

Len Deighton

Violent Ward



MODERN
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Violent Ward

Len Deighton was born in 1929 in London. He did his national service in the RAF, went to the Royal College of Art and designed many book jackets, including the original UK edition of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The enormous success of his first novel, *The IPCRESS File* (1962), was repeated in a remarkable sequence of books over the following thirty or so years. These varied from historical fiction (*Bomber*, perhaps his greatest novel) to dystopian alternative fiction (*SS-GB*) and a number of brilliant non-fiction books on the Second World War (*Fighter*, *Blitzkrieg* and *Blood, Tears and Folly*).

His spy novels chart the twists and turns of Britain and the Cold War in ways which now give them a unique flavour. They preserve a world in which Europe contains many dictatorships, in which the personal can be ruined by the ideological and where the horrors of the Second World War are buried under only a very thin layer of soil. Deighton's fascination with technology, his sense of humour and his brilliant evocation of time and place make him one of the key British espionage writers, alongside John Buchan, Eric Ambler, Ian Fleming and John le Carré.

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Violent Ward

*If America is a lunatic asylum
then California is the Violent Ward.*

I

‘There’s a woman sitting on my window ledge,’ I said quietly and calmly into the phone.

‘I can’t see you, Mr Murphy!’ said Miss Magda Huth, my secretary. Her German accent was more pronounced when she was agitated, like now, and her voice was strangled whenever she stood on tiptoe to see into my office over the frosted glass partition.

‘There’s a woman sitting on my window ledge. You can’t see me because I’m behind my desk.’

‘You must be on the floor.’

‘Yes, well, I’m trying not to frighten her,’ I said. ‘Will you please just do something about it?’

Miss Huth has no sense of urgency except when she is leaving work. ‘Your coffee is losing its froth out here,’ she said. ‘Perhaps if I brought it in to you—’

Jesus! ‘Are you listening to me?’ I said. ‘She didn’t come by for a cup of coffee and a Danish. She’s going to throw herself into the street. Any minute.’

‘There is no need to become belligerent.’ Magda Huth wasn’t young. She’d been some kind of schoolteacher in Dresden until reunification gave her a chance to leave, and at times she treats me like a backward pupil in a totalitarian kindergarten. That’s the way she was treating me now. ‘I will see if I can reach the Fire Department,’ she said primly.

‘Yes, you do that,’ I said.

Miss Huth had not been with my law partnership very long. Previously, for five years I’d had Denise, a really sensible woman and an efficient secretary. Then she went off on a package-deal skiing

weekend in Big Bear – I must have been soft in the head to give her so much time off – and within eight weeks she was married to a Mexican orthodontist she met in a singles bar there. For a long time I kept hoping she'd tire of living in Ensenada and ask for her job back. But then last Christmas I had this long chatty boilerplate letter, plus a blurred snapshot of her and her husband and twin bambinos, and now I was trying to get used to Miss Huth all over again. It wasn't easy.

'That's right,' I said. 'Get the Fire Department, and tell them to make it snappy or they'll be hosing her off the sidewalk.'

'You should not talk that way,' Miss Huth said, with a sniff, and cut me off before I could reply. I hung up so gently it didn't make a sound.

I looked through the knee-hole of the desk so that I could see the window. The woman was still there, fidgeting around, trying to look down into the street below her. This *would* happen today of all days. My new boss, the mighty Zachary Petrovitch – el supremo, ichi-ban, tycoon extraordinaire – was spending a few days at his Los Angeles mansion so he could be guest of honor at the 'surprise party' his minions had been planning for weeks. Petrovitch wanted his own little law firm here in the city, and he was bringing to this partnership something it had never had before – money. By putting one of his tame in-house lawyers behind Korea Charlie's empty desk he'd found a legal way of getting control of a law practice. It had been decreed that I should be at his party tonight, tugging my forelock and bowing low and telling everyone how grateful I was to become a toiler ant in the Petrovitch zoo.

The phone buzzed and I snatched it up. It was Miss Huth again. 'The people from Graham's builders' discount store have come out into the street; they are all staring up here, Mr Murphy.'

'So?'

'I thought you would wish to know.'

'What did the Fire Department say?'

'They've put me on hold,' she said.

'On hold?'

'I've got them on the other line. They asked was it a fire, and I said no, it was not a fire.'

‘Well, that’s dandy. I’ll throw a lighted cigar butt into the shredder basket, and then maybe they’ll discuss the possibility of dropping by sometime.’

‘They are on the line now!’ she said urgently and cut me off again. I had to crouch real low to see properly. The woman outside my window was still shifting her ass about. Maybe the rubbernecks in the street thought she was getting ready to throw herself off the ledge, but I had my reasons for guessing that she was getting a cramp in the gluteus maximus and moving around to be more comfortable.

There was a tapping noise – imperious and persistent – on the frosted glass panel. It was Miss Huth, making a menacing shadow against the whitened glass with just her fringed hair and beady eyes peeping over it. She signaled to tell me that I’d put the phone down without putting it properly on the hook. I picked it up and she said, ‘They are coming. The firemen. They are coming – right away.’

‘I should hope so.’ There was the sound of a siren, but it grew fainter and went north up Western Avenue toward Hollywood. ‘Maybe I could use that cup of coffee,’ I told her. ‘If you put it on the mat inside the door, I’ll crawl over and pull it toward me.’

‘I don’t see what good you think you’re doing sitting there on the floor, Mr Murphy.’ She was peering over the frosted glass again; I could hear it in her voice.

‘I’m trying not to alarm her.’

‘The firemen will arrive and the woman will see them, won’t she? Why don’t you get up and go over and talk with her?’

‘And if she jumps, I take the blame? *You* come in and talk to her. Maybe you’ve got an insight into the motivation of women who jump off ledges.’

She let that one go and busied herself with placing two tall polystyrene cups on the mat, together with a Bear Claw on a paper napkin. I’d ordered one coffee and an almond croissant; the Bear Claws were too big and had brightly colored strawberry jelly inside, and I didn’t like them. The little old Vietnamese guy who had taken over Tony’s Deli employed his relatives, and some of them couldn’t understand a word of English. When Big Tony and his brother ran

that place, Tonichinos – large cappuccinos to go – had froth you could cut with a knife. Now it withered and died within five minutes; I guess the Vietnamese didn't understand the froth machine. Even so, Tony's Deli still made the best cappuccinos in this part of town. Thank God those guys had passed on the recipe to their successor, because I was hooked on them.

Gently I pulled the mat over and grabbed the coffees. They were still warm; I savored them. Sitting there on the Persian carpet, the final sixteen payments for which had now been underwritten by our new owner, gave me a chance to reflect on the arrangements for the party that night. It had to go well. I needed the money, really needed it.

Before I'd finished the second cup of coffee I heard a siren coming along Olympic. I looked under the desk to see the window. The woman outside must have heard it too, for she was slowly and painfully getting up. First she brought one foot up onto the ledge, then she was kneeling there. Finally, moving like someone terrified of heights, she stood up and leaned back against the window, with both arms pressed flat against the glass. She was wearing an expensive lightweight tweed pants suit and a gold and blue Hermès scarf around her head, the kind of outfit a choosy woman would need to throw herself out of a Los Angeles window in springtime. I watched her cautious movements with great interest. Considering the way she'd been acting out there on the ledge, enjoying all the motions of a would-be suicide, she was certainly taking great pains now to make sure she didn't lose her balance.

I went across the room. She had her back to me now. I slid the window up and said, 'For God's sake come on in.'

She swung her head around and stared at me with hate in her eyes. 'Did you send for the Fire Department?' She coughed to clear her throat. Her cheeks had reddened; I could see she was cold. Maybe that was why she'd decided to come in.

'Why me?' I said. 'Any one of those people down there might have sent for them. The whole neighborhood's been watching you.' This was one of the few tall buildings in a street of one-story shacks; everyone could see her. 'Come in!'

‘You’re a shit,’ she said, and moved suddenly, swinging her feet into the room with commendable dexterity. Spotting the polystyrene cups on the mat, she went across to get a hot drink. Finding that both cups were empty, she tossed them across the room with a violence that made me shudder. She didn’t seem to fancy the Bear Claw; I suppose it was the strawberry jelly. She made for the door.

‘The Fire Chief is going to be asking you some questions,’ I called after her.

‘You answer them, you goddamned lawyer,’ she yelled. ‘You’ve always got an answer for everything!’ She slammed out through the door that leads to the back stairs, just as the sirens were dying outside in the street. She knew the way to the back entrance; it was the way she got in.

The next moment the whole room was filled with burly men in shiny oilskin coats, rubber boots, and yellow helmets. They were mad at me. ‘How is it my fault?’ I yelled back at them. ‘You let her get away.’

‘Where’d she come from?’ said a burly firefighter, picking up the Bear Claw and chewing a piece out of it.

‘How should I know where she came from? Maybe she escaped from the zoo.’

‘You called in and said this was an emergency,’ said a rat-faced little guy who seemed to be the chief. He smelled of metal polish and mint digestive tablets.

‘Is that so? Did I interrupt a poker game or something? What am I supposed to do when someone comes into my office and wants to leap out of the window, get an entertainment license?’

The burly one tossed the remains of the Bear Claw into the wastebasket, where it landed with a loud clang. No wonder they give me indigestion: toss away an almond croissant and it makes only a soft *swoosh*.

Maybe if I’d been a little more diplomatic, Ratface wouldn’t have turned nasty and sent two of his men to search out violations of the Fire Department Code. ‘You should have been doing that before your own block burned down,’ I said. But these guys were young kids; they hadn’t been with the department long enough to remember

that scandal. Finally Ratface came up with a clipboard, reading aloud what he said were twenty-two infringements. 'The fire escape is rusty,' he said, jabbing at the clipboard with his finger.

'We just ran out of Brillo,' I said. I looked over his shoulder and read the sheet. Most of the faults were minor ones, but it looked like someone was going to have to renew the sprinkler system, put up new smoke detectors, and install some kind of fire doors. If I knew anything about the small print in the lease, it wasn't going to be my rapacious landlord, but no matter. It wasn't my pigeon. Two months earlier, the bottom line on that kind of work might have been enough to bankrupt me, but now it was just something to pass on to the new owner: the mighty Petrovitch. 'These old firetraps should be torn down,' said the guy who didn't like Bear Claws to his buddy. 'The whole block should be flattened. It's just a shantytown.'

'We can't all live in Bel Air, buddy.'

After they all trooped out, I examined the carpet and the dirty marks that their boots had left. The carpet needed cleaning anyway, but the extra stains were not going to help me when Zachary Petrovitch came to see what kind of premises he was getting for his money.

When at last I was free to sit down behind my desk and leaf through all the work outstanding, I found there was plenty to do. A new client, hooray. A one-time soap star, drunk and resisting arrest. It took me a minute to recognize her name; there is no limbo more bleak than the oblivion to which the soapers go. Then there were two movie scripts, one dog-eared and the other pristine. This client was a writer – a nice intelligent guy until now – who had worked himself up into a roaring frenzy about a movie that was being made by a producer he used to work with. He wanted me to read the two scripts and sue the production company for plagiarism. Plagiarism! He must be living on another planet. Start seeking injunctions for that kind of larceny and Hollywood would slither to a complete standstill. Did he think those guys with the Armani suits could write connecting the letters just because they had Montblanc fountain pens? Original ideas?

None of it was more urgent than the red box file marked Sir

Jeremy Westbridge. A lawyer gets used to the idea that most of his clients are on a course of self-destruction, but this Brit was something else. Every mail delivery brought word of some new and more terrible misdeed. I could see no way of keeping him out of prison, it was just a matter of whether he got ten or twenty years. The only consolation was that he had me on retainer and paid up like a sweetheart. How did I ever get into this crock? When I left high school I had everything set for a career as a car thief.

Dumping the whole stack of work back into the tray, I found myself looking at that damned window ledge, so finally I decided to go see Danny. I picked up the phone and told Miss Huth, 'I have to see my son.'

'No. You have an appointment at eleven-thirty.'

'Cancel it.'

'It's far too late to do that, Mr Murphy. It is already eleven-twenty-two.'

'Who is it?'

'Mr Byron.' She purred: she recognized his name. Women always knew his name. Budd Byron was now old enough for his early shows to be on daytime runs.

'Oh,' I said. I guess his old shows were on TV in Germany too.

'I think he's here,' she said, and I heard the outer door buzz. 'Shall I show him in?' I could hear the emotion in her voice. No woman could catch sight of Budd Byron without losing her emotional equilibrium.

'Yes, do that, Miss Huth . . . Budd! It's good to see you.' Budd was slim and tanned. He came into my office with the kind of cool, calm confidence of General MacArthur wading ashore in the Philippines, Newton demonstrating the force of gravity, or Al Capone denying that he owed income tax.

Budd had been a college classmate; you maybe would not have guessed that from the hellos. Budd has a certain sort of Hollywood formality. He fixed me with a sincere look and gripped my hand tight while giving my upper arm a slap: a California salutation.

'You're looking great,' I said. 'Great.' He was wearing Oxford brogues, custom-made gray-flannel slacks, and a jacket of Harris

tweed, the heavy sort of garment worn in the winter months by Southern California's native male population. His shirt was tapered and his collar gold-pinned to secure the tight knot of a blue-and-red-striped Brooks Brothers silk tie. The effect was of a prosperous young banker. It was the look many Hollywood actors were adopting now that so many of the bankers were going around in bleached denim and cowboy boots.

'Coffee? A drink?'

'Perrier water,' said Budd. To complete the costume, he was wearing a beautiful gray fedora, which he took off and carefully placed on a shelf.

I went to the refrigerator hidden in the bookcase and brought him a club soda. 'Cigarette?' I picked up the silver box on my desk and waved it at him.

He shook his head. I can't remember the last time someone said yes. One day someone was going to puff at one of those ancient sticks and spew their guts out all over my white carpet.

'I read the other day the UCLA School of Medicine calculated that one joint has the carbon monoxide content of five regular cigarettes and the tar of three,' Budd said.

'These are not joints,' I said, shaking the silver box some more.

Budd laughed. 'I know. I just wanted to impress you with my learning.'

'You did.'

Budd didn't have to work hard at being a charmer: it just came natural to him. We'd stayed in touch since he abandoned Social Sciences in favor of Actors' Equity. He'd made a modest rep and his face was known to those who spent a lot of time in the dark, but he expended every last cent he earned keeping up a standard of living way beyond his means because he had to pretend to himself and everyone else that he was a big big star. I suppose only someone permanently out of touch with reality tried for the movie big time in Hollywood. The soup kitchens and retirement homes echo with the chatter of people still talking about the big chance that's coming any day. But Budd was not permanently out of touch with reality, just now and again. As the smart-ass student editor of our college

yearbook wrote of him, his head was in the clouds but his feet were planted firmly on the ground. He really enjoyed what he did for a living, whether it was first class acting or not. Back in the forties, when movie stars were youthful and wholesome and gentlemanly, Budd might have made it big – or even in that brief period in the sixties when the collegiate look was in style – but nowadays it was stubble-chinned mumbling degenerates who got their names above the title. Budd was out of style.

‘You *are* coming to my little champagne-and-burger birthday bash?’ said Budd.

‘You couldn’t keep me away,’ I said. I’d received an elaborate printed invitation to a luncheon party at Manderley, his old house perched up in the Hollywood Hills, near the Laurel Canyon intersection. Budd was one of those people who keeps in touch. He always knew what all his old classmates were doing, and when reunion time came round he was there addressing the envelopes.

‘Lunch, a week from Sunday. We’ll keep going until the champagne runs out.’

‘Sounds like a challenge.’

He shifted in his chair, ran a fingernail down his cheek, and spoke in a different sort of voice. ‘Mickey, I need advice. You’re my attorney, right?’

‘You don’t need an attorney,’ I told him. ‘You’re too smart. If all my clients kept their noses clean the way you do, I’d be out of business.’ It was true. I sent hurry-up letters and sorted out the occasional misunderstanding, but most of what I did for Budd could have been done by a part-time secretary. Maybe I didn’t charge him enough.

He nodded and smiled some more and looked out of the window. ‘This is a lousy neighborhood, Mickey.’

‘I know, all my visitors tell me. But we got cops on every corner and great ethnic food. What can I do for you, Budd?’

A pause, a tightening of the jaw. ‘Would you get me a gun?’

‘A gun? What do you want a gun for?’ I said, keeping my voice very steady and matter-of-fact.

‘No special reason,’ he said, in that nervous way people say such things when they do have a special reason. Then came the prepared

answer: 'The way I see it, the law will be putting all kinds of new restrictions on gun sales before long. I want to get a gun while it's still legal to purchase them over the counter.'

'I guess you saw that TV documentary on the Discovery channel. But you don't need a gun, Budd.'

'I do. My place is very vulnerable up there. There have been two stickups in the doughnut shop since Christmas. My neighbors have all had break-ins.'

'And having a gun will keep you from being burglarized? Listen, the chances of someone breaking in while you're there are nearly zero. When you're not there, a gun won't be any good to you, right?'

'It would make me feel better.'

'Okay. So you made up your mind. Don't listen to me; buy a gun.'

'I'd like you to purchase it.'

'Come on, Budd. What's the problem?'

'I'll be recognized. My face is known. Maybe it will get into the papers. That's not the kind of publicity I want.'

'Buying a gun? If that was the secret of getting newspaper publicity, there'd be lines forming outside the gun shops and all the way to the Mexican border.'

'The paperwork and license and all that stuff. You know about that, Mickey. You do it for me, will you?'

'You mean within the implied confidentiality of the client-attorney relationship?'

He nodded.

I sat back in my swivel chair and looked at him. Just as I thought I'd heard everything, along comes a client who wants me to buy a heater without his name on it. Next he's going to be asking me to file off the identity marks and make dum-dum cuts in the bullets. 'I'm not sure I can do that, Budd,' I said, very slowly. 'I'm not sure it's within the law.'

He caught at the equivocation. 'Will you find out? It's the way I'd like it done. Couldn't you say it was for a well-known movie actor who wanted to avoid the fuss?'

'Sure. And I'll promise them signed photos and tickets for your

next preview.' As he started to protest, I held up a hand to deflect it. 'I'll ask around, Budd.'

'A Saturday-night special or a small handgun would do. I just want it as a frightener.'

'Sure, I understand: no hand grenades or heavy mortars. Can you use a gun? You were never in the military, were you?'

'I was in ROTC,' said Budd, the hurt feelings clearly audible in his voice. 'You know I was, Mickey.'

'Sure, I forgot.'

'I can shoot. I've had a lot of movie parts using guns. I like to get these things exactly right for my roles. I do an hour in the gym every day. I jog in the hills, and sometimes I go to the Beverly Hills Gun Club.' He slapped his gut. 'I keep myself in shape.'

'Right,' I said. Well, wind in the target; he sure scored a bull's-eye with that one. The only thing I could sincerely say I devoted at least one hour every day to was eating.

'Am I keeping you too long?' he said, consulting the Rolex with solid gold band that came with every Actors' Equity card.

'No rush. I'm going to see Danny: my son, Danny.'

'Sure, Danny. You brought him and his girlfriend along to watch me on the set of that Western I did for Disney last year.'

'That's right.'

'Give Danny my very best wishes. Tell him if he wants to visit a studio again I can always fix it up for him.'

'Thanks, Budd. That's really nice of you. I'll tell him.'

Budd didn't get up and leave. He reached out for his glass and took a sip, taking his time doing it, as I had seen so many witnesses on the stand do, buying time to think. 'I haven't told you the whole truth. There's something else. And I want to keep it just between the two of us, okay?'

'The client-attorney privileged relationship,' I said.

He got to his feet and nodded. All my clients like hearing about the confidential relationship the attorney offers; I always remind them about it just before I give them my bill. Prayer, sermon, confession, and atonement: in that order. I figure the whole process of consulting an attorney should be a secular version of the mass.

‘How could I get a gun without anyone knowing?’

‘Without even me knowing? Buy it mail order under an assumed name, I guess.’

‘Could I have it sent to you?’ he said.

‘But then I would know,’ I said, keeping my tone real negative. I didn’t want him mailing guns to my office.

‘It’s like this,’ Budd said, making a futile gesture with his hand. ‘I have a friend who is being threatened. She needs a gun.’

‘Well, you tell her to order one through the mail and have it sent to a post office box,’ I said. I guessed we were into some kind of show-biz fantasy, and I wasn’t in the mood for that kind of crap. I looked at my watch. ‘I’m going to have to kick you out of here. I’ve got a heavy schedule.’

‘Sure, Mickey, sure.’

He reached for his hat and went to the mirror to be sure it was on exactly right. Then he turned to shake hands firmly and say a soft goodbye. There was something he still hadn’t said, and I plowed my brain to guess what it might be. What new bullshit was he going to hang on me now?

His dark, lustrous eyes focused and he said, ‘If an intruder was shot on my premises . . . what could happen?’

‘Stay out of it, Budd,’ I advised sincerely. ‘Buy your friend a subscription to *Shooter’s Monthly* and call it a day.’

‘Okay,’ he said, in a way that made it clear it wasn’t advice he was likely to heed. Then, hands raised Al Jolson style, he struck a pose. ‘What do you think of the snazzy outfit?’

‘You got a portrait painting somewhere in your attic, Dorian old buddy?’

‘Just termites,’ said Budd. He was in an entirely different mood now. Lots of actors are like that; they go up and down with disconcerting suddenness.

When Budd had departed I went and looked out the window. That was enough to make anyone want to buy a gun. It was indeed a lousy block. My neighbors were mostly immigrants who quickly became either entrepreneurial, destitute, or criminal. I shared this ancient office building with a debt collection agency, an insurance

agent, a single mothers advisory center, and an architect. These law offices were the best in the building. Miss Huth's reception area gave onto three rooms. Mine was the only one with a white carpet, but the others had two windows each. Equipped like that, they could handle two suicides at a time.

I'd moved in right after my divorce, to share expenses with two Korean immigration lawyers who had a sideline in fifty-dollar flat-fee divorces. People all said we'd never get along together, they said Koreans were combative people, but I found Billy Kim and Korea Charlie to be congenial partners. We would share our business, each passing our most troublesome clients to the other. Then we'd compare notes and have some great laughs together. Korea Charlie was the founding member of the partnership. He was a fat old guy who knew everyone in the neighborhood and built up a colossal reputation getting green cards for local illegals. Then, just as everyone was saying that Korea Charlie was the richest, happiest lawyer in town, one of his grateful clients accidentally shot him dead during a drunken celebration in a bar in Crenshaw.

Now, apart from the token lawyer whom Petrovitch would assign to us to make the takeover legal, I had only one partner, Billy Kim, a thirty-year-old go-getter who was attending his brother's wedding in Phoenix. He'd been due back this morning, but there was no sign of him so far and no message either. Either his brother had chickened out or it was one hell of a party.

On all sides of this block were single-story buildings that in any other city would have been temporary accommodation. From ground level LA may be a paradise, but from this height it's hell. The paved backyards of these cheap box-like buildings were littered with dented cars and pickups, and their rooftops were a writhing snakepit of air-conditioning pipes. Directly across the street was a parking lot surrounded with a chain-link fence; parked up tight against the entrance, a converted panel truck was selling soft drinks, tacos, and chili dogs. Now that we were to become a part of the Petrovitch organization I was going to press them to finance for us a proper office with Muzak, up-to-date magazines in the waiting room, distressed-oak paneling, and yards of antiqued leather books behind glass doors on stained wood shelving.

I tidied my desk and reminded Miss Huth that I was going to see my son. I didn't give too much thought to the task of getting a gun for Budd. I figured by next week the desire for a gun would have worn off. Budd was like that.

I went down to the garage. That was the best facility of this ancient building: it had a lockup garage so I could come back to my car and find it complete with radio antenna and hubcaps. Since I drive a beautiful 1959 Cadillac, that means a lot to me. It was one of the reasons I came here. I wouldn't move to another building unless it had an equally dry, airy garage with someone guarding it. This one was not really subterranean, it was a semi-basement with ventilation slots that let air and daylight in. Ventilation is important for a car: condensation can do more damage than the weather, especially in California. The story was that the landlord had wanted to make this lowest floor into accommodations but the city ordinances forbade it.

When I got down there I saw Ratface talking to the janitor. They both stopped talking as I went past them. I had a strong suspicion that they were comparing my shortcomings. They watched me without speaking.

'You're still dripping oil, Mr Murphy,' the janitor called as I was getting into my car. I pretended I hadn't heard him, but as I pulled away I glanced in the mirror and could see the dark patch shining on the garage floor. Okay, so it's an old car.

My son, Daniel, is studying Philosophy at USC— the University of Spoiled Children — and living with a girl named Robyna Johnson. They share an apartment in a rooming house off Melrose near Paramount Studios. Melrose is a circus, but the kids think it's smart to be near where the movies are cranked. When you reach the studios, the first thing you see is that vast rectangular slab of blue sky that is the backdrop for the Paramount water tank. And if you know where to look inside the back lot you can spot the old Paramount Gate, the most evocative landmark still left of real Hollywood. That gate is the same way it was in the old days. I never see it without remembering when Gloria Swanson's Rolls-Royce purred through it in *Sunset Boulevard*.

My son doesn't live on the posh side of Melrose. Where he lives is as bad as where I work. They have steel gratings on the liquor stores and fierce guard dogs in the hallways. When I was a kid it was an Irish area and there was a great neighborhood atmosphere, but when Grace Kelly married into Monaco, the Irish here got big ideas and bank mortgages and bought homes with pools in the Valley, and the area filled up with weeds, rust, and sprayed graffiti. I waved to Danny's landlady, Mrs Gonzales, as she dragged the curtain aside to see who it was. She was a whiskery old crone: she scowled and ducked out of sight.

Danny shared a two-room apartment on the second floor. The buzzer didn't work, so I rapped on the door with my knuckles. They were watching a game show on TV, *The Price Is Right*: I could hear it through the door. *The Price Is Right*! After all that griping these kids are always giving me about materialism.

'It's your father,' said Robyna, after she'd undone the mortise lock, slipped the bolts, and opened the door as far as the chain would allow. She stared at me for a long time before unhooking the chain to let me in. She never says, How nice to see you, or anything. I always get the same treatment: she snaps her head around, so her long, straight blonde hair swings in my face, and calls over her shoulder, 'It's your father,' in a voice marine color sergeants use to announce the arrival of incoming artillery fire.

'Hello, Robyna,' I said affably. 'Do you mind if I talk to Danny in private?' She shook out her skirt – a long cotton one with African tie-dye designs – slipped her feet into jewel-encrusted sandals, picked up her makeup box, tossed her head to make her hair shake, and strode past without looking at me. She didn't even say goodbye. 'Come back, Jane Fonda, you forgot your muesli!' I called.

'Drop dead!' she snapped over her shoulder as she flounced out and slammed the door.

'Is your girlfriend always so charming?' I asked Danny.

'I don't know,' said Danny. 'I don't tell her to get lost the way you do every time you arrive. She pays half the rent, you know.'

The TV was still going, and Danny was searching to find the remote control to turn it off. Eventually he grabbed a pair of jeans

from somewhere and draped them over the screen. He just couldn't bear to switch the damned thing off: he'd always been like that about TV; he just had to have it going all the time.

'Robyna must have the remote in her pocket,' he said apologetically.

There was a smell of burning incense in the room. It had a sweet flowery smell. I sniffed here and there. Although I looked all around, I couldn't see where the smoke was coming from. 'She's not on drugs, is she?'

'You always ask me if she's doing drugs,' said Danny wearily. 'We're vegetarians.'

'So maybe she passes on red meaty drugs.'

'She won't even drink tea or coffee because of the caffeine. No, she's not on drugs.' His search for the remote finally forced him to get up on his feet. Under some schoolbooks he discovered two paper plates containing a half-eaten burrito and a squashed package of tofu. He gave up trying to find the TV control and sank back, dropping his weight into the sofa with spring-shattering force. He'd wrecked all the best chairs at home doing that, but I tried not to remark on it this time. I hate to fight with him.

'Is your mother here?'

'Betty?' He always called her Betty. He never said Mom or Mother even when he was small. I blamed Betty for that. She never disciplined him. That's why he was slouching here with a stubbly face, long unwashed hair, and a dirty T-shirt printed with the slogan *Go away, I'm trying to think*. 'You can see Betty's not here; I don't know where she is.'

'How would it grab you if I told you she just now forced her way into my office and climbed out onto the window ledge?'

Danny took the news very calmly. I mean, this was his mother. He nodded. 'She did that with Uncle Sean in Seattle. He called the Fire Department.'

'So did I. I called the Fire Department, but she made herself scarce before they arrived. So of course they prowled through the office trying to find ways to give me a bad time.'

'Why?' He was always unnaturally calm with me. Calm in a studied and exaggerated way so I sometimes wondered if it was an effect