

## Chapter One

# Richmond Maine

It was while he was working on his Master's at the University of Maine that Eugene had met Miriam. He had not noticed her at first as he was never forward enough to actually go about meeting women. It was not in his nature. But she spotted him in the main library working with a group of undergraduates. It struck her that this tall, handsome man with the disheveled brown hair was probably the most artistic person she had seen on campus. It might have been the wire rimmed glasses, or the quiet smile he shared often. But it had caught Miriam's attention, and she did something she never did. She walked up to the group and interrupted their meeting.

"Excuse me," she said. "I couldn't help noticing - but what are you all working on?"

"We're preparing for the math praxis." One of the students sitting on the table said.

"Math? Oh my God. I am so sorry I . . . I thought, I don't know what I thought."

"Hey it's all right," Eugene said. "You are certainly welcome to join." He extended his hand. "I'm Eugene Benoit. That's Anglicized - Ben - Oit - not French Ben - waw"

She slowly took his hand and shook it.

"Miriam. Miriam Wilson. Strictly Old English - Wilson."

Eugene laughed as they shook hands. He was immediately taken by the quick wit in her response to his explanation of his name. She stayed

around for part of the meeting. And that was the beginning of their seeing each other, which lasted throughout their last year at the University. As the year end approached they began to talk about what their plans would be for the Fall. Without planning for it, jobs in the Richmond school district became available - an art teaching job for her, and a middle school math teaching position for Eugene. They both interviewed.

So it was. It became apparent, especially after having had the second and final interview at the Board of Education in the town of Richmond and then both being offered jobs. It was then, especially seeing the quiet and quaintness of the town itself, that they decided to accept the jobs and find a place to live together. It all seemed so right since they knew just enough about each other to know they really liked being together, knowing that this would be a way to go into the next phase of their lives without having to get established in this bristly world as adults, especially in the seemingly quiet of legacy Maine. It would be a convenient way for the two of them to get their feet on the ground and get started.

And it was Richmond that attracted Miriam and Eugene - they felt they could build their life here, slowly, without the pressure of commuting or hassle. It was a lazy village from a bygone era of boat building and fishing built along the Kennebec River below Merrymeeting Bay - bucolic and tranquil - a step away from the harshness of cities like Portland. It reflected another era. Also it seemed almost fortuitous finding the large yellow farmhouse right on the main street, and that the Frazier's were so nice and kind - it just came together.

They had been driving slowly through the town when they passed the huge yellow house on the main street. There was a small "For Rent" sign in the front yard and. They pulled into the driveway. It was a large two story farm type house that telescoped out into the large garage. They knocked on the door and met Mr. And Mrs. Frazier who owned the house, and who, like many of the town's residents, were last generation owners who wanted to get out and move to Florida. This was Maine which, while fairly near the coast, still had really cold Winters.

Eugene and Miriam had been enthralled with the town and actually thought that they would be part of a great Renaissance within it. The main street was called Water Street. It was lined with incredibly beautiful Neo-Classic 1830's homes mixed in with Victorian style houses with widow

peaks that were once the homes of the shipbuilders and captains. Richmond had been the center of a shipbuilding business and there used to be many boats that tied up to the riverfront of what had once been a bustling small mill town. But the industry was no more. The town had become quieter, less populated, and now almost all the brick front shops downtown were empty and deserted. Still, they enjoyed walking through the streets of the town and passing by many of these huge relics - most in a state of decline and disrepair. The beauty, class and architectural uniqueness, however, could still be seen through the sagging shutters, broken wrought iron gates and overgrown brush that clogged some porches.

Eugene and Miriam really liked living in the quiet, large house they had found, and Miriam had immediately taken over the empty garage and turned it into her workshop. They also liked the fact that it was just close enough to both their parents' homes. Eugene was from Portland, about 50 miles away, and Miriam was from Harpswell, also about 50 miles away.

But now, as Eugene stood on the front porch leaning against a pillar and watched Miriam work on her latest sculpture, he realized that there was a gulf growing between them. Through the large open garage door, he could see her brazing as the sparks flared, crackled, and exploded in bursts of bright white light. It really hit him. Their relationship was definitely changing. The many quiet, long and alone nights when he would play solitaire, or read quietly by himself, or finish grading quiz papers until Miriam would come in from the studio in the garage were becoming more numerous. And he was making most of the evening meals now, usually eating alone, staring at her empty plate wondering when she would be in.

Things were so different now, especially since her exhibit at Bowdoin College in Brunswick when so many of her pieces had sold. He was glad for her, really proud that she was being recognized for her art, but it was becoming apparent that they were not doing as much together as they used to.

The changes seemed to have started right after Tom Watson became such a part of their lives. Eugene remembered like it was yesterday - the vividness of that first encounter stuck in his mind. He had been cleaning the last of the leaves in the front yard last Spring getting ready for planting

flowers when he had been interrupted.

"Excuse me," the unfamiliar voice said, startling Eugene. "What is she doing?"

Eugene looked up and did a double take, even more startled. It was like looking at a young Abe Lincoln.

"You mean her?" Eugene said, pointing to Miriam who was welding inside the open garage.

"Yes. Is she an artist?"

"Oh that's Miriam. She teaches art at the middle school." He extended his hand. "Hi. I'm Eugene Benoit."

The stranger shook his hand. "Tom Watson. Could you introduce me? I'm a painter and I always like to meet other artists"

"Sure."

Eugene had walked Tom up to the garage and introduced him to Miriam, and from that point on the friendship became the main social event for both he and Miriam.

As they all became closer Miriam's art began to flourish. As Miriam became aware of Tom's notoriety and reputation in the art community, 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. Tom had taken her under his wing and promoted her work, right up to the point when he organized the successful art show of her sculptures at Bowdoin College. People from Connecticut, Boston, and even New York had purchased her work.

Tom had bought a large farm outside of town, and was trying to escape the fame of being a world renowned artist. He had wanted a quiet place to work, and had enough money to afford this lifestyle. Some of his best friends, fellow artists from New York and Boston moved to the farm with him. It became an artists' commune where they grew their own food and were free to live their lives and pursue their art.

Eugene and Miriam visited there often, especially on weekends, and soon Tom posed the idea that she, or she and Eugene, move out there too. But that posed a dilemma as he and Miriam had a great place to live in the town. They could actually walk to work, and they loved the antiquity and quaintness of Richmond. The town itself had been one of the reasons three years before that they both accepted teaching jobs at Richmond Middle School.

As he watched her work he thought how it was hard to believe that Miriam, with her soft brown hair and absolutely beautiful face, could have come from the hardness of life in Harpswell on the craggy coast of Casco Bay. Her family had farmed on the rocky neck since the 1820's.

The Wilson house was one of the oldest in Harpswell. It was classic Federalist architecture with the main house telescoping into an addition and on into a large garage barn. Incredibly picturesque, Eugene often wondered why Miriam hadn't wanted to live there and do her art work. But that wouldn't have been possible as her brother wanted to continue the farming. Eugene always thought Miriam's brother was a great farmer of rocks - a new crop was always coming up. No one ever laughed at his joke.

The Wilson's were a good family and had always welcomed him, though he and Miriam hadn't visited there in quite a while. In fact, Miriam and he really had not been doing much of anything together lately, and that was what was troubling Eugene.

## **The Phone Call**

The ringing phone startled Carl. He put his plate on the hassock, muted the TV and went to answer the phone. He thought, who the heck could it be; he never got phone calls.

"Hello?"

"Hey Pops."

"Hey Eugene. Good to hear from you . How are you?"

"Great Pops. I just wanted to know what you got going on - I wanted to stop by."

"Oh, good. When you coming over?"

"Spring break is coming up next week and I thought I would drive down Friday and spend the night."

"Great . Going to spend some time?"

"Well, just overnight, Dad. I got some things going on that I want to talk to you about."

"Well, uh okay . What's up?"

"Let's talk in person - get your opinion. You know - stuff like that."

"Uh, okay. Is everything okay? Is Miriam okay?"

"Yeah - we'll talk - things are fine - just things I want to talk to you about, Dad. Okay?"

"Sure, sure. How about I make a reservation at O'Malley's and we can go get lobster - on me of course?"

"That sounds great Dad. Well I will see you on Friday, about 5 okay?"

"See you then - bye."

Carl hung up and began to think. He went back and sat down and turned the TV off mute, but turned the volume down. This was so unlike Eugene, he thought. And the same - or worse - for Carole, for that matter. He never heard from his children. Eugene was busy teaching in Richmond, and Carole was not working, a stay at home Mom and raising her two little ones, married to Harold, in the small town outside of Augusta. Hallowell, that was it. He'd only been there a few times. And they never visited. But that was another story.

Carl stared blankly at the TV. The phone call brought back much that he had lately put out of his mind. It had been easier that way to go from one day to another, but now he found himself rethinking those times with his family. Some were faded, a few were vivid - but most were vague, weak memories. Hearing from Eugene got him thinking about how confusing these moving sets of remembrances from the past had become - from the days of the children playing, tossing the youngsters through the legs, the laughter and joy, the amazement in their wide eyes, and the overpowering sense of how life could never be the same if that incredibly beautiful smile he remembered was not something he would see every day, how to him life would seemingly end if he was not able to see that. Boy, he thought, that was a long time ago, and things sure are different now.

He turned off the television and walked to the front windows.

Time was kind to no one, Carl felt. He was becoming more aware of it as each day passed. While it was true that he was alone now, he felt grateful that he still had his work. He found himself working longer now too, as it helped to give meaning to the days as they went by. Immersed in the business of his job as office manager at Multigraphics, there was a lot of activity and work to do, making him feel needed. Eugene had been after him to retire, and though he was old enough to, and had the years in, he didn't want to, and felt that he just couldn't. He didn't want to spend any more time alone in the house that was so flooded with family memories.

And yet he hardly ever heard from his children. Yes, Eugene and Carole both had lives and families, and were very busy with all that entailed, but it hurt just a little that neither of them called, not even once a week - or even two weeks - just to talk or find out how he was doing.

Carl looked out at the very familiar view of the front yard. There were no children playing now, the swing just hung motionless from the great oak, but in his mind he could still see Eugene and Carole playing there - she taunting him about getting off the swing, taking turns and hogging everything, and then finally going behind and pushing him off. Eugene would always just quietly walk away. He and Carole really did not get along well - still did not. And standing there in the deafening quiet, Carl sensed again the pangs of being alone. That was why he had continued to work. He didn't need to, financially he was well off, but he just could not stand being alone day after day in this house where all he had were memories.

So little had changed in the house since Agnes died. Since she passed, Carl felt time alone here now was just a quagmire of slog through which he was having to trudge. Television had become a source of dulling numbness that helped get him sleepier and sleepier until it was really bedtime. And the busyness of work kept these memories and feelings from creeping back in. Most days he stayed at the job an hour or more later than he had to.

And while Carl never heard from his children, and he really had thought he might since their Mother passed, he knew they were busy with their lives. He knew. But they had called, a few times at first, but lately less and less. Both his kids seemed very busy in their lives. Now he felt

really alone. Not just the quiet of the house but the building quiet of the memories.

And lately he had been remembering a lot more - rethinking all that had happened over these past years, especially sensing the isolation with Agnes gone. It had been almost two years, yet it seemed like just yesterday, as if she would come around the corner from the kitchen at any moment to ask what he wanted for dinner. So many nights he would sense that, but of course she would not, and dinner would be his to make. He had lost a lot of weight since her passing.

And now Eugene had called, hadn't said a whole lot, wanted to talk over something. He would be here Friday for the night. They would talk. Well, Carl thought, at least I still have my work. Thank God for Multigraphics. My God, he thought, I have two grown kids and I don't know them - hell they don't know of themselves - I am so alone with my life now - all I have is my work to make the days make sense. Meals, nights - they get tough. Tired of this sludge of life.

He would talk with Eugene about this when he came.

## The Letter

Eugene hung up the phone.

"Well," he said, "That is started."

"How did he sound?" Miriam asked.

"Excited actually." Eugene sat down at the table in the kitchen across from Miriam. "I think he is excited that I am coming down to see him."

"He's a great guy. We should have gone to visit more often."



"Yeah, We should have."

"But he doesn't know, right?"

"No, I didn't want to lay it on him over the phone," he said, taking her hands into his. "We will talk in person. I don't think he would understand. Things like this just don't happen to people in his generation."

"Yeah," Miriam said, "I'm not sure either of us understands either."

"But it is right, Miriam. Deep down you and I both know it is. We've just reached a point where things cannot continue as they are. They have to change. It is best for both of us."

"You're right." She looked up at him. "You're right - your stupid, silly, logical math brain is right. Dammit."

"Hey," he said. "Look at what is happening to you right now. You are actually becoming, you know, a little bit famous. And that is a good thing. People are actually buying your art pieces. A lot of them."

"You're right," she said, shaking her head slowly. "You are right."

"And Fennely has said that there will probably be budget cuts for next year. And last hired first fired - and that applies to both of us - so we both could lose our teaching jobs. So I think what we have decided is best. Best definitely for you, and probably best for me."

"But I don't understand," she said,, "Why can't you just move with me to the farm? Even if you lose your job - why not?"

"Right. And do what? Farm? I don't think so. I don't like manual labor. It's not my forte and besides the prospects in Maryland seem really good."

Tears began to well in Miriam's eyes.

"But what about us?"

Eugene looked down, slowly turning his hands within hers, very tenderly, very caring. "You know how strongly I feel about us - we've agreed as bestest friends we would always look out for each other," he said. "But most importantly, I care for you even more."

He looked directly at her.

"And I know you do too," he said. "But that is the point. It is where we are now."

"Yeah," she said, smilingly slightly. "It is where we are now."

Sitting there in the quiet of the kitchen the two of them sensed the enormity of the decision they had come to, mostly because of the letter that Eugene had written to Miriam a few weeks earlier. It had brought

their situation into clear focus. Since then they had walked through the small town many times, talking over and over the choices they each had and which each would follow. But it had started with Eugene's letter.

As changed as their relationship had become, Eugene was beginning to feel troubled that they were moving further and further apart. He sensed that Miriam was not feeling that same need to change, or even that there was change happening because she was so busy working. Like almost always now, she was in the garage working feverishly on her latest large metal sculpture. But that was what she did when she had the time. As soon as she got home from work, and especially on weekends, she would spend almost all her time there brazing, welding, and twisting the metal into the huge pieces that were now in such demand .

This had become the case ever since Tom Watson had stopped by that fateful day last Fall. Ever since that time Miriam had worked more and more on her art work and finally believed she was good at her craft. Her art pieces were sought by more and more patrons, mostly because of the one woman show Tom had arranged for her in Brunswick.

Eugene hadn't known exactly what to do - how to broach the subject with her. He really did care for her deeply and didn't want to hurt her feelings, but he knew deep down that a fork in the road had been reached. The two of them needed to face this, make major decisions, and hopefully not be hurt by the honesty.

So he had decided to write it out in a letter. That way he could see the words, make them better, make them say what he really meant. And they would not be forgotten as in conversation - spoken - maybe heard - maybe misinterpreted - maybe not understood. They would be concrete and he and Miriam could talk about what they were, what they meant - and just maybe a resolution to their dilemma could be reached without hurting each other.

It took Eugene over a week to compose the short letter. He had placed it in an envelope and propped it against her glass at the dinner table so that when she came in for dinner she would see it. It was a Thursday evening; he had already eaten and left her dinner on the stove for when she came in from the garage. When she came in and saw the envelope on the table, she had stopped and cocked her head slightly .

"What's this?" She had said.

"Oh I just wrote a little letter to you. Just some thoughts."

"What about?"

"Best you just read it - we can talk."

She sat down, carefully opened the envelope and took out the letter.

*Dear Miriam:*

*Life sometimes seems but an anachronism to itself - defined by the vagueness of what was to be as wanted and yet has become so clear as it has to be different - if only music could define these moments - felt it in my mind - I did. Felt it in my mind - knew who you wanted to become and did know how hard that was for me to accept. Yep. We are not meant to be any longer - that which we had clung to as the path that we were supposed to follow - well I can see now that that is not supposed to be - damn - I see it now - sense that fullness of what you needed that I was not able to give you. Damn, see it now - see it and really know that we are and cannot be any longer. It is true that we must now follow - each - our own path.*

*Love you Miriam in ways I could never have imagined - that I have to let you go - be free - be you - be whatever that which being with Tom and the others - without me - that will help you grow - that is what matters - not what we had. Damn. It had been good - but it should and cannot be enough. As true friends who care so much for each other we have to grow - you absolutely must - it is what will make you shine - will be what must be for you in this tomorrow - damn. Has to be.*

*And I do understand this - and I will move on into whatever my future will hold. I am really leaning toward making the move to Maryland - be with my best friends there and start something new. And tomorrow you will grow into the future that will allow you to become the artist that you truly should be. And me? I will go wherever I must and will do what it is I need to do to become the teacher I know I can be. That is why. We can remain bestest of friends - but I think it is time to find our own separate paths.*

*Seriously. We need to do this - for both of us.*

## *Eugene*

Miriam stopped reading, dropped the letter to the table. She sat there staring blankly ahead, her face drawn white as the gravity of the words began to sink in.

"Damn," she said, "I never thought a math man could speak so eloquently, but holy crap you may actually be right." She had looked up at Eugene who stood leaning against the refrigerator, his arms clasped across his chest. "We do need to make changes. Somehow I just kind of expected us to both move to Winthrop. But that wouldn't be fair to you. Would it?"

"I have been thinking a lot about this," Eugene said, sitting down at the table. "You're so young and so fortunate that you will have this opportunity - you are not tied to debt, obligations and really not to me - I see that now. So you should do this - go live on the farm with the other artists - be yourself - let yourself grow - you have so much promise and this way you can actually do this."

"But what about you? Us?"

"Oh honestly Mir, think about us. We really hardly do much together at all really. I mean you have been really busy with your art. And school. And as hard as it is for me to accept, Tom, Ray, Abby, Alicia - they are really your friends - you guys share so much in common."

"And you're okay with this - I mean you and me going - separate ways?"

He had taken her hands in his and slowly shook his head.

"None of this is easy," he said. "But the timing I think is coming up right. Spring break is in a couple of weeks. I think I will call Rich and make arrangements to drive down over break, maybe get an interview, see what is what, and I think I would stop by my Dad's on my way down to Maryland. Already emailed Richard about it. He is going to send me contact info about who to get in touch with at the Calvert County Board of Education. He says they are hiring. I think we need to do this to let each of us off as gradually as we can. Damn, I don't want to hurt you."

They leaned in toward each other, their heads touching gently. Miriam began to softly cry.

"Oh damn, Gene," she said, sitting up, taking a deep breath. She exhaled deeply. "I have been so wrapped up in my work I just wasn't

thinking about what was happening to us. It wasn't that I didn't care. You believe me , don't you?"

"Of course I do. Meeting Tom and becoming part of the group has made you blossom. My God you have grown. What am I supposed to do? Say stop! Stop becoming this great artist. Stop becoming you? That's not fair." He half laughed.

Miriam tried to laugh but it came out more as a sob.

"Oh Gene, " she said, "You are really something else - thank you. Thank you so much for caring so much and believing in me. Damn."

"Come here. " Eugene had taken Miriam in his arms, held her close, her head resting against his shoulder.

"I don't want either of us to be hurt. Deep down I have this feeling that if we do not truly see what is happening now, what could be ahead would be anger, resentment and feelings of bitterness when we did finally see where we were. And I do not want that for you, or for me. So I think it is time to face where we are so we can keep the good things we have with us ahead."

She looked at him and smiled.

"Damn, math man - you really are my bestest friend - ever. Let me eat - I'm starved. We need to talk more."

"Well, that's what bestest friends do - look out for each other. Hope pork chops and rice hit the bill? "

And he had served her the pork chop, rice and mixed vegetables, and sat down with her in the small kitchen as she began to eat.

## Chapter Two

# Need For Change

Driving down Reed Street, Eugene saw the house where he had grown up and he felt a rush of memories. This was the first time in three years he had been back. Seeing the house and knowing how different his life was now, it settled heavily on him - he had not been here since his mother had passed. He suddenly felt the overpowering need to talk to his old man - just thinking those words made him realize how much things had changed. And soon they were going to change a whole lot more.

As he sat in the driveway, the car still running, he felt the dread and churning stomach acid that thoughts of death always brought. Death, he thought, 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.

Then it hit him - he hadn't even been there when she died. Everyone else was, but the drive had taken him over an hour and he hadn't made it in time. Everyone understood. But he didn't.

The whole ugly, weighty circumstance had stayed in his mind like a never healing sore; each time he looked into the mirror of himself he saw it - like an overwhelming sin. It had 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 his Mom was dying?. And how it seemed

to take forever to get those plans finished and into the mailbox in front of the school at four thirty in the morning - then the drive from Richmond to Portland - only 47 miles, but the longest drive of his life. . Then the hospital, knowing he had not made it in time, running from the car through the deserted corridors past the man mopping the floor, not knowing where he was going - just running - and realizing the futility, then asking and running more and finally arriving and seeing his Dad and sister holding each other - late had become too late.

The whole macabre sequence of that morning had branded itself into his memory; he could replay it by just closing his eyes. It was almost like viewing a slow motion movie through a camera lens, moving slowly around the hospital room. He remembered the silent and still person that was Mom, sitting beside her holding her hand, sensing that this was the last time ever. And then he realized that it was going to have to be him; he was going to have to be strong and his grief was going to have to wait. Dad and Carole needed him.

Eugene and his Dad had grown a little closer since his Mom died. They talked at least once a month, usually with Eugene trying to get his Dad to retire, sell the house, find a new life, and put the memories to rest. And lately during their conversations, where Eugene had once only heard his Dad's words, he now felt that he understood what they meant. Even though he hadn't visited these past two years he appreciated his Dad, which was why he had driven down to talk with him. He needed his advice.

He turned the car off and got out. It was almost a relief to look around and see that very little had changed in the neighborhood. Patches Sandwich Shop was still open at the corner and just seeing the familiar double pane window shop had made him 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 his favorite. He knew what he would have for lunch.

The houses all looked like they always did. That was good. No new monster homes, just the smallish Cape Cods like his Dad's, 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 similar houses and no one had swimming pools as the lots were too small. The neighborhood was more than forty years old, so all the trees, bushes and shrubs were moderate to

large in size.

At the front door Eugene found the key in the bottom of the metal mailbox where they had always hid it . As he opened the door and went in the smells rushed at him - smells he was not used to. Christ, what was his Dad cooking anyway? It smelled like meat and garlic, very different than when Mom was there.

Surprisingly the place was pretty clean - no dirty dishes in the sink, the stovetop was actually free of grease, and everything looked very familiar. Obviously his Dad had not made many changes . The living room, small and compact, was still cluttered with his Mom's bric-a-brac. Her collection of elephants still filled every shelf, sill and cranny. Doilies still covered the backs of the chairs - looking a little soiled, but his 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.

He almost expected to see his Mom come down the center stairs, turn into the living room and be excited to see him, like she had so many times. That was never going to happen again - damn.

He sat down hard into one of the wingback chairs. They had bought two of them at the same time, both covered in a yellow felt type material. His Dad's was on the left directly across from the TV, and his Mom's was on the right near the bookcases and tables to hold her knitting and the other things she was always working on. Everything was still there, like she would be coming back to it soon. He would have to ask Dad about that.

Hunger was getting the best of him and he decided to walk up to Patches for a sandwich.

The tiny bell made the jangling sound when he opened the door and went inside. He didn't recognize the man behind the counter.

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

"Sure do. "

"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, as he sliced the bread. "You 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?" He 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 last time I got one of these. That is fantastic. Thanks a lot."

"Enjoy - see you again."

"See you," He said as he walked out. That was probably the last time he would buy a sandwich there - unless of course his Dad and he decided to get their lunch there tomorrow. Planning his day around lunch - many pointed this out as one of Eugene's faults - especially Miriam.

As Eugene walked around the corner of Reed Street, he saw his Dad getting out of his truck in front of the house.

"Hey Pops, it's me."

His Dad looked at Eugene and beamed. "Hey, Eugene, good to see you."

They embraced, his Dad giving 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," Eugene laughed softly. "Not even close."

"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," His Dad said. "Sounds serious. Let's do it."

In the kitchen, Eugene's Dad made coffee his usual way, adding an egg to cut the bitterness - a French Canadian recipe taught to him by his father. 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'm going to Maryland to stay 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 best friends forever. So what's going on down there?"

"He says they are hiring a lot of teachers in Calvert County where he lives. Their building lots of schools; it's growing like crazy."

"Damn, Gene! 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?"

"Dad, it's really hard to say. Things are different now. But even they have changed."

"So tell me about it."

"It is really strange, Dad. We care a lot for each other - been together over 4 years now - and we do care, it is just not going anywhere."

"I don't understand today's ways. You're with someone, live together - ought to be getting married. Have babies, and family, I just don't get it. Is there someone else?"

"No, Pops." Eugene laughed. "Miriam's just very serious about her art. She's taken over the whole first floor of the garage - welding sculptures now. They're big and impressive. She had a major show a while back at Bowdoin. People came from Boston, Connecticut - even New York to buy 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 so far 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?"

His Dad leaned back and looked at his son. "You certainly do take

after 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. Lots to think over."

"Let's take a break," his Dad said. "I got to go upstairs and change - came home early hoping you'd be here. Bring your stuff in - you are staying?"

"I'm staying for a day or two."

There really was a lot to think about. Richard and Eugene had been best friends since high school. They were closer than bark was to trees. They had become friends in high school, both had gone to the University of Maine in Orono, and both had earned Masters Degrees in their fields. Eugene loved Richard's family, loved tossing the kids around, and loved the warmth and laughter whenever they were together. It hurt like hell two years earlier when they had moved for Richard to take the job at the nuclear power plant in Maryland.

Richard was geeky and smart as heck, and when the opportunity arose, he had to take it. That was the beginning of the realization for Eugene that he and Miriam might not stay together.

So here he was at his Dad's house, with a lot to think about and even more to talk about.

He went to his car, got his two suitcases and took them upstairs to the bedroom that had been his sister's. The Cape Cod only had two small bedrooms on the second floor. Each room had one dormer with a seat at the base of the window. When he was growing up, he had been given the choice of either making his bedroom in the basement, or using the family room as his bedroom.

Carole was given the bedroom upstairs because, well, she was the girl and needed her privacy. He had ended up making what he thought was a cool bedroom in the basement. He 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 he was constantly working on. It was kind of dank and dark, but at least he'd had privacy.

He placed one of the suitcases on the seat in the dormer and opened it as he remembered how he and Carole used to love playing up here as kids. They would crawl from the storage area in this bedroom all the way over to their parent's bedroom.

Looking out the window at the quiet neighborhood made him think of the many days walking to school - Lincoln Junior High School, then Deering High School. It was quite a long walk and there were very few days off. True, this was Maine, but he remembered walking in the middle of many huge snow storms. The streets were always cleared and he never remembered a day of school being closed because of snow.

He looked around the room. Hardly anything had changed since high school. The posters, the small desk, the twin bed - all were like Carole had left them years ago. He pulled the curtains back. The front yard had hardly changed either. The swing - the source of so many childhood arguments between him and Carole - hung motionless.

His Dad was still in the shower, so Eugene decided to go downstairs and go out to the large backyard and sit at the picnic table and wait for his Dad.

The canopied back yard brought back so many memories; so much of his life had taken place here. He'd had his first kiss here with Marjorie Trembow as his cousin held his hands behind his back. Another girl had held Marjorie's hands behind her back as they had leaned slowly toward each other and kissed so slightly. It could have been yesterday. The memory made him smile.

And the barbecues, they always had friends and family here cooking steaks and chicken with the sweet smells of the cooking literally making them salivate with anticipation. They had played games on the lawn - badminton, Frisbee and horseshoes. It seemed that every weekend there were people over. It was much like what Miriam and he had hoped it would be like at their house in Richmond.

Now all he felt was the struggle to find missing feelings - the feeling that Spring was in the air and that the surge of life would get better. Usually there were smells that came with the beginning of Spring: bursting flowers, fresh turned soil, warm breezes that tasted slightly salty from the

ocean - all smells that aroused the deepest, most strident feelings of being alive. But instead, all he felt was angst as he sat at the picnic table in the quiet of the backyard thinking only of life with Miriam and how everything was about to change so dramatically.

His Dad came out the back door and sat down with him. "So here you are. I wondered where you had gone. Now what's this with Miriam?"

"Well, not much. Like I said, she's thinking about making a move to the communal farm with Tom Watson."

"Is he her. . .how do I say?"

"No," Eugene shook his head and laughed 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." His Dad scowled.

"Trust me, I'm not sure I do 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 in Richmond 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."

His Dad got up and walked toward the back woods, stopped and folded his arms. He had not changed much over the years, still slightly thin with a receding hairline. Not like Eugene who was truly getting bald. Their complexions were not alike either. His Dad was darker, more swarthy, and always seemed to need a shave, while Eugene 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 turned around.. "You've been together so long, and your Mother was so sure you had found the right

one. I don't get it."

Eugene took off his wire rims and rubbed his eyes. He was tired.

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

"A good thing?"

"Yeah." Eugene spoke 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."

His Dad came back and sat down across from him.

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

"I can't, Dad." He put his glasses back on. "I can't, I can't live here again. 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, probably. I called last week and have a job interview set for Monday. Already sent my application and letters of recommendations down. I am serious about this."

"So how far is it?"

"Over 500 miles."

"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 become that round little butterball your Grampa Mills was."

They got up from the table and walked back towards the house, arms around one another's shoulders.

"But seriously." Eugene said. "My treat for lobsters, at O'Malley's."

"Wow that'll be a treat. 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."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Nothing." He laughed. "Just a metaphor. Just a dumb old metaphor."

"Sometimes I do not understand you, boy."

"Me neither."

## The Dinner

"Gene? You about ready, Gene?" Dad hollered up the stairs..

"Be down in a bit."

He walked down the stairs dressed in casual shorts and a short sleeve shirt.

"Well, you'd think it was summer the way you're dressed, and not late March."

"You know Dad, they say I am like Gramps Moss - right out of the mountains, a true maniac."

"Couldn't have said it better myself. Let's go."

Outside they got into Carl's pickup truck.

"I know the way a lot faster," his Dad said.

"Sure, sure whatever you say."

As they drove into downtown Portland to O'Malley's Lobster House they were both quiet; the truck was too noisy to have a conversation without shouting. Eugene never understood why his Dad liked to drive the truck so much, but he had always had a truck as long as Eugene could remember. As they parked at the restaurant, memories of his Mom, Dad

and even Carole, flooded his mind. They had come here for so many, many family dinners. It was truly their family restaurant. His Mom used to love to wear her mink shawl. She called it her "one touch of class" - the one piece of non-essential clothing she could wear when she wanted to "put on the airs."

O'Malley's was still run by Vincent O'Malley. Ever dapper and exquisitely dressed, cuffs extending the right inch and a half, impeccable gray hair coiffured exactly, always the consummate restaurant owner. And he appeared, true to form, as they walked into the darkened lobby. He embraced Carl.

"Carl, Carl. So good to see you. And is this Eugene?" He asked in his gravely voice.

"Yes, Vince. He is here for a short visit."

Vincent grasped Eugene's hand and shook it firmly. "Good seeing you again. It has been a long time. All is well?"

Eugene nodded.. "Actually, on my way to Maryland."

"Really? 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 have. And pick out the best wine - on me. So good seeing you again!"

Vincent O'Malley led them into the very familiar setting.. This was his flagship restaurant - at one time just one of fourteen. . Mr. O'Malley seated them in their usual place, a quiet corner in the back.. The décor had not changed one bit - still dark, candle lit with deep burgundy booths, and mirrors and chrome highlighting the walls.

"Do you still promise the freshest, sweetest lobster on the East coast?" Eugene asked.

"For you Eugene, the special tonight is a two for the price of one. 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?" He said in jest, because all the locals knew that folks only came to O'Malley's for one thing - the freshest and most succulent lobster anywhere.

They ordered the special, got a bottle of Chianti and settled into the



evening. They 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."

"No," Carl said, "She wouldn't have come."

"Why? She only lives in Hallowell. 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. At the rest home."

"It's funny - she is only two years older than I am and yet I feel like we're a generation apart."

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

"Yeah - Aunt Betty sure has strong opinions - don't get on her bad side. So," Eugene paused, "So, what are you up to. Any plans to retire?"

Carl frowned. "Oh I've been thinking about it but it's tough living alone in that house, Eugene. Everywhere I look, I see your Mother."

"So sell it. God, you'd make a lot of money and could move anywhere you want to. Seriously, it would open a lot of new ideas, places, you could find a place with other people your age, find things to do, you know, instead of sitting in our old home."

Carl lightly pounded his fist on the table. "Other people my age." He sighed deeply. "Shows what you know. Main reason I stay working is they need me - I do work that needs to be done. That's important to me - damned important!"

"I'm sorry, Dad, I didn't mean anything by what I said. Hey, maybe if I get settled in Maryland and get a big enough house, you can move down with me - we could back it together. That'd be interesting?"

"Hey, we'll see. Besides look what's coming."

They both leaned back as two waiters arrived and placed many plates of food in front of them.

It was time for some serious good eating. For the time being, conversation was replaced by plenty of hmmms and lip smacking. Nothing was as good as lobster dipped in melted butter.

"Well," Eugene said, as he poured another glass of wine, "That was worth the drive if nothing else. I forgot how good O'Malley's lobsters were."

"I don't come here by myself. Somehow that's just not right. So I'm glad you came. Gave me a reason."

They toasted and clinked glasses.

"So you are going to Maryland, huh Eugene?"

"Yep. It's just for the interview. I'll be staying at Richard's and I'll be checking out what the 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." Carl said.

## Chapter Three

# Richard Pratt

As he pulled into the driveway of the home that his GPS guided him to, Eugene saw the front door fly open. His best friend, Richard, and Richard's wife and two young children all came running out. Eugene, put the car in park and hopped out. He embraced Richard and slapped him on the back.

"My God it's good to see you!"

"Oh my yes," Richard said. "How was your trip?"

"Holly crap - whoever wants to go through New York? It took me like two hours just to get through the damned city. Wendy!" He embraced her and swung her around. "It is so, so good to see you! And look at you two." He kneeled down to take the two youngsters in his arms. "Glad to see Uncle Gene?"

They had not seen each other in over two years, just before Richard and his family moved down to Southern Maryland when Richard took the new job at the nuclear power plant. Wendy had been fortunate also in finding a job right away at the local hospital as a registered nurse.

"So, wow, this is where you guys settled. Pretty good sized house." Eugene looked over the craftsman style split level house. The front porch was decked out with hanging plants.

"Hey, let me help bring your stuff in. We have lots to go over my friend, and I have a case of cold beer on tap just to lubricate us up."

Eugene laughed. "Oh yeah - can't wait."

As they unloaded the car, a sense of excitement and happiness began

to build in Eugene. He really had missed these close friends. He had known Richard since high school. He and Richard were on the debate team, had developed such a close bond that they went to the states their senior year and won first in the advocacy trial and in such an outstanding way that everyone around fully expected that they were seeing future great litigators. No one would have ever guessed that these two men would pursue each their own separate path. Richard majored in engineering physics at the University of Maine, while Eugene majored in teaching math and went on to get his Master's Degree in the field.

When Richard and Emily expanded their family with the birth of their second child, Jason, both Eugene and Miriam had gladly agreed to be Godparents. Richard had worked at the Bucksport Mill power plant since he graduated, and Wendy was a registered nurse at Blue Hill Memorial Hospital. While it was a good distance from Richmond, the two couples made it a point to get together at least once a month. But two years ago Richard had been recruited by the Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant, and he had taken the time off to drive down and interview. He was offered the job at almost twice the salary he had been making in Maine, and after working out the details with Wendy, they made the move to Maryland. It created a void in the social life for Eugene and Miriam. It was during this time Miriam began to really concentrate her efforts in building her sculptures.

Now, sitting here in Richard and Wendy's large kitchen Eugene realized how much he had missed his friendship with the whole family. He especially loved seeing the two children, watching Richard play with them, seeing the kind of stalwart person Wendy was as the hub of their family, and listening to the children's laughter. Emily was five now and seemed to be a surrogate mother for her little three year old brother, who was a terror of unconstrained energy.

This was exactly the type of life Eugene wanted for himself. It all made so much sense, doing what you do for your family to grow.

"So," Richard said, sitting next to him on a counter stool, "is your interview all set?"

"Yep. Monday. 10:30 at the Board of Education. I'm not sure where that is."

"We'll take you on a tour tomorrow. Show you all the sights. You got an extra ten minutes? That's about all it will take."

"Wow," Eugene said, "Ten whole minutes, huh? Sure makes me want to move here. The excitement, the lights, the sights."

"It's not that bad, really. You want something? Soda? Coffee?"

"No, I'm fine. But it's gotta be better than Richmond."

"Speaking of which, is Miriam excited about maybe coming down here to Maryland?"

"Well," Eugene stroked his chin. "She won't be coming if I get a job."

Wendy leaned in across from Eugene. "What, what's going on?"

"Long story. I guess we kind of drifted apart."

"Wow," Richard said, shaking his head. "You guys seemed like such a happy couple the last time we were together."

"Yeah," Eugene said. "That was a little over two years ago. She met a really good group of friends, all artists, led by a fairly famous painter, Tom Watson. There's Abby Norton, a poet, Ray Adamson who is a writer, and Alicia Reynolds who does pottery and sculpture. Not like Miriam's though. Miriam's been doing welded sculpture."

"Is she still teaching?" Wendy asked.

"Oh yeah, but these guys all live on this huge farm up in Winthrop. It's basically a subsistence farm. They grow their own food, raise chickens and stuff like that, so they can concentrate on their art."

"Wow," Richard repeated.. "So what's she going to do? Move out there with them?"

"Looks that way."

Wendy bent down and picked up Jason who was upset that no one was paying him any attention. "How are you doing with that?" she asked, bouncing the boy on her hip.

"Well, kind of okay. I've sensed this was going to happen. I mean it really is a good thing for her. She had this show last Fall at Bowdoin College, and damned if she didn't sell a bunch of her stuff. Tom is quite famous and has a lot of money."

"Are he and Miriam... you know..., are they?" Richard asked.

"No, no. I don't think so, and besides it wouldn't really matter. We, well we have kind of, I don't know, just become good friends."

"Why don't you move to the farm with her?" Wendy asked.

Eugene looked at his friends. He could see The concern on their faces.

“Well, quite frankly there is the possibility that my teaching job could be cut for next year. People are not moving to Richmond.”

“But you could still move with her,” Wendy said.

Eugene slowly shook his head. “No, I don’t think that would be best. That’s why I am going to impress the hell out of these people at the Board and get this job.”

“Of course you are!” Richard slapped Eugene on the back. “And then you’re going to move in here with us and we will have a great time. I can’t wait. I, seriously, can’t wait.”

## The Move

It struck Eugene thinking about it that time blends memories into a vagueness of unimportance. It seemed to be worse as he was growing older. We are where we are, he thought, and remember selective parts of where we have been, and then only parts of the pictures come up like bubbles. We try to fit them together and it doesn’t always work as round touches round only at tangential points - he laughed to himself - 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.

It was hard to believe here he was, living in Maryland, his best friends renting him the entire lower level of their house. Looking out from the front windows across the lawn all he could see was the lumber yard across the road, almost no traffic on the road - there was never a lot - and the huge towers of the power lines. It was awfully quiet here - something he was having a hard time adjusting to. He had his own bedroom, living area and full bath - just like a real apartment, even with his own entrance

in the back. And he had settled in rather quickly.

Thinking back over the past few months they seemed like a blur. The quickness of Miriam's move out to the farm, the closing of the big house in downtown Richmond. How extremely excited and happy she had been, and justifiably so as this move for her would really be a positive step into her future. In reality, it had not been so hard to say goodbye, for either of them. He felt that this was good, no hard feelings, both excited for the other as each had chosen to move into their own new place. At first they had texted a few times but lately even those were much less frequent.

The new job was incredibly exciting - from the first interview on, he had impressed his new principal. When Eugene first met the man at the interview he had been taken aback just a bit. The principal was a large gruff man, very forward in his demeanor. He had looked at Eugene, leaned toward him, and said, "Arthur Moldore - Principal at Calvert Middle School.

"Eugene Benoit - that's Ben - Oit Anglicized."

"You know you look pretty smart. How about I make you my computer guy."

Eugene had smiled. "Well that's great. We literally had three computers in our library at my last school."

"Sit down, sit down. So what is your area?" He bent over the papers in front of him. "Says here math. So why are you applying here, in Calvert County?"

"Honestly? My best friend and his wife live here and claims it is one of the best and fastest growing counties in the country? And quite frankly I am looking for a new challenge."

The principal looked through the sheaf of papers. "You were in Richmond Maine . . . For what? Three years?"

"Yes sir. We were going to see a decline in student population, probably as soon as next year and there would be the possibility that, you know first hired. You know."

Mr. Moldore sat looking at Eugene, rubbing his chin.

"So let me ask you," he said. "What do you do with a student who - you know - just stands up and starts talking out, disrupting the class. What would you do?"

"Well, " Eugene said pausing, "I'm not sure that would ever

happen.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I got this policy that I always start the school year off where I make sure the kids know the 3 rules I have in my class. Do what is necessary, come to class prepared and respect the rights of others.”

“Really?” The principal said looking at him quizzically.

“Yes sir. We discuss those in great detail. I elicit a lot of discussion about how that incorporates what are school based rules, about when we sharpen pencils, about bathroom breaks and about disrupting class with unnecessary movements or comments.”

The principal leaned back, clasping his hands behind his head. He was smiling.

“And if they don’t follow your 3 rules”

“Well, I tell them that if they have problems following reasonable rules, being a part of our class and doing what we consider reasonable, well then they are dealing with me.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well it means that if that behavior happens and they do not respond to the request to follow our rules then I send a letter home asking that this student be allowed to stay after for extra help as they seem to be having difficulty with our subject matter.”

“Really? You do that?”

“I do. Usually they try me early in the school year and I need to send a letter home - usually just one. And they get the message. You mess with me, you’re messing with me. The idea is we have to work together as a class in order to get our job done. They get it.”

“Wow. You’re hired. Actually I can’t say that now, but I am going to fight for you. I want you on my staff.”

And he did. Eugene got the phone call two days later. And he became the Tech Coordinator, in charge of the two 30 computer labs as well as teaching technology to the other teachers. He had spent almost all the summer at the school learning how to manage and maintain the labs and the networks. He fell in love with the technology available at the school. While it was challenging Eugene found he had a natural penchant for working with computers.

But as the Fall came and turned into Winter it became obvious to Eugene that the living arrangement, while cost wise was very reasonable,



was becoming more and more difficult as far meals were concerned. Eugene was staying very late after school working on his plans and in particular working on the computers. And he would usually call Wendy and say don't worry about me for dinner - working late again - no it's okay don't save a plate - I'll just grab a bite on the way home.

So he decided to try and find a place of his own. Not that he didn't appreciate all that his friends were doing to let him rent that part of their house. He felt that his presence was becoming too disruptive for their normal family time. He did want to be really fair with these wonderful people who had so openly welcomed him in their house.

"Hey Richard," he said after a dinner he had made it home for, "I really need to talk with you about something that is weighing heavily on my mind. Got a few minutes?"

"Sure I do? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, sort of. Let's go out on the back deck. Okay"

The two men went out onto the back deck. There was a definite chill in the air with the sun setting.

"So what's on your mind?" Richard said sitting at the picnic table on the deck.

"I am thinking of getting my own place. But I don't want to upset you and Wendy. You guys have been the best and I cannot thank you enough."

"Man, are you sure? You are absolutely welcome here. The kids love having you here. Sort of a new playmate."

"Yeah. Love them guys. But seriously Richard I really like my new job and it is just taking so much time. And I feel it is not fair for you and your family. Not sure when Uncle Eugene will be home for dinner or not. And, well, I think with your kids at this age they just really need the family, together, without any unnecessary distractions. Do I make any sense?"

"Of course you do. But really it's not a distraction. We love having you here."

"Well, in thinking about it, I guess that teaching in Calvert is going to be where I am going to be for quite a while."

Richard stood up and went over to his friend. He put his arm around his shoulder.

"And for that," he said, "I am truly glad. Look, if that is what you

want to do I will ask a bunch of my coworkers at the plant about places they may know about and we'll see what comes up. I am here to just be your best friend, and you are truly welcome to stay here for as long as you need to. You know that."

"I do. And I can't tell you how much your friendship, you and your family, how much that really means to me."