

The Establishment

Howard Fast

Author of
Second Generation



The Establishment

HOWARD FAST

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON 1979

**THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT WITH ERIC LASHER.**

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Fast, Howard Melvin, date
The establishment.

I. Title.
PZ3.F265Es [PS3511.A784] 813'.5'2 79-1186
ISBN 0-395-28160-1

Printed in the United States of America

P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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PART ONE

Marriage

Cohen, a large, heavyset man of forty-three, was gradually losing his patience, and that would be a prelude to losing his temper and taking it out on everyone around him, and that had been happening too often. Small things, unimportant things, irritated him and provoked him. He had been through too many large things in his life, things that had failed to provoke him, not to realize that something unpleasant and corrosive was happening to him. He had fallen into a pattern of swallowing anger, frustration, and annoyance, remaining fairly unconscious of what was building up inside him. Now he exploded at the meek little woman who faced him.

"God damn it, Mrs. Melcher, I am trying to explain to you why this happens! You ride the damn clutch! A clutch is not something God made, like a horse's rump. It's a mechanism for connecting and disconnecting the engine and the transmission. There's a spring-loaded pressure plate, which is surfaced on both sides with friction material. Your foot is always on the damn pedal, and it shouldn't be. You have to learn how to drive. It happened before, and it will happen again."

She turned white and whispered, "You have no right to talk to me like that. You have no right to."

He stared down at her. "Oh, Jesus," he said to himself. Gomez, one of his mechanics, was watching him. He dropped his voice and apologized.

"You have no right to talk to me like that," Mrs. Melcher complained, on the point of tears, as if there were no other words she could imagine.

"I'm sorry. We'll fix the car. You'll have it tomorrow."

He turned and stalked through the garage to the men's room

at the rear, locked the door behind him, slammed down the toilet cover, and sat there with his chin propped on his clenched, grimy fists. On the door facing him, surrounded by expressions of witless smut, someone had scrawled: "There was an old hermit called Dave, who kept a dead girl in his cave. He said, I'll admit I'm a bit of a shit, but think of the money I save." He stared at the words at first without comprehension. They hadn't been there the day before. Then, suddenly, everything bottled up inside him exploded. He kicked the door open and roared out at his four mechanics, "I want this goddamn toilet painted! Today! And the next one of you mothers who writes on the walls gets booted out of here on his ass!"

With the mechanics staring at him in amazement, he strode across the garage and into the little glass-walled office. A knot of pain swelled in his stomach as he dropped down behind his desk. He breathed deeply and stared at the inkstained blotter and wondered whether he was developing an ulcer. That would be the final ignominy. An ulcer or a heart attack. He was a big, heavily muscled man, and the last time he had undergone a physical examination, the doctor had warned him that he was the physical type that suffered the greatest incidence of early coronary.

Gomez opened the door of the office gingerly. "Hey, Bernie," he said softly, "something bad happen?"

He stared at Gomez without replying. Gomez, a small, skinny competent Chicano, was the foreman of the shop.

"You really want the crapper painted, Bernie? We're loaded with work."

"Forget it."

"You let them crazy dames get under your skin. Two guys here, they want to see you."

"Take care of it."

"They want to see you."

"About what?"

"I don't know." Gomez spread his arms. "Bernie, Jesus, what is with you? You got good men working here. We give you a day's work, and you chew our asses off. I stand here arguing with you. These guys, they don't want a car job. They want to talk to Mr. Cohen. Talk to them, huh? Let me get back to work."

Cohen nodded. Gomez left the office, and a few moments

later, the door opened, and two men entered Cohen's office. One was a slight, sandy-haired man in his mid-thirties. He had bright blue eyes, a pale mustache, and a scar that ran from his temple to his chin. The other man was younger, twenty-three or twenty-four at the most, Cohen decided, plump, with a round, pink-cheeked, baby face. They came into the office and stood facing Cohen, and the pink-cheeked man said, "That's him?"

"That's him," said the sandy-haired man.

Cohen stood up slowly, staring at the sandy-haired man, who grinned at him complacently.

"He is one big sonofabitch," the pink-cheeked man said.

Cohen came around the desk, stared for a moment more, and then threw his arms around the sandy-haired man, sweeping him up in an enormous bear hug. The pink-cheeked man watched and nodded.

"You're killing me with affection, you dumb slob," the sandy-haired man managed to say.

Cohen let go of him.

"This is Herbie Goodman," the sandy-haired man said. "Herbie, I want you to meet Bernie Cohen."

They shook hands. "You're a legend," Herbie said. "You are absolutely a legend."

"How in hell did you find me?" Cohen asked.

"We got our ways. You'd be surprised what ways we got."

Barbara Lavette's child was born six months after she married Bernie Cohen and became Barbara Lavette Cohen, or, as the gossip column hastened to point out, Barbara Seldon Lavette Cohen. The reference was pointed, since the Seldon family had been part of the tight, high-walled circle that constituted San Francisco society for almost a hundred years, which now, in 1948, spanned the whole age of San Francisco. Scandal, and the juicy gossip that flows from it, had begun when Barbara's father, Dan Lavette, the son of Italian immigrants, had wooed and won the daughter of the banker Thomas Seldon. Jean Seldon, the banker's daughter and Barbara's mother, had subsequently divorced Dan Lavette, married the very wealthy John Whittier, divorced him, and now lived openly and out of wedlock with her first husband, a condition that provided some of the best dinner table and cocktail party conversation that San Francisco had

known in a long while. The marriage of Jean and Dan's daughter, Barbara Lavette, to one Bernie Cohen, a more or less indigent soldier of fortune, a man without family or past or future — and a Jew, to boot — heightened the gossip to a point of delightful titillation. When, six months after this marriage, a son was born to Barbara at Mount Zion Hospital, with no attempt at concealment, the resulting structure of gossip and scandal reached a new level of interest.

To all this, Barbara was indifferent. When she considered the stages of her life, it was always with the sense of being a late finisher. Her childhood had been long and lonely; her adolescence had continued beyond the suggested boundaries, and her age of innocence had extended into her college years. She felt that she had never caught up with a proper calendar of life. In 1946, at the age of thirty-two, she had her first and only child. Dr. Kellman, who saw her through her pregnancy, was not worried about her age; he said that thirty-two was by no means too late to begin childbearing. Barbara was a tall, strong, and healthy woman, and Kellman assured her that the birth would present no difficulties.

She rejected the use of anesthesia. Until the last month, her pregnancy had been relatively easy, and she said to her husband, "I may or may not have another child — "

"Or two more or three more," he put in.

"Another, I said. Never mind about two or three more. The point is that I want to experience this, and experience it fully. I want to know what happens and how it happens."

"So you can write about it? That's crazy."

"I write about what I have seen and experienced, and it's not so crazy at all."

Bernie was with her when her labor began, and he wanted to remain with her in the hospital. After the first two hours, when her moans at each contraction became screeches of agony, Dr. Kellman persuaded Bernie to leave the room. Twelve hours later, her strength gone, her agony tearing her mind apart, they decided that her pelvic opening was too small and that the child could not come through the birth canal. A Caesarean section was performed, and a nine-pound boy came into the world.

Now, fifteen months later, Barbara was sitting in the nursery of her home on Green Street, instructing her son in the proper

pronunciation of *dump truck*. His name was Samuel Thomas Cohen. The Samuel was for Sam Goldberg, who had been Barbara's lawyer, who had been much beloved of her, and who had once owned the Victorian house in which she now lived. Thomas was her Grandfather Seldon's name. Young Samuel was a large, chubby, healthy child, with brown hair, blue eyes, and five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot — all Barbara had asked for.

This evening, feeding Samuel his dinner and introducing a modest dose of linguistics, Barbara was listening for the sound of the door downstairs that would tell her Bernie was back — providing he had decided to come home for dinner and not work until ten or eleven or midnight. Another part of her mind was engaged in planning a way to get through the evening without rancor, acknowledging at the same time that similar plans had failed dismally on other nights.

Again and again during the past months, she had told herself that her marriage was going down the drain; again and again, she had denied it. She had waited until her thirty-second year before she married, and then, as most of those who knew her put it, she had married the most unlikely person on earth.

"I have waited," she said to herself. "I have not plunged into a marriage. I have watched the marriages of almost everyone I know go down the drain. I know the weaknesses of this man, and I also know his virtues. I have no more illusions about marriage. I have seen enough love nests turn into snake pits to realize that at best a marriage is close to impossible. But we are both mature people, and we have each of us been through our own particular hells. We will work it out."

When she said much the same thing to her mother, it sounded flat and unconvincing, and her mother had regarded her thoughtfully and without too much enthusiasm. Jean Whittier, at fifty-eight, was still a very handsome woman. Together, they were no longer taken for sisters, and Jean made no attempt to fight wrinkles and graying hair; but they had the same height and the same good carriage. Jean had seen two marriages wash out, both of them her own.

"You may work it out and you may not," Jean had observed.

"I want to, desperately," Barbara had said.

"He needs the same desperation. Why should he have it?"

You're a very successful writer. You have a national reputation. Just because you put your money into a charitable foundation doesn't change things too much. You head the foundation. You have money of your own. That puts one damned awful burden on him, doesn't it?"

"I think we've talked that out."

"The question is whether you've worked it out."

Barbara's son said something that sounded vaguely like "dump truck." Barbara finished feeding him and presented him with the dump truck; then she heard the door downstairs. It was only six o'clock. Bernie shouted, "Hey, Bobby, I'm back!" There was a note in his voice that she had not heard in a long time, eagerness, enthusiasm, and excitement.

The day before, it had been almost midnight when Bernie came home. There was never a thought in Barbara's mind of another woman, an extramarital affair. You didn't come home from a tryst in working clothes, hands ingrained with dirt, and a body slumped with weariness. They had their assortment of problems, but another woman was not one of them.

Barbara had been in her room, writing. Hearing the sound of her typewriter, he opened the door and stood there. She had leaped to her feet and turned to embrace him, but he pulled back. "I'm filthy," he'd said.

"I'll draw you a bath."

"I'm too damned tired to take a bath."

"Bernie, you can't go to bed like that."

"Why not? I'm a lousy grease monkey. What in hell difference does it make?"

"Come on. You're not a grease monkey. You run one of the best garages in town and you're making a good thing of it."

"I wish you wouldn't wait up for me. I work late, and we get into these stupid arguments, and I'm just too damn tired to argue about anything."

That had been the night before. There had been other nights precisely like that. Barbara would always feel a chill creep through her, she would fight for control, she would tell herself that all people hurt but all people are approachable.

"I wasn't waiting up for you, Bernie," she had answered gently. "I can't get much work done during the day. I mean, not that I wouldn't want to wait up for you, but it's a good time to work. Sammy is demanding —"

So many other nights, no different; suddenly tonight his voice from downstairs, booming with eagerness and warmth. Barbara put her son and his dump truck into the playpen and ran down. Bernie caught her up in a bear hug. Then he apologized. "Filthy as usual. I'll have a bath. Where's the kid?"

"In his playpen. I just fed him."

"Good. I'll let him know who's boss, and then I'll take a bath. I won't be fifteen minutes. What's for supper?"

"Chicken, potatoes, peas, salad — "

"Great!"

Bewildered, delighted, yet apprehensive, she watched him bound up the stairs. This was not the man she had lived with for the past six, seven, eight months, not the morose, depressed, angry man who felt he was cornered in a trap of his own making. She followed him up the stairs. His time with the child had been brief, for he was already in the tub. By the time she had put Sam into his crib, Bernie was in clean clothes and waiting for her.

At the table, Barbara said gently, "It's been a good day for you, Bernie, hasn't it?"

"The best."

"I'm glad." She waited for him to tell her what had happened.

"I haven't been much fun lately, have I?"

"Not much. No. I think I understand."

"Do you, Bobby?" He stopped eating and stared at her. "I used to say to myself that I love you as much as anyone can love a woman. That's not true. I love you as much as I can love anyone. I've loved you since the day we met in Paris. I've been pretty damn faithful to that love."

"I know," she said softly. A clutch of fear began to tighten in her stomach. In spite of his ebullience, this was not going to be a good evening. His words brought back that day in 1939 when he had knocked at the door of her apartment in Paris. She had opened the door and there he stood, an enormous figure of a man dressed in old dungarees and a sweat shirt, unshaven. The Spanish war had ended. The International Brigades had been disbanded. Bernie Cohen, one-time volunteer in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, then unemployed, had made his way across the Pyrenees into France and had walked and hitched to Paris. She could even remember the first thought that had gone through her mind: What a strange man, like a bear with a large nose!

Until she saw his eyes. His eyes were pale blue, large and wide and innocent as a child's. You looked at those eyes, and there was no question of mistrust or deception.

Those same eyes were watching her now, wide open, childish. Her son, Sam, had the same eyes. This man had never grown up. Women mature; it is in their glands, their bodies, their life force; but men can experience a host of hells, and still they are small boys framed in large bodies.

"What happened today, Bernie? Why don't you tell me about it?"

"Well, sure, sure. But it's one of those damn things that has a history. It didn't just happen, any more than you and me, any more than we just happened. You remember when I left you in Paris?"

"I remember."

"Well, I made my way south. I told you about that, and in Marseille I teamed up with this kid, Irv Brodsky. You remember?"

"He was with the Internationals too." Barbara nodded. "Just tell me, Bernie. I remember."

He looked at her questioningly. Something in her tone threw him off. "What was I saying? Oh, yes, Irv Brodsky. A Spanish vet from the Bronx in New York. He got out of Barcelona by boat to Marseille, and we both got jobs with two Frenchmen who were running illegals from Marseille into Palestine. We were scuttled off the coast of Palestine, and we got to shore and made our way inland and ended up in a kibbutz near Haifa."

Barbara nodded. She had heard the story many times.

"Well, I wasn't sure you remembered. We were very close, Brodsky and me. We worked at the kibbutz a few months, and we organized a defense for them. I'm just putting it into perspective," he said uneasily. "I guess I told you how the kibbutz decided that I should enlist in the British army and learn how to be a pilot. I mean that was the last time I saw Brodsky — until today."

"You saw him today? Where?"

"That's what I'm trying to get at, Bobby. Today, around lunchtime, he and another guy, name of Herb Goodman, well, they just walked into the garage and there they were, Irv

Brodsky and this fellow Goodman. You can imagine how I felt, seeing Brodsky after all these years."

"You mean they just walked into your garage by accident?"

"No, no. Good heavens, no. Brodsky tracked me down."

"What do you mean, he tracked you down?"

"It's not so complicated. The Lincoln vets have an office in New York, and they keep track of us. I subscribe to their newsletter, you know, and I sent them some money. He got my address from them—I gave them the garage address—and he and Herb Goodman came out here to see me."

"Just to see you," Barbara said after a long moment. "They came all this distance just to see you again. I got the impression that you never met this Herb Goodman before."

"That's right. And I get the impression that you're angry. Good God, for once I don't feel like a hole in the ground and you're angry."

"I'm not angry." And to herself she added, "Only afraid. I'm so afraid."

"I run a garage," he exclaimed. "Do you ever reflect on that fact? That's what I do. I'm a damn grease monkey, whether you want to accept it or not. I work twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day trying to meet my payroll and make the mortgage payments. I don't even support my wife and kid. You do."

"That's not true."

"I come home at night and I'm too damn tired to put my arms around you and say I love you. I'm too tired for sex. Or maybe I've come to hate myself so much that sex doesn't work."

"Do you want dessert?" Barbara asked quietly. "We have ice cream."

He leaned back, and a slow grin spread over his face. "You know, I love you, Bobby. I get these crazy fits, but I love you so damn much. It's just that loving you and running a garage don't make it for me. I don't know why. I eat myself up. This morning I was sure I was developing an ulcer. I'm only forty-two years old. That's not old. But I live with the feeling that everything's behind me and nothing's ahead of me."

"Until today?" Barbara asked.

"Yes."

"Do you want ice cream?"

"Sure."

She went to the refrigerator. With her back to him, scooping the ice cream onto a plate, she asked, "Who are they, these two men — Brodsky and —?"

"Goodman. They're both members of the Haganah, which is the defense force of the Jewish settlements in Palestine. They're Americans, but they've been living there. Now they've come back on a special mission."

"What kind of a mission?" She set the ice cream in front of him. He began to eat it, watching her out of his pale, childlike eyes.

"This is very damn secret, Bobby."

"I am your wife."

"All right. With the UN decision for the partition and the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, all hell will break loose. It will probably happen in weeks, months — in any case it means war with the Arab states, and the most desperate need for the Jews is planes. Somehow or other, they made a deal with the Czechs. They can't get anything out of the States because of the embargo. The Czechs want two million in cash, and the money was put together in New York. It was all very subrosa. They can't go to any of the regular sources. Then there's the question of getting the money to Czechoslovakia, picking up the planes, which will be dismantled, and getting them to Palestine. The FBI has gotten wind of it, and they're watching the whole operation like hawks."

"And why did they come to you, Bernie? Just to renew an old friendship?"

He had finished the ice cream. He got up, went to her, and bent and kissed her. She made no response. She felt that her blood had stopped flowing, that ice was congealing around her heart. He went to the stove and picked up the coffeepot. "Can I pour you some coffee?"

When they got married, he had had about three thousand dollars, his British army pay, and what he had picked up shooting craps. He would be a good, honest, substantial, hard-working citizen. He borrowed five thousand more, and for eight thousand dollars and a large mortgage, he had purchased the garage. He went to work each morning; he returned each night.

He poured coffee for both of them. "There are ten C-54s on a field down near Barstow. They're the big four-motor jobs that

Air Transport used during the war. The guy who owns them bought the lot for sixty-five thousand, war surplus. He wants a hundred and ten thousand for them. If we can get them, we'll rip out the seats and use them for cargo. Fly them to Czechoslovakia, pick up the planes, and fly them to Palestine." Then he waited, watching her. The silence built up between them.

Finally she said, "'We,' Bernie?"

He nodded slowly.

"When did you make that decision?"

"Bobby, haven't you watched me? Don't you see what's happening to me? I'm turning rotten. I tried. God, how I tried! For two years I've gone to that damn garage every day. It's no good. You've seen the way I've been for the past six months. Do you want me that way?"

"I want you," she whispered. "I still want you, Bernie. I didn't come to this marriage easily. We took each other for better or worse."

"I'm not walking out on you. I love you. We got a kid together. We got blood and grief and agony between us. We didn't just run into each other and say 'I do.' "

Controlling herself, choosing her words carefully, Barbara said, "You're not walking out on me. Then what would you call it, Bernie?"

"It's something I have to do, Bobby. Sure, this thing with Brodsky came out of the blue. But there hasn't been a day in the past year when I didn't think about what's going on over there. Now I look at it this way. I'll help them find the money to buy the planes, then I'll make the flight. I've spent ten years of my life being a soldier. I'm worth my weight in gold over there, and I'm needed. That's the thing. I am needed. I fought for the Spanish Republic, and for six years I fought for the damn Limeys. And I wasn't needed. There were twenty million others. Here you count heads. I'm a Jew. You forget that."

"You never let me forget it, Bernie."

"And I'm not walking out on you. It may take a few months to work things out over there, but we will. Then there'll be peace, and I'll be in a place that I made. I'll have a function. My life will make some sense. Then you and Sam can join me."

She shook her head. "No. This is my place, Bernie, here in San Francisco. I had my romantic dreams. It's your place too."