



Second Generation



HOWARD FAST

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON

For Jerry and Dotty

THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY
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PART ONE

Homecoming

Pete Lomas' mackerel drifter was an old, converted, coal-fired steam tug of a hundred and twenty-two tons, purchased as war surplus in 1919. It cost him so little then that he was able to sell its oversized engine for scrap and replace it with a modern, oil-burning plant. He named it *Golden Gate*, packed his wife and kids and household goods into it, and sailed from San Francisco Bay down to San Pedro. There he rented a berth for the tug and went into the mackerel business. His wife suffered from asthma, and her doctor determined that the San Francisco area was too damp. Lomas then decided to make the move to Los Angeles County, and he bought a house in Downey.

He laid out his drift nets with a three-man crew, and until the Depression came, in the thirties, he did well; and even after 1929 he managed to make a decent living out of his boat and to pay his crew living wages as well. Years before, he had worked for Dan Lavette as the captain of his fleet of crabbing boats on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco; and when, in 1931, he stumbled on Lavette on the dock at San Pedro, broke and hungry, he offered him a job. Now, in 1934, Dan had been working for Lomas steadily for three years.

Today, the first of June, 1934, Dan Lavette came off the mackerel boat at ten o'clock in the morning and got into his 1930 Ford sedan to drive to his home in Westwood, where he lived with his second wife, an American-born Chinese woman named May Ling, their son, Joseph, and her parents. Their small house was a few blocks from the University of California campus in Los Angeles, where May Ling worked at the library.

Dan was a big man, six feet and one inch in height, heavily built but without fat, broad in the shoulders, his skin tanned and

weather-beaten by the sun and the salt water. He had a good head of curly hair, mostly gray, dark eyes under straight brows, high cheekbones, and a wide, full mouth.

To the two men who comprised the crew of the mackerel boat along with Dan and Pete Lomas, Lavette was a plain, soft-spoken, easygoing, and competent fisherman. He never lost his temper and he never complained, regardless of how brutal or backbreaking the conditions were, and that in itself was most unusual among fishermen. Of his background, they knew only that years before he had fished with Pete Lomas in San Francisco Bay. One of them was a Chicano, the other an Italian who spoke little English, and they were not inordinately curious. As for Lomas, who knew a great deal more about Dan Lavette, he kept his peace.

The Chicano, whose name was Juan Gonzales, while only twenty-two years old, was alert enough to realize that Dan Lavette was unlike any of the other fishermen on the wharf. He said to him one day, "Danny, how come a man like you, he's satisfied to pull fish?"

Dan shrugged. "I'm a fisherman. Always been one."

"You'll be an old man soon. I'll be goddamned if I spend my life on a fishing boat, take home twenty, thirty dollars a week, and end up a poor bum on the dock."

"I've been a bum on the dock," Dan replied. "I like fishing better."

Driving home today, Dan thought of that. Did he actually like what he did, enjoy what he did? It had been a bad night, cold and wet out on the water, and he had wrenched a muscle in his shoulder. His whole body ached, and he thought longingly of the hot bath that he would climb into the moment he set foot in the house. He supposed he was as happy as a man might be. He had made his peace with himself. Nevertheless, he was still a fisherman who took home between twenty and thirty dollars a week, and he was forty-five years old.

The morning mist and overcast had cleared by the time he reached Westwood. His father-in-law, Feng Wo, was in the garden, tending his beloved rosebushes, and he greeted Dan formally, as always.

"You are well, Mr. Lavette?" He had never broken his old habit of addressing Dan as Mr. Lavette.

"Tired."

"You have a letter. From your daughter, Barbara."

Dan nodded. "I'll have a bath first."

He soaked in the tub, and strength and comfort flowed back into his body. In a few hours, May Ling would come home, and he would sprawl in a chair and listen to her recitation of what had happened that day on the campus. She dispelled the common notion that nothing but whispers are heard in a library; everything that May Ling looked at or encountered took on a marvelous and enchanting dramatic shape. Her whole life, every day of it, was an adventure in newness. This past night, out at sea, one of their drift nets had parted. Dan hated the drift nets, which trapped the mackerel by their gills. This time he spent an hour splicing the break, soaked to the waist, the dying fish threshing around his hands; still, he could not put into words what he felt, yet with the most ordinary occurrence May Ling brought a whole world to life.

Out of the tub, he towed himself dry, relaxed, delightfully weary. The *Golden Gate* would lay over until tomorrow morning while the nets were refurbished, so he had a long, lazy time of daylight ahead of him, and then a night when he could sleep himself out on a clean bed instead of huddling for an hour or two on the damp bunk in the cabin of the boat. He and his son would play a game of checkers. May Ling would be reading a book, looking up every now and then to catch his glance and smile at him. Hell, he thought, it was all and more than anyone wanted out of life.

Dressed in a clean shirt and trousers, he went down to the kitchen where the old woman, So-toy, his mother-in-law, had tea and cake waiting for him. The letter from Barbara lay on the table next to his plate. "You'll excuse me," he said to So-toy.

Still, after so many years in America, she spoke very little English. She simply smiled with approval as he opened the letter, then sat down opposite him at the kitchen table while he read. At first, he had been uncomfortable living with two people who worshipped him as uncritically as Feng Wo and his wife. Now he was almost used to it.

"Daddy," the letter began — always that single word, as if it conveyed a significance beyond what any adjective could, yet a word she had spoken to him only at one meeting, a year before

—and then went on: “School’s over, but I had to write to you before I leave New York for San Francisco, because you will remember that every letter I ever wrote to you has been from here over the past eight months, and I want this to complete our correspondence for this semester. You always tell me that you are not much of a letter writer, and it’s true your letters are short, but I do treasure them. And if anyone ever asked me about my father, and they do, you know, I could have said that so much of what I know of him is from his letters, which is strange, don’t you think?”

“Anyway, school is over. It was such a good year and I do love Sarah Lawrence, but really, I don’t know whether I want to go back. Isn’t that a strange thing for me to say? For the past week I have been puzzling over the way I feel and trying to make some sense out of it. Have you ever been very happy, but with a little worm of discontent nibbling away at your insides? I shouldn’t ask you that, because I saw you with May Ling and I know how happy you are and that there are no worms of discontent eating at you, and it’s worse because I don’t for the life of me know why. Can one be happy and so terribly dissatisfied at the same time?”

“But now when I look at what I have written here, it occurs to me that happy is not the right word. Jenny Brown, who is one of my roommates, gets very blue, and she can’t understand why I am always so cheerful, and I guess that’s what I really mean. Cheerful is a better word than happy to describe how I usually feel, because even when I feel that something is deeply wrong about the way I am, I don’t get depressed about it. But I am going to take two decisive steps when I get home. I shall tell mother that I want a place of my own, and I also intend to find a job, and the latter may have to take place before the former, since it’s up to mother whether my allowance continues. Anyway, I feel a little ashamed writing to you about that, when my allowance is more than anyone deserves without working for it. All of this is just to tell you what to expect when I come down to see you, because it’s so very long since my first trip to Los Angeles, and every time I think about that I get all wet-eyed and emotional. But I do promise you that very soon after I get home, I will drive down to Westwood.

“I can’t tell you how much I want to see Joe again. It’s so strange to have a brother you have only seen once in your entire life, and I liked him so much. How can one have two brothers

as different as Tom and Joe? But of course I can answer that myself. I do love Tom, but he's such a stuffed shirt. You know that he's graduating from Princeton this year, and he's just furious at me because I wouldn't hang around with mother's family in Boston until the graduation, and I wouldn't because I don't think it would matter a bit for me to be there at the graduation and I don't intend to make that long train trip twice in one month.

"Anyway, two more weeks away was just too much. I am so eager to get home and to see San Francisco, and to see you and Joe and May Ling, who is just the loveliest person in the world, and her father and mother, who are just darling and much more like two people you read about in a book and don't ever meet in real life."

She signed the letter "Barbara," as if no term of endearment could add to what she had written, something Dan understood very well indeed.

"How is daughter Barbara?" So-toy asked him.

"Good. Yes, she's fine."

I have stepped into the pages of *Alice in Wonderland*, Barbara told herself; yet she had been here and lived in this San Francisco mansion before, and nine months away was not such a long time. She was playing a role, not they. She was having dinner in the pretentious dining room with her mother and her stepfather, John Whittier, and while it was true that the room was somewhat larger and more elegant than the dining room in the house where she grew up on Russian Hill, when her mother was still married to Dan Lavette, the difference was not all that great. The mahogany table was no longer. It was true that they had not had a butler on Russian Hill, but this was by no means her first dinner in the Whittier house, and the position she occupied between her mother at one end of the long table and John Whittier at the other was not particularly novel. Why then did she feel totally disconnected from this world, a stranger, an intruder? The plain fact of the matter was that she was a daughter of the very rich and had been from the moment of her birth, so how could she sit in judgment? But I am not sitting in judgment, she assured herself, I am simply very uncomfortable and filled with guilt, and I don't know why.

Jean was not an insensitive person, and Barbara realized that

she had planned a simple but delicious dinner that would be quite different from the institutional food at school: a clear soup, then a planked steak with scalloped potatoes and asparagus, and ice cream for dessert, remembering Barbara's passion for ice cream. Knox, the butler, brought in the ice cream, a gallon brick sitting in a tureen of lovely pale ivory Limoges. He served a portion of the ice cream to each of them and then put the tureen down in front of Jean and left the room.

John Whittier was holding forth on the waterfront strike, which had been called in San Francisco just two weeks before Barbara's return. Whittier was not a conversationalist; he had small ability to listen to anything he was not saying himself; and when he spoke, especially in anger, he tended to be carried away and lose the threads of his discourse. It always helped him to be accusative.

"Don't tell me you can understand why they're striking," he said to Barbara.

"But I can."

"Because you don't understand one damn thing about it," he went on. "That's the trouble with a place like Sarah Lawrence. I told your mother that. It's not only a wretched substitute for education, it's a communist substitute. It's anarchy — and I'm not saying that because of what it has cost your mother and myself personally."

"Leave me out of it, dear," Jean said softly. "I left the bank this morning. I am through with business." She smiled.

"Hardly, my dear," Whittier said. "Like it or not, this family is the largest shipowner on the West Coast, and for two weeks we haven't moved one damn pound of cargo out of this port. Do you know what that has cost us?"

He directed this at Barbara. She shook her head, her eyes fixed on the mound of ice cream in the Limoges tureen. It was melting. No one noticed that it was melting. No one cared that it was melting.

"Would a million dollars shock you? Or does a million dollars mean absolutely nothing to you? What do they teach you back there in school? That Karl Marx was a saint? Or do we have our own living saint in Franklin Delano Roosevelt? Do you know what longshoremen are? Have you ever met a longshoreman? Have you ever smelled one?"

"John," Jean said.

"The dregs of this city, and we've put the bread in their mouths all these years, and this is our repayment — to be destroyed! And you tell me you can understand why they're striking —"

Listening to this, Barbara watched the ice cream melt. In back of her mind, there was the memory of Professor Franklin's Sociology II, where he made the point that the rich are incapable of understanding the rich. It had been a non sequitur then, and now suddenly it made sense. A gallon of ice cream, melted, could only be thrown away.

"Mother," she said, "the ice cream is melting."

Jean's slight smile remained unchanged. She was watching her husband, and Barbara realized that her mother heard nothing Whittier was saying, nothing she was saying. The ice cream continued to melt.

"As for Harry Bridges," Whittier was saying, "if there were law and order in this city, he'd be behind bars. Oh, yes, behind bars."

Barbara was in bed, reading Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, intrigued, fascinated by a world so distant and different, when the door opened and Jean entered the room. She wore a dressing gown of pale pink velvet and she had removed her make-up, and as far as Barbara was concerned, it only enhanced her face. If she were as beautiful as her mother, she would never touch make-up. She put down the book, and Jean came to the bed and sat down beside her. Jean picked up the book and glanced at it.

"Like it?"

"I like to pretend I'm in Paris."

"The question is, darling, are you glad to be back in San Francisco?"

"I think so. Yes."

"You mustn't mind John. He's terribly upset. People in his position develop a tremendous feeling of power. I know the feeling, and now, with the waterfront closed down as it is, he's utterly frustrated. This is hardly the best side of him."

"Mother —"

"It used to be 'mummy.'"

"I know. I'm twenty years old."

Jean was smiling.

"So you mustn't laugh at me."

"I wouldn't dream of laughing at you. But you're so very serious."

"Yes," Barbara agreed. "I guess I'm forcing myself to be serious because I have been trying to get up the courage to talk about this —"

"Baby, we can talk about anything. You know that."

"We can't," Barbara protested almost plaintively. "You're my mother. It's just not true that we can talk about anything."

Jean stopped smiling. "Try."

"All right. I want a place of my own."

"What do you mean by a place of your own?"

"My own apartment. I can't live here."

Jean sighed. "The truth is, you don't live here — I mean in reality, my dear. Think about it. You're away at school. It's only the few summer months. And your horse is down in Menlo Park, and you can stay at the club there whenever you wish — and if I know you, you'll be practically living there. You do have your car, so I just don't understand what you mean."

"You don't want to understand what I mean."

"No, that's not fair. Put yourself in my position, Barbara. You tell me that you want an apartment of your own — but why? You're comfortable here. You have everything you could possibly want. You come and go as you please, and whatever you may feel about John, he certainly doesn't restrict your movements or impose any discipline on you."

"That's not it."

"Then tell me what it is."

"This isn't my home. It never has been my home."

"Why? Because you don't like John?"

"Please, please don't get angry with me, mother," Barbara begged her. "You said we could talk. It's not easy for me to explain what I feel. There's a teacher at school, Professor Carl Franklin, who conducts a seminar in sociology, and he said the Embarcadero was a slave market, different, but no better and no worse than the old Negro slave markets in the East, and I was so indignant I almost walked out of the class, because really, they don't think we're quite civilized out here."

"I don't see what that has to do with it," Jean said. "The Embarcadero is not a slave market. The longshoremen are well paid and their demands are utterly preposterous. And what on earth has this to do with your wanting an apartment of your own?"

"Like the ice cream at dinner," Barbara said hopelessly.

"What on earth! The ice cream at dinner?"

"Don't you see? There was that enormous brick of ice cream, and we just sat there and let it melt down while John lectured me about the strike. You can't do anything with ice cream once it melts. You throw it away, and it didn't mean a thing to any of us. It just doesn't. We can't think that way — I mean, we don't even understand what food is in a country where thousands of people are starving."

"But you do understand this," Jean said.

"Now you are angry with me."

"Barbara," Jean said calmly, "I am not angry. Not really. You're a very romantic child, you always have been. I'm well aware of the inequities of society, but we did not create them."

"I'm not a child, mother."

"I think you are. In many ways. You dislike John, and you compare him to your father. I don't think seeing your father has helped, and the romantic image of him that you have is far from the reality."

"Then I dislike John Whittier," Barbara said flatly. "I can't control who I like and who I dislike. Do you think it's pleasant for me to live under his roof?"

"It's my roof too. I happen to be married to John Whittier, and you are a part of a very wealthy family, like it or not. I have no intention of shedding crocodile tears or wallowing in guilt over what my father and his father created by their own sweat and wit. As for the apartment — well, we'll talk about that another time."

It had not been the best of days for Jean Whittier, and now, looking at her daughter, the strong, lovely face, the pale gray eyes, the honey-colored hair, so like her own — and thinking that this was probably the only person in the world she truly loved — it promised to end even more wretchedly than it had begun.

It had been Jean's last day as president of the Seldon Bank, a great, unshakable financial institution, which her grandfather had founded in a wagon at the placer mines just eighty-two years before, and which her father had continued and cherished and nourished. At his death, six years ago, Jean — then Jean Lavette and not yet divorced — had become trustee for three hundred and eighty-two thousand shares of stock in the Seldon Bank, to be divided equally between her two children, Thomas and Barbara, twelve years later. With over seventy percent of the voting stock of the Seldon Bank in her trust, with the right to vote it, Jean had taken over the presidency of the bank, becoming the first woman in California, if not in the entire country, to sit as president of a major bank.

Now she was surrendering. No, as she saw it, not a surrender but an abdication. Willing or unwilling? She could not be certain. Until today, she had felt that she was certain, that she was taking a step out of her own free will, doing what was best for her and for the bank. Walking into the bank that morning, passing through the great marble-clad street section that fronted on Montgomery Street, she had been shaken by a sudden and desperate sense of loss. Which, she told herself immediately, was an understandable and emotional reaction. Essentially, nothing had changed. She still, as trustee for her children, voted the controlling interest in the stock; she would still sit on the board of directors; and at long last she would be able to return to the central interest of her life, her collection of paintings and sculptures, which she had so long neglected. It would be said, as it was perhaps already being said, that her husband, John Whittier, had persuaded her to take this step; and she admitted to herself that it was true in part — but only in part. It was her own decision.

Alvin Sommers, vice president of the Seldon Bank, had been waiting and watching for her that morning, and as he saw her enter, he hurried to meet her. He noticed that she was wearing what to his way of thinking was civilian dress, a bright flowered taffeta with pink velvet trimming, both cheerful and youthful, he assured himself. Even at the age of forty-four, Jean Lavette — he still thought of her as Jean Lavette — was, as the news stories so often observed, perhaps the most fashionable and attractive woman in San Francisco social circles. He himself, a

small, dry man in his middle sixties with a small, pudgy wife, had long entertained his own fantasies about Jean Whittier; it was a totally frustrated, totally concealed love, lust, hate fixation, nourished on the one hand by her cold, distant beauty, and on the other by his resentment at the manner in which, after her father's death, she had taken over control of the bank. The fact that the bank had flourished during the first five bitter years of the Depression, when so many banks were in crisis or closing their doors, only increased his resentment. Now that time had come to an end, but he was still not certain that his own temporary ascendancy to the presidency would be made permanent, and he was thus more deferential than ever, more effusive in his greeting.

"My dear Jean," he said to her, "I've never seen you look so radiant. But what will we do now? We'll become a drab and colorless place."

"You will manage, Alvin. In fact, you will manage very well indeed. By the way, I told Martin" — Martin Clancy was the second vice president — "that I shall empty my office. You'll be moving in, I presume, and I hardly think you'll be comfortable with an Aubusson carpet of pale blue, or with the Picassos and Monet's *Water Lilies*, which you and Martin have always regarded as being a slur on the entire tradition of banking."

"No, indeed. You have a beautiful office."

He had to quicken his pace to keep up with her as she swept through the bank into the main lobby of the Seldon Building.

"Alvin, how old are you?"

"Sixty-five," he answered, thinking, What an outrageous question, and the way she asked it, like making a remark about the weather. But no comment followed it, and his inner debate on whether to follow her into the elevator like an obedient puppy dog was decided by her own motion. They were alone with the operator in the elevator reserved for the top three floors, where the bank's offices were.

"We set the board meeting for three o'clock," he told her. "Tentatively, that is. If you are free then?"

"No, I'm not. I'm meeting Barbara at the station, and that's at two-thirty, I think. But you don't need me, Alvin. I've drawn up the agenda. Martin will propose you and the board will vote it that way. You do know that, don't you?"