of her girlfriends came to visit her, she insisted on singing the notes to her. The friend, who couldn't make out anything but what sounded like the same note repeated several times, nevertheless smiled and said it was beautiful. And in her sadness, Nelly was happy.