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The Old Folks At Home: Warehouse Them or Leave Them on the Ice Floe

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Old Folks at Home:

Warehouse Them

or

Leave Them on the Ice Floe

Barry Friedman

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Chapter One

““This is an old folks home?” I said.

Harriet shook her head and clucked. She has been shaking her head and clucking at me for the fifty-eight years of our marriage. “*Retirement* home, Henry.”

She gazed up at the 20-story high rise while I drove the car through a circular drive to the *porte co-chere* where a young man in a blue-shirted uniform hurried from the podium where he’d been standing, and opened the passenger side door. The pin on his shirt read “Phillip, Valet.”

I’m always wary of parking valets. They gun your car, the tires screeching as they careen off to the place where they back it in at 75 miles-an-hour, missing a back wall by a millimeter.

Another valet emerged, opened the door on my side and handed me a ticket. Big smile. “Welcome to Restful Bowers. When you’re ready to leave, call down and we’ll have your car ready.”

We were here to look over the place Harriet had found in a full page newspaper ad. The enticing spread showed a group of handsome, grinning silver-haired men and women, obviously models, sitting on deck chairs sipping drinks. “A place to spend your golden years in luxury and dignity!” Translation: Buy in and we’ll house you, feed you, and change your Depend® diapers until they box you.

Golden years. Ha!

I was eighty-one and Harriet was seventy-seven. Our “golden years” were a tarnished green. In the past ten years, several of my organs been surgically removed for a variety of reasons, and it now took me fifteen minutes to get out of bed each morning with some guy driving a harpoon into my lower back. I could read *War and Peace* while I stood at the toilet bowl each morning waiting for my diuretic to kick in.

Harriet was healthy but had gotten to the point where she was losing her glasses every other day, and twice that I can recall, had put her car keys in the refrigerator.

Golden years my ass.

A seventy-ish man in plaid shorts, a bag of golf clubs slung over his shoulder, came through the ornate front door handing the golf bag to a valet who stashed it in the trunk of a Cadillac parked partway through the circular drive. The man waved at the valet saying “Thank you, Sam.” He then drove off.

The guy was obviously a shill the management trotted out when the marketing department was expecting a prospective inmate/resident.

I stood staring at the building. This was an old folks—pardon me— *retirement* home? Where was the wrap-around porch with a gaggle of toothless crocks, rocking in creaky chairs, humming tunelessly to themselves? Where were the hovering nurses holding drinking straws to the mouths of the wrinkled fossils? Where were the canes and walkers and wheelchairs parked against the wall? The old men playing checkers?

Harriet and I entered the lobby where a concierge behind a marbled counter asked us to sign in as Visitors. We told her we had an appointment with Betty, a marketing person.

“Have a seat,” she said, pointing to a pair of easy chairs on the other side of the lobby. “I’ll tell her you’re here.”

Ten minutes later, a smiling young woman, probably in her thirties, bounced over to us, hand outstretched.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Callins. I’m Betty and I’ll be your marketing representative.”

She was an attractive brunette wearing slacks and a flowered blouse.

“I’ll give you a tour of our wonderful facilities. I’ve arranged for you to have a delicious lunch when we’re through with our business.”

She kept up an endless chatter en route to the elevators. Most of her sentences included the words “wonderful” or “we’re excited by...” or “you’ll just love.”. Her sales pitch made your average car salesman sound like a killjoy.

“Coming through!” The shout from behind us had me clinging to the side rail which ran the length of the corridor. A moment later, a woman hunched over the handlebars of a motorized wheelchair whizzed by at eighty miles per hour.

“Hi Mrs. Parker.” yelled Betty.

Mrs. Parker was well out of earshot by this time. Of course, “earshot” could have been inches from her ears stuffed with hearing aides.

“And this is one of our card rooms,” said Betty as we went by a room with four or five card tables. At each table were white-haired or bald men and women, silently squinting over their cards. They could have been mannequins or even corpses in perpetual *rigor mortis*. Museum statues made more movements.

Harriet’s eyes bulged in excitement. “Are there many bridge players here?” She wouldn’t miss her Thursday bridge club if she’d had to leave me lying comatose on the floor at home.

“Practically everybody plays,” said Betty. “Bridge, mahjong, canasta, bingo, lotto, poker. You name it.”

I gazed around looking for the roulette, crap tables and slot machines.

We passed a ramp leading to a door. Betty pointed. “That leads into a separate building for Assisted Living and Care Center.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The apartments in Assisted Living are for residents who are not really sick, but require help dressing, eating, getting in and out of a wheelchair, and so on. The Care Center is for residents who are wholly or partially bed-ridden. They need nursing care. Many have been hospitalized and returned here to convalesce. When they are well enough, they return to their

apartment in the Independent Living section. That's where you'll be."

"Do the ones in Assisted Living return to their apartments?" I said.

She shook her head. "No. They're in Assisted Living permanently. Many are memory-impaired."

I said, "If a husband needs to be in Assisted Living, does his wife remain in their apartment in—what did you call it — Independent Living?"

"No. Even if only one of a couple needs assistance, they move in together."

We had reached the bank of elevators bringing a close to the discussion. Two of the three elevators were working. Our guide said, somewhat apologetically, "They're doing some work on the other elevator."

A man standing behind us, also waiting, muttered, "Damned elevators. They're *always* doing some work on one. I think it's an empty shaft."

Betty smiled ignoring the comment, but kept up her chatter telling us about the fabulous apartments we were about to see.

The elevator finally came.

The apartments she showed us were vacant and undergoing renovation. I assumed the previous occupants were en route to their Maker. You don't leave one these places upright. You have too much invested in it.

We stepped around paint cans and rolls of carpeting as we toured through the rooms. The freshly painted walls were tastefully decorated with pull cords attached to small red alarms. Betty explained. "If a person falls, he or she just has to pull the cord and someone will come to help."

Provided they were conscious and could crawl to the wall.

It was hard for me to visualize what the rooms would look like with furniture, but Harriet was busy framing with her hands making comments like, "Our breakfront would go here. Our knickknack cabinet would go there. This corner

would be for your desk.” To me it was obvious that most of the furniture in our 2100 square foot condo would be finding a home in the Goodwill or Salvation Army warehouse. We had downsized before, moving from our big house in Decatur. Our kids weren’t interested in the overstuffed furniture and other relics, some of which had arrived on the *Pinta*. A few years later, we moved again to the condo we now call home, leaving some more furniture and assorted space hogs. Get ready Salvation Army, here we come again.

We finished our tour of apartments and Betty said, “I’m sure you have questions. Would you like to go to lunch, or would—?”

Before we had a chance to edge in a word she said, “Did you like the two-bedroom or the three? I’ve got samples so you can pick out the cabinet hardware and the color of carpet.”

I’ve had car salesmen who pressured me less. “Whoa!” I said. “You *are* going to tell *us* about the cost and other minor details involved, aren’t you?”

She looked at me as though I had asked her to undress.

“I’ll get the cost sheets.”

She went to a file cabinet and extracted a sheaf of papers.

The buy-in cost had me gulping.

Betty saw my face turn white. She was quick to point out that “The Bowers” was a luxury establishment. “You can probably find something cheaper but it won’t have the amenities we have. Incidentally, there’s no tipping.”

“How about the valet who took my car?”

“No tipping. Period.”

“Gratuities?”

“That’s the same as tipping.” Betty went on. “Of course residents can show that they value the services they get by voluntarily contributing to an Employee Appreciation Fund.”

I said, “You mean like a giant tip jar?”

Betty shook her finger at me. “There’s that ‘T’ word again.”

This exchange of semantics could have gone on forever, but I got the idea—or did I.

Betty glanced down at my scuffed shoes. “Luxury such as you’ll find here doesn’t come cheap.”

I wasn’t looking for cheap, but the price of an apartment was about the same as the GNP of Ethiopia. And that wasn’t the end of it. There was also the monthly fee. I did some mental arithmetic while Harriet was more interested in the samples of hardware and carpeting.

Before we came to Restful Bowers, we had decided that the time was right to move to a place where we could get care if we needed it. An umbrella. I was reaching the age where my birthday cake candles were setting off sprinklers. Harriet was no longer driving. The last few times she drove, she made so many wrong turns, the lady inside our GPS navigator sobbed, “Recalculating, you dummy.” And that was in our driveway.

Previously, we had looked at three retirement homes, but the apartment rooms were either matchbox size or they looked out on a blank wall. One place was so isolated there were no stores or other signs of civilization for miles. You’d have thought it housed people with some dreaded contagious disease.

In the end, we decided on Restful Bowers. Besides, as Betty pointed out in her sales pitch, we could be secure in the knowledge that it was owned and operated by a well-known hotel chain, Motel 7.

Two weeks after our visit to The Bowers, I phoned our marketing rep, Betty.

“Great! All you have to do is bring me your bank statement, your citizenship papers, copies of your last five income tax filings and the result of your blood test. We’ll also need reference letters from your minister or rabbi and your fifth grade teacher.”

“I can understand why you need my financial and moral records,” I said. “But why the blood test?”

She smiled showing me her tolerance and my stupidity. “We want to make sure you have blood. You’d be surprised at the number of people who try to sneak in here dead. We turn most of them away.”

Chapter Two

So we sold our condo and emptied our bank account to pay for the entry fee. We crammed some of our furniture into a two-bedroom apartment with a den.

Betty greeted us with a thick sheaf of papers to sign. Most had to do with absolving the management from responsibility if anything happened to us because of their mismanagement. I thought that was a contradiction, but we had come this far, so I signed everything she put in front of us. Page after page of small print except places which were highlighted and marked with an “X.” The words “Signature” were half an inch tall. I guess the owners didn’t expect anyone to read the small print, or maybe hoped they didn’t.

“Lawyers,” said Betty apologetically. “

I leaned back and massaged my right hand which suffered from writer’s cramp.

“So now we’re official inmates of Restful Bowers, “

Residents. We prefer that term.”

Semantics.

We were still unpacking our shipping cases when we had our first visitor: Linda Goodbody the Welcome Lady.

Linda told us the locations of the activities room, exercise room, library, and dining rooms. There were two. One was for “fine dining” where men were required to wear jackets. The other was more informal. I assumed, you could eat with your fingers and the dress code was more relaxed.

“But no jeans,” she hastened to tell us, an unnecessary precaution since neither Harriet nor I had worn jeans for forty years. I suspected there might be a little problem when our kids and grandchildren came to visit. I don’t think any of them *had* anything but jeans, designer jeans each costing more than my best suit or Harriet’s formal gowns.

She gave us a map of the building, and a card with her phone number. "If you need any help just call me."

It was dinner time. We decided to eat at the casual dining room which turned out to be in another time zone. At least we'd be able to work up an appetite.

At the dining room podium, a pleasant young lady with an armful of menus said, "Are you dining with anyone?"

I said, "No. We just moved in. We don't know anyone."

Practically all the tables were for four.

"I'll seat you with Mr. and Mrs. Young."

Harriet was ecstatic. "Wonderful! We're anxious to get to know people here."

When I saw the couple at the table she led us to, I lacked the enthusiasm Harriet exhibited. Mr. and Mrs. Young were anything but. Mr. Young sat with his chin on his chest. He might have been asleep or dead. Mrs. Young was a tiny thing whose head was level with the table top. If I'd known her better, I would have suggested she get a Los Angeles phone book to sit on.

I had brought a bottle of wine to the table. It was only polite to offer some to our tablemates. "Would you care to have some wine," I said.

Mr. Young mumbled something. So he wasn't dead, after all. Mrs. Young glanced at her wrist. "The time? It's quarter to six."

I thought we should be on a first name basis. I said, "This is Harriet and I'm Henry."

Mrs. Young said, "We have a son-in-law named Lenny, don't we Horace?"

Horace mumbled something.

I spoke louder. "It's Henry, not Lenny."

Mrs. Young smiled. "Lenny's married to Gladys, isn't he Horace?"

Horace's lips moved soundlessly.

This was going to be a fun dinner.

Our server came to take our order ending the brilliant conversation.

Harriet and I finished our dinners while Mrs. Young was still dunking a tea bag. We'd had enough so I asked to be excused. Although the food was well-prepared and tasty, unless we were seated with people we could talk to, I told Harriet we'd eat in our apartment.

The next morning Linda Goodbody, the welcome lady, phoned and asked if we had plans for dinner that evening. When I told her she was in luck, we were free, she said, "Would you join my husband and myself?"

Although I didn't know the state of consciousness of her husband, from our previous contact with Linda, I was relieved to know we'd be dining with a real person.

Meanwhile, Harriet had gone down to the card room to see if she could join one of the bridge games. When she returned to our apartment, she proudly announced that she had been permitted to sit in on one of the games as dummy. "Not only that," she said, "I made a date for dinner tomorrow evening with one of the players."

"Which one?"

"I think it was East."

"Her name was East?"

"No, stupid, that's where she was seated."

"Do you remember her name?" I knew it was a ridiculous question. Half the time she couldn't remember the names of her children or how many we had.

"I think they called her Sally, or maybe it was Joan."

That was helpful. All I had to do was go through the roster of residents, all 300, and find a Sally or Joan. The roster gave the apartment number and phone number of all the residents. Each last name in alphabetical order was followed by the first name of the individual if the person was single, or the names of both spouses. There was no Sally, but there were several Joans. I picked a Joan and Alvin Spears and crossed my fingers. Worst case: I'd say I dialed the wrong number and try

Joan #2. My phone call was answered by Alvin. I identified myself adding that we were new residents.

“I believe my wife made a dinner date with your wife for tomorrow night. But she didn’t recall the time we were to meet.”

Alvin said, “Joan makes our dinner dates. She said something about making a dinner date for tomorrow night with a couple of new residents. She’s not here now so I can’t be sure. But we usually eat at six. Why don’t we make it for that time. If there’s any change after I talk to her, I’ll phone you back. And welcome aboard.”

Now we had *two* dinner dates. Our dance card was filling up. We had arrived.

Restful Bowers, a fictitious Residence for Seniors, is the target of this satirical novel. Motorized scooters scoot through the corridors. Meetings are held to plan more meetings. The big event of the day is the arrival of the mailman with his load of solicitation letters. But something sinister lurks behind the doors of the Assisted Living section providing a shocking conclusion.

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