



Good Evening
Mr. & Mrs. America,
and All the Ships at Sea

Richard Bausch

**GOOD EVENING MR. & MRS. AMERICA,
AND ALL THE SHIPS AT SEA**

a novel

RICHARD BAUSCH

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Suzie

It is the duty of old men to lie to the young.

—Thornton Wilder, *The Eighth Day*

The places that we have known belong now only to the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience...remembrance of a particular form is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.

—Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

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Author's Note

This is a work of fiction. I made up everything except the facts and the politics, which everybody knows are of little importance.

Chapter 1

The other students still enrolled in the D'Allessandro School for Broadcasting in the fall of 1964 had heavy responsibilities and worries, and were making sacrifices to come to school. Lately it had seemed to Walter Marshall as if there were some general discouragement these students were all stoically enduring to continue acquiring their training, though Mr. D'Allessandro himself was always cheerful, and went about his business in the usual meaningless hurry. He had a big ring of keys attached to his belt, and each evening he opened his office with a great jingling of the keys and breathless protestations about how pressed for time he was. Everything he did, every aspect of the school's operations, took place in the same hectic rush.

The building that housed the school was old—it had been erected during the presidency of Andrew Jackson—and occasionally the lights flickered or went out, as though something in the heart of the structure had failed momentarily. There were holes in the plaster of the ceilings in the corridors, and some of the wainscoting had come away from the walls of the rooms; the radiator pipes made an awful pounding noise in cold weather, when they

worked at all. And if the building itself was dilapidated, the school's equipment was not much better—several student desks were falling apart; some of the switches on the electronic console in the sound booth were broken; there were sheets of baffling dangling from the ceiling in the studio; only one of the phones worked. Mr. D'Allessandro had cut down on the electricity as much as possible, and was economizing in other ways: When the toilet in the men's bathroom broke, instead of calling a plumber he had fashioned a small cardboard sign for the one good bathroom: OCCUPIED (the *U* was closed at the top, so it looked as if it said OCCOPIED); because the radiator in his office was unpredictable and worked on its own undiscoverable schedule, he could be found some winter evenings sitting at his desk wearing a coat.

In the middle of all these homely concessions to frugality, Walter Marshall felt more than a little guilty: His tuition had been paid for out of an inheritance from his father; and just as it was becoming clear to his classmates that he had the best prospects for landing a job after graduation—he was already spending some Saturday mornings taping sixty-second commercials in English to be run during a South American public affairs program on Sunday afternoons—he had let it be known that he was no longer interested in broadcasting as a career.

So while the others struggled to meet their payments and to fulfill the responsibilities that were weighing them down—and while Mr. D'Allessandro himself seemed more harried and threadbare than ever—Marshall was coasting through only in order that the money already spent would not be wasted.

Aside from Albert Waple, who had been friendly from the first days, the other students had begun keeping a certain distance. There was never any unpleasantness—but in fact they now possessed more shared experience to talk about, since together they had also begun to arrive at the painful conclusion that the resources they were spending on this training might as well have been spent on something else.

There was Ricky Dalmas, who at twenty-two was only three years older than Marshall, but who already had a wife and two children. During the days, he worked in an auto shop behind the parts counter, and barely made enough money to pay his rent. Of course

he could not afford payments on a car. School nights, his wife packed sandwiches for his evening meal, and sent him trudging through the weather to school. Often, he had part of a sandwich with him to eat during the break, and when he did not have anything, he watched the others eat their candy bars and snack crackers. No one offered him anything, because he always refused and always seemed vaguely affronted by the offer. He kept an unlighted pipe in his mouth a lot of the time, bringing it out and holding it up as if to savor its aroma before he spoke. This was a nervous gesture, unconscious as a blink, and it was rendered all the more awkward by the fact that you could see him striving to be the sort of person who held a pipe a certain way—a man pondering troubles, the complexities of existence. Each night he wore the same dark green sport coat with patches on the sleeves, and his hair always dangled over his forehead, black, straight, and with a sheen like polish. At times the dark forelock looked exactly like that of Adolf Hitler in the photographs, but no one ever mentioned this. The pipe had a chip in its stem, and he had a chipped tooth, and it was difficult not to connect the two, somehow, as though there had been some kind of collision in his past having to do with the pipe. He had not finished high school, and was now having some trouble with the required work. His best hope for the future, according to Mr. D'Allessandro himself, was to find a job selling advertising time or something. That was as near as he would ever get to a real job in broadcasting, and Mr. D'Allessandro had been straight with him about it. He would never work the microphones, because his voice was too high-pitched, his ear for where emphasis ought to fall too weak. "There's no way to fake a tin ear," Mr. D'Allessandro told him.

Yet each night, as part of the second-year training schedule, Dalmas was required to read out some advertising copy, which—as was nearly always immediately evident—he had taken the trouble to write himself.

You know, death is always inconvenient, but to make it even more convenient, try Gausson's Funeral Home on West Pike Street in Landover Heights. That's Gausson's Funeral Home, the place to bring your family and friends during moments of grief...

There was Joe Baker, thirty-one years old, a civil servant now, though until the year before last he had been an elementary school teacher, in Alabama. He had been with the National Guard there during the riots three summers ago. "They had me guarding a church in Montgomery," he told Marshall in the first minutes of their acquaintance. "After the Freedom Riders came in and this mob went after them. That was a world of hurt. A bunch got away from the mob and gathered in this old church. A lot of the famous ones, too. I mean the whole boatload of Civil Rightsers—King himself was in there—making speeches and singing. It was something. Didn't know if anybody'd get out alive, least of all me. I believe in integration, too. I do. You know why? I think it's good for business. A lot of Southerners do. Even the ones raising all the hell. Like the bus-company owners. That's the most ridiculous thing in the world. Everybody knows they need the Negro's business—can't survive without it. And here they are insisting on this back of the bus shit. For the sake of form. All knee-jerk shit, you see? They're afraid to look at it differently. And then everybody's afraid of the crowd." He was also married, with three daughters, one of whom occasionally came with him to class. She looked nothing like her father, and he teased that this was one of God's mercies to the country. Baker was heavy-jowled, and pug-nosed, and wore a flattop haircut that showed the crown of his scalp. His mouth was crowded with teeth, especially on the bottom row, and they made his jaw stick out. The starched white shirt he always wore was invariably rolled up at the sleeves, showing powerful, almost hairless forearms. He possessed a good radio voice, but could not distinguish the tones needed—again, a problem of emphasis. When he spoke into the microphone, you could hear authority and confidence, but there was no music in it; it sounded flat, almost machine spoken—which was not at all the way he sounded simply talking. His ambition was to work his way up to sports announcer.

Only auto accident I ever had, it was summer, I was going slow in traffic, bumper to bumper, and I saw this beautiful girl—this vision, you know?—come walking out of a bank over on H Street. I couldn't take my eyes off her, and—bang!—I hit the guy in front of me.

I'm—what—eighteen years old, scared shitless, and out of the car this old, old man comes, all bent over with a cane. He walks slow, back to the window of my car, leans in and without quite looking at me says, "That's all right, son. I saw her, too." Then he turns around and walks back to his car and gets in, and that's just the way I want to be when I'm eighty-five...

There was Martin Alvarez, whose uncle worked at the FCC, and who claimed to have important connections there. Even these, he seemed to be saying at times, would do him no good. He was twenty-eight or twenty-nine, unmarried, and it was hard to know much else about him, since he never wanted to come out with the other students after classes and he seldom talked about himself. Big-shouldered and dark and round-faced, he spoke with an accent that made the others wonder why he was not the one doing advertisements for South American Radio. One of his eyes had a white fleck of something in it, and when he looked at you, with his white smile and his enthusiasm, the fleck made you think of helpless children in dire circumstances.

My favorite guy een show business ess thees guy Bert Pahks. Mos' talented guy I have ever seen, mun. No sheet. I saw him perform at thees club las' year, almos' keel me, mun...

The one woman in the class, Mrs. Gordon, had a very rich—even an attractive—voice and some ability to hit the right notes, but she had problems with certain words. At a point early in the course of study, she had announced to the others that there were words she simply would not say in any context, as a matter of principle—she did not use them in her daily affairs if she could help it, and she certainly would not use them, no matter the pressure or the cost, on the public airwaves. She was adamant about this, for personal reasons. She would not say the word “i-n-t-e-r-c-o-u-r-s-e,” she said, spelling it out very slowly as if intending to deprive the letters of their meaning when in proximity with each other, or the words “s-e-x,” “b-r-e-a-s-t,” “l-o-v-e-r,” or any word implying the name of a body part or function, including “k-i-d-n-e-y” function. She was not old—she might have been only a dozen years Marshall’s senior—

but she dressed and behaved as though she were. She came to class in severe suits and dresses, with high white collars and long sleeves, even during the hot, airless days of late June, and her hair was always tied up in a bun at the back of her head, then wrapped tight in a white hairnet. Marshall had supposed that the grounds for the restrictions she placed on language were religious.

They were not.

One evening, quite out of the blue, she expressed in the strongest way her conviction that God did not exist. Marshall had said something about Kennedy's funeral, how Cardinal Cushing had called for the angels to greet him, and how there had been something oddly emotionless about the old man's voice. "It's all a lot of baloney," Mrs. Gordon broke in. "A terrible lie. Something to keep people happy until they carry them away in the box." Her voice was nearly shrill. The others stared at her. "I didn't mean to interrupt," she said to Marshall, nervously touching her collar and looking down. You could see the effort it took to restore her demeanor.

In the evenings, just before class, her husband dropped her off, and was always waiting to pick her up when class was over. Marshall had watched her get into the car, and lean over to kiss the husband on the cheek, the husband concentrating on getting into the flow of traffic; and as the car moved off, the two of them stared straight ahead.

When Mrs. Gordon read copy, she did so in soft tones that were somehow motherly and caressive; even, in an odd way, alluring: If you did not look at her, you would have sworn that she was a much older, much more comfortable and confident woman.

This evening, ladies and gentlemen, we will be listening to the incomparable music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart...

Finally, there was Albert Waple. Tall, thin, sad-looking, ugly and angular, Albert had rough, strong, long-fingered hands, lean arms, and pipe-thin legs, like all the old caricatures one saw of Abraham Lincoln, and he had told Marshall when they first knew each other that his close friends called him Abe. "I think it's in honor of my good qualities, as well as appearance," he said with a

knowing smile. "You can call me that, too, if you want. Because I bet we'll be friends." He was twenty-two, severely myopic, and engaged to be married to the young woman who had taught him to read Braille. He could not wear glasses because the lenses were not made that could help him see any better, and, in fact, his doctors had told him that in a few years what little sight he did have would leave him. He wanted to be ready for the experience, and learning to read Braille was a way of doing that. He had thick, ash-blond hair, which usually stood straight up off the top of his head, as if he had just been aroused from a night's sleep; and if it was true that he could not drive a car, nor do many of the things people around him could do, he behaved always as though he were quite content to be where he was, doing whatever he happened to be doing. He could read only in direct, bright light, with the book almost touching his nose, yet he read a lot. It gave him terrible headaches, and caused cramps in his neck and back, and still he pursued it with the calm pitted happy resolute stubbornness of someone who appreciates a thing wholly, without the slightest doubt about its value. When reading, he looked like a man examining the smallest minutia, searching for some moving thing on the page; but of course he was attending to the words, the sounds that language made, saying the lines quietly to himself, and it was this whispering that had made him think he might make a career in radio. He liked the music of the words when they were arranged well, read aloud, and he read copy with a good, easy flair, a friendly sort of confiding simplicity.

His eyes were so deep set that his face seemed caved in on either side of his nose, and when he wasn't reading, he tended to gaze off, a look of patient acceptance on his face—he was someone to whom the whole of the rest of the world was a bad blur of colors and shapes, and he did not seem to mind this at all. Often, he had his copy done in Braille, now, speaking in his soft, amiable, small voice about the trouble in Alabama, or Laos, or Vietnam. He might as well have been some kindly stammering person on the telephone. And no matter how often Mr. D'Allessandro corrected him, talking about objectivity and distance, the detached, professional voice of radio news, he always took it quite seriously and patiently, and then went on in the same way, unable to be other than what he was.

Let's see, what do we have here—oh, yes, Jimmy Hoffa, president of the teamsters union, has been found guilty of jury tampering—that's from a trial in sixty-two, I believe. He's been sentenced to eight years imprisonment and a ten-thousand-dollar fine. He's still liable for conviction in another case, where he's charged with fraud and conspiracy, too.

Marshall imagined that this offhand style might start a trend, and that Albert would be famous one day, sitting on *The Tonight Show* with the new, younger guy, the former game-show host, talking with fondness about the old radio-school days, when Mr. D'Allesandro tried to get him to sound like everyone else....

Regarding Marshall's own future, broadcasting was now the farthest thing from his mind. He had other, loftier, ideas, having calculated that in the year 1988 he would be forty-three—John F. Kennedy's exact age when Kennedy had assumed the office of president. (It was difficult not to see significance in the fact that 1988 would be a presidential election year, too.) Since Kennedy's assassination, he had dreamed about politics—"the honorable profession" Kennedy had called it—and had entertained hopes of following in the dead president's footsteps. He felt something like a sense of mission about it, wanting to serve the people, as Kennedy had set out to do, although he had not given much thought to what the people actually might need in the way of service: Freedom, Opportunity, and Peace, of course...and jobs...less crime...and Medicare...and fully integrated schools, buses, and lunch counters. Integration generally. For real. An end to the nuclear threat. And security from the monolithic Communist plot to achieve world domination. He supposed that more definite ideas would come to him as he progressed. He considered that he was a patriot; he had recently described himself as an idealist without illusions, using the martyred president's phrase, though again he was not certain about the meaning of the phrase as it might actually apply to him. What he knew for certain was that he desired the chance to risk everything for his country.

And when 1988 did roll around, if he was a politician, perhaps he would be in a position to run....

He told no one about his plan, of course—not really. Well, he had spoken of it to Alice Kane, the young woman who worked the mailroom with him at the Census Bureau, on Twelfth Street. When he came to the job, the summer before President Kennedy’s assassination, Alice was already there, working in another department. He’d met her in the cafeteria. They had been seeing each other for a few months now, “just friends” she said to everyone else, including her father, who ran the Washington bureau of the news for CBS. The fact was that there were a number of young girls in the building who liked Marshall’s company, and troubled to spend time with him in the dead hour after lunch on summer afternoons. He was what they called cute, among themselves: He had a way of paying such deep attention to them; they felt almost revered in his presence. Moreover, he was naturally rather funny; he could imitate the gestures and voices of others with startling accuracy—he did Dick Nixon especially well, and the speech about retiring from politics after California had the temerity to elect Pat Brown over him the year before last—and he told stories, mostly having to do with various embarrassments he had experienced while in school, all of which amused and diverted them and made them laugh. He understood in a visceral, unspoken way that to these young women, if he was lovable, he was also not a serious candidate for love-life, as they called it to his face more than once, and he was usually happy enough to play to their idea of him as the harmless young clown. This was the role he played with all the women he knew, including the German girl he saw two nights a week at the D’Alessandro School. With Alice, though, there had been a shift toward something more substantial; they had been taking lunch hours together, and on the days he didn’t have school, she rode the same bus with him into Arlington. They had talked about more important matters, like the future, his future. It was becoming clear that she looked upon him less frivolously than the others. As a person to tell serious things to, she was the logical choice (for instance, she was the one to whom he had described himself as an idealist without illusions). Four years older than he was, and better informed about certain things concerning world news, she seemed to admire his intelligence, his finer qualities—an obvious tenderness of heart, the high-minded sentiments, the will

to improve himself. He had read *War and Peace*, for instance (it was an abridged version, but he had bought the paperbacks of the full edition, translated by Rosemary Edmonds, and he was several chapters into the first volume). Though Alice often teased him about the age difference, she had a way of seeming to hang on his every word. Once, in a strangely dolorous mood, she talked about what others might think of her, going around like this with a nineteen-year-old. This murmured confidence seemed to imply an invitation for him to reciprocate. And so he had mentioned, casually, but concentrating intensely on her face, that he was thinking of pursuing the presidency.

"The presidency," she said. "The presidency of what?"

"The—the United States," he said.

"Really? You?"

"Sure," he said through a small gulp. "Why not?"

"You're too sensitive. And blunt. And you don't have any money. I mean, being interested in politics is one thing—but gosh."

He had read somewhere that people thought Robert Kennedy was blunt. "It doesn't always take money," he said.

"It helps."

"What do you mean, 'blunt'?"

"Blunt. Blunt. As in, you don't have a lot of subtlety."

This did not sound good. He felt odd, having to pick through these thoughts while she watched him. He felt quite stupid doing it.

"I'd have an easier time believing you were going to be a painter," she said.

He was abruptly pleased. "I'm color-blind," he told her.

"You draw good pictures."

True—though he had no feeling for it at all, nor the slightest desire to pursue it. "I'm not interested in art," he said. "Not to do, anyway, like a career."

"Well, politics might be fun. I'm involved in some politics, you might say. I've been working for Civil Rights. We both live in what is still a segregated state, you know. Even though it's against the law now. Do you believe in Civil Rights?"

"I do," he said. "Very much."

She was staring off. "Running for president." She turned to him. "Stranger things have happened, I guess. Actually, now that I