BECOMING

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WHEN I WAS IN FIRST GRADE, A BOY IN MY CLASS punched me in the face one day, his fist coming like a comet, full force and out of nowhere. We'd been lining up to go to lunch, all of us discussing whatever felt urgent just then to six- and seven-year-olds—who was the fastest runner or why crayon colors had such weird names—when *blam*, I got whacked. I don't know why. I've forgotten the boy's name, but I remember staring at him dumbfounded and in pain, my lower lip already swelling, my eyes hot with tears. Too shocked to be angry, I ran home to my mom.

The boy got a talking-to from our teacher. My mother went over to school to personally lay eyes on the kid, wanting to assess what kind of threat he posed. Southside, who must have been over at our house that day, got his grandfatherly hackles up and insisted on going over with her as well. I was not privy to it, but some sort of conversation between adults took place. Some type of punishment was meted out. I received a shamefaced apology from the boy and was instructed not to worry about him further.

"That boy was just scared and angry about things that had nothing to do with you," my mother told me later in our kitchen as she stirred

dinner on the stove. She shook her head as if to suggest she knew more than she was willing to share. "He's dealing with a whole lot of problems of his own."

This was how we talked about bullies. When I was a kid, it was easy to grasp: Bullies were scared people hiding inside scary people. I'd see it in DeeDee, the tough girl on my neighborhood block, and even in Dandy, my own grandfather, who could be rude and pushy even with his own wife. They lashed out because they felt overwhelmed. You avoided them if you could and stood up to them if you had to. According to my mother, who would probably want some sort of live-and-let-live slogan carved on her headstone, the key was never to let a bully's insults or aggression get to you personally.

If you did—well, then, you could really get hurt.

Only later in life would this become a real challenge for me. Only when I was in my early forties and trying to help get my husband elected president would I think back to that day in the lunch line in first grade, remembering how confusing it was to be ambushed, how much it hurt to get socked in the face with no warning at all.

I spent much of 2008 trying not to worry about the punches.

I'LL BEGIN BY jumping ahead to a happy memory from that year, because I do have many of them. We visited Butte, Montana, on the Fourth of July, which happened to be Malia's tenth birthday and about four months ahead of the general election. Butte is a hardy, historic copper-mining town set down in the brushy southwestern corner of Montana, with the dark ridgeline of the Rocky Mountains visible in the distance. Butte was a toss-up town in what our campaign hoped could be a toss-up state. Montana had gone for George W. Bush in the last election but had also elected a Democratic governor. It seemed like a good place for Barack to visit.

More than ever, there were calculations involved in how Barack spent every minute of every day. He was being watched, measured, evaluated. People took note of which states he visited, which diner he showed up at for breakfast, what kind of meat he ordered to go with his eggs. About

twenty-five members of the press traveled with him continuously now, filling the back of the campaign plane, filling the corridors and breakfast rooms of small-town hotels, trailing him from stop to stop, their pens immortalizing everything. If a presidential candidate caught a cold, it got reported. If someone got an expensive haircut or asked for Dijon mustard at a TGI Fridays (as Barack had naively done years earlier, meriting an eventual headline in the *New York Times*), it would get reported and then parsed a hundred ways on the internet. Was the candidate weak? Was he a snob? A phony? A true American?

This was part of the process, we understood—a test to see who had the mettle to hold up as both a leader and a symbol for the country itself. It was like having your soul X-rayed every day, scanned and rescanned for any sign of fallibility. You didn't get elected if you didn't first submit to the full-bore scrutiny of the American gaze, which ran itself over your entire history, including your social associations, professional choices, and tax returns. And that gaze was arguably more intense and open to manipulation than ever. We were just coming into an age where clicks were being measured and monetized. Facebook had only recently gone mainstream. Twitter was relatively new. Most American adults owned a cell phone, and most cell phones had a camera. We were standing at the edge of something I'm not sure any of us yet fully understood.

Barack was no longer just trying to win the support of Democratic voters; he was now courting all of America. Following the Iowa caucuses, in a process that was at times as punishing and ugly as it was heartening and defining, Barack and Hillary Clinton had spent the winter and spring of 2008 slogging it out in every state and territory, battling vote by hard-earned vote for the privilege of becoming a boundary-breaking candidate. (John Edwards, Joe Biden, and the other contenders had all dropped out by the end of January.) The two candidates had tested each other mightily, with Barack opening up a small but ultimately decisive lead midway through February. "Is he president now?" Malia would ask me sometimes over the months that followed as we stood on one stage or another, with celebratory music blasting around us, her young mind unable to grasp anything but the larger purpose.

"Okay, *now* is he president?"

"No, honey, not yet."

It wasn't until June that Hillary acknowledged that she lacked the delegate count to win. Her delay in conceding had wasted precious campaign resources, preventing Barack from being able to reorient the battle toward his Republican opponent, John McCain. The longtime Arizona senator had become the Republican Party's presumptive nominee all the way back in March and was running as a maverick war hero with a history of bipartisanship and deep experience in national security, the implication being that he'd lead differently than George W. Bush.

We were in Butte on the Fourth of July with twin purposes, because nearly everything had a twin purpose now. Barack had spent the previous four days campaigning in Missouri, Ohio, Colorado, and North Dakota. There was little time to waste by having him come off the campaign trail to celebrate Malia's birthday, and he couldn't slip out of voters' view on what was the country's most symbolic holiday. So instead we flew to him, for what would be a sort of attempt to have it both ways—a family day spent mostly in full view of the public. Barack's half sister Maya and her husband, Konrad, came with us, along with their daughter Suhaila, a cute little four-year-old.

Any parent of a child born on a major holiday knows that there's already a certain line to be walked between an individual celebration and more universal festivities. The good people of Butte seemed to get it. There were "Happy Birthday Malia!" signs taped inside the windows of storefronts along Main Street. Bystanders shouted out their good wishes to her over the pounding of bass drums and flutes piping "Yankee Doodle" as our family watched the town's Fourth of July parade from a set of bleachers. The people we met were kind to the girls and respectful to us, even when confessing that voting for any Democrat would be a half-crazy departure from tradition.

Later that day, the campaign hosted a picnic in an open field with views of the spiny mountains marking the Continental Divide. The gathering was meant to be a rally for several hundred of our local supporters as well as a kind of casual birthday celebration for Malia. I was moved by all the people who'd turned out to meet us, but at the same time I was feeling something more intimate and urgent that had nothing to do with

where we were. I was struck that day by the gobsmacked tenderness that comes with being a parent, the weird telescoping of time that happens when you notice suddenly that your babies are half-grown, their limbs going from pudgy to lean, their eyes getting wise.

For me, the Fourth of July 2008 was the most significant threshold we'd crossed: Ten years ago, Barack and I had shown up on the labor and delivery floor believing that we knew a lot about the world when, truly, we hadn't yet known a thing.

So much of the last decade had been about trying to strike a balance between my family and my work, figuring out how to be loving and present for Malia and Sasha while also trying to be decent at my job. But the axis had shifted: I was now trying to balance parenting with something altogether different and more confusing—politics, America, Barack's quest to do something important. The magnitude of what was happening in Barack's life, the demands of the campaign, the spotlight on our family, all seemed to be growing quickly. After the Iowa caucuses, I'd decided to take a leave of absence from my position at the hospital, knowing that it would be impossible, really, to stay on and be effective. The campaign was slowly consuming everything. I'd been too busy after Iowa to even go over and box up the things in my office or say any sort of proper goodbye. I was a full-time mother and wife now, albeit a wife with a cause and a mother who wanted to guard her kids against getting swallowed by that cause. It had been painful to step away from my work, but there was no choice: My family needed me, and that mattered more.

And so here I was at a campaign picnic in Montana, leading a group of mostly strangers in singing "Happy Birthday" to Malia, who sat smiling on the grass with a hamburger on her plate. Voters saw our daughters as sweet, I knew, and our family's closeness as endearing. But I did think often of how all this appeared to our daughters, what their view was looking outward. I tried to tamp down any guilt. We had a real birthday party planned for the following weekend, one involving a heap of Malia's friends sleeping over at our house in Chicago and no politics whatsoever. And that evening, we'd hold a more private gathering back at our hotel. Still, as the afternoon went on and our girls ran around the picnic grounds while Barack and I shook hands and hugged potential voters, I

found myself wondering if the two of them would remember this outing as fun.

I watched Sasha and Malia these days with a new fierceness in my heart. Like me, they now had strangers calling their names, people wanting to touch them and take their pictures. Over the winter, the government had deemed me and the girls exposed enough to assign us Secret Service protection, which meant that when Sasha and Malia went to school or their summer day camp, usually driven by my mother, it was with the Secret Service tailing them in a second car.

At the picnic, each one of us had our own agent flanking us, canvassing the gathering for any sign of threat, subtly intervening if a well-wisher got overenthused and grabby. Thankfully, the girls seemed to see the agents less as guards and more as grown-up friends, new additions to the growing knot of friendly people with whom we traveled, distinguishable only by their earpieces and quiet vigilance. Sasha generally referred to them as "the secret people."

The girls made campaigning more relaxing, if only because they weren't much invested in the outcome. For both me and Barack, they were a relief to be around—a reminder that in the end our family meant more than any tallying of supporters or bump in the polls. Neither daughter cared much about the hubbub surrounding their dad. They weren't focused on building a better democracy or getting to the White House. All they really wanted (really, really wanted) was a puppy. They loved playing tag or card games with campaign staff during the quieter moments and made a point of finding an ice cream shop in every new place they went. Everything else was just noise.

To this day, Malia and I still crack up about the fact that she'd been eight years old when Barack, clearly feeling some sense of responsibility, posed the question one night while he was tucking her into bed. "How would you feel if Daddy ran for president?" he'd asked. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Sure, Daddy!" she'd replied, pecking him on the cheek. His decision to run would alter nearly everything about her life after that, but how was she to know? She'd just rolled over then and drifted off to sleep.

That day in Butte, we visited the local mining museum, had a water-

pistol battle, and kicked a soccer ball around in the grass. Barack gave his stump speech and shook the usual number of hands, but he also got to anchor himself back inside the unit of us. Sasha and Malia climbed all over him, giggling and regaling him with their thoughts. I saw the lightness in his smile, admiring him for his ability to block out the peripheral distractions and just be a dad when he had the chance. He chatted with Maya and Konrad and kept an arm hooked around my shoulder as we walked from place to place.

We were never alone. We had staff around us, agents guarding us, members of the press waiting for interviews, onlookers snapping pictures from a distance. But this was now our normal. Over the course of the campaign, our days had become so programmed that we'd watched our privacy and autonomy slowly slip away, both Barack and I handing nearly every aspect of our lives over to a bunch of twentysomethings who were highly intelligent and capable but still couldn't know how painful it could feel to give up control over my own life. If I needed something at the store, I had to ask someone to get it for me. If I wanted to speak to Barack, I usually had to send a request through one of his young staffers. Events and activities I didn't know about would sometimes show up on my calendar.

But slowly, as a matter of survival, we were learning to live our lives more publicly, accepting the reality for what it was.

Before the afternoon ended in Butte, we gave a TV interview, all four of us—me, Barack, and the girls—which was something we'd never done before. Usually, we insisted on keeping the press corps at a distance from our kids, limiting them to photos and then only at public campaign events. I'm not sure what prompted us to say yes this time. As I recall, the campaign staff thought it would be nice to give the public a closer glimpse of Barack as a parent, and in the moment I saw no harm in this. He loved our children, after all. He loved all children. It was precisely why he'd make a great president.

We sat down for about fifteen minutes with Maria Menounos of *Access Hollywood,* the four of us speaking to her while sitting together on a park bench that had been draped with some sort of cloth to make it look more festive. Malia had her hair braided and Sasha wore a red tank

dress. As always, they were disarmingly cute. Menounos was gracious and kept the conversation light as Malia, the family's junior professor, earnestly pondered every question. She said that her dad embarrassed her sometimes when he tried to shake hands with her friends and also that he bothered all of us when he left his campaign luggage blocking the door at home. Sasha did her best to sit still and stay focused, interrupting the interview only once, turning to me to ask, "Hey, when are we getting ice cream?" Otherwise, she listened to her sister, interjecting periodically with whatever semirelevant detail popped into her head. "Daddy had an Afro once!" she squealed at one point toward the end, and we all started to laugh.

Days later, the interview aired in four parts on ABC and was met with an enthused fervor, covered by other news outlets with cloying taglines like "Curtain Rises on Obama's Girls in TV Interview" and "The Obamas' Two Little Girls Tell All." Suddenly Malia's and Sasha's little-kid comments were being picked up in newspapers around the world.

Immediately, Barack and I regretted what we'd done. There was nothing salacious about the interview. There was no exploitative question asked, no especially revealing detail offered. Still, we felt like we'd made a wrong choice, putting their voices into the public sphere long before they could really understand what any of it meant. Nothing in the video would hurt Sasha or Malia. But it was out in the world now and would live forever on the internet. We'd taken two young girls who hadn't chosen this life, and without thinking it through, we'd fed them into the maw.

BY NOW, I knew something about the maw. We lived with the gaze upon us. It added a strange energy to everything. I had Oprah Winfrey sending me encouraging texts. Stevie Wonder, my childhood idol, was showing up to play at campaign events, joking and calling me by my first name as if we'd known each other forever. The amount of attention was disorienting, especially because I felt as if we hadn't really done much to deserve it. We were being lifted by the strength of the message Barack was putting forward, but also, I knew, by the promise and the

symbolism of the moment. If America elected its first black president, it would say something not just about Barack but also about the country. For so many people, and for so many reasons, this mattered a lot.

Barack, of course, got the most of it—the public adulation as well as the scrutiny that rode inevitably on its back. The more popular you became, the more haters you acquired. It seemed almost like an unwritten rule, especially in politics, where adversaries put money into opposition research—hiring investigators to crawl through every piece of a candidate's background, looking for anything resembling dirt.

We are built differently, my husband and I, which is why one of us chose politics and the other did not. He was aware of rumors and misperceptions that got pumped like toxic vapor into the campaign, but rarely did any of it bother him. Barack had lived through other campaigns. He'd studied political history and girded himself with the context it provided. And in general, he's just not someone who's easily rattled or thrown off course by anything as abstract as doubt or hurt.

I, on the other hand, was still learning about public life. I considered myself a confident, successful woman, but I was also the same kid who used to tell people she planned to be a pediatrician and devoted herself to setting perfect attendance records at school. In other words, I cared what people thought. I'd spent my young life seeking approval, dutifully collecting gold stars and avoiding messy social situations. Over time, I'd gotten better about not measuring my self-worth strictly in terms of standard, by-the-book achievement, but I did tend to believe that if I worked diligently and honestly, I'd avoid the bullies and always be seen as myself.

This belief, though, was about to come undone.

After Barack's victory in Iowa, my message on the campaign trail grew only more impassioned, almost proportional to the size of the crowds that were turning out at rallies. I'd gone from meeting hundreds of people at a gathering to a thousand or more. I remember pulling up to an event in Delaware with Melissa and Katie and seeing a line of people five-deep and stretching around the block, waiting to get inside an already-jammed auditorium. It stunned me in the happiest of ways. I relayed this to every crowd: I was floored by what people were bringing

to Barack's campaign in terms of enthusiasm and involvement. I was humbled by their investment, the work I saw everyday people doing to help get him elected.

When it came to my stump speech, building on the theory of campaigning that had worked so well for me in Iowa, I'd developed a loose structure for it, though I didn't use a teleprompter or worry if I went off on a slight tangent. My words weren't polished, and I'd never be as eloquent as my husband, but I spoke from the heart. I described how my initial doubts about the political process had slowly diminished week by week, replaced by something more encouraging and hopeful. So many of us, I was realizing, had the same struggles, the same concerns for our kids and worries about the future. And so many believed as I did that Barack was the only candidate capable of delivering real change.

Barack wanted to get American troops out of Iraq. He wanted to roll back the tax cuts George W. Bush had pushed through for the superwealthy. He wanted affordable health care for all Americans. It was an ambitious platform, but every time I walked into an auditorium of revved-up supporters, it seemed as if maybe as a nation we were ready to look past our differences and make it happen. There was pride in those rooms, a united spirit that went well past the color of anyone's skin. The optimism was big and it was energizing. I surfed it like a wave. "Hope is making a comeback!" I would declare at every stop.

I'd been in Wisconsin one day in February when Katie got a call from someone on Barack's communications team, saying that there seemed to be a problem. I'd evidently said something controversial in a speech I'd given at a theater in Milwaukee a few hours earlier. Katie was confused, as was I. What I'd said in Milwaukee was really no different from what I'd just finished saying to a crowd in Madison, which was no different from what I'd been saying to every crowd for months. There'd never been an issue before. Why would there be one now?

Later that day, we saw the issue for ourselves. Someone had taken film from my roughly forty-minute talk and edited it down to a single ten-second clip, stripping away the context, putting the emphasis on a few words.

There were clips suddenly circulating from both the Milwaukee and

the Madison speeches, focused on the part where I talked about feeling encouraged. The fuller version of what I'd said that day went like this: "What we've learned over this year is that hope is making a comeback! And let me tell you something, for the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm really proud of my country. Not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change. I have been desperate to see our country moving in that direction, and just not feeling so alone in my frustration and disappointment. I've seen people who are hungry to be unified around some basic common issues, and it's made me proud. I feel privileged to be a part of even witnessing this."

But nearly all of that had been peeled back, including my references to hope and unity and how moved I was. The nuance was gone; the gaze directed toward one thing. What was in the clips—and now sliding into heavy rotation on conservative radio and TV talk shows, we were told—was this: "For the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm really proud of my country."

I didn't need to watch the news to know how it was being spun. *She's not a patriot. She's always hated America. This is who she really is. The rest is just a show.*

Here was the first punch. And I'd seemingly brought it on myself. In trying to speak casually, I'd forgotten how weighted each little phrase could be. Unwittingly, I'd given the haters a fourteen-word feast. Just like in first grade, I hadn't seen it coming.

I flew home to Chicago that night, feeling guilty and dispirited. I knew that Melissa and Katie were quietly tracking the negative news stories via BlackBerry, though they were careful not to share them with me, understanding it would only make things worse. The three of us had worked together for the better part of a year at this point, logging more miles than any of us could count, perpetually racing the clock so I could get back home to my kids at night. We'd trekked through auditoriums all over the country, eaten more fast food than we ever wanted to, and shown up for fancy fund-raisers at homes so opulent we'd had to actively keep ourselves from gawking. While Barack and his campaign team traveled in chartered planes and cushy tour buses, we were still taking off our shoes in slow-moving airport security lines, sitting in coach on United and Southwest, relying on the goodwill of volunteers to shuttle us to and from events that were sometimes a hundred miles apart.

I felt as if overall we'd been doing a pretty excellent job. I'd seen Katie stand on a chair to shout marching orders at photographers twice her age and dress down reporters who asked out-of-line questions. I'd watched Melissa mastermind every detail of my schedule, expertly coordinating multiple campaign events in a day, pounding her BlackBerry to squelch potential problems, while also making sure I never missed a school play, an old friend's birthday, or a chance to get myself to the gym. The two of them had given everything over to this effort, sacrificing their own personal lives so that I could try to preserve some semblance of mine.

I sat under the dome light of the airplane, worried that I'd somehow blown it with those fourteen stupid words.

At home, after I'd put the girls to bed and sent my mom back to Euclid Avenue to get some rest, I called Barack on his cell. It was the eve of the Wisconsin primaries, and polls there were showing a tight race. Barack had a thin but growing lead when it came to delegates for the national convention, but Hillary had been running ads criticizing Barack on everything from his health-care plan to his not agreeing to debate her more frequently. The stakes seemed high. Barack's campaign couldn't afford a letdown. I apologized for what was happening with my speech. "I had no idea I was doing something wrong," I said. "I've been saying the same thing for months."

Barack was traveling that night between Wisconsin and Texas. I could almost hear him shrugging on the other end of the line. "Look, it's because your crowds are so big," he said. "You've become a force in the campaign, which means people are going to come after you a little. This is just the nature of things."

As he did pretty much every time we spoke, he thanked me for the time I was putting in, adding that he was sorry I had to deal with any fallout at all. "I love you, honey," he told me, before hanging up. "I know this stuff is rough, but it'll blow over. It always does."

HE WAS BOTH right and wrong about this. On February 19, 2008, Barack won the Wisconsin primary by a good margin, which seemed to suggest I'd done him no damage there. That same day, Cindy McCain took a potshot at me while speaking at a rally, saying, "I am proud of my country. I don't know about you, if you heard those words earlier—I am very proud of my country." CNN deemed us to be in a "patriotism flap," and the bloggers did what bloggers do. But within about a week, it seemed that most of the commotion had died down. Barack and I both made comments to the press, clarifying that I felt a pride in seeing so many Americans making phone calls for the campaign, talking to their neighbors, and gaining confidence about their power inside our democracy, which to me did feel like a first. And then we moved on. In my campaign speeches, I tried to be more careful about how the words came out of my mouth, but my message remained the same. I was still proud and still encouraged. Nothing there had changed.

And yet a pernicious seed had been planted—a perception of me as disgruntled and vaguely hostile, lacking some expected level of grace. Whether it was originating from Barack's political opponents or elsewhere, we couldn't tell, but the rumors and slanted commentary almost always carried less-than-subtle messaging about race, meant to stir up the deepest and ugliest kind of fear within the voting public. *Don't let the black folks take over. They're not like you. Their vision is not yours.*

This wasn't helped by the fact that ABC News had combed through twenty-nine hours of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermons, splicing together a jarring highlight reel that showed the preacher careening through callous and inappropriate fits of rage and resentment at white America, as if white people were to blame for every woe. Barack and I were dismayed to see this, a reflection of the worst and most paranoid parts of the man who'd married us and baptized our children. Both of us had grown up with family members who viewed race through a lens of cranky mistrust. I'd experienced Dandy's simmering resentment over the decades he'd spent being passed by professionally because of his skin color, as well as Southside's worries that his grandkids weren't safe in white neighborhoods. Barack, meanwhile, had listened to Toot, his white grandmother, make offhanded ethnic generalizations and even confess to her black grandson that she sometimes felt afraid when running into a black man on the street. We had lived for years with the narrow-mindedness of some of our elders, having accepted that no one is perfect, particularly those who'd come of age in a time of segregation. Perhaps this had caused us to overlook the more absurd parts of Reverend Wright's spitfire preaching, even if we hadn't been present for any of the sermons in question. Seeing an extreme version of his vitriol broadcast in the news, though, we were appalled. The whole affair was a reminder of how our country's distortions about race could be two-sided—that the suspicion and stereotyping ran both ways.

Someone, meanwhile, had dug up my senior thesis from Princeton, written more than two decades earlier—a survey that looked at how African American alumni felt about race and identity after being at Princeton. For reasons I'll never understand, the conservative media was treating my paper as if it were some secret black-power manifesto, a threat that had been unburied. It was as if at the age of twenty-one, instead of trying to get an A in sociology and a spot at Harvard Law School, I'd been hatching a Nat Turner plan to overthrow the white majority and was now finally, through my husband, getting a chance to put it in motion. "Is Michelle Obama Responsible for the Jeremiah Wright Fiasco?" was the subtitle of an online column written by the author Christopher Hitchens. He tore into the college-age me, suggesting that I'd been unduly influenced by black radical thinkers and furthermore was a crappy writer. "To describe it as hard to read would be a mistake," he wrote. "The thesis cannot be 'read' at all, in the strict sense of the verb. This is because it wasn't written in any known language."

I was being painted not simply as an outsider but as fully "other," so foreign that even my language couldn't be recognized. It was a small-minded and ludicrous insult, sure, but his mocking of my intellect, his marginalizing of my young self, carried with it a larger dismissiveness. Barack and I were now too well-known to be rendered invisible, but if

people saw us as alien and trespassing, then maybe our potency could be drained. The message seemed often to get telegraphed, if never said directly: *These people don't belong.* A photo of Barack wearing a turban and traditional Somali clothing that had been bestowed on him during an official visit he'd made to Kenya as a senator had shown up on the *Drudge Report,* reviving old theories that he was secretly Muslim. A few months later, the internet would burp up another anonymous and unfounded rumor, this one questioning Barack's citizenship, floating the idea that he'd been born not in Hawaii but in Kenya, which would make him ineligible to become president.

As we carried on through primaries in Ohio and Texas, in Vermont and Mississippi, I had continued to speak about optimism and unity, feeling the positivity of people at campaign events coalescing around the idea of change. All along, though, the unflattering counternarrative about me seemed only to gain traction. On Fox News, there'd be discussions of my "militant anger." The internet would produce more rumors that a videotape existed of me referring to white people as "whitey," which was outlandish and just plainly untrue. In June, when Barack finally clinched the Democratic nomination, I'd greet him with a playful fist bump onstage at an event in Minnesota, which would then make headlines, interpreted by one Fox commentator as a "terrorist fist jab," again suggesting that we were dangerous. A news chyron on the same network had referred to me as "Obama's Baby Mama," conjuring clichéd notions of black-ghetto America, implying an otherness that put me outside even my own marriage.

I was getting worn out, not physically, but emotionally. The punches hurt, even if I understood that they had little to do with who I really was as a person. It was as if there were some cartoon version of me out there wreaking havoc, a woman I kept hearing about but didn't know—a too-tall, too-forceful, ready-to-emasculate Godzilla of a political wife named Michelle Obama. Painfully, too, my friends would sometimes call and unload their worries on me, heaping me with advice they thought I should pass on to Barack's campaign manager or wanting me to reassure them after they'd heard a negative news report about me, or Barack, or the state of the campaign. When rumors about the so-called whitey tape

surfaced, a friend who knows me well called up, clearly worried that the lie was true. I had to spend a good thirty minutes convincing her that I hadn't turned into a racist, and when the conversation ended, I hung up, thoroughly demoralized.

In general, I felt as if I couldn't win, that no amount of faith or hard work would push me past my detractors and their attempts to invalidate me. I was female, black, and strong, which to certain people, maintaining a certain mind-set, translated only to "angry." It was another damaging cliché, one that's been forever used to sweep minority women to the perimeter of every room, an unconscious signal not to listen to what we've got to say.

I was now starting to actually feel a bit angry, which then made me feel worse, as if I were fulfilling some prophecy laid out for me by the haters, as if I'd given in. It's remarkable how a stereotype functions as an actual trap. How many "angry black women" have been caught in the circular logic of that phrase? When you aren't being listened to, why wouldn't you get louder? If you're written off as angry or emotional, doesn't that just cause more of the same?

I was exhausted by the meanness, thrown off by how personal it had become, and feeling, too, as if there were no way I could quit. Sometime in May, the Tennessee Republican Party released an online video, replaying my remarks in Wisconsin against clips of voters saying things like "Boy, I've been proud to be an American since I was a kid." NPR's website carried a story with the headline: "Is Michelle Obama an Asset or Liability?" Below it, in boldface, came what were apparently points of debate about me: "Refreshingly Honest or Too Direct?" and "Her Looks: Regal or Intimidating?"

I am telling you, this stuff hurt.

I sometimes blamed Barack's campaign for the position I was in. I understood that I was more active than many candidates' spouses, which made me more of a target for attacks. My instinct was to hit back, to speak up against the lies and unfair generalizations or to have Barack make some comment, but his campaign team kept telling me it was better not to respond, to march forward and simply take the hits. "This is just politics" was always the mantra, as if we could do nothing about it,

as if we'd all moved to a new city on a new planet called Politics, where none of the normal rules applied.

Anytime my spirits started to dip, I'd punish myself further with a slew of disparaging thoughts: I hadn't chosen this. I'd never liked politics. I'd left my job and given my identity over to this campaign and now I was a liability? Where had my power gone?

Sitting in our kitchen in Chicago on a Sunday evening when Barack was home for a one-night stopover, I'd let all my frustrations pour out.

"I don't need to do this," I told him. "If I'm hurting the campaign, why on earth am I out there?"

I explained that Melissa, Katie, and I were feeling overmatched by the volume of media requests and the work it took to travel on the tight budget we were on. I didn't want to foul anything up and I wanted to be supportive, but we lacked the time and resources to do any more than react to the moment at hand. And when it came to the mounting scrutiny of me, I was tired of being defenseless, tired of being seen as someone altogether different from the person I was. "I can just stay home and be with the kids if that's better," I told Barack. "I'll just be a regular wife who shows up only at the big events and smiles. Maybe that'd be a lot easier on everybody."

Barack listened sympathetically. I could tell he was tired, eager to head upstairs and get some needed sleep. I hated sometimes how the lines had blurred between family life and political life for us. His days were filled with split-second problem solving and hundreds of interactions. I didn't want to be another issue he needed to contend with, but then again, my existence had been fully folded into his.

"You're so much more of an asset than a liability, Michelle, you have to know that," he said, looking stricken. "But if you want to stop or slow down, I completely understand. You can do whatever you want here."

He told me I should never feel beholden to him or to the machinery of the campaign. And if I wanted to keep going but needed more support and resources to do it, he'd figure out how to get them.

I was comforted by this, though only a little. I still felt like the first grader in the lunch line who'd just been walloped.

But with this, we dropped the politics and took our weary selves to bed.

NOT LONG AFTER THAT, I went to David Axelrod's office in Chicago and sat down with him and Valerie to watch video of some of my public appearances. It was, I realize now, something of an intervention, an attempt to show me which small parts of this process I could control. The two of them praised me for how hard I'd been working and how effectively I was able to rally Barack's supporters. But then Axe muted the volume as he replayed my stump speech, removing my voice so that we could look more closely at my body language, specifically my facial expressions.

What did I see? I saw myself speaking with intensity and conviction and never letting up. I always addressed the tough times many Americans were facing, as well as the inequities within our schools and our health-care system. My face reflected the seriousness of what I believed was at stake, how important the choice that lay before our nation really was.

But it was too serious, too severe—at least given what people were conditioned to expect from a woman. I saw my expression as a stranger might perceive it, especially if it was framed with an unflattering message. I could see how the opposition had managed to dice up these images and feed me to the public as some sort of pissed-off harpy. It was, of course, another stereotype, another trap. The easiest way to disregard a woman's voice is to package her as a scold.

No one seemed to criticize Barack for appearing too serious or not smiling enough. I was a wife and not a candidate, obviously, so perhaps the expectation was for me to provide more lightness, more fluff. And yet, if there was any question about how women in general fared on Planet Politics, one needed only to look at how Nancy Pelosi, the smart and hard-driving Speaker of the House of Representatives, was often depicted as a shrew or what Hillary Clinton was enduring as cable pundits and opinion writers hashed and rehashed each development in the campaign.

Hillary's gender was used against her relentlessly, drawing from all the worst stereotypes. She was called domineering, a nag, a bitch. Her voice was interpreted as screechy; her laugh was a cackle. Hillary was Barack's opponent, which meant that I wasn't inclined to feel especially warmly toward her just then, but I couldn't help but admire her ability to stand up and keep fighting amid the misogyny.

Reviewing videotape with Axe and Valerie that day, I felt tears pricking at my eyes. I was upset. I could see now that there was a performative piece to politics that I hadn't yet fully mastered. And I'd been out there giving speeches already for more than a year. I'd communicated best, I realized now, in smaller venues like the ones I'd done in Iowa. It was harder to convey warmth in larger auditoriums. Bigger crowds required clearer facial cues, which was something I needed to work on. I was worried now that it was almost too late.

Valerie, my dear friend of more than fifteen years, reached out to squeeze my hand.

"Why didn't you guys talk to me about this sooner?" I asked. "Why didn't anyone try to help?"

The answer was that no one had been paying all that much attention. The perception inside Barack's campaign seemed to be that I was doing fine until I wasn't. Only now, when I was a problem, was I summoned to Axe's office.

For me, this was a turnaround point. The campaign apparatus existed exclusively to serve the candidate, not the spouse or the family. And as much as Barack's staffers respected me and valued my contribution, they'd never given me much in the way of guidance. Until that point, no one from the campaign had bothered to travel with me or show up for my events. I'd never received media training or speech prep. No one, I realized, was going to look out for me unless I pushed for it.

Knowing that the gaze was only going to intensify as we moved into the last six or so months of the campaign, we agreed, finally, that I needed real help. If I was going to continue to campaign like a candidate, I needed to be supported like a candidate. I'd protect myself by being better organized, by insisting on having the resources I needed to

do the job well. In the final weeks of the primaries, Barack's campaign began expanding my team to include a scheduler and a personal aide—Kristen Jarvis, a warmhearted former staffer from Barack's U.S. Senate office whose steady demeanor would keep me grounded in high-stress moments—plus a no-nonsense, politically savvy communications specialist named Stephanie Cutter. Working with Katie and Melissa, Stephanie helped me sharpen my message and my presentation, building toward a major speech I'd deliver late that summer at the Democratic National Convention. We were also finally granted access to a campaign plane, which allowed me to move more efficiently. I could now give media interviews during flights, get my hair and makeup done en route to an event, or bring Sasha and Malia along with me at no extra cost.

It was a relief. All of it was a relief. And I do think that it allowed me to smile more, to feel less on guard.

As we planned my public appearances, Stephanie counseled me to play to my strengths and to remember the things I most enjoyed talking about, which was my love for my husband and kids, my connection with working mothers, and my proud Chicago roots. She recognized that I liked to joke around and told me not to hold back with my humor. It was okay, in other words, to be myself. Shortly after the primaries wrapped up, I signed on to co-host *The View*, spending a happy and spirited hour with Whoopi Goldberg, Barbara Walters, and the other hosts in front of a live audience, talking about the attacks against me, but also laughing about the girls and the fist bumps and the nuisance of panty hose. I felt a new ease, a new ownership of my voice. The show aired to generally positive commentary. I'd worn a $148 black-and-white dress that women were suddenly scrambling to buy.

I was having an impact and beginning to enjoy myself at the same time, feeling more and more open and optimistic. I also was trying to learn from the Americans I was meeting around the country, holding roundtables designed to focus on work-family balance, an issue in which I had a keen interest. For me, the most humbling lessons came when I visited military communities and met with soldiers' spouses—groups of mostly women, though sometimes with a few men mixed in.

"Tell me about your lives," I'd say. And then I'd listen as women with babies on their laps, some of them still teenagers themselves, told me stories. Some described being transferred between bases eight or more times in as many years, in each instance needing to start over in settling their children into things like music lessons or enrichment programs. They explained, too, how difficult it could be to maintain a career over the course of all those moves: A teacher, for instance, wasn't able to find a job because her new state didn't recognize the old state's teaching certificate; nail technicians and physical therapists faced similar problems with licensing. Many young parents had trouble finding affordable child care. All of it, of course, was shaded by the logistical and emotional burdens of having a loved one deployed for twelve months or more at a time to a place like Kabul or Mosul or on an aircraft carrier in the South China Sea. Meeting these spouses instantly put whatever hurt I was feeling into perspective. Their sacrifices were far greater than mine. I sat in these meetings, engrossed and somewhat taken aback by the fact that I knew so little about military life. I vowed to myself that if Barack was fortunate enough to be elected, I'd find some way to better support these families.

All this left me more energized to help make the final push for Barack and Joe Biden, the affable senator from Delaware who'd soon be announced as his running mate. I felt emboldened to follow my instincts again, surrounded by people who had my back. At public events, I focused on making personal connections with the people I met, in small groups and in crowds of thousands, in backstage chats and harried rope lines. When voters got to see me as a person, they understood that the caricatures were untrue. I've learned that it's harder to hate up close.

I would go on to spend the summer of 2008 moving faster and working harder, convinced that I could make a positive difference for Barack. With the convention drawing close, I worked with a speechwriter for the first time, a gifted young woman named Sarah Hurwitz who helped shape my ideas into a tight seventeen-minute speech. After weeks of careful preparation, I walked onstage at the Pepsi Center in Denver in late August and stood before an audience of some twenty thousand people

and a TV audience of millions more, ready to articulate to the world who I really was.

That night, my brother, Craig, introduced me. My mother sat in the front row of a skybox, looking a little stunned by how giant the platform for our lives had become. I spoke of my father—his humility, his resilience, and how all that had shaped me and Craig. I tried to give Americans the most intimate view possible of Barack and his noble heart. When I finished, people applauded and applauded, and I felt a powerful blast of relief, knowing that maybe I'd done something, finally, to change people's perception of me.

It was a big moment, for sure—grand and public and to this day readily findable on YouTube. But the truth is, for those exact reasons, it was also strangely kind of a small moment. My view of things was starting to reverse itself, like a sweater slowly being turned inside out. Stages, audiences, lights, applause. These were becoming more normal than I'd ever thought they could be. What I lived for now were the unrehearsed, unphotographed, in-between moments where nobody was performing and no one was judging and real surprise was still possible—where sometimes without warning you might feel a tiny latch spring open on your heart.

For this, we need to go back to Butte, Montana, on the Fourth of July. It was the end of our day there, the summer sun finally dropping behind the western mountains, the sound of firecrackers beginning to pop in the distance. We were holing up for the night at a Holiday Inn Express next to the interstate, with Barack leaving for Missouri the next day and the girls and I headed home to Chicago. We were tired, all of us. We'd done the parade and the picnic. We'd engaged with what felt like every last resident in the town of Butte. And now, finally, we were going to have a little gathering just for Malia.

If you asked me at the time, I'd have said that we came up short for her in the end—that her birthday felt like an afterthought in the maelstrom of the campaign. We got together in a fluorescent-lit, low-ceilinged conference room in the basement of the hotel, with Konrad, Maya, and Suhaila, plus a handful of staffers who were close with Malia, and of

course the Secret Service agents, who were always close no matter what. We had some balloons, a grocery-store cake, ten candles, and a tub of ice cream. There were a few gifts bought and wrapped on the fly by someone who was not me. The mood was not exactly desultory, but it wasn't festive, either. It had simply been too long of a day. Barack and I shared a dark look, knowing we'd failed.

Ultimately, though, like so many things, it was a matter of perception—how we decided to look at what was in front of us. Barack and I were focused on only our faults and insufficiencies, seeing them reflected in that drab room and thrown-together party. But Malia was looking for something different. And she saw it. She saw kind faces, people who loved her, a thickly frosted cake, a little sister and cousin by her side, a new year ahead. She'd spent the day outdoors. She'd seen a parade. Tomorrow there would be an airplane ride.

She marched over to where Barack sat and threw herself into his lap. "This," she declared, "is the best birthday *ever*!"

She didn't notice that both her mom and her dad got teary or that half the people in the room were now choked up as well. Because she was right. And suddenly we all saw it. She was ten years old that day, and everything was the best.

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FOUR MONTHS LATER, ON NOVEMBER 4, 2008, I CAST my vote for Barack. The two of us went early that morning to our polling place, which was in the gym at Beulah Shoesmith Elementary School, just a few blocks away from our house in Chicago. We brought Sasha and Malia along, both of them dressed and ready for school. Even on Election Day—maybe especially on Election Day—I thought school would be a good idea. School was routine. School was comfort. As we walked past banks of photographers and TV cameras to get into the gym, as people around us talked about the historic nature of everything, I was happy to have the lunch boxes packed.

What kind of day would this be? It would be a long day. Beyond that, none of us knew.

Barack, as he always is on high-pressure days, was more easygoing than ever. He greeted the poll workers, picked up his ballot, and shook hands with anyone he encountered, appearing relaxed. It made sense, I guess. This whole endeavor was about to be out of his hands.

We stood shoulder to shoulder at our voting stations while the girls leaned in closely to watch what each of us was doing.

I'd voted for Barack many times before, in primaries and general