

BECOMING

MICHELLE
OBAMA



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To all the people who have helped me become: the folks who raised me—Fraser, Marian, Craig, and my vast extended family, my circle of strong women, who always lift me up, my loyal and dedicated staff, who continue to make me proud.

To the loves of my life:

Malia and Sasha, my two most precious peas, who are my reasons for being, and finally, Barack, who always promised me an interesting journey.

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Becoming



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Preface

March 2017

When I was a kid, my aspirations were simple. I wanted a dog. I wanted a house that had stairs in it—two floors for one family. I wanted, for some reason, a four-door station wagon instead of the two-door Buick that was my father’s pride and joy. I used to tell people that when I grew up, I was going to be a pediatrician. Why? Because I loved being around little kids and I quickly learned that it was a pleasing answer for adults to hear. *Oh, a doctor! What a good choice!* In those days, I wore pigtails and bossed my older brother around and managed, always and no matter what, to get As at school. I was ambitious, though I didn’t know exactly what I was shooting for. Now I think it’s one of the most useless questions an adult can ask a child—*What do you want to be when you grow up?* As if growing up is finite. As if at some point you become something and that’s the end.

So far in my life, I’ve been a lawyer. I’ve been a vice president at a hospital and the director of a nonprofit that helps young people build meaningful careers. I’ve been a working-class black student at a fancy mostly white college. I’ve been the only woman, the only African American, in all sorts of rooms. I’ve been a bride, a stressed-out new mother, a daughter torn up by grief. And until recently, I was the First Lady of the United States of America—a job that’s not officially a job, but that nonetheless has given me a platform like nothing I could have imagined. It challenged me and humbled me, lifted me up and shrank me down, sometimes all at once. I’m just beginning to process what took place over these last years—from the moment in 2006 when my husband first started talking about running for president to the cold morning this

winter when I climbed into a limo with Melania Trump, accompanying her to her husband's inauguration. It's been quite a ride.

When you're First Lady, America shows itself to you in its extremes. I've been to fund-raisers in private homes that look more like art museums, houses where people own bathtubs made from gemstones. I've visited families who lost everything in Hurricane Katrina and were tearful and grateful just to have a working refrigerator and stove. I've encountered people I find to be shallow and hypocritical and others—teachers and military spouses and so many more—whose spirits are so deep and strong it's astonishing. And I've met kids—lots of them, all over the world—who crack me up and fill me with hope and who blessedly manage to forget about my title once we start rooting around in the dirt of a garden.

Since stepping reluctantly into public life, I've been held up as the most powerful woman in the world and taken down as an "angry black woman." I've wanted to ask my detractors which part of that phrase matters to them the most—is it "angry" or "black" or "woman"? I've smiled for photos with people who call my husband horrible names on national television, but still want a framed keepsake for their mantel. I've heard about the swampy parts of the internet that question everything about me, right down to whether I'm a woman or a man. A sitting U.S. congressman has made fun of my butt. I've been hurt. I've been furious. But mostly, I've tried to laugh this stuff off.

There's a lot I still don't know about America, about life, about what the future might bring. But I do know myself. My father, Fraser, taught me to work hard, laugh often, and keep my word. My mother, Marian, showed me how to think for myself and to use my voice. Together, in our cramped apartment on the South Side of Chicago, they helped me see the value in our story, in my story, in the larger story of our country. Even when it's not pretty or perfect. Even when it's more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.

For eight years, I lived in the White House, a place with more stairs than I can count—plus elevators, a bowling alley, and an in-house florist. I slept in a bed that was made up with Italian linens. Our meals were cooked by a team of world-class chefs and delivered by professionals more highly trained than those at any five-star restaurant or hotel. Secret

Service agents, with their earpieces and guns and deliberately flat expressions, stood outside our doors, doing their best to stay out of our family's private life. We got used to it, eventually, sort of—the strange grandeur of our new home and also the constant, quiet presence of others.

The White House is where our two girls played ball in the hallways and climbed trees on the South Lawn. It's where Barack sat up late at night, poring over briefings and drafts of speeches in the Treaty Room, and where Sunny, one of our dogs, sometimes pooped on the rug. I could stand on the Truman Balcony and watch the tourists posing with their selfie sticks and peering through the iron fence, trying to guess at what went on inside. There were days when I felt suffocated by the fact that our windows had to be kept shut for security, that I couldn't get some fresh air without causing a fuss. There were other times when I'd be awestruck by the white magnolias blooming outside, the everyday bustle of government business, the majesty of a military welcome. There were days, weeks, and months when I hated politics. And there were moments when the beauty of this country and its people so overwhelmed me that I couldn't speak.

Then it was over. Even if you see it coming, even as your final weeks are filled with emotional good-byes, the day itself is still a blur. A hand goes on a Bible; an oath gets repeated. One president's furniture gets carried out while another's comes in. Closets are emptied and refilled in the span of a few hours. Just like that, there are new heads on new pillows—new temperaments, new dreams. And when it ends, when you walk out the door that last time from the world's most famous address, you're left in many ways to find yourself again.

So let me start here, with a small thing that happened not long ago. I was at home in the redbrick house that my family recently moved into. Our new house sits about two miles from our old house, on a quiet neighborhood street. We're still settling in. In the family room, our furniture is arranged the same way it was in the White House. We've got mementos around the house that remind us it was all real—photos of our family time at Camp David, handmade pots given to me by Native American students, a book signed by Nelson Mandela. What was strange about this night was that everyone was gone. Barack was traveling. Sasha was out with friends. Malia's been living and working in New York,

finishing out her gap year before college. It was just me, our two dogs, and a silent, empty house like I haven't known in eight years.

And I was hungry. I walked down the stairs from our bedroom with the dogs following on my heels. In the kitchen, I opened the fridge. I found a loaf of bread, took out two pieces, and laid them in the toaster oven. I opened a cabinet and got out a plate. I know it's a weird thing to say, but to take a plate from a shelf in the kitchen without anyone first insisting that they get it for me, to stand by myself watching bread turn brown in the toaster, feels as close to a return to my old life as I've come. Or maybe it's my new life just beginning to announce itself.

In the end, I didn't just make toast; I made cheese toast, moving my slices of bread to the microwave and melting a fat mess of gooey cheddar between them. I then carried my plate outside to the backyard. I didn't have to tell anyone I was going. I just went. I was in bare feet, wearing a pair of shorts. The chill of winter had finally lifted. The crocuses were just starting to push up through the beds along our back wall. The air smelled like spring. I sat on the steps of our veranda, feeling the warmth of the day's sun still caught in the slate beneath my feet. A dog started barking somewhere in the distance, and my own dogs paused to listen, seeming momentarily confused. It occurred to me that it was a jarring sound for them, given that we didn't have neighbors, let alone neighbor dogs, at the White House. For them, all this was new. As the dogs loped off to explore the perimeter of the yard, I ate my toast in the dark, feeling alone in the best possible way. My mind wasn't on the group of guards with guns sitting less than a hundred yards away at the custom-built command post inside our garage, or the fact that I still can't walk down a street without a security detail. I wasn't thinking about the new president or for that matter the old president, either.

I was thinking instead about how in a few minutes I would go back inside my house, wash my plate in the sink, and head up to bed, maybe opening a window so I could feel the spring air—how glorious that would be. I was thinking, too, that the stillness was affording me a first real opportunity to reflect. As First Lady, I'd get to the end of a busy week and need to be reminded how it had started. But time is beginning to feel different. My girls, who arrived at the White House with their Polly Pockets, a blanket named Blankie, and a stuffed tiger named Tiger, are now teenagers, young women with plans and voices of their own. My

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husband is making his own adjustments to life after the White House, catching his own breath. And here I am, in this new place, with a lot I want to say.

Michelle Obama

Becoming Me

1

I spent much of my childhood listening to the sound of striving. It came in the form of bad music, or at least amateur music, coming up through the floorboards of my bedroom—the *plink plink plink* of students sitting downstairs at my great-aunt Robbie’s piano, slowly and imperfectly learning their scales. My family lived in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, in a tidy brick bungalow that belonged to Robbie and her husband, Terry. My parents rented an apartment on the second floor, while Robbie and Terry lived on the first. Robbie was my mother’s aunt and had been generous to her over many years, but to me she was kind of a terror. Prim and serious, she directed the choir at a local church and was also our community’s resident piano teacher. She wore sensible heels and kept a pair of reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She had a sly smile but didn’t appreciate sarcasm the way my mother did. I’d sometimes hear her chewing out her students for not having practiced enough or chewing out their parents for delivering them late to lessons.

“Good night!” she’d exclaim in the middle of the day, with the same blast of exasperation someone else might say, “Oh, for God’s sake!” Few, it seemed, could live up to Robbie’s standards.

The sound of people trying, however, became the soundtrack to our life. There was plinking in the afternoons, plinking in the evenings. Ladies from church sometimes came over to practice hymns, belting their piety through our walls. Under Robbie’s rules, kids who took piano lessons were allowed to work on only one song at a time. From my room, I’d listen to them attempting, note by uncertain note, to win her approval, graduating from “Hot Cross Buns” to “Brahms’s Lullaby,” but only after many tries. The music was never annoying; it was just persistent. It crept up the stairwell that separated our space from Robbie’s. It drifted through open windows in summertime, accompanying my thoughts as I played with my Barbies or built little kingdoms made out of blocks. The only respite came when my father got

home from an early shift at the city's water treatment plant and put the Cubs game on TV, boosting the volume just enough to blot it all out.

This was the tail end of the 1960s on the South Side of Chicago. The Cubs weren't bad, but they weren't great, either. I'd sit on my dad's lap in his recliner and listen to him narrate how the Cubs were in the middle of a late-season swoon or why Billy Williams, who lived just around the corner from us on Constance Avenue, had such a sweet swing from the left side of the plate. Outside the ballparks, America was in the midst of a massive and uncertain shift. The Kennedys were dead. Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed standing on a balcony in Memphis, setting off riots across the country, including in Chicago. The 1968 Democratic National Convention turned bloody as police went after Vietnam War protesters with batons and tear gas in Grant Park, about nine miles north of where we lived. White families, meanwhile, were moving out of the city in droves, lured by the suburbs—the promise of better schools, more space, and probably more whiteness, too.

None of this really registered with me. I was just a kid, a girl with Barbies and blocks, with two parents and an older brother who slept each night with his head about three feet from mine. My family was my world, the center of everything. My mother taught me how to read early, walking me to the public library, sitting with me as I sounded out words on a page. My father went to work every day dressed in the blue uniform of a city laborer, but at night he showed us what it meant to love jazz and art. As a boy, he'd taken classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, and in high school he'd painted and sculpted. He'd been a competitive swimmer and boxer in school, too, and as an adult was a fan of every televised sport, from professional golf to the NHL. He appreciated seeing strong people excel. When my brother, Craig, got interested in basketball, my father propped coins above the doorframe in our kitchen, encouraging him to leap for them.

Everything that mattered was within a five-block radius—my grandparents and cousins, the church on the corner where we were not quite regulars at Sunday school, the gas station where my mother sometimes sent me to pick up a pack of Newports, and the liquor store, which also sold Wonder bread, penny candy, and gallons of milk. On hot summer nights, Craig and I dozed off to the sound of cheers from the

adult-league softball games going on at the nearby public park, where by day we climbed on the playground jungle gym and played tag with other kids.

Craig and I are not quite two years apart in age. He's got my father's soft eyes and optimistic spirit, my mother's implacability. The two of us have always been tight, in part thanks to an unwavering and somewhat inexplicable allegiance he seemed to feel for his baby sister right from the start. There's an early family photograph, a black and white of the four of us sitting on a couch, my mother smiling as she holds me on her lap, my father appearing serious and proud with Craig perched on his. We're dressed for church or maybe a wedding. I'm about eight months old, a pudgy-faced, no-nonsense bruiser in diapers and an ironed white dress, looking ready to slide out of my mother's clutches, staring down the camera as if I might eat it. Next to me is Craig, gentlemanly in a little bow tie and suit jacket, bearing an earnest expression. He's two years old and already the portrait of brotherly vigilance and responsibility—his arm extended toward mine, his fingers wrapped protectively around my fat wrist.

At the time the photo was taken, we were living across the hall from my father's parents in Parkway Gardens, an affordable housing project on the South Side made up of modernist apartment buildings. It had been built in the 1950s and was designed as a co-op, meant to ease a post-World War II housing shortage for black working-class families. Later, it would deteriorate under the grind of poverty and gang violence, becoming one of the city's more dangerous places to live. Long before this, though, when I was still a toddler, my parents—who had met as teenagers and married in their mid-twenties—accepted an offer to move a few miles south to Robbie and Terry's place in a nicer neighborhood.

On Euclid Avenue, we were two households living under one not very big roof. Judging from the layout, the second-floor space had probably been designed as an in-law apartment meant for one or two people, but four of us found a way to fit inside. My parents slept in the lone bedroom, while Craig and I shared a bigger area that I assume was intended to be the living room. Later, as we grew, my grandfather—Purnell Shields, my mother's father, who was an enthusiastic if not deeply skilled carpenter—brought over some cheap wooden paneling and built a makeshift partition to divide the room into two semiprivate

spaces. He added a plastic accordion door to each space and created a little common play area in front where we could keep our toys and books.

I loved my room. It was just big enough for a twin bed and a narrow desk. I kept all my stuffed animals on the bed, painstakingly tucking them around my head each night as a form of ritual comfort. On his side of the wall, Craig lived a sort of mirror existence with his own bed pushed up against the paneling, parallel to mine. The partition between us was so flimsy that we could talk as we lay in bed at night, often tossing a balled sock back and forth through the ten-inch gap between the partition and the ceiling as we did.

Aunt Robbie, meanwhile, kept her part of the house like a mausoleum, the furniture swathed in protective plastic that felt cold and sticky on my bare legs when I dared sit on it. Her shelves were loaded with porcelain figurines we weren't allowed to touch. I'd let my hand hover over a set of sweet-faced glass poodles—a delicate-looking mother and three tiny puppies—and then pull it back, fearing Robbie's wrath. When lessons weren't happening, the first floor was deadly silent. The television was never on, the radio never played. I'm not even sure the two of them talked much down there. Robbie's husband's full name was William Victor Terry, but for some reason we called him only by his last name. Terry was like a shadow, a distinguished-looking man who wore three-piece suits every day of the week and pretty much never said a word.

I came to think of upstairs and downstairs as two different universes, ruled over by competing sensibilities. Upstairs, we were noisy and unapologetically so. Craig and I threw balls and chased each other around the apartment. We sprayed Pledge furniture polish on the wood floor of the hallway so we could slide farther and faster in our socks, often crashing into the walls. We held brother-sister boxing matches in the kitchen, using the two sets of gloves my dad had given us for Christmas, along with personalized instructions on how to land a proper jab. At night, as a family, we played board games, told stories and jokes, and cranked Jackson 5 records on the stereo. When it got to be too much for Robbie down below, she'd emphatically flick the light switch in our shared stairwell, which also controlled the lightbulb in our upstairs

hallway, off and on, again and again—her polite-ish way of telling us to pipe down.

Robbie and Terry were older. They grew up in a different era, with different concerns. They'd seen things our parents hadn't—things that Craig and I, in our raucous childishness, couldn't begin to guess. This was some version of what my mother would say if we got too wound up about the grouchiness downstairs. Even if we didn't know the context, we were instructed to remember that context existed. Everyone on earth, they'd tell us, was carrying around an unseen history, and that alone deserved some tolerance. Robbie, I'd learn many years later, had sued Northwestern University for discrimination, having registered for a choral music workshop there in 1943 and been denied a room in the women's dorm. She was instructed to stay instead in a rooming house in town—a place “for coloreds,” she was told. Terry, meanwhile, had once been a Pullman porter on one of the overnight passenger rail lines running in and out of Chicago. It was a respectable if not well-paying profession, made up entirely of black men who kept their uniforms immaculate while also hauling luggage, serving meals, and generally tending to the needs of train passengers, including shining their shoes.

Years after his retirement, Terry still lived in a state of numbed formality—impeccably dressed, remotely servile, never asserting himself in any way, at least that I would see. It was as if he'd surrendered a part of himself as a way of coping. I'd watch him mow our lawn in the high heat of summer in a pair of wing tips, suspenders, and a thin-brimmed fedora, the sleeves of his dress shirt carefully rolled up. He'd indulge himself by having exactly one cigarette a day and exactly one cocktail a month, and even then he wouldn't loosen up the way my father and mother would after having a highball or a Schlitz, which they did a few times a month. Some part of me wanted Terry to talk, to spill whatever secrets he carried. I imagined that he had all sorts of interesting stories about cities he'd visited and how rich people on trains behaved or maybe didn't. But we wouldn't hear any of it. For some reason, he'd never tell.

I was about four when I decided I wanted to learn piano. Craig, who was in the first grade, was already making trips downstairs for weekly lessons on Robbie's upright and returning relatively unscathed. I figured I was ready. I was pretty convinced I already *had* learned piano, in fact,

through straight-up osmosis—all those hours spent listening to other kids fumbling through their songs. The music was already in my head. I just wanted to go downstairs and demonstrate to my exacting great-aunt what a gifted girl I was, how it would take no effort at all for me to become her star student.

Robbie's piano sat in a small square room at the rear of the house, close to a window that overlooked the backyard. She kept a potted plant in one corner and a folding table where students could fill out music work sheets in the other. During lessons, she sat straight spined in an upholstered high-back armchair, tapping out the beat with one finger, her head cocked as she listened keenly for each mistake. Was I afraid of Robbie? Not exactly, but there was a scariness to her; she represented a rigid kind of authority I hadn't yet encountered elsewhere. She demanded excellence from every kid who sat on her piano bench. I saw her as someone to win over, or maybe to somehow conquer. With her, it always felt like there was something to prove.

At my first lesson, my legs dangled from the piano bench, too short to reach the floor. Robbie gave me my own elementary music workbook, which I was thrilled about, and showed me how to position my hands properly over the keys.

"All right, pay attention," she said, scolding me before we'd even begun. "Find middle C."

When you're little, a piano can look like it has a thousand keys. You're staring at an expanse of black and white that stretches farther than two small arms can reach. Middle C, I soon learned, was the anchoring point. It was the territorial line between where the right hand and the left hand traveled, between the treble and the bass clefs. If you could lay your thumb on middle C, everything else automatically fell into place. The keys on Robbie's piano had a subtle unevenness of color and shape, places where bits of the ivory had broken off over time, leaving them looking like a set of bad teeth. Helpfully, the middle C key had a full corner missing, a wedge about the size of my fingernail, which got me centered every time.

It turned out I liked the piano. Sitting at it felt natural, like something I was meant to do. My family was loaded with musicians and music lovers, especially on my mother's side. I had an uncle who played

in a professional band. Several of my aunts sang in church choirs. I had Robbie, who in addition to her choir and lessons directed something called the Operetta Workshop, a shoestring musical theater program for kids, which Craig and I attended every Saturday morning in the basement of her church. The musical center of my family, though, was my grandfather Shields, the carpenter, who was also Robbie's younger brother. He was a carefree, round-bellied man with an infectious laugh and a scraggly salt-and-pepper beard. When I was younger, he'd lived on the West Side of the city and Craig and I had referred to him as Westside. But he moved into our neighborhood the same year I started taking piano lessons, and we'd duly rechristened him Southside.

Southside had separated from my grandmother decades earlier, when my mother was in her teens. He lived with my aunt Carolyn, my mom's oldest sister, and my uncle Steve, her youngest brother, just two blocks from us in a cozy one-story house that he'd wired top to bottom for music, putting speakers in every room, including the bathroom. In the dining room, he built an elaborate cabinet system to hold his stereo equipment, much of it scavenged at yard sales. He had two mismatched turntables plus a rickety old reel-to-reel tape player and shelves packed with records he'd collected over many years.

There was a lot about the world that Southside didn't trust. He was kind of a classic old-guy conspiracy theorist. He didn't trust dentists, which led to his having virtually no teeth. He didn't trust the police, and he didn't always trust white people, either, being the grandson of a Georgia slave and having spent his early childhood in Alabama during the time of Jim Crow before coming north to Chicago in the 1920s. When he had kids of his own, Southside had taken pains to keep them safe—scaring them with real and imagined stories about what might happen to black kids who crossed into the wrong neighborhood, lecturing them about avoiding the police.

Music seemed to be an antidote to his worries, a way to relax and crowd them out. When Southside had a payday for his carpentry work, he'd sometimes splurge and buy himself a new album. He threw regular parties for the family, forcing everyone to talk loudly over whatever he put on the stereo, because the music always dominated. We celebrated most major life events at Southside's house, which meant that over the years we unwrapped Christmas presents to Ella Fitzgerald and blew out

birthday candles to Coltrane. According to my mother, as a younger man Southside had made a point of pumping jazz into his seven children, often waking everyone at sunrise by playing one of his records at full blast.

His love for music was infectious. Once Southside moved to our neighborhood, I'd pass whole afternoons at his house, pulling albums from the shelf at random and putting them on his stereo, each one its own immersing adventure. Even though I was small, he put no restrictions on what I could touch. He'd later buy me my first album, Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book*, which I'd keep at his house on a special shelf he designated for my favorite records. If I was hungry, he'd make me a milk shake or fry us a whole chicken while we listened to Aretha or Miles or Billie. To me, Southside was as big as heaven. And heaven, as I envisioned it, had to be a place full of jazz.

At home, I continued to work on my own progress as a musician. Sitting at Robbie's upright piano, I was quick to pick up the scales—that osmosis thing was real—and I threw myself into filling out the sight-reading work sheets she gave me. Because we didn't have a piano of our own, I had to do my practicing downstairs on hers, waiting until nobody else was having a lesson, often dragging my mom with me to sit in the upholstered chair and listen to me play. I learned one song in the piano book and then another. I was probably no better than her other students, no less fumbling, but I was driven. To me, there was magic in the learning. I got a buzzy sort of satisfaction from it. For one thing, I'd picked up on the simple, encouraging correlation between how long I practiced and how much I achieved. And I sensed something in Robbie as well—too deeply buried to be outright pleasure, but still, a pulse of something lighter and happier coming from her when I made it through a song without messing up, when my right hand picked out a melody while my left touched down on a chord. I'd notice it out of the corner of my eye: Robbie's lips would unpurse themselves just slightly; her tapping finger would pick up a little bounce.

This, it turns out, was our honeymoon phase. It's possible that we might have continued this way, Robbie and I, had I been less curious and more reverent when it came to her piano method. But the lesson book was thick enough and my progress on the opening few songs slow

enough that I got impatient and started peeking ahead—and not just a few pages ahead but deep into the book, checking out the titles of the more advanced songs and beginning, during my practice sessions, to fiddle around with playing them. When I proudly debuted one of my late-in-the-book songs for Robbie, she exploded, slapping down my achievement with a vicious “Good *night!*” I got chewed out the way I’d heard her chewing out plenty of students before me. All I’d done was try to learn more and faster, but Robbie viewed it as a crime approaching treason. She wasn’t impressed, not even a little bit.

Nor was I chastened. I was the kind of kid who liked concrete answers to my questions, who liked to reason things out to some logical if exhausting end. I was lawyerly and also veered toward dictatorial, as my brother, who often got ordered out of our shared play area, would attest. When I thought I had a good idea about something, I didn’t like being told no. Which is how my great-aunt and I ended up in each other’s faces, both of us hot and unyielding.

“How could you be mad at me for wanting to learn a new song?”

“You’re not ready for it. That’s not how you learn piano.”

“But I *am* ready. I just played it.”

“That’s not how it’s done.”

“But *why?*”

Piano lessons became epic and trying, largely due to my refusal to follow the prescribed method and Robbie’s refusal to see anything good in my freewheeling approach to her songbook. We went back and forth, week after week, as I remember it. I was stubborn and so was she. I had a point of view and she did, too. In between disputes, I continued to play the piano and she continued to listen, offering a stream of corrections. I gave her little credit for my improvement as a player. She gave me little credit for improving. But still, the lessons went on.

Upstairs, my parents and Craig found it all so very funny. They cracked up at the dinner table as I recounted my battles with Robbie, still seething as I ate my spaghetti and meatballs. Craig, for his part, had no issues with Robbie, being a cheerful kid and a by-the-book, marginally invested piano student. My parents expressed no sympathy for my woes and none for Robbie’s, either. In general, they weren’t ones