PRIMARY COLORS

A Novel of Politics

by

ANONYMOUS

PRIMARY COLORS

A NOVEL OF POLITICS

ANONYMOUS

RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material:

Carlin America, Inc.: Excerpt from "Please Mr. Please" by Bruce Welch and John Rostill. Copyright © 1975 by Bluegum Music Ltd. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and Harold Ober Associates Incorporated: Ten lines from "Dinner Guest: Me" from *The Panther and the Lash* by Langston Hughes. Copyright © 1967 by Arna Bontemps and George Houston Bass. Rights throughout the British Commonwealth are controlled by Harold Ober Associates Incorporated. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and Harold Ober Associates Incorporated.

PolyGram Music Publishing: Four lines from "Good Ole' Boys Like Me" written by Bob McDill. Copyright © 1979 by PolyGram International Publishing, Inc. Six lines from "Primrose Lane" written by Wayne Shanklin and George Callender. Copyright © 1958 by PolyGram International Publishing, Inc. Copyright renewed. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc.: Excerpt from "Listen Lord—A Prayer" from *God's Trombone* by James Weldon Johnson. Copyright © 1927 by The Viking Press, Inc. Copyright renewed © 1955 by Grace Nail Johnson. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Primary colors : a novel of politics / Anonymous.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-679-44859-4
1. Presidents—United States—Election—Fiction.
PS3550.A1P75 1996
813′.54—dc20 95-39823

Manufactured in the United States of America
68B975

PRIMARY COLORS

For my spouse, living proof that flamboyance
and discretion are not mutually exclusive

Men as a whole judge more with their eyes than with their hands.

—Machiavelli

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Several well-known people—journalists, mostly—make cameo appearances in these pages, but this is a work of fiction and the usual rules apply. None of the other characters are real. None of these events ever happened.

PRIMARY COLORS

I

He was a big fellow, looking seriously pale on the streets of Harlem in deep summer. I am small and not so dark, not very threatening to Caucasians; I do not strut my stuff.

We shook hands. My inability to recall that particular moment more precisely is disappointing: the handshake is the threshold act, the beginning of politics. I've seen him do it two million times now, but I couldn't tell you *how* he does it, the right-handed part of it—the strength, quality, duration of it, the rudiments of pressing the flesh. I can, however, tell you a whole lot about what he does with his other hand. He is a genius with it. He might put it on your elbow, or up by your biceps: these are basic, reflexive moves. He is interested in you. He is honored to meet you. If he gets any higher up your shoulder—if he, say, drapes his left arm over your back, it is somehow less intimate, more casual. He'll share a laugh or a secret then—a light secret, not a real one—flattering you with the illusion of conspiracy. If he doesn't know you all that well and you've just told him something "important," something earnest or emotional, he will lock in and honor you with a two-hander, his left hand overwhelming your wrist and forearm. He'll flash that famous misty look of his. And he will mean it.

Anyway, as I recall it, he gave me a left-hand-just-above-the-elbow plus a vaguely curious "ah, so you're the guy I've been hearing

about" look, and a follow-me nod. I didn't have the time, or presence of mind, to send any message back at him. Slow emotional reflexes, I guess. His were lightning. He was six meaningful handshakes down the row before I caught up. And then I fell in, a step or two behind, classic staff position, as if I'd been doing it all my life. (I had, but not for anyone so good.)

We were sweeping up into the library, the librarian in tow, and now he had his big ears on. She was explaining her program and he was in heavy listening mode, the most aggressive listening the world has ever known: aerobic listening. It is an intense, disconcerting phenomenon—as if he were hearing quicker than you can get the words out, as if he were sucking the information out of you. When he gives full ear—a rare enough event; he's usually ingesting from two or three sources—his listening becomes the central fact of the conversation. He was doing this now, with the librarian, and she was staggering under it. She missed a step; he reached out, steadied her. She was middle-aged, pushing fifty, hair dyed auburn to blot the gray, unexceptional except for her legs, which were shocking, a gift from God. Had he noticed the legs when she almost went down on the stair? I couldn't tell. Howard Ferguson III had insinuated himself next to me, as we nudged up the crowded staircase, his hand squeezing my elbow—Lord, these were touchy fellows—saying: "Glad you changed your mind. Jack's really excited you could do this."

"What are we doing?" I asked. Howard had called and invited me to meet Governor Jack Stanton, who might or might not be running for president. The governor was stopping in New York on his way to do some early, explanatory wandering through New Hampshire. The invitation came with an intriguing address—in Harlem, of all places. (There was no money in Harlem and this was the serious money-bagging stage of the campaign, especially for an obscure Southern governor.) It also came with shameless flattery. "You're legendary," Howard had said in a dusty midwestern voice, cagey and playful. "He wants to lure you out of retirement."

Retirement: I had fled Washington after six years with Congressman William Larkin. It had been my first job out of school—and I was a victim of his upward mobility, from member to whip to majority leader. Too much. I hadn't been ready for power; I'd kind of en-

joyed the back benches. It was too soon for me to be someone, the majority leader's guy, the guy you had to get with if you wanted something in or out of this or that. And so, on my thirtieth birthday, an epiphany: "I'm sorry, sir—I need a break," I told the congressman.

"Don't you believe in what we're doing?" he asked.

You mean, counting heads? Lemme outta here. I was going out with a woman named March then; she was great-looking, but she worked for Nader and came equipped with a lack of irony guaranteed to survive the most rigorous crash testing. I found myself having fantasies of working my way through the months: April, May, June. . . . I don't remember what I told her. I told her something. "Henry, isn't this a little young for a midlife crisis?" she asked.

No. I called Philip Noyce at Columbia. I'd known him all my life. He was a colleague of Father's—back when, back before Father left Mother and began his World's Most Obscure Universities Tour. In the event, Philip got me a gig. I taught legislative process. As midlife crises go, it had been a busman's holiday.

Now I thought I might be ready to resume . . . things.

Anyway, I was curious. What was Jack Stanton doing up in Harlem when he should have been down on Wall Street trying to impress the big spenders? Was he trying to impress *me*? I doubted it. More likely, he had invited me along for racial cover. I was, I realized, the only black face in his entourage. Howard Ferguson certainly was about as far as you could get from dark. I noticed a discrete bauble of perspiration moving diagonally down the side of his forehead into his weird Elvis sideburn, as if his sweat were rationed: he was so dry, so thin-lipped austere—and his eyes burned so hard—one imagined that whatever juice he had inside was precious; if he didn't stay lubricated, he might catch fire. Howard was legendary himself, sort of: vestigial, a prairie ghost. He was born to a line of arsonists. His great-grandfather Firefly Ferguson had set the wheat fields ablaze and run for governor from a jail cell. Howard wore Firefly's parched, sandy face, thinning hair parted in the middle—and a pink flowered Liberty tie: I do not take this life, these lawyer clothes seriously, it said. His role in the Stanton operation was elusive—months later I'd still be trying to figure it out. He was a man who never tipped his hand, who never expressed an opinion in a meeting, and yet gave off the

sense that he had very powerful convictions, too powerful to be hinted among strangers. He had known the governor forever, since the antiwar days. "You ever been to an adult literacy program?" he asked, then chuckled. "Jack eats this shit up. Says it's like going to church."

So it was. It was a better room than the usual government-issue Formica and cinder block. There were none of the relentlessly cheery posters of books and owls. It was a dark, solemn place—a WPA library. The bookcases were oak and went most of the way up the walls; there was a mural above, a Bentonian, popular-front vision of biplanes buzzing the Statue of Liberty, locomotives rushing through wheat fields, glorious, muscular laborers going to work—a Howard Ferguson dreamscape. (They didn't need hortatory READ BOOKS propaganda back then; there were other struggles.) The class was seated around a large, round oak table. They were what the WPA muralist had in mind: a saintly proletariat.

The librarian, condescending to them in the reflexive, unconsciously insulting manner of public servants everywhere, introduced the visitor: "Governor Jack Stanton, who has been a great friend of continuing education, and is now running for . . ." She tossed a flirtatious look his way.

"Cover," he said.

"Do you want to say a few—"

"No, no—y'all go on ahead," he purred. "Don't mind me."

He took a seat away from the table, deftly respecting the integrity of the class. I sat diagonally across the room from him; I could watch him watching them. Howard stood behind me, leaning against a bookcase. They introduced themselves. They were waitresses, dishwashers and janitors, most in their twenties and thirties, people with night jobs. Each read a little; the women had an easier time of it than the men, who really struggled. And then they said something about their lives. It was very moving. The last to go was Dewayne Smith, who weighed three hundred pounds easy and was a short-order chef. "They just kept passin' me up, y'know?" he said. "Couldn't read a lick, had a . . . learning disbility." He looked over to the librarian to make sure he had said it right.

"Dewayne's dyslexic," she said.

"They just kept a passin' me up—third grade, fourth grade—and I'm like too proud, y'know? It was like no one noticed anyways. I sit in the back, I ain't a mouthy broth—person, I don't cause no trouble, I stick to my own self. So I go on through, *all* the ways through. I graduate elementary school. They send me to Ben Franklin, general studies. They coulda sent me to the Bronx Zoo. No one ever tell me nothin'. No one ever say, 'Dewayne, you can't read—what you gonna do with your sorry ass?' Scuse me." He looked over at the governor, who smiled, urging him on.

"This was twenty years ago," the librarian interjected. "We're better about catching those things now"—as if that canceled out such monumental callousness, the numb stupidity of the system.

"Anyway, graduation come. My momma come. She take the day off from the laundry where she work, puts on her church dress. She don't have a clue nothin's wrong; me neither. I been skatin' through? So we're there and Dr. Dalemberti is callin' out the names and what we did, like 'Sharonna Harris, honors,' or 'Tyrone Kirby, Regents diploma,' and everyone's gotta just stand there on the stage, while they come up one by one. So they get to my name—goin' alphabetical, y'know—and Dr. Dalemberti says, so everyone hear it, 'Dewayne Smith receive a certificate of attendance.' You can hear people buzzin', coupla folks laughin' a little, and I gotta go walk up there, and get this . . . it look just like a diploma, y'know? Same kind of paper—funny, how I'm thinking people won't notice 'cause it's the same kind of paper. But that don't work: everyone know the truth now. And I'm thinkin': Sucker. These folks expect you a fool, they got rid of everyone else can't read, they drop out. And my reward for stickin' around is—I gotta stand there, burnin', and I'm tryin' not to look at anyone, tryin' not to look too stupid, y'know? But feelin' stupid as a rock. The girl come up after me gigglin' a little, still laughin' 'bout me, y'know? She nervous cause she gotta stand next to the idiot. Like it's catchin' or somethin'. And I see Momma out there with her hat on and her purse in her lap. She wearin' her white church gloves. She got her glasses on, and tears comin' down from behind her glasses, like someone hurt her bad, like someone die."

I kind of lost it then. I tried to gulp down the sob, but Dewayne had caught me somewhere deeper, and earlier, than politics. Damn. I shud-

dered, tears leaked out the side of my eye. And: Do you know how it happens at a moment like that, when you are embarrassed like that, you will look directly—reflexively—at the very person you don't want to see you? I looked over at Jack Stanton. His face was beet-red, his blue eyes glistening and tears were rolling down his cheeks.

The first thought was—relief: relief and amazement, and a sudden, sharp, quite surprising affinity. This was followed, quickly, by a caveat: Weakness? Ed Muskie in the snow in New Hampshire? But that evaporated, because Stanton had launched himself into motion, rubbing his cheeks off with the back of his hands—everyone knew now that he had lost it—standing up, standing over the table, hands on the shoulders of two of the students, leaning over the table toward Dewayne and saying, "I am so very, very deeply grateful that you'd share that with us, Dewayne." It wasn't nearly so bad as the words sound now. He had the courage of his emotions. "And I think it is time we made it impossible—I mean *impossible*—for anyone to get lost in the system like you did. We have to learn to cherish our young people. But most of all, I want to thank you for believing, for having faith—faith that you can overcome the odds and learn and succeed." It was getting a little thick, and he seemed to sense it. He got off the soapbox, kicked back, circled the table over to where Dewayne was; I had him in profile now. "Takes some courage, too. How many y'all tell your friends and family where you're going when you come here?" There were smiles.

"Let me tell you a story," he said. "It's about my uncle Charlie. This happened just after I was born, so I only got it from my momma—but I know it's true. Charlie came home from the war a hero. He had been on Iwo Jima—you know, where they raised the flag? And he had taken out several machine-gun nests of Japs . . . Japanese soldiers, who had a squad of his buddies pinned down. First one with a grenade. Second one by himself, with his rifle and bayonet and bare hands. They found him with a knife in his gut and his hands around an enemy soldier's throat. He had two bullets in him, too."

Dewayne said, "Shit."

"Yeah, that's right," Stanton said, moving clockwise around the table now, like a big cat. "They gave him the Medal of Honor. Presi-

dent Truman did. And then he came home to our little town, Grace Junction. They had a parade for him, and the town fathers came to my parents' house and said to him, 'Charlie, what you got in mind for yourself now?' Charlie said he didn't know. Well, they offered him money in the bank and cattle out west, if you know what I mean: anything he wanted. The mayor said Charlie could have a full scholarship to the state university. The banker said he could understand if Charlie didn't want to go back to school after all he'd been through, so he was offering him a management job, big future, at the bank. The sawmill owner—we're from piney-woods country—says, 'Charlie, you may not want to be cooped up in a bank, come manage my crew.' And you know what? Damned if Charlie didn't turn them all down."

Stanton stopped. He waited. One of the women said, "So what he do?"

"Nothin'. He just lay down on the couch, smoked his Luckies, let himself go. . . . No one could get him off that couch."

"Oh, I got it," said a wiry Hispanic with a pencil-thin mustache. "He got his head fu— ah, mess up. He got one of them post-dramatic things, right?"

"Nope," Stanton said, very calmly. "It was just that, well . . . He couldn't read."

Heads snapped, someone said *What?,* someone whistled, someone said, "No shit."

"He couldn't read, and he was embarrassed, and he didn't want to tell anyone," Stanton said. "He had the courage to win the Congressional Medal of Honor, but he didn't have the strength to do what each of you has done, what—each—of—you—is doing—right—here. He didn't have the courage to admit he needed help, and to find it. So I want you to know that I understand, I appreciate what you are doing here, I *honor* your commitment. And when people ask me, 'Jack Stanton, why are you always spending so much money and so much time and so much effort on adult literacy programs?' I tell them: Because it gives me a chance to see real courage. It inspires me to be stronger. I am so grateful you've let me visit with you today."

I have seen better speakers and heard better speeches, but I don't think I'd ever heard—at least, not till that moment—a speaker who measured his audience so well and connected so precisely. It was an

impressive bit of politics. And they were all over him then, clapping his back, shaking his hand, hugging him. He didn't back off, keep his space, the way most pols would; he leaned into them, and seemed to get as much satisfaction from touching them, draping his big arm over their shoulders, as they got from him. He had this beatific, slightly goofy look on. And then Dewayne said, "Wait a minute." The room fell silent. "What about Charlie?"

"Well, it took a while," Stanton said, more conversationally. They were all friends now. "He started hanging 'round the high school when I got up there. He, uh—" Stanton was embarrassed. He was making a decision. He went ahead with it—"Well, I was the manager of the varsity baseball team and Charlie liked to sit with me on the bench, helping out—and that grew into helping out around the gymnasium, and finally they offered him a job when Mr. Krause died."

"Who Mr. Krause? What job he got?"

"Oh, he was the school janitor."

"No shit."

He stayed with them for a time, answering questions, signing autographs. The library lady pitched Stanton about the need for more money—there was a long waiting list of people who wanted to get into that program but had to be turned away. Then they all followed him back downstairs, and out to the car. Howard Ferguson and I trailed the crowd. Howard squeezed my arm gently, just above the elbow, kind of chuckled—a strangled guffaw—and shrugged, as if to say: What can I say?

"How do you know him?" I asked, having to ask something.

"Oh, a long time," he said.

The governor was down on the sidewalk now, chugging through another round of meaningful handshakes. Ferguson and I stood over by the car. "So what do you think?" Howard asked.

I said something enthusiastic, but I really was wondering: Is he expecting me to say something like "Where do I sign up?" Didn't they want to sit down and say, Here's what we're doing and here's what we'd like you to do and what do you think about this issue, or that person, and how do you think someone should run for president of the United States these days?

Stanton came over. Looked at me. So? "Well, that was something," I said.