

## Bill-and-Doris

Alexa Lebeis

Irene noticed Bill and Doris's porch light was on long after the sun had risen that Wednesday morning. Like Irene, Bill and Doris got up without fail around six AM and would typically be out walking the neighborhood by six-thirty. Even in mid-March it was necessary in Phoenix to get out early to beat the heat. It was almost nine now, and it certainly wasn't like Bill and Doris to waste electricity; they covered their western windows in tin foil to reduce cooling costs, clipped coupons religiously, placed cardboard behind their back tires to shield them from the sun. Irene walked across the street to see what was the matter. *The Arizona Republic* lay in its dry plastic sleeve at the end of Bill and Doris's driveway; the early morning dew had already evaporated. No answer when Irene knocked tentatively on the door. She could hear the radio on inside. Bill and Doris always left the radio on when they weren't home, but their burgundy Pontiac sat in the carport. She could see light from the living room lamp through the drawn curtains, but no sign of motion. She lingered at the door for a moment.

Irene was not a rash woman; she was logical and composed, but also gentle and warm, the ideal temperament for an ER nurse. She and her roommate, Bette, had both been nurses in New York City before they'd retired and moved to Rancho Drive. Bette was feistier, more outwardly emotional and opinionated. They balanced each other well. Irene knew what she had to do, though she didn't want to upset Bette before she had all the information.

"What's wrong?" Bette asked when Irene came back inside. Bette could read her like no one else. Irene called the police. Bette rushed outside while they waited, Irene following reluctantly. Dennis, who lived next door to Bill and Doris, was out watering his geraniums, and Bette made a beeline toward him.

"Bill and Doris aren't answering their door!" Bette hollered before she'd made it across the street.

"Pardon?" Dennis turned off the hose. He invited Bette and Irene inside as the cop car pulled up, though Bette would have much rather stayed out there. He told them, now that he thought of it, he'd heard something the night before—two pops.

My mom and I had moved away almost two years before. I'd grown up in the house on the other side of Bill and Doris. Because their own children and grandchildren lived far away, Bill and Doris would come to our house on holidays. They'd give me foil-wrapped oranges for Halloween and invite me over for Milano cookies and tea with cubed sugar. Bill had a different bolo tie for every day of the week and an impressive geode collection, which he'd let me examine for as long as I liked. I remember their silver tinsel Christmas tree—the first one like it I'd ever seen. I remember marveling at how tall Doris had been, and how graceful. She'd let me sit beside her on the piano bench and I'd watch, mesmerized, as her spider-leg fingers danced across the keys. I remember the two giant orange trees in their front yard. Bill had painted their trunks white. "It's like tree sunscreen," he'd explained to me. Bill loved his trees and his lawn. My mother would chuckle because he'd open his irrigation valve a little earlier than his allotted time slot, siphoning some of the water meant for our yard. I also remember the little NRA sign in their living room window with the picture of a revolver. I worried, as I crossed their front yard to visit, that they would mistake me for an intruder and accidentally shoot me; I'd sprint to their front door shouting "It's Alexa!"

Since we had moved away, Doris had been forgetting—the pot on the stove, the keys in the door. According to Irene, she'd also started wandering off. I could imagine her, lithe, all limbs, gliding through the neighborhood with the effortless fluidity of a woman far younger than eighty-five. In my mind, it was always dawn when she'd disappear; it would have been too hot any other time of day and I couldn't bear to imagine Doris alone and confused in the dark of night. Bill would stir, sensing her absence before he'd opened his eyes—they'd been married for sixty-five years, after all. He would reach for her and feel her cool pillow. He would always find her before long, serenely smiling. She would take him by the elbow and he would kiss her cheek. They'd meet Bette and Irene and their black cocker spaniel, Lady, on the way home.

“Already a scorcher!” Bill would announce.

“It's going to be a doozy!” Bette would reply exuberantly.

Irene called to tell us what had happened.

“Bill and Doris killed themselves,” she told my mom softly. Actually, Bill had shot Doris and then himself. Doris had left something on the stove and almost burned the house down the week before. Their children started insisting that Bill put her in a home.

I cannot imagine how hard it must have been for Bill to place the gun against Doris's temple. Was she awake? Did she know what was happening? I also cannot imagine Bill without Doris; I suspect he couldn't either.

Word count: 893