The Goodbye Summer

Patricia Gaffney

1

The first Caddie Winger ever heard of Wake House was when she was helping her grandmother get her drawers on over the cast on her leg.

It was Nana's second day back from the hospital. "If I was at Wake House," she said, lying flat on the sofa and holding her bunched-¬up nightgown over her lap for modesty, "somebody who knew what they were doing would be doing this."

"What house? Awake?"

"Wake House. That place on Calvert Street across from the thing. The thing, where you go with papers. To get signed."

"The notary? Put your good foot in here, Nan. Are you talking about that old house with the tower and all the porches? I think it's a boarding-house."

"Before. Now it's an old folks' home."

"Oh, you don't need to go to a place like that, I can take care of you fine."

"Ow."

"It's a learning curve."

Nana mentioning a nursing home, imagine that. For the rest of the morning Caddie pondered what it might mean. When the old lady across the street went dotty and her children put her in a ¬nursing home, Nana was aghast. "Shoot me if you ever want to get rid of me that bad, you hear? Take me out in the backyard and fire away." Caddie assumed the subject of nursing homes was off-¬limits forever.

That afternoon, though, out of the blue, Nana brought up Wake House again.

They were on the front porch, Nana slumped in her rented wheel¬chair, resting her broken leg on a pillow on top of the low kitchen stool. Caddie stood behind her, braiding her hair. Nana had long, pretty, smoke-¬gray hair and, before it softened with age, a long, bony, sharp-¬featured face. She loved it when people told her she looked like Virginia Woolf. Nobody ever added, "If she'd lived to seventy-¬nine instead of walking into the river."

"What's-¬her-¬name died there," she said, breaking a drowsy silence.

"Who died where, Nan?"

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney
Published by Pocket / Simon & Schuster

"Wake House. What's-¬her-¬name, you know. Pink hair, Tuesday nights."

Hm. Back in Nana's Buddhist period, when she'd led a chanting service in the dining room one night a week, an elderly lady who dyed her hair pink had shown up occasionally. "Mrs. Pringle?"

"Inez Pringle, thank you."

"She died at Wake House?"

Nana shrugged. "You have to die someplace."

Caddie leaned over to see if she was joking. Her eyes were fixed on something out in the yard—Caddie followed her gaze to what was left of George Bush in Love. That's how she'd broken her leg, by falling off the stepladder while putting a final cowboy boot on top of her phallus-¬shaped, seven-¬foot-¬high lawn sculpture. Nana was an artist.

"Are you serious?" Caddie asked.

A moment passed. "About what?" Nana said dreamily.

Caddie smiled and went back to braiding her hair. How were they going to wash it? This old house had only one bathroom, upstairs, and right now Nana ¬couldn't stand up at the kitchen sink for longer than a minute or two. Maybe one of those dry shampoos, they were supposed to . . .

"About Wake House? Damn right I'm serious. Call 'em up, find out how much it costs to stay there."

Her next pain pill ¬wasn't for forty minutes. She'd broken her leg in two places, but luckily the breaks were simple, so her recovery was supposed to be long and tedious but not tricky or dangerous. The pain made her irritable, though. That's all Caddie could think of to account for Nana's sudden interest in recovering anyplace except the house on Early Street she'd lived in for fifty years.

"Wake House. I even like the sound of it."

"You do?" It made Caddie think of a funeral home.

"It's not like one of those places, it's not a mick . . . mick . . ."

"McNursing Home," Caddie guessed.

"This place is going to the dogs."

"Our house?"

"The whole neighborhood. It's not even safe anymore."

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney
Published by Pocket / Simon & Schuster

"Yes, it is."

"No, it's not."

Caddie stopped arguing, because she never won, but Nana was exaggerating. Early Street might not be what it used to be, not that it had ever been that much, but it still had decent, hardworking families with fairly well-behaved children, plenty of old-timers rocking out their afternoons on the shady, crooked front porches. Crime was still pretty much in the vandalism category, boys breaking things or writing on things. It was getting older, that's all. Everything got older.

"Wake House," Nana resumed. "I bet it's got an elevator. Ramps, wheelchairs with motors. People giving you massages."

"Oh, boy."

"I'm a senior citizen, I deserve the best. This place is a death trap."

"Only about half an hour till your next pill, then you'll feel better. Want me to play the piano? You could listen through the window."

"Look it up in the yellow pages. Better yet, take me to see it—I always wanted to go inside that place. It's not just for old folks, you can get well there, too. Conva . . . conva . . ."

"Nan, I know you don't want to, but if you would just go upstairs, this whole thing would be a lot simpler. I really think."

"No way."

"You'd be near the bathroom—you know how you hate that climb up the stairs four or five times a day. You could sleep in your own bed instead of the lumpy couch. You ¬wouldn't have to move every time one of my students comes over for a lesson. You could have a bell or a whistle, and I'd come up anytime you needed something, I ¬wouldn't mind a bit. It just makes so much more—"

"No."

"But why?"

"I told you, I'm not going up there."

"But why not?"

"Once you go up, you never come down."

"Nana, you only broke your leg."

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney
Published by Pocket / Simon & Schuster

"That's it, I've made up my mind. Wake House. I used to know the family, you know."

Maybe Caddie could take one of Nana's pills for the headache she was getting. "You knew the Wakes?" Her back cracked when she arched it to stretch out the stiffness.

"Well, not knew as in know, as in sit in the parlor and drink tea and eat cucumber sandwiches." She cackled; she cracked herself up. "The whole town knew the Wakes. The old man owned the Bank of Michaelstown. It used to be on the corner of Maryland and Antietam."

"It still is."

"Yes, but Wakes don't own it anymore. They were the big cheeses around here, like the, the—Hyannisport—"

"Kennedys."

"Kennedys, till the old man lost all the money. After that they just disappeared. Dried up and blew away."

"Well, anyway—I still think if you'd go to bed and not move for about two weeks, your own bed, it would give you a good start. On healing. Remember, the doctor said—"

Her grandmother stuck her thumbs in her ears and wriggled her fingers while she went pbbbbbb with her lips.

"Well—honestly," Caddie said, offended, then saw the two boys out on the sidewalk. Neighbor kids; she knew their faces but not their names. They stopped in front of the house, arrested by Nana's raspberry. One had a skateboard slung over his shoulder, the other had a silent boom box; like little men coming home from work, Caddie thought, only with toys instead of rakes or picks on their shoulders. "Hi!" she called out, with a cheery smile, waving. "How're you doing?"

"Miniature thugs," Nana said too loud.

"Hush." They already thought old lady Winger was a witch. "How's it going?" Caddie called gaily. "What's happening?"

The one with the skateboard finally lifted his hand in a belligerent half-¬wave.

"Have a good day!"

They jostled each other, swaggering off down the sidewalk.

"Nana, why do you—"

"Hoodlums."

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney

"You don't even know it's them."

"If it's not, it's one of their com . . . you know, com . . ."

"Comrades. Compatriots."

George Bush in Love ¬wasn't Nana's only artistic creation in the front yard, not by a long shot. It was starting to look like a playground out there, or a wax museum. Her most attention-¬getting artworks were Earthen Uterus and the long, cylindrical Passionate Ones United. Mysterious additions that infuriated Nana and mortified Caddie appeared on or near the sculptures in the night, things like scattered sanitary napkins or used condoms; once somebody hung a toilet seat over the scrap metal head of Fecund Goddess. The sculptures weren't popular on Early Street, but they were legal—the neighbors had found that out after a lot of complaints to the police, the city council, the Neighborhood Watch.

Finney, Nana's Jack Russell terrier, scratched at the screen door to come out. "Okay," Caddie told him, "but only on your rope." Otherwise he'd take off after anything that moved.

"Jane, put him up on my lap."

"Sure?" She'd long since stopped correcting Nana when she called her by her daughter's name—Caddie's mother, who'd been dead for twenty-¬three years. "Won't it hurt your leg?"

"You kidding?" She knocked on the fiberglass cast under her denim skirt. "Can't feel a thing."

"You know, if you went to a place like Wake House, you prob¬ably ¬wouldn't be able to keep Finney," Caddie said, lifting the dog onto her grandmother's lap. He was only two and a half and still a holy terror, but if Nana petted him, he'd sit still for hours.

"Maybe, maybe not. Inez said they have cats." She stroked the dog's silky ears and kissed him on top of his head. "Now, listen to me, Caddie Winger. You're . . . oh, shoot."

"What?"

"How the hell old are you?"

"Thirty-¬two."

"I knew that."

"Course you did." She finished with her grandmother's hair, gave her a quick hug, and came around to sit on the porch rail. The sun felt good on her back. Spring was finally getting started. She batted a bee away. It was a soft, shimmery-¬blue

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney

afternoon, and the neighbors' yards were sprouting tulips and azaleas and dogwood blossoms. In Nana's yard the sculptures made of dirt were ¬sprouting bright green, spiky-¬soft grass, like Chia pets.

"We went to the movies on your birthday," Nana recalled.

"Yes."

"Now that is a fine thing, going to a movie with your grandmother on your birthday."

"I thought you liked it." Caddie had worried a little about the profanity; it was a gangster movie.

"It was okay. I give it one thumb up. But that's not the point." She frowned, trying to recall the point. "The point is, when's the last time you went out on a date? A real date, not violin practice with that Adolphe Menjou guy."

"If you mean Morris, he was my stand partner in the orchestra, and anyway, he's gay."

"That's the point. I'm holding you back. I see it all now, it came to me in the hospital."

"Boy, you must've been high on those painkillers." Caddie laughed weakly. "Because that's ridiculous."

"Look at you. It's my fault."

"What's wrong with me?" She had on her gray pants and her black sweater, which was speckled with Finney's little white hairs. But everything in the house was speckled with Finney's hairs, it was like they were coated with an adhesive.

She should never have asked, because Nana squirmed in her wheelchair, searching for a more comfortable position, and proceeded to tell her what was wrong with her. "You don't look like other girls. I've been watching a lot of tube lately, I know what I'm talking about."

"Soap operas in the hospital, that's not—"

"You don't put yourself out. You're invisible. Look at your hair, it ¬doesn't have any oomph. Blondes have more fun, but not if they don't even try. Are you having fun?"

"I'm having plenty of fun."

"How tall are you?"

Caddie sighed. "Five eleven."

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney

"Five eleven!" she exclaimed, as if this were brand-¬new news. "Five feet eleven inches tall, and look at you. Sit up straight, make your shoulders go back. Let's see your bosoms, I know you've got some."

"Yikes!" Caddie jumped off the rail and whirled around, turning her back on her grandmother. "Quit picking on me," she wailed, laughing along with Nana's wheezy haw-¬haw. "What's gotten into you?"

Funny, though, that Nana would use the word "invisible." When Caddie was little, pretending nobody could see her had been her favorite game. And later, like a song hook in the back of her mind had been any version of I could've fallen through the floor, or I wished the earth would open up and swallow me. Maybe Nana was right; maybe she'd succeeded so well that at last nobody could see her.

"Nothing's gotten into me, I've seen the light. I'll go to Wake House and you go to a whatchamacallit, garden apartment, handsome men hanging over the balcony looking down at the girls in the swimming pool. Everybody's single, nobody's got a job."

"No more TV for you."

"You think you'll be lonesome. That's why you're against it." When they focused, Nana's eyes could look unnervingly shrewd. "You've never been on your own, so you're scared."

"I have, too. Graduate school, when I got my music master's."

"Two years," she said dismissively, "and you ¬didn't go very far away, did you? How'd you like it?"

"Fine. I liked it fine."

"I bet."

"What does that mean? What does 'I bet' mean?"

"I bet you had the time of your life."

"I did not. I mean . . ." She forgot what side she was arguing on.

Nana's lined old face sagged. "Caddie, honey, I'm the old lady, not you. I'm the one who's supposed to not want anything to change."

"That's not right." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I want plenty of things to change. About me, though—I don't see why you have to do anything."

Caddie ¬didn't get the joke, but for some reason that tickled her grandmother. She went into her wheezy laugh again, haw-¬haw-¬haw, bobbing Finney up and down

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney
Published by Pocket / Simon & Schuster

on her lap. “Oh, me.” She pushed her knuckle under her glasses to wipe away a tear. “I’m only talking for a couple of months, you know.”

“Oh. A couple of months?”

“While my leg heals. I can’t even pee down here.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, that’s why going upstairs makes so much more—”

“Lord, I’m tired all of a sudden. Wheel me inside, honey, I have to lie down.”

No more was said about old folks’ homes, and Caddie was pretty sure the subject was closed. She gave Nana her pain pill and got her ¬settled on the couch, then went in the kitchen and tried to be quiet while she chopped onions for a casserole. Her grandmother confused her with her talk of leaving, but no more than she confused herself. What did she want? Normalcy, she’d have said, her unsuccessful goal since about age ten. And Nana was offering it to her, at least temporarily, a chance to be really invisible. She could bring a friend home and not have to worry that her grandmother would invite what was left of her ¬nudist club over to join them, or that she’d have finger-¬painted Coptic symbols on the front door, or dyed Finney beige for fun. Caddie ¬wouldn’t want to fall through the floor. Being by herself was nothing compared to that. Anyway, you ¬didn’t have to be alone to be lonesome.

They had a quiet dinner. Nana watched Jeopardy! while Caddie did the dishes and tidied up, fed the dog. When she went in the ¬living room to get Nana ready for bed, she found her with the telephone on her lap, dialing.

“Who are you calling?”

“Sh.” She pressed the phone to her ear with her shoulder and held up her left wrist. “Good thing I put this on”—she flicked a rubber band—“because you’d sure never’ve remembered.”

“What?”

She put a finger to her lips and screwed up her face, listening. “Oh, for Pete’s sake. Well, this ¬doesn’t bode well.”

“Who is it?”

She cleared her throat and spoke in her message-¬leaving voice. “Hello, this is Frances Winger. Please call me back at your earliest convenience.” She gave the number and started to hang up. Changed her mind. “And frankly, even if this is the business office, I think you ought to have a human being at the helm over there, not a machine. Even at night.”

“Nana, who are you calling?”

“If you’re a home, you should be homey.”

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney

"Oh, boy."

Nana hung up decisively.

"How'd you get the number?" The phone book was in the kitchen.

"Information." She wore a smug smile. She plucked at her skirt, arranging it over her cast just so. "We'll go there tomorrow, check the joint out."

"Wake House."

"Wake House."

"And it's just temporary?"

"Just temporary. Did I tell you I used to know the Wakes? Well, not know as in know . . ."

Copyright © 2004 Patricia Gaffney
Published by Pocket / Simon & Schuster