

Blind Bill

Blind Bill's day started like any other. He was a man who liked routine and on warm summer days he liked to spend his time in his garden. He shifted his position in his garden chair and checked his table top again for his mobile telephone. He would phone his son later, but not yet. Bill would only bother him in the really lonely times.

- 5 This morning he hoped there would be some visitors or a neighbour passing his gate who would stop and pass the time of day with him.

Some time later, Bill recognised Mrs Jobson's heavy footsteps. It was a Wednesday, and Bill knew it was her day for Willbridge supermarket.

"Nice drying day for your washing, Mrs Jobson."

- 10 His comment took her by surprise, and he heard her gasp. She would wonder how a blind man could know about her washing. Heavens, silly woman; the flapping, cracking sound it made as gust of wind came down the valley was loud enough. And he knew she always did her washing before going to the supermarket. He enjoyed teasing her. "You'd better have it in by three, though. It'll rain by three."

- 15 Again he was rewarded by her gasp of surprise. But she believed him because he'd always been right before. He could feel the weather fronts coming as the wind changed to the west on his cheek, and he felt the slight pressure of warm dampness on his skin that confirmed the change of weather to come. He hoped it wouldn't rain; it would finish his day outside so early. Nothing indoors but quiz games on TV that you didn't need
20 sight to play. Bill was good at quizzes and, since his blindness, stuffing his brain with new facts was one way of not going mad. Indoors, Bill's blindness was a prison cell. Not like being out here, where at least every sound brought back memories from the time when he'd had eyes. At times, though, despair hit him. He'd do anything to have two eyes again, to be rid of the dark.

- 25 It was nearly one o'clock when he heard the voices. A girl's voice, a boy's voice. Two pairs of feet coming up the lane slowly, out for a walk. The girl had a soft, timid voice. He felt she would be small and dark with a shy smile. He didn't notice the boy's voice at first. Then he realised. It was a wrong sort of voice, rough, uneven. It didn't fit with the girl's voice. He'd heard many such voices and they always meant trouble.

- 30 They belonged to lads who caused fights, who bullied, who stole from where they worked. What was that girl doing out with a boy like that?

They paused outside his gate. He was quite sure they hadn't noticed him sitting behind the cover of the hawthorn hedge.

What are we coming up here for Trev?" The girl sounded nervous. The boy chuckled,

35 not very pleasantly.

“Oh, we’ll just sit in the cornfield and watch the birds and bees.”

“Won’t the farmer mind us being in his field?”

“I often used to come here. Think the farmer could see my head in a cornfield? With hair this colour? And I washed it last night, ‘specially for you.” That should have

40 sounded touching. But there was a note in the voice that made the listening Bill shudder.

“We haven’t anything to sit on. I’ll get my best dress dirty.”

“We can sit on my anorak.”

“But it’ll get all grass stains....and it’s new.”

45 “Grass stains won’t show on this colour. That’s why I bought it.”

There was a long awkward silence. Then the girl said, “Look at them apples on the tree. Never see as many apples on one branch like that before.

“D’you want one?” There was a small grunt of effort, then a wild commotion of leaves from the apple tree set into Bill’s hedge. Then the sound of feet returning to the ground

50 with a thump. There was another grunt followed by the sound of thrashing leaves, creaking and cracking, then a loud snap. And the sound of apples thudding on the ground.

“Here, y’are, seven apples. Don’t say I never give you anything?”

“But you’ve broken that branch. Can’t you tie it up again?”

55 “Nah. Why should these snobs have all the apples? Don’t have no apple trees round where I live. Sod ‘em.”

Bill sat and shook with fury. But he knew he could do nothing. That kind of voice would knock a blind man down and kick him where he lay, and Bill knew it. He sat very still and quiet, trembling.

60 The footsteps and the voices faded. Bill broke out in a sweat of relief that they were gone. He had done the sensible thing, but he felt humiliated. He sat fretting at the way the world had changed. But the girl had sounded so nice, gentle, innocent. .

The tones of the job’s voice ground through Bill’s memory again and he just knew something terrible was going to happen. What could he do? Only wait. And listen.

65 Listen as he’d never listened before.

Time passed. He heard Mrs Jobson next door turning off her tap and then the sound of his wife’s car. And then he heard it. The scream. And not just any old scream. It was a scream of pure terror, cut short. And then he heard running footsteps. Male footsteps. Running away. They passed the gate and slapped down on the

- 70 sandstone slabs with a particular kind of slap that Bill knew well.
And then they were gone. Bill's moment of decision had come. He picked up the mobile phone and called 999. The policewoman who answered the phone took him seriously. "We'll send a car to check immediately, sir. Cinder Lane, Welbury. Have you any description of the young man?."
- 75 "Short," he said. "Less than five foot six. Long blond hair, newly washed. Wearing trainers, denim jeans and a dark anorak, probably green. She called him Trev."
It was much later, after he dozed off in his armchair, when his wife called out. "Bill, there's a policeman to see you." A tall man stood in the doorway. "Inspector Ambleside, sir" said a voice that was full of respect. "You'll be pleased to
- 80 know that we found the young woman in the cornfield. She was bleeding headily but alive. She would have died if we hadn't found her. And we got the man. Walking along the main road, bold as brass. Your description fitted him perfectly. Nasty bit of work he is."
"Good. I'm glad I could help," said Bill.
- 85 "The only thing is, sir, your wife says you're as blind as a bat, if you'll pardon the expression. So how did you do it?"
"I listened, Inspector. I heard the thump of trainers on the sandstone. I heard the noise denim makes when legs rub together. And what colour hair won't be noticed in a cornfield? And what colour anorak won't show grass stains? He also had to be little
- 90 because he had to jump for apples outside my gate. Jump hard. I can reach them but I'm six foot three."
"Good heavens, you should be in the police force, sir. You could teach some of my lads a bit about observation." And Blind Bill allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

From 'Blind Bill' by Robert Westall