

FRESH SHEETS / Patricia Klas

"That Mrs. Tillman sure has a lot of zip for her age," Betty Berkley had often observed to her husband, Bob, as they peered across the lawn at the old woman next door who, propped on a ladder, was Windexing the glass above her front doorway. "I wonder, though, if she doesn't get lonely in that big house all by herself."

But if she did the Berkleys never saw any sign of it, for Mabel Tillman kept a busy schedule, always shoving off to some church shindig or passionately ridding her house of any God-forsaken dirt.

Mabel Tillman might have been "crowding eighty" as she called it, but she was by all means still kicking. "I'm on the way out, but I'll be damned if I'm going to sit around and wait for death to come a-knockin'."

And she didn't. Mabel's weeks were filled with luncheon dates with "the old gals," morning bridge at St. Ignatius Church hall on Wednesdays, and vegetable shopping at the farmer's market in the parking lot behind the rectory on Fridays. She also baked a mean batch of goodies for the parish bake sales. Her specialties—cranberry bread and cinnamon apple pie—were a favorite of the parish, and the ladies implored her for the recipes. She never measured ingredients and thus it proved impossible to transpose her formulas onto three-by-five index cards. But in a smug way she liked the fact that she "took the cake" so to speak in the baking circle.

Today Mabel had gotten an early start on some plum dumplings. Those plums from the backyard tree ripened all at once this year and were spoiling quicker than she could eat them. Last week she had made jelly, but there were still a couple dozen hanging around and Mabel had other uses for the refrigerator space.

So she began by rolling out crusts of bread into crumbs at eight and it was ten before she spooned the last of the soggy dumplings out of the pot, coating it with the sugared breadcrumbs.

"There. Sure is a lot of messing around for a few plums." And she lined the dumplings into a baking dish and set it aside as she tidied the kitchen and ran the water for dishes.

Her cockapoo skittered across the linoleum toward her and began licking her ankles.

"Get down now, Huxley. Nothing for you now. You've had your breakfast." And the dog wiggled its curly stubbed tail and peeped between the tuft of white fur covering its eyes. "About time we had your hair cut there, old boy. Be blind as a bat if you have to look cross-eyed through that mop all day." She opened a drawer, reached into a box full of rubber bands she had accumulated over the years, and snapped one around the

dog's mane, making a ragged whalespout between its ears.

Mabel put on rubber gloves and soaked her hands in the warm dishwater, letting the pans soak a bit before scrubbing them. She looked out beyond the yellow-trimmed curtains above the sink into her yard. Summer had diminished and the autumn gusts had begun to pick up as the September hues foreshadowed the dull of winter and spread a gloom through the air. Mabel had dreaded the encroachment of the season, for as fall crept in, the calendar mercilessly ticked off the days toward October 6.

She considered the wood pile along the back fence near the abundant branches of the mountain ash. "Better get that Richards boy to gather some more logs. Never know when the weather might take a sharp turn." She perished the thought of being stuck without firewood while the winds blustered outside the oak rooms of the house. There was something comforting in the rich, charred aroma of burning wood that curbed the reality of the cold outside, and she stoked up a fire often during the winter even if it was more for consolation than heat. "Fire's much more comforting than the banging of the radiator pipes." And the hardwood floors perpetuated a lingering draft if she walked about in her slippers and robe. It was nice to have a wave of heat taking the cold edge off the place.

The skillet proved a stubborn job. She had allowed her ham to fry a bit too long earlier, and its bottom, covered with a burnt film, took scouring powder and plenty of hot water and scrubbing to come clean. But she had no engagements that afternoon and as yet had not sketched out her activities for the rest of the morning, so she allowed the warmth of the dishwater to travel up her forearms as she continued to ponder the state of the backyard.

"Those lilac bushes need trimming again." Ever since Bill had gone, the yard had suffered in a rather shoddy state, as Mabel had a hard time tracking down the Richards boy long enough to employ him. She supposed that carefree, on-the-go syndrome was characteristic of all boys his age, especially about the time a girl of two began to turn their heads, but she did regret not having anyone reliable in the neighborhood. Bill would have been distraught to see the yard neglected so. He had always taken pride in its immaculate trimming by manicuring the hedges and neatly outlining the lawn with the edger. Rarely a weed escaped his eye. To Bill, pruning, weeding and nurturing his backyard nursery became an art. Mabel sighed to think how the greenery had degenerated since he had gone.

She peered out at the plum tree beyond the picnic table. Ripe season had just ended. Bill had been so proud of that tree. Every summer when

the sweet red plums sprang forth, Bill gathered the neighbor children to help him pick the juicy fruit, and Mabel, smiling to herself, watched him atop the ladder as he delighted in the kids.

"Now who's going to volunteer to test these to see if they're ripe enough?" Immediately five little hands waved in the air and the kids bounced on their tippy-toes shouting "Me!" and reaching for the rich spheres Bill plucked off the branches.

Bill would descend with a full basket: "Now a plum's at its best when the skin's not too sour or tough and the inside's nice and juicy. Shouldn't take any effort to bite into, but almost melts in the mouth. Like this." Bill bit into one and sucked the juice from the little ball between his fingers. "Mmm... just right. See the juice is nice and plentiful, and the skin is tender."

The kids nodded as they slurped the plums. The juice dripped around their mouths as they smoothed the pits clean.

Bill had always fascinated children. The little ones always flocked to him, crawled over his lap, and urged him to tell stories. After playful coaxing, Bill would start in on a hearty tale, drawing out the words in deep, slow tones like a poet who had spoken the words inside so long, they came out warmed and alive. And the children would be fixed still by the intensity of his eyes as they widened and drew close at intervals.

Mabel took a deep breath and ran the water over the back of the mixing bowl, watching it roll off in rivulets, divide into little streams over the sink, and convene again at the drain. There weren't many hours in the day that Bill's memories did not creep into her daily activities. As though a part of herself whose image appeared with a single reflection in a pane of glass, Bill's memories would flood her thoughts all at once, in full color and dimension.

Some days were not as bad as others. She kept busy, and that helped things, but during the weeks when no bridge was scheduled or no baking, canning, or pickling project stood before her, Mabel was left to Huxley and the silence that resounded disturbingly between the walls.

This morning the house was an enormous abundance of quiet. Even the sparrows that usually fidgeted in the bird feeder below the back porch roof were sadly absent. Everything flew away as autumn rolled in and the season lulled the outdoors to sleep.

The silence made Mabel uneasy, and she found nothing that might cure it. She never paid much attention to television as she had a hard time understanding the dialogue, even if she turned up the volume. Her hearing aid irritated her so much, she rarely bothered to put it in anymore except when she went to church. The priest's homily on Sunday was the one thing she was at pains to hear, but otherwise the ear

device caused her nothing but frustration. It amplified the racket of the dog's chains, while jumbling together human voices. So she gave up on the business, stuffed the little machine in its box on her dresser and left it be most days.

Mabel wiped her hand on the dishtowel and spread it out on the rack to dry. "There," she sighed, "that's done with." She scooted Huxley out of her way and retrieved the broom from the pantry to sweep the back steps. The wind picked up this time of year, and there were always layers of dust and leaves accumulating if she didn't get at it once a week. She angled the broom in the far corner and worked the worn bristles along the wood grain as her thoughts, lifted by a gentle gust, spun out again to the yard and in-spired the image of Bill kneeling over the tomato plants.

"Just a bit more seasoning and we'll have ripe ones, tasty enough to eat plain with just a hint of salt," he had remarked once while she pinched the bedsheets onto the line with clothespins. "That is if those squirrels don't make a feast out of them first. Little devils." He had forsworn the use of pesticides, for no matter how precious his vegetables, he couldn't justify endangering the squirrels and rabbits. He did his best with chicken wire, but nothing proved foolproof in keeping the creatures out of his little Eden.

Mabel would marvel at Bill going about his business in the yard, checking his plants as though each were a child sleeping in its bed, the soil tucked softly under its chin. He'd wear a flannel shirt over his blue jeans and the same weathered work boots that had seen over twenty years of wear. Mabel would shake her head at what a sight the old boy made—a sort of Jack and the Beanstalk in his later years, having triumphed over giants and other threats to his terrain.

The memory shuffled away as Mabel swept the leaves off the last porch stair. This would be the first autumn without Bill's labored ritual of sealing up the garden each fall. She supposed the tomato plants and the rhubarb would run together in disarray. She just didn't have the flexibility to stoop over the vegetables like Bill had. The squirrels would have a hearty Thanks-giving at least. Mabel tapped the dust off the broom, banging it against the side of the stairs. "Better get to that laundry so the sheets'll air out before dusk."

Huxley scurried beneath her feet as she pushed inside. "That dog. Always under my feet and I can never hear him coming." She grunted a few exclamations—"Get!"—toward the animal as she sauntered toward the stairs.

She took one slow step at a time, pausing to catch her breath on the landing before tackling the remaining flight. She was aware of her chest

inflating and falling in rapid sweeps as she heaved air to catch her breath. Gripping the smooth banister, she steadied herself and concentrated on inhaling. She waited for the equilibrium to settle back in her head. "Just so it isn't those dizzy spells again," she thought. And regaining her senses, she leaned over the hamper and began sorting the lights from the darks in piles about the floor.

Mabel had always insisted on clean sheets once a week and chuckled now as she remembered crawling into bed on Saturday nights after washing day. She would press next to Bill with the sweet crispness of the sheets perfectly smooth against the blankets. Bill would sneak his cold toes against hers at the foot of the bed and tease her as they snuggled in. Then Mabel would feel the peaceful rhythm of Bill's snore as he dropped off just as she finished her last Hail Mary and had wound her rosary back into its red velvet case at the headboard.

As Mabel scooped up the pile of sheets and moved toward the stairway, she surrendered to the memory of October 6, its anniversary now less than a month away. She had come to grips with the fact that the morning she found Bill would stay with her forever, and although she fought to shove it to her mind's backseat, every now and then it would slip in behind the wheel and catch her off guard, driving forth the stark details, still so cruelly vivid, into her consciousness. It was as though time had not softened the images' harsh bold line but had continually redefined them so they stood out more clearly as the months had passed.

The events of that morning accosted her now like an acute attack of paralysis. She had risen early that day to get a head start on a batch of waffles so she could dollop the batter onto the iron in a snap as soon as Bill came down for his coffee. Huxley had pestered her to go out, and she decided as long as she was up, she might as well get a few things done. So she whipped up the egg whites, folded them into the batter and setting the whole works aside, began her attack upon the lower oven, scouring powder in hand. Squatting on her knees, she scrubbed, reprimanding Huxley for poking his snout into the oven beside her.

A half hour of hearty work and she rose to her feet, dabbing her forehead. She admired the shiny surface of the oven's inner walls and wiping her hands on her apron, looked at the clock. "Bill should be up by now. Probably dallying around up there in his pajamas when there's Saturday work to be done." She had a list of chores for him to do before he ventured outside with his rake.

She called at the bottom of the stairs: "Bill!" No answer. "Must be in the bathroom," she mused. "Not like him to still be in bed. He's such an early riser by nature."

Mabel shrugged and returning to the kitchen, turned on the waffle iron and began warming the maple syrup in a saucepan. After she had set the table and arranged a selection of jams, Bill had not yet come down. Mabel shouted again at the stairs: "Bill! Breakfast is ready. You'd hurry up and come and eat if you knew what's good for you. There's work to be done, you know. Bill!" Silence encompassed the echo of her voice along the stairwell and the whole house lay eerily still. Mabel climbed the stairs, aware of the sound of her tread against the quiet.

"Bill!" Still no answer, only the mimicking echo. When she reached the top of the stairs, the bedroom door was ajar as she had left it earlier. Mabel now felt the meaning of the unspoken reply. It lay cruelly beyond the door. Her heart grew dense inside her as her breathing raced toward her elevated pulse. She pushed the door wide. Bill lay in bed in a still heap. "Bill," she whispered, "Oh my dear Bill." There was no longer any need for shouting. The whole world had been reduced to a whisper. Suddenly all sound seemed useless, a waste.

Mabel moved to the bed, sank down near its foot and sat rocking back and forth beside the mound of Bill beneath the covers. She put her warm, wrinkled hand against one of his purplish-white cheeks. It stung her with coldness. His face spread out in hollow pockets, the deep crevices of his cheeks sucked out as though the vigor and healthy redness that rose up against his eyes when he smoked his pipe had evaporated. His eyelids were still but without the lightness that held them serenely while he slept. They were shut now, irretrievably.

Mabel tugged the sheets up further beneath Bill's chin and the inert limbs resisted her movement. She leaned her head upon his chest and began to pray, pressing her eyes tight to concentrate. Drops squeezed out from behind her eyelids, moistening the white sheets beneath her face. "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, amen..."

Something compelled her today to stop in front of the bedroom door as she moved toward the stairs with the laundry. Since the funeral, Mabel had transferred her things to the sunroom down the hall, and the bedroom door had remained closed for almost a year. She avoided the room as though disturbing even the dust might threaten the tranquility that surrounded Bill's memory. She had been afraid that the slightest rearrangement might chip away at the lush memories of Bill or replace them with visions of that October morning. But the thought occurred to her now that Bill would have wanted things to be nice and clean. Like his garden, he would have wanted to put the house through a rejuve-

nating cleaning to get ready for the winter when the dust seemed to accumulate in slow motion, lingering in the cold crevices of the wood floors. She felt the need now to be sure everything in the bedroom was tidy. Perhaps she would change the sheets on the bed.

The brass doorknob's squeak echoed along the wooden corridor, and the hinge gave way slowly. She stood in the doorway and held the cold metal of the doorknob as the icy silence of the room slapped against her and firmed her feet in place.

Everything was in its place, but a dull fading seemed to have overtaken the room. The shades pulled over the windows forced the room to suffocate in murky yellow. The golden tones of the frilled curtains paled to a dull sweet-corn yellow and the wallpaper's peaked daisies seemed malnourished and dispirited. Everything had been kept frozen still and had aged like the little prayer card she kept in her Bible from Bill's funeral, whose edges had gone from off-white to yellow. She crossed to the windows and released the blinds with a few good yanks. The shades flapped and squeaked into their rolls as the height of the windows. Mabel blinked as she exposed a flush of white sunlight.

She stared at the unwrinkled bed. The stale sheets had been left to grow cold and stiffen. She hesitated, wondering whether to freshen the bed with new ones. She clung to the bundle of worn sheets in her arms, squeezing them as though to extract their warmth and life, then looked across at the sterile ones on the bed. She shivered to imagine sliding into their starched crispness, so unlike those fresh from the line where the sweet fragrant air had billowed through them.

All at once, Mabel tore off the bedspread, unleashing dust onto the planes of sunlight. She pulled off the top sheet in one clean sweep and coughed away the cloud of dust as she freed the fitted sheet's corners. A chill had seized her and as she gathered up the bedclothes in her arms, she wrapped them around her forearms and descended to the laundry room. "Today is washing day," she thought, "and we must have fresh sheets. Yes, we must." And she eased down the stairs with her load, humming a tune awkwardly to break the silence pervading the floor below.