

The Gilded Cage

A Novel

By

**Charles O. Gauthier
Huntingtown, MD 20639**

Chapter One

There are a few times in our lives when the need for a major change is so unpalatable that the taste chokes us up. This was such a time. Seeing the house where I grew up and knowing how different it was. And knowing that I really needed to talk to my old man – just thinking those words made me realize how different my life had become...churned back the dread and feelings of ulcerated stomach acid that friggin death always brings. Death – I hate it. Just hate it. Such a cheap emotion – like cheap perfume – no matter how hard you try to run away from it, it wraps around you and stays in your nostrils long after you've put it away.

And I wasn't even there when she died. Everyone else was but I had an hour and a half drive and I didn't make it. Everyone understood. But I didn't.

You absolutely remember when some people die. The whole ugly time and weighty circumstances stay in your mind like a never healing sore and each time you look into the mirror of yourself you see it - almost like a sin to yourself - overwhelming. It started with the phone call at three thirty - the quiet voice on the other end. Your Mother had a very serious stroke tonight and she won't probably make it until morning. Yes, you should get here as soon as possible. And the absolute nearly insane work of having to organize lesson plans for some somebody to present to the kids. Jesus didn't they know my Mom was dying. And how it seemed to take forever to get those plans finished and dropping them into the mailbox in front of the school at four thirty in the morning - then the longest drive in my life from Richmond to Portland - only 47 miles and it took so very long. At the hospital knowing I had not made it on time or whatever time you were supposed to make it - and running from the car through the deserted corridors past the man

mopping the floor not knowing where I was going - just running and realizing the futility - then asking and running more and finally arriving and saw Dad with my sister holding each other - late had become too late.

The whole macabre sequence of the rest of that morning branded into my memory so that I could replay it by just closing my eyes - almost as though it were this slow motion movie that I could view as though I were a camera and moving slowly around the hospital room seeing us hug, the silent and still person that was Mom, sitting beside her holding her hand sensing that this was the last time ever - and then realizing that it was going to have to be me. I was going to have to be strong, that my grief was going to have to wait. Dad and Carole needed me. My Father and I have grown so much closer since Mom died. Lately to the point where I see that I used to just hear his words - now I understand what they mean. These past four years we have become so

much closer. I actually appreciated my Dad and that was why I drove down to talk with him. I needed his advice.

It was Easter/Spring break and I had driven down from Richmond and was going to stay with Dad for a while. I didn't let him know I was coming and knew he would still be at work. That was really what I wanted - I wanted to go into the home where I grew up and just remember some things for a while.

Almost as a relief, as I drove into the neighborhood I saw that little had changed. Patches sandwich shop was still open at the corner and just seeing the familiar double pane window shop made me hungry - they made the best Italian sandwiches - something about the olive oil, green peppers, black olives, sliced Italian ham, cheese and slightly sweet bread made them my favorite. I knew what I would have for lunch.

The houses all looked like they always did. That was good. No new monster homes, just the smallish

Cape Cod that was ours with the two car garage and the Sandler's stucco front – they all looked the same. Reed Street was a wide quiet street lined with house similar to ours and no one had swimming pools as the lots were too small. The trees, bushes and shrubs were all moderate to large in size as this neighborhood was built a good forty or more years ago.

Pulling into the driveway, I got out and found the key in the bottom of the metal mailbox where we always “hid” it since I was very little. As I Opened the door and went in the smells were a rush – smells I was not used to hit my nose – Christ what was Dad cooking anyway – meaty and garlic smells. Sure smelled different than when Mom was here.

Surprisingly the place was pretty clean – no dirty dishes in the sink, stovetop was actually free of grease and everything looked very familiar. Obviously Dad still had not made many changes in our house. The living room, small and compacted, was still

cluttered with my Mom's bric-a-brac – her collection of elephants were still on every shelf, sill or cranny. Dollies were still on the backs of the chairs – looked a little soiled but Dad would never notice. The RCA cabinet record player was still there and the huge box TV still occupied a large portion of the far wall. I almost expected Mom to come down the center stairs and turn into the living room and act so excited to see me, like she had so many times. But that was never going to happen – damn.

I sat down hard into one of their wingback chairs – they had bought two yellow felt type material at the same time. Dad's was on the left directly across from the TV and Mom's was on the right with bookcases, tables around to hold her knitting and other things she was always working on. Everything was still there, like she would be coming back to it. I would have to ask Dad about that.

Hunger got the best of me and I decided to walk up to Patches and get a sandwich. The tiny bell made

the jangling sound when I opened the door and went inside. I didn't recognize the person behind the counter.

"Hi, " I said. " Still make the best Italian sandwich in Portland?"

"Sure do, " he said.

"Give me one with everything but no hot peppers."

"You got it."

"Do the Patches still own the place?"

"Well, his wife does, " he said slicing the bread.

"Not from around here?"

"Grew up over on Reed Street."

"Oh, yeah she is just about to sell the place.

After Mr. Patch died, she tried to run it herself but it was too much."

"Whoa, when did Mr. Patch die?" I asked.

"A little over a year ago - and her kids could care less - I can't afford to buy it or I would - got fantastic

customers here – like you,” he said smiling. “Oil and salt on that”

“Yeah – so who’s going to buy it?”

“Not sure but a couple of franchises are interested in the location. That be it?”

“Yeah. Thanks”

“That’s two and a quarter”

“Wow – some things don’t change. That’s what I paid for these last time I got them. That is fantastic. Thanks a lot.”

“Enjoy – see you again.”

“See you, “ I said leaving. That was probably the last time I would buy a sandwich there – unless of course tomorrow Dad and I do lunch there. Planning my day around lunch, many said that was a fault of mine.

As I came to the corner of Reed Street, I saw Dad getting out of his truck.

“Hey Pops – it’s me”

He turned and looked at me – beaming. “ Hey Gene, Eugene good to see you.”

I gave him a big hug, slapping him on the back a couple of times.

“It is really good to see you – been way too long.”

“So what do I owe this visit to?”

“ It’s Miriam, Dad.”

“Is she pregnant?”

“No. . . not quite,” I said laughing softly.

“Sometimes I wish it were that.”

“So what is going on?”

“Hey, let’s go in and make some of your famous coffee – got a lot to talk over with you.”

“Damn, “ Dad said. “Sounds serious. Let’s do it”

We went into the house and Dad started to make coffee. He had a way of adding an egg to the coffee that took out the bitterness – said it was a French Canadian recipe taught to him by his father.

Whatever it was it worked and the coffee was great.

“So, Eugene, what is this serious matter?”

“Well, actually I am on my way somewhere but I wanted to stop and talk with you first.”

“Somewhere?”

“Yeah – I am going to Maryland and stay for a couple of days with Richard. You remember Richard Pratt, Wendy and the two kids – Jason and Emily.”

“Of course I do. You guys have been buds forever. So what’s going on down there?”

“He says they are hiring a lot of teachers as Calvert County – where he lives – are building lots of schools – growing like crazy.”

“Damn, Gene!” Dad said looking shocked. “You thinking about moving to Maryland. That’s a long way off.”

He got up and poured another cup of coffee.

“What about Miriam? Is she going with you?”

“No, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk with you about. She wants to move to a communal farm with four other artists outside of Richmond in Winthrop. Her art work is starting to take off.”

“Wow. I don’t understand this – you guys were planning something?”

“At one point we had been. But things have sure changed.”

“So tell me about it.”

“It is really strange, Dad. We love each other – been together over 8 years now – and we do care, it is just not going anywhere.”

“I don’t understand today’s ways. You’re in love, live together – ought to be getting married. Have babies, and family, I just don’t get it. Is there someone else?”

“No, Pops.” I said laughing. “Miriam’s just very serious in her art. She’s taking over the whole first floor of the garage – welding sculptures now. They’re big and impressive. She has a major show right now at Bowdoin. People are coming from Boston and buying her stuff. She is becoming known. And I’m just putting in the days teaching them middle schoolers math.”

“Don’t you be talking like that – you are the first – and only – Benoit to graduate from college. I’m damned proud of you for that and so was your Mother.”

“Yeah. Mom was especially proud. Enough about me. How are you doing?”

Dad leaned back, looking at me.

“You certainly do have your Mother’s side. Spitting image of Grandpa Mills only he was balder than you at 30. Maryland? So what the hell’s down there for you?”

“My best friend and his family. A new start. Someplace not here. Someplace different. I’ve got to go see what it’s like. Never been there. If Miriam moves to the farm, I can’t maintain that big house in Richmond by myself and I don’t want to live alone, really.”

“Move in here?”

“Right, Pops. Me and you batching it together. I don’t think I could keep up with your nightlife.”

“I don’t have no nightlife. I watch TV and go to bed.”

“Well, (that’s what I’m talking about)lot to think about.”

“Let’s take a break. I got to go upstairs. Bring your stuff in – you are staying?”

“I’m staying for a day or two.”

But there was a lot to think about. Richard and I had been best friends since high school. We were closer than bark was to trees. I loved his family, loved tossing the kids around, and loved the warmth and laughter whenever we were together. It hurt like hell when they moved two years ago for the job at the nuclear power plant in Maryland.

Richard was geeky – smart as heck – and when the opportunity came up, he had to take it. That was the beginning of the realization that Miriam and I might not stay together.

We were so much alike – from our senior year at Maine to the last seven years in Richmond - there was

always a softness and caring that we had. It was hard to believe that Miriam with her soft brown hair and absolutely beautiful face could come from the hardness of life in Harpswell on the craggy coast of Casco Bay.

Her family had been farmers on the rocky neck since the 1820's. Their house was one of the oldest. It was classic Federalist architecture with the main house telescoping into an addition and on into a large garage barn. Incredibly picturesque, I often wondered why Miriam wouldn't have wanted to live there and do her art work, but that wouldn't have been possible as her brother wanted to continue the farming. I always thought he was a great farmer of rocks – a new crop was always coming up. No one ever laughed at my joke.

They were a good family and had always welcomed me on visits with Miriam but we hadn't visited there in quite a while. In fact Miriam and I really had not been doing much together lately. She

was increasingly spending more and more time in the garage working on her sculpture. Especially since Tom had taken her under his wing.

Tom Watson was a tall, thin, gaunt fellow with burning eyes. He was an extremely well known painter who had moved to Maine to escape the turmoil of fame. About two years ago as he was walking past our house on Main Street in Richmond, he saw Miriam sparking and flashing the welding torch in the garage.

“Excuse me, “ he said. “What’s she doing?”

I stopped raking leaves and looked up startled. It was like looking at Abe Lincoln.

“Oh that’s Miriam. She does sculpture with welding.” I extended my hand. “Hi. I’m Eugene Benoit.”

He shook my hand. “Tom Watson. Could you introduce me. I’m a painter and I always like to meet other artist people.”

“Sure.”

So they met and we all became good friends , very good friends. As his fame became known to Miriam, she took his advice more seriously and put a lot of trust into his judgment. That was why she got her show in Brunswick at the college. He knew people who knew people.

So here I was, at my Dad's with a lot to think about. And even more to talk about.

Chapter Two

Time blends our memories into a vagueness of unimportance. We are where we are and remember selective parts of where we have been, and then only parts of the pictures come up like bubbles and we try to fit them together and it doesn't always work as round touches round only at tangential points – my background as a math teacher. So we sense instead the immediacy of the moment. It steals its way like a thunderclap into our consciousness and makes sure we don't forget what matters and what doesn't.

Seeing the canopied back yard and remembering so much of my life that had taken place here – first kiss with Marjorie – my cousin holding my hands behind my back – another girl holding Marjorie's

hands behind her back. We leaned slowly toward each other and slightly kissed. It could have been yesterday.

And the barbeques, we always had friends and family here cooking steaks and chicken with the sweet smells of the cooking literally making us salivate with anticipation. We played games on the lawn, badminton, frisbee and horseshoes. It seemed that every weekend there were people over. Much like what Miriam and I had at the house in Richmond.

Now all I felt was the angst and the struggle to find missing feelings - the feeling that Spring is in the air and the surge of life would get better. Since it was the start of Spring there would be a smell - bursting flowers, fresh turned soil, a warm breeze that tasted slightly salty from the ocean - a smell that would arouse the deepest, most strident feelings of being alive. But instead I sat at the picnic table in the quiet of the backyard thinking only of life with Miriam and how everything was going to so dramatically

change. My Dad came out the back door and sat down with me.

“So here you are, now what’s this with Miriam?”

He said.

“Well, not much. Like I said she is packing to make a move to the communal farm with Tom Watson..”

“Is he her. . how do I say?”

“No,” I said shaking my head and laughing softly.

“They are not a couple. She is a true artist and is very focused on continuing to develop her art pieces. Tom is a very gifted, well-known artist and he sees a lot of potential in Miriam. He has become her mentor. Says she has what it takes to be really good.”

“So what’s with not staying where you are?”

“There will be five artists moving into the farm and Miriam thrives from the group being together.”

“I don’t understand,” Dad said scowling.

“Trust me, I don’t either. But I don’t think I would want to move to the farm. It would be a thirty

minute drive to school each way and I'm not sure Miriam would be comfortable. And I don't want to live in that big old house by myself, either."

"But why not move to the farm, aren't you and Miriam still planning, you know?"

"Actually, no. We had a big talk about that and it is the strangest thing in the world - I guess we have become better friends than, than whatever we used to be. I really care for her a hell of a lot. And, Dad, you should see how she has grown."

Dad got up and walked toward the back woods, stopping and folded his arms. He had not changed much over the years, still slightly thin with a receding hairline. Not like mine - I was truly getting bald. Nor our complexions, they were not alike either. Dad was darker, more swarthy and always seemed to need a shave while I took after Grampa Mills with fine brown hair and could go two or three days without shaving.

"I just don't get it, Eugene. " He said turning toward me. "You have been together so long, and

your Mother was so sure you had found the right one. I don't get it."

I took off my wire rims and rubbed my eyes. I was tired.

"Look Dad, as much as I hate to say it, I think this is really a good thing."

"Good thing?"

"Yeah," I said slowly. "I think they may be actually cutting back teachers at Richmond."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. People are not moving to the town and the number of students is dropping. Besides I feel I need to move on."

Dad came back and sat down across from me.

"Come down here and get a job in Westbrook or Portland. Live here with me. Save some money."

"I can't, Dad" I put my glasses back on. "I can't, I can't live here again. It's too many memories. Besides I really want something new, somewhere different, and something exciting."

“But Maryland?”

“Richard says it’s really growing and very beautiful. And they are hiring. I’ve never been there – I don’t know.”

“So where you going to live?”

“I’ve got to get a job first. I’m driving down tomorrow and have a job interview on Thursday. Already sent my application and letters of recommendations down. I am serious about this.”

“So how far is it”

“Over 500 miles,” I said.

“Wow, that’s a good day’s drive. That’s a long way from home, Eugene.”

“Dad, I am not hired yet.”

“Oh, you will be. You’re one of the best teachers. They will hire you.”

“One step at a time. So what are we going to do for dinner?”

“Food? Is that all you think about? Keep that up and you’ll be that round little butterball your Grampa Mills was.”

We got up and put arms around each other’s shoulders and started walking back towards the house.

“But seriously. My treat for lobsters, at Malley’s.”

“You sure know how to take a man’s mind off his worries.”

“Nothing to worry about, Pops. Just moving forward. You know, tracks in the ever shifting sands of life.”

“What?” Dad said looking at me. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. “ I said laughing. “Just a metaphor. Just a dumb old metaphor.”

“Sometimes I do not understand you, boy”

“Me neither.”

We went back inside the house and I took my suitcase upstairs to the bedroom that had been my sister's. The Cape Cod only had two bedrooms on the second floor that were small. Each room had one dormer with a seat at the base of the window. When I was growing up here, I had the choice of either making my bedroom in the basement or using the family room as my bedroom.

Carole, my sister, was given the bedroom upstairs because, well, she was the girl and needed her privacy. I ended up making what I thought was a cool bedroom in the basement. I had all kinds of electronic junk all over the place, old televisions in various stages of disassemble, huge stereo speakers with large amplifiers and turntables that I was constantly working on. It was kind of dank and dark, but at least I had my privacy.

I placed the suitcase on the seat in the dormer and opened it. We used to love playing up here as

kids. You could crawl from the storage area in this bedroom all the way over to my parent's bedroom.

Looking out the window at the quiet neighborhood made me think of the many days walking to school – Lincoln Junior High School, then Deering High School. It was quite a long walk and I couldn't think of ever when we had a day off. True this was Maine, but I remember walking in the middle of huge snow storms. The streets were always cleared and we would walk. I never remember a day off from school because of snow.

“You about ready, Gene?” Dad hollered up at me.

“Be down in a bit”

As Dad and I drove into downtown Portland to Malley's Lobster House we rode quietly. I never understood why Dad liked to drive the truck. It made noises just being on the road. Conversation had almost to be shouted but he had always had a truck as long as I could remember. As we parked at the restaurant memories of Mom, Dad and even Carole,

all of us coming here for so many, many family dinners. It was truly our family restaurant. Mom used to love to wear her mink shawl – according to her, it was her one touch of class, the one piece of non-essential clothing she could wear when she wanted to put on the airs.

Malley’s was still run by Vincent Malley. Ever dapper and exquisitely dressed, cuffs extending the right inch and a half, impeccable gray hair coiffured exactly, he always appeared the consummate restaurant owner. And true to form, as we walked into the darkened lobby, he came out and embraced my Dad.

“Carl, Carl. So good to see you. And is this Eugene?” He said in his gravelly voice.

“Yes, Vince. He is here for a short visit.”

He shook my hand firmly. “Good seeing you again. It has been a long time. All is well?”

I shook my head affirmatively. “Actually, on my way to Maryland?”

“Really,” Mr. Malley said. “I have a restaurant in Springfield, Virginia. Is that close to where you’ll be?”

“I have no idea.”

“Well, I’ll give you a ticket for a dinner. Anything for one of my favorite families! You guys are the best. Come in. Come in. Let me seat you at the best seat I got. And pick out the best wine – on me. So good seeing you again!”

Mr. Malley led us into the very familiar setting where so many dinners by our family had taken place. This was Mr. Malley’s flagship restaurant. At one time he had fourteen restaurants. We were seated in our usual place in the back quiet corner, at the table where we usually sat. The décor had not changed one bit – still dark, candle lighted with deep burgundy booths and mirrors and chrome highlighting the walls.

“Do you still promise the freshest, sweetest lobster on the East coast?” I asked.

“For you Eugene, the special tonight is a two for one. Both you and Carl, on me, tell Natalie that Vince said so. Enjoy and I’ll stop by to see how everything is going. Good seeing you both!!”

“So, Dad, what’s good on the menu?” I said in jest because you only came Malley’s for one thing – the freshest and most succulent lobster anywhere.

We ordered the special, got a bottle of Chianti and settled into the evening. We used to do this as a family at least once a month.

“We should have called Carole and had her and Denny meet us here,” I said.

“No, she wouldn’t have come.”

“Why? She only lives in South Portland, that’s not that far away.”

“She and Denny are having problems. So I hear. I really don’t hear from her much. Since your Mother died.”

“Really? That surprises me. I never hear from her at all. No phone, nothing”

“And she works those crazy shifts.”

“It’s funny – she is only two years older than I am and yet I feel she is a generation apart.”

“Your sister is a lot like my sister, Aunt Betty. Got her opinions.”

The lobster arrived, and both Dad and I knew it was time for serious good eating. There were lots of hmmms and lip smacking. Nothing was as good as good lobster.

“Well,” I said pouring another glass of wine, “That was worth the drive if nothing else. I forgot how good Malley’s lobsters were.”

“I don’t come here by myself. Somehow that’s not right. So I’m glad you came. Gave me a reason.”

We toasted and clinked glasses.

“So you are going to Maryland, huh Eugene”

“Yep. It is just for the interview. I’ll be staying at Richard’s and I’ll be checking what that place is like.”

“You know, you’ve been in Maine your whole life. What are you going to do for snow?”

“I hear it snows there.”

“Well, maybe. I guess it is true. The only thing you can be sure of is change.”

“And I think for me it is time for a change. A big change.”

“Then that is what you should do.” He said.

Chapter Three

Driving was never one of my favorite ways to spend my time. My Dad had given me directions to use for the long drive, especially to avoid New York City. Richard had also written detailed directions. So I was taking my time knowing it was at least a ten hour drive and alternating between whatever radio stations I could find worth listening to and the few cassettes that had made, I watched to make sure I followed the correct highways and just drove. Driving always triggered long mind-wandering thinking processes, almost daydreaming as I was not interested in what I was driving through, only getting there.

In order to begin we must end

