Becoming

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MICHELLE OBAMA

Michelle Obama was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago by her mother and father, along with her older brother Craig. She went on to attend college at Princeton University, where she majored in sociology. After college, she attended Harvard Law School and, after graduating, got a job at a corporate law firm in Chicago called Sidley & Austin. At Sidley, she was assigned to mentor a summer associate, Barack Obama, who worked for Sidley between his first and second years at Harvard Law. The two quickly began dating and married after Barack graduated from law school. Michelle then quit her job at Sidley, looking for something more fulfilling, and had a string of jobs working with the South Side community—first at City Hall, then at an organization called Public Allies, and then at the University of Chicago Medical Center. Michelle and Barack had two daughters, Malia and Sasha, in 1998 and 2001. Barack quickly became involved in politics, rising from Illinois State Senator to United States Senator, and then becoming the forty-fourth president of the United States. Barack was president from 2008 to 2016, and Michelle and her family moved to the White House with him. During her time as First Lady, Michelle worked on initiatives called Let's Move! (a children's health initiative), Joining Forces (which focuses on supporting military families), and Let Girls Learn (supporting girls' education worldwide), and a new White House garden. Michelle and her family currently live in Washington, D.C.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Michelle's memoir focuses not only on events from her lifetime, but also on the historical events that shaped her relatives' lives and the lives of other African Americans over time. Michelle describes how her maternal grandfather grew up in the South during the time of Jim Crow laws—laws that enforced racial segregation in the South and remained in place until the 1960s. Despite the U.S. Supreme Court's assertion that public facilities would be "separate but equal," facilities, buses, and education for people of color were often far inferior to those of their white counterparts. Additionally, this period of time was notorious for its discrimination and violence towards African Americans. Michelle's paternal grandfather moved to Chicago during the Great Migration, a period between 1916 and 1970 in which six million southern African Americans began to move north, fleeing the racial oppression of the South and attempting to find industrial jobs. Often, however, when arriving at these northern cities, they would still face many kinds of discrimination. This prevented African Americans from accumulating wealth and often left them disenfranchised—both forms of discrimination that, Michelle points out, are still felt generations later. This history is one of the reasons that Barack Obama's presidential election is so symbolically important to African Americans. Additionally, *Becoming* describes Michelle Obama's personal experiences living through three historically significant presidential elections: her husband Barack's two elections in 2008 and 2012, and Donald Trump's election in 2016.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Books that touch on similar topics as *Becoming* include Michelle's husband Barack Obama's first memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, which was published in 1998 and explores Barack's childhood as the son of a Kenyan father and white Kansan mother. Like *Becoming*, the book touches on themes of understanding one's own childhood and identity in the context of one's parents' histories, as well as the history of the nation as a whole. Michelle also discusses Barack's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, which outlines Barack's vision for the country prior to his running for president in 2008, and which displays the quintessential optimism and faith in the country that Michelle shares. *Becoming* can also be compared to other memoirs of First Ladies' experiences. Particularly relevant is *Living History*, which is Hillary Clinton's account of her own childhood through her time as First Lady and how she tried to shape White House initiatives and policies. Barbara and Laura Bush have also published memoirs of their time in the White House: *Barbara Bush: A Memoir* and *Spoken from the Heart*, respectively.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Becoming
- **When Written:** 2017-2018
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** November 13, 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Chicago; Princeton; Washington, D.C.
- **Climax:** Michelle and Barack leave the White House
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Staying out of the race. Despite the fact that she has been involved in politics for many years, Michelle has stated that she

has no intention of running for any kind of political office.

Codename. Michelle's secret service codename is "Renaissance," which she reportedly adopted after reading that Jackie Kennedy was obsessed with the Mona Lisa.

PLOT SUMMARY

Michelle Obama (born Michelle Robinson) grows up on the South Side of Chicago, in a neighborhood slowly being deserted by white and wealthy families. Michelle's family (which includes her mother, her father, and her older brother Craig) is a very tight-knit, middle-class family living together in a small apartment upstairs from her great-aunt Robbie and her great-uncle Terry. Despite the fact that Michelle's family is not very affluent, she has a happy childhood—largely due to the sacrifices and investment of her family and the adults around her. She learns **piano** from Robbie, her mother teaches her to read early, and she works hard to get a good education.

Michelle's childhood is not without its hiccups and challenges, however. When she attends a piano recital, she realizes that she has only ever played on one with broken keys. Her father has multiple sclerosis and his body is slowly deteriorating, despite the fact that he insists he feels fine. And once, when Michelle and her family visit some family friends in a predominantly white neighborhood, they return to their car and find that someone has keyed a deep gash into it.

Still, Michelle doesn't let these challenges get her down. She works hard in school, and despite a guidance counselor's doubts, she gets into Princeton (following her brother). At the Third World Center at Princeton (a student center for minority students), she finds friends and mentors that make her feel more at home in a place she describes as "extremely white and very male." One such friend is Suzanne Alele, who is very different from Michelle in that she prioritizes fun over more pragmatic choices.

Michelle graduates magma cum laude with a degree in sociology, but she doesn't stop to truly consider what makes her passionate. Instead, she dives right into Harvard Law School, knowing that it will give her a degree of validation and certainty about what her future might look like. After law school, she moves back to Chicago to join a firm called Sidley & Austin. A year into working at Sidley, Michelle agrees to mentor an incoming summer associate. She is assigned Barack Obama, an African American man who is three years older than she is and has already gained a reputation as an exceptional law student (after finishing only his first year at Harvard). She and Barack quickly strike up a friendship, and she notes his intense optimism, his diligence, and also his humility. She is also intrigued by the fact that he seems more concerned with a broader "potential for mobility" than his own wealth. They begin to date just before Barack returns to Harvard.

Over the next two years, as Barack finishes up law school, Michelle starts to feel dissatisfied in her job, knowing she's not passionate about it. Michelle also experiences two losses: the loss of her friend Suzanne to cancer, and the loss of her father. Her father dies of a heart attack just after finally agreeing to make a doctor's appointment. Michelle is heartbroken; these losses prompt her to understand that life is precious and she cannot waste any more time in a job that she doesn't enjoy.

Michelle leaves Sidley & Austin to begin what will become a series of jobs. First, she takes a job at city hall. Though she is skeptical of politics, she is excited by the opportunity to actually improve people's lives. Meanwhile, Barack graduates from law school and moves back to Chicago. On the day he takes the bar exam, he proposes to Michelle, and she says yes. Michelle and Barack marry in the summer of 1992, then take a honeymoon in Northern California. When they return, Bill Clinton wins the presidency and Carol Mosely Braun (the first African American woman to hold a U.S. Senate seat) wins her race as well. Barack has missed a deadline to turn in a book manuscript, and so he decides to hole up in a cabin in Indonesia for six months to work on it while Michelle remains in Chicago.

Michelle and Barack go through a series of changes: she takes a job at a company called Public Allies, which recruits young people and places them in non-for-profit companies in the hopes that they will stay in that line of work. Barack wins a seat in the Illinois Senate; his mother Ann passes away. Michelle then moves on to a job at the University of Chicago, as an associate dean focusing on community relations. This job's health benefits are particularly important to Michelle, as she and Barack are trying (unsuccessfully) to get pregnant. After months of failed attempts and a miscarriage, Michelle and Barack decide to try in vitro fertilization, and their daughter Malia is born via this method in 1998. Michelle has a difficult time adjusting to the schedule of being a mom and also having a part-time job. Barack, too, experiences some of the sacrifices of parenting: when they are on vacation in Hawaii, Malia falls ill and Barack is forced to miss a crime bill vote because they cannot fly home while she is sick. He loses a Congressional race as a result of missing the vote.

In 2001, Barack and Michelle have another girl, Sasha. Michelle debates whether to go back to work, but she interviews for a job with the University of Chicago Medical Center (again working on community outreach) and brings Sasha along, making her need for a competitive salary as well as a flexible schedule clear. She is hired. Still, even with the ability to afford childcare, Michelle grows frustrated with Barack's absence—he is away every Monday through Thursday. The two go to couple's counseling together and identify ways to make their schedules more compatible.

Michelle is happy at her new job, finding ways to improve how the hospital interacts with the local community and how

community members seek treatment and get health care. Barack, meanwhile, decides to run for the U.S. Senate. He gets a few lucky breaks along the way: both the Democratic frontrunner and the Republican nominee are embroiled in scandals, and Barack is also selected by presidential nominee John Kerry as the keynote speaker for the 2004 Democratic National Convention. He gives a rousing seventeen-minute speech demonstrating how he is the embodiment of the American dream, calling for hope, progress, and unity among the American people. He becomes an instant sensation and wins his Senate race with 70 percent of the vote.

After two years in the Senate, Barack thinks about running for President. Michelle, who can already see her own identity slipping away in support of Barack's, is hesitant, but she agrees, knowing that he could help millions of people. Along the campaign trail, Michelle and Barack face extra scrutiny because of their race. People often make racist comments about Barack and Michelle, and Michelle also faces a great deal of sexism when people speak about her "emasculating" Barack by being such a strong woman.

As Barack and Michelle campaign heavily in Iowa, Malia's pediatrician tells Michelle that Malia's body mass index is creeping up. Michelle hires a young man named Sam Kass to cook healthy meals for the family, and Michelle starts to become passionate about children's health and nutrition. She and Sam discuss the possibility of planting a **garden** at the White House and starting a children's health initiative if Barack wins.

After months of hard campaigning, Barack wins the Democratic nomination (beating Hillary Clinton), and ultimately wins the presidency against Republican John McCain. This sets off a whirlwind of changes in the Obamas' lives. They move to Washington and into the White House; they all receive dedicated Secret Service agents and a heavy security detail; they experience the luxury of a full-time staff catering to their needs.

Barack and Michelle waste no time: Barack is focused on rescuing a failing economy, while Michelle begins a series of initiatives in the White House. The first is planting a garden alongside Sam Kass, which helps spark her children's health initiative, called *Let's Move!* She gets large chain companies to promise to cut the salt, fat, and sugar in the meals they market to children, works with schools to provide healthier lunches, and gets networks like Disney and NBC to run PSAs during kids' programs about the importance of physical activity.

Michelle knows that all of her decisions will face some kind of backlash: from women who believe she is giving up her education and career to become a domestic housewife; to those who believe she is too involved in policy; to those who simply focus on her fashion. Michelle knows, too, that as the first black First Lady, she is not perceived to have the "presumed grace" of other First Ladies.

Over the course of Barack's two terms as President, both Michelle and Barack accomplish a lot. Barack is able to pass the Affordable Care Act, his signature domestic achievement. He starts to pull America out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and American forces are able to kill Osama bin Laden. Barack rescues the economy. Michelle accomplishes a lot of her goals with *Let's Move!* and also works on other initiatives like Joining Forces (which focuses on supporting military families), Reach Higher (which helps kids get to and stay in college) and Let Girls Learn (which supports girls' education worldwide).

Still, there are many instances in which Barack and Michelle aren't able to achieve all of their goals, and they feel the weight and responsibility of caring for a grieving nation. When a gunman kills twenty first-graders and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary school in Connecticut, Barack knows there is no solace to be had, but resolves to fight for common sense gun control laws. Yet despite more and more instances of gun violence and school shootings, Congress does not budge.

As Barack's presidency draws to a close, the next election kicks up. Michelle helps campaign for Hillary Clinton, particularly because she is disgusted by the racist and misogynistic comments that Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, makes. When Donald Trump eventually wins, Michelle is disheartened, worrying that so much of the progress that has been made in the last eight years might be undone. Still, as her family transitions out of the White House, she retains her optimism. No one person, she says, can reverse all progress.

Michelle concludes by affirming that she is "an ordinary person who found herself on an extraordinary journey." She reflects on all of the ways that she and the country have changed over her lifetime. Neither she nor the country is perfect, but continuing to grow, and owning one's own unique story, is what "becoming" ultimately means to her.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Michelle Obama – The author and protagonist of *Becoming*. Michelle is born Michelle Robinson and grows up on the South Side of Chicago. From an early age, her parents make a great deal of sacrifices for her and her older brother Craig: her mother stays home to care for the kids, and also ensures that Michelle gets a good education. Her father tends boilers at a filtration plant and sacrifices everything for the benefit of his children. Thanks to their investment in Michelle, she is able to get ahead in school and make good grades, eventually earning herself a spot at Princeton and then going on to attend Harvard Law school. After she begins working at a law firm, however, Michelle starts to understand that she needs to find work that is more fulfilling to her. The book explores how Michelle, through each subsequent phase of her life, is able to find

different ways to do meaningful work and serve her community, whether in a job at city hall, work in nonprofits, or as First Lady. After Michelle marries Barack Obama (whom she met at her law firm), has two daughters, and eventually becomes First Lady of the United States, she also grapples with other aspects of her life. She aims to find a balance between her work life and her family life, making sure her daughters Malia and Sasha are well-cared for and protected, but also wanting to work hard to support under-served communities. She also faces a great deal of racist and sexist criticisms both while working on Barack's campaign and while in the White House, but learning to dodge these punches only gives Michelle an extra fortitude. Through each part of her life, Michelle sees the value in finding something one is passionate about and working to make concrete progress on that issue. She writes *Becoming* because she wants to impart how not only she, but other people, can make a tangible difference in the world by acknowledging that one is never finished growing.

Barack Obama – Michelle's husband and the forty-fourth president of the United States. Barack is the son of a white Kansan mother, Ann Dunham, and a black Kenyan father, Barack Obama Sr. He is born and grows up in Hawaii, and though his parents' marriage is short-lived, his mother prioritizes making sure that he gets a good education. Barack goes to college at Columbia before moving on to Harvard Law School. Michelle serves as his mentor when he becomes a summer associate at her law firm, between his first and second years at law school. Michelle is struck by his signature optimism, which she quickly realizes is not only his attitude towards his own everyday life, but also how he views the world. He wants to make a tangible difference in the country, particularly hoping to improve the lives of marginalized people and communities. This is what ultimately prompts him to become a state senator, before running for the Senate and then President of the United States. Campaigning on the promise of hope and change, Barack inspires other people to be optimistic about the future of the country, particularly as it falls into a deep economic recession. Barack, like Michelle, experiences a great deal of racism along his various campaigns and while President, but his election does demonstrate a tangible social change in the country (although not an eradication of racism altogether, as some believe). Barack takes the responsibility of the presidency extremely seriously, making sure that he understands both everyday issues of Americans as well as the complexities of social, political, and economic issues that he hopes to improve.

Michelle's mother – Michelle's mom, named Marian Shields Robinson. Michelle's mother works hard to make sure that her children get a good education. She teaches Michelle to read early, and when Michelle comes home from second grade and complains about her teacher's incompetence, Michelle's mother gets her placed in a third-grade class instead. Michelle's mother also makes a great deal of sacrifices, not only for her kids but also for Michelle's father. Sometimes Michelle's mother does not work so that she can take care of Michelle and Craig; sometimes she works so that she can fund Michelle and Craig's college education. Michelle's mother also spends a good deal of time caring for her husband's medical needs as he lives with, and ultimately passes away from, multiple sclerosis. Michelle's mother's support for her daughter extends into her time in the White House, as she moves to Washington with the family in order to help Malia and Sasha adjust to life there. She ends up staying all eight years they live in the White House.

Malia Obama – Michelle and Barack's elder daughter, born on July 4, 1998. When Malia is eighteen months old, Barack and Michelle travel to Hawaii and she spikes a high fever. Barack, despite needing to return to Illinois to vote on an important crime bill, understands his need to prioritize his family and stays to make sure Malia is okay. When Malia is young, her body mass index also rises, prompting Michelle to hire Sam Kass to cook the family healthy meals and ultimately helping to inspire Michelle to tackle the issue of childhood obesity and nutrition while in the White House. Malia is ten years old when Barack is elected president. She and her younger sister Sasha grow up in the public eye amidst a great deal of privilege, but she still find a way to maintain a sense of normalcy. As the Obamas leave the White House at the end of the book, Malia is taking a gap year before starting college at Harvard.

Michelle's father – Michelle's dad, named Fraser Robinson III. Michelle's father had been diagnosed in his thirties with multiple sclerosis, but throughout his life he largely ignores his declining health. Instead, he works hard at a filtration plant in order to make sure that Michelle and Craig can get a quality education. Michelle admires his fortitude, but also tries to get him to see a doctor when it becomes clear that he is having trouble walking. After this development, he is quickly hospitalized, and passes away from a heart attack due to complications from M.S. when Michelle is twenty-seven years old.

Sasha Obama – Michelle and Barack's younger daughter, born on June 10, 2001. Sasha's arrival in the family prompts Michelle to evaluate her priorities and to wonder whether the family would better be served by Michelle staying home. However, Michelle then takes baby Sasha to a job interview to demonstrate her needs for a competitive salary (to afford childcare) and flexible time to be with her daughters. She gets the job, and decides to remain at work. Sasha is seven years old when Barack is elected president, and like her sister Malia, experiences both the privileges and the responsibility of growing up in the public eye in the White House.

Craig – Michelle's older brother. Craig and Michelle are very close growing up, and he often breaks ground for her in school because he is a very good student, as well. Craig is also a great basketball player and is recruited to Princeton, which is what

inspires Michelle to attend Princeton, too. Like many of Michelle's other relatives, Craig has experienced discrimination from an early age: when he got a new bike, a policeman stopped him, disbelieving that he could have acquired the bike in "an honest way."

Suzanne Alele – One of Michelle's close college friends, whom she meets at the Third World Center. Personality-wise, she and Suzanne are very different despite their close friendship: Suzanne often prioritizes fun over making a practical choice. Michelle initially judges her for this, but when she passes away from an aggressive cancer at twenty-six, Michelle realizes that Suzanne's way of doing things may have been right, and Michelle tries to find more fulfilling work in her own life.

Robbie – Michelle's great-aunt. Robbie lives downstairs from the Robinsons along with her husband Terry. Robbie teaches Michelle **piano** when she is four years old, and though she is strict, Michelle appreciates Robbie's teaching and the fact that she inspires Michelle to work hard at learning piano. Robbie is also an example of how many of Michelle's relatives have experienced discrimination as a result of their race. Robbie had once sued Northwestern University for discrimination, when she tried to take a music workshop there and had been denied a room in the women's dorm.

Hillary Clinton – Barack's main competitor for the 2008 Democratic nomination. Hillary then becomes Barack's Secretary of State and runs for president as the Democratic nominee in 2016 against Donald Trump. Despite winning three million more popular votes, she loses the electoral college and Donald Trump wins the presidency. Hillary was also the First Lady, as she is married to former president Bill Clinton.

Valerie Jarrett – Michelle and Barack's colleague. Michelle meets Valerie when she interviews with Valerie for a job at city hall in Chicago. Valerie is also a working mother who gave up corporate law to find work that is more fulfilling. Michelle eventually introduces Valerie to Barack, and Valerie becomes Barack's finance chair for his Senate campaign and a senior advisor to him while he is president.

Dandy – Michelle's paternal grandfather. Dandy grew up in South Carolina during the Great Depression before moving to Chicago in what became known as the Great Migration. Michelle notes that Dandy is often irritated and bitter, but she understands that this is due to generations of oppression that had manifested itself in very limited opportunities for Dandy to work and find social mobility.

Reverend Jesse Jackson – A "firebrand Baptist preacher" who becomes a political leader as Michelle grows up. Jackson had worked with Martin Luther King and becomes the second African American to run a serious national campaign for president. He calls for African Americans to shake off "ghetto stereotypes," preaching messages of hope that Barack will echo in his own campaign for president. In high school, Michelle becomes friends with Jackson's daughter Santita.

Harold Washington – The first African American Mayor of Chicago, elected in 1983. He ran on the ideals of progressivism and inspired many young people of color to get involved in politics, including both Barack and Valerie Jarrett. Washington served in office for four years before passing away suddenly from a heart attack.

Terry – Michelle's great-uncle. Terry lives downstairs from the Robinsons along with his wife Robbie. Like Robbie, Terry's life has also been deeply affected by the limited opportunities available to him as a black man. Terry was once a Pullman porter on overnight passenger rail lines, a job that made him very subservient.

Southside – Michelle's maternal grandfather. Southside had grown up in the South during the time of Jim Crow before moving to Chicago. He is often mistrustful of the police and white people in general as a result of the discrimination he experienced as a child. He also introduces Michelle to her love of music.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Reverend Jeremiah Wright – A pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Wright officiates at Michelle and Barack's wedding. Later, Michelle and Barack are scrutinized for their connection to him because old sermons of his are unearthed, criticizing the treatment of African Americans in America.

Czerny Brasuell – A mentor of Michelle's who works at the Third World Center at Princeton, a student center meant to support students of color. Czerny opens Michelle's eyes to a variety of things: she shows her New York City, recommends academic reading to her, and always pushes her to "think bigger."

Sam Kass – A young man Michelle and Barack hire during the campaign to cook meals for their family, after Malia's body mass index starts to creep up. Sam helps Michelle plan the **garden** in the White House and helps her with her children's health initiative, Let's Move!

Ann Dunham – Barack's mother, who grew up in Kansas and met Barack Obama Sr. in college in Hawaii. Their marriage was short-lived, but Ann always made sure that her son felt loved and got a good education. Ann passes away during Barack's campaign for Illinois senate.

Hadiya Pendleton – A fifteen-year-old honor student from the South Side of Chicago who performed in the Inaugural parade. Eight days after the Inauguration, she was shot and killed in Chicago. Michelle attended her funeral.

Barack Obama Sr. – Barack's father, a Kenyan man who married Barack's mother, Ann Dunham, after they attended college. Barack Obama Sr. died in a car crash when Barack was

twenty-six years old.

Donald Trump – The forty-fifth president of the United States and Barack's successor as president. During his campaign, Michelle is appalled by his racist and misogynistic language and policies.

John Kerry – The Democratic nominee for president in the 2004 presidential campaign, running against George W. Bush. Kerry selects Barack as the keynote speaker for the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

John McCain – The Republican nominee for president in 2008, running against Barack. McCain was also a Senator from Arizona.

Jill Biden – Vice President Joe Biden's wife, who works with Michelle on her Joining Forces initiative.

David Axelrod – A chief strategist for Barack's presidential campaign and ultimately a senior advisor to Barack when he becomes president.

Bill Clinton – The forty-second president of the United States, serving from 1993 to 2001. Also Hillary Clinton's husband.

John Edwards – One of Barack's competitors for the Democratic nomination for president in 2008 and a former Senator from North Carolina.

George W. Bush – The forty-third president of the United States, serving from 2001 to 2009.

Laura Bush – Michelle's predecessor as First Lady and George W. Bush's wife.

Santita Jackson – Michelle's high school friend and the daughter of the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

Grandma – Michelle's paternal grandmother, and Dandy's wife.

Joe Biden – Barack's Vice President.

Kevin – Michelle's college boyfriend.

Cindy McCain – John McCain's wife.

Melania Trump – Michelle's successor as First Lady and Donald Trump's wife.

Art Sussman The in-house legal counsel for the University of Chicago.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

OPTIMISM, GROWTH, AND FULFILLMENT

Becoming follows the life of United States First Lady Michelle Obama. The memoir recounts Michelle's childhood on the South Side of Chicago, her time at Princeton and Harvard Law School, her career as a lawyer, and her marriage to Barack Obama, who eventually becomes the forty-fourth President of the United States. As she examines each phase of her life, Michelle highlights the importance of fulfillment, as well as the optimism required to achieve that fulfillment. Several times over the course of the book, Michelle moves beyond a safe path in order to find one that is more rewarding and will allow her to grow. This hope and faith in a better future is characteristic not only of Michelle's journey, but also of her and Barack's vision for the country. Over the course of the book, Michelle's primary argument is that it is imperative to maintain optimism in order to strive for personal growth and, eventually, fulfillment.

Michelle describes how even at an early age, she found value in wanting to grow and get better in all aspects of her life. The first memory that Michelle recounts is of taking **piano** lessons from her great-aunt Robbie, who lived in the apartment downstairs from her family. Michelle would often hear other piano students practicing and writes that she spent much of her childhood listening to "the sound of striving." The word "striving" itself suggests both hard work and a hope that one will get better in the future—that is, an optimism that effort will lead to growth. Michelle demonstrates this same optimism as she practices, and she carries the persistent belief that she can improve to kindergarten. One day, her kindergarten teacher instructs each student to stand and read cards with colors on them. She trips up on the word "white" and is asked to sit back down. She realizes instantly what the word was, and the next day demands to try again, optimistic that she can get it right this time. Michelle maintains this optimism through the rest of her time in school, rising to the top of her class so that she can continue to find fulfillment beyond high school. Michelle decides to follow in her older brother Craig's footsteps and apply to Princeton. But when a guidance counselor tells her that she doesn't think that she's "Princeton material," Michelle refuses to let this shake her confidence. She continues to work hard and seeks support from a trusted individual to write her a recommendation letter. Michelle is able to prove the guidance counselor wrong and eventually attend Princeton, emphasizing that optimism is essential for growth.

Michelle continues to succeed, going on to Harvard Law School after Princeton. But later on, she realizes that she isn't happy at her law firm job. When Michelle realizes that she is uncertain about her professional path at the law firm, she decides to leave, telling her mother explicitly, "I'm just not fulfilled." Even though she takes a major pay cut, she does so in order to find something she really feels passionate about and will allow her

to grow as a person. Michelle then finds fulfillment in a job at City Hall, where she works on "elaborate and unending" government issues. She notes that the job is "broad and people oriented enough to be energizing and almost always interesting." Thus, by maintaining optimism that another job will be a better fit for her, Michelle is able to find something more fulfilling than her previous position at the law firm. Michelle then gets another job at a non-profit called Public Allies, which aims to "build a new generation of community leaders." Essentially, the work involves investing in young people today in the hopes that they will work to better the future society—a job steeped in the idea of optimism and growth. With these two jobs, Michelle begins to realize that in order to find fulfillment, she needs to focus on growth even when doing so might be daunting.

Michelle's message of striving is echoed in Barack's message for the country. His political career demonstrates that optimism can help a nation grow in the same way that a person like Michelle can grow as an individual. Michelle constantly references Barack's optimism, showing how negativity doesn't faze him because he truly believes in his ability to better the world. Early in their relationship, she watches as he leads a training session as a community organizer. "Do we settle for the world as it is, or do we work for the world as it should be?" he asks. This constant belief in "the world as it should be" becomes a pillar of his entire political career. When Barack works his way up the political ladder to delivering a speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, he calls for "hope over cynicism." His words are so inspiring that pundits and citizens alike immediately start believing that he will be the first black president of the United States, despite the fact that he has not been in the national spotlight prior to this moment. When Barack does run for president, his campaign tagline is literally "Hope," proving his firm optimism and his belief in a better world. The American people elect him overwhelmingly, inspired by this optimism and the idea that the country might actually become better. Michelle thus demonstrates how optimism is a powerful force, one that can lead both individuals and entire societies to grow toward greater fulfillment.

Even the title of Michelle's book, "Becoming," implies the importance of optimism and growth. *Becoming* suggests that Michelle believes that people never stop growing; that she is always searching for greater fulfillment; and that she is optimistic in embracing each new phase of life and to finding her purpose within it. Through her own example, she suggests that the country, and the reader, should do the same.

COMMUNITY, INVESTMENT, AND HARD WORK

The early chapters of Michelle Obama's memoir track her trajectory from middle-class kid from the South Side of Chicago to graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law School. On the surface, Michelle's story appears to tout the age-old narrative that hard work is the key ingredient to success. And while Michelle *did* work hard, she acknowledges that there were many other factors involved in her accomplishments. Throughout the memoir, Michelle demonstrates the value of a supportive community and people (particularly family and teachers) who cared about her and were invested in her success. She argues that these factors are just as important as hard work, and that without them, even smart kids who work hard can get left in the dust.

Michelle describes how, from an early age, her desire to work hard was positively reinforced by her family. Michelle learns **piano** from her great-aunt Robbie, who values hard work and sets high standards for her, demanding that she play one song perfectly before moving on to the next. This support taught Michelle to work doggedly at each goal in front of her before tackling an even bigger challenge. Similarly, Michelle's mother teaches her to read at an early age and sets her up for success in grade school. For example, her mother pulls her out of an unruly second grade class and moves her up to a bright, well-ordered third grade class. This kind of parental investment and care is what enables Michelle to feel like her hard work will ultimately pay off and lead people to invest in her further. Michelle's parents also pay for her brother, Craig, to go to a good high school, while Michelle luckily places into a good magnet school that costs nothing called Whitney Young. The assumption at the school is that everyone is working toward college, which allows Michelle to feel like she can be smart without being criticized for it. This kind of supportive community again allows Michelle to flourish and inspires her to work hard. Craig and Michelle both aim to go to college, and their parents constantly tell them not to worry about paying their way through school, instead wanting them to focus on their studies and getting the best education that they can. Thus, not only emotional investment, but also financial investment goes a long way to helping kids to achieve success. By lifting the burden of finances and providing their children with emotional support and encouragement, Craig and Michelle's parents enable them both to attend and graduate from Princeton University. Thus, Michelle makes it clear that it wasn't just her own hard work that caused her early successes; her family and community were crucial factors too.

At Princeton, Michelle continues to rely on support from others who aid her growth. She often feels like an outsider as one of the only black female students, but then she finds the Third World Center (TWC)—"a poorly named but well-intentioned offshoot of the university with a mission to support students of color." It becomes a home base for her, where she makes several "instant friends" who give her more of a sense of belonging. School requires an extra level of confidence and effort for students who don't like they belong, and this community allows Michelle to feel that she deserves to be there. Michelle takes a

work-study job at the TWC, and her boss, Czerny Brasuell, becomes an important mentor for her and an investor in her success as well. This mentorship makes Michelle even more invested in her own success, because she sees that someone else believes in her.

But Michelle acknowledges throughout that not everyone is afforded the same opportunity to be surrounded by positive mentors and loving family members. Bryn Mawr, Michelle's secondary school, is deemed a "run-down slum" by a newspaper, and she often wonders what happened to the children in the second-grade class whose mothers did not pull them out. Michelle recognizes that systems of poverty and institutionalized racism can quickly catch up with children who don't have the same resources she did, no matter how hard those children work. She notes that kids understand these dynamics early on: "I realize that kids know at a very young age when they're being devalued, when adults aren't invested enough to help them learn. Their anger over it can manifest itself as unruliness. It's hardly their fault. They aren't 'bad kids.' They're just trying to survive bad circumstances." Thus, Michelle argues that without the proper circumstances—a community or parents that are able to invest in and support them—hard work is much less likely to lead to the same kinds of success that Michelle herself has found.

Michelle believes so strongly in the power of community investment that as First Lady, she actively works to invest in children around the country and the world. For example, Michelle visits a school in Chicago on the South Side, where she grew up. The students feel that no one cares about them, and most of the time they're less focused on their schoolwork and more focused on staying alive and avoiding gang violence. She invites them to the White House to visit with her and Barack and to visit Howard University—with both trips sponsored by local business people—in order to show them that people do care about them. Michelle organizes these visits because she knows that having a supportive community can enable these kids to escape bad circumstances. Michelle acknowledges, however, that such visits aren't enough—her hope is to eventually help all students feel like they are being valued. Ultimately, she concludes that only the unwavering support of family, teachers, and mentors can inspire children to work hard and overcome adversity.

RACE, GENDER, AND POLITICS

In *Becoming*, Michelle Obama describes how the racism and sexism that she experiences as a black woman in America have shaped her life. Seeing these forms of discrimination both personally and on a larger societal scale allows her to give the reader a full view of how discrimination shapes both individuals and America's institutions. She demonstrates how racism and sexism affect her everyday life as well as the lives of other black women in America, and she argues that they influence America's entire society as well. Throughout, Michelle shows how these forms of discrimination are pervasive forces that demand an incredible amount of resolve to withstand—and to fight back against.

At the societal level, Michelle highlights how slavery left residual racism in many of society's institutions, and how that racism oppressed the generations before her. Michelle describes the backstory of her older relatives, starting with her grandfather Dandy, born in 1912 in South Carolina. The grandson of slaves, Dandy was intelligent and dreamed of going to college, but because he was black and from a poor family, he was unable to find a path to get there. He moved to Chicago in what became known as the Great Migration, in which "six million southern blacks relocated to big northern cities over the course of five decades, fleeing racial oppression and chasing industrial jobs." Not only was Dandy unable to find a path to college, it was also hard to find a well-paying job in Chicago without a union card (which was nearly impossible for black people at the time). Michelle notes that this form of discrimination "altered the destinies of generations of African Americans" by limiting their income. Michelle's great-aunt Robbie was also discriminated against based on her race. Robbie sued Northwestern University for discrimination because she had registered for a workshop there but was denied a room in the women's dorm, barring her from getting an education and entering an elite community. Michelle writes about how the South Side in Chicago began as a co-op, meant to ease the World War II housing shortage for black working-class families. But Michelle describes how, in her youth, "the word 'ghetto' got thrown around like a threat." This word, she says, implies that a place is "black and hopeless," and this threat caused wealthy and white families to depart for the suburbs, leaving the South Side to be forgotten in poverty and gang violence. Thus, even the implication that a place was primarily black led to significant disadvantages for those who lived there.

Michelle goes on to explore how racism continues to affect those in her own generation, and how it forced her and her peers to develop an extra degree of resilience. For example, when Michelle's brother, Craig, gets a new bike, he is immediately picked up by the police because they don't believe that a young black boy would have gotten a new bike in an honest way. Similarly, when family friends move out of the South Side and into a suburb, Michelle and her family go to visit them. While they are having fun with their friends, neighbors key her father's car, which he cherished. Michelle's exploration of how racism affected her upbringing becomes particularly pertinent at Princeton, a university which she describes as being, at the time, "extremely white and very male." People view Michelle, a black woman, as if she doesn't deserve to be there; they think that she was only accepted because of affirmative action, and not because she was extremely bright and worked

extremely hard. In each of these examples, the family's reaction to racism is not to complain or call out injustice, but simply to understand that they are subject to an extra level of scrutiny and hatred born of centuries-old prejudice.

The wide reach of racism and prejudice becomes especially clear during Michelle's husband Barack's presidential campaign and election. While many people view Barack's election as a sign that America has moved past its racist history, the Obamas' experiences with racism during the campaign and then also in the White House tell a different story. During Barack's first campaign, rumors swirl that Barack had been schooled as a radical Muslim; that he was sworn into the Senate on a Koran; and that he wouldn't recite the Pledge of Allegiance or put his hand over his heart during the national anthem. Even more extreme, during Barack's campaign for reelection, Donald Trump feeds a conspiracy theory that Barack's Hawaiian birth certificate was a fake—a conspiracy that Michelle calls "crazy and mean spirited […] its underlying bigotry and xenophobia hardly concealed." These criticisms are deeply racist because they stem solely from the fact that Barack is black and has a name that sounds unfamiliar to many white people.

Michelle herself also deals with prejudice based on her race, but she also faces an extra level of discrimination because she is a black woman. As Michelle starts to read criticism of her behavior during the campaign, she thinks to herself: "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." The criticism she cites reeks of both racism and sexism, playing on the trope of the "angry black woman." Michelle is criticized for everything from her choice of dress, to how she acts and speaks. Comparing herself to previous First Ladies, she describes how "if there was a presumed grace assigned to my white predecessors, I knew it wasn't likely to be the same for me." Throughout, however, Michelle thinks of her need to dodge these criticisms as analogous to "dodging punches." That is, she maintains that no matter how often racism and sexism are used to attack her, the fact that she has experienced them all her life also gives her an extra fortitude to fight back.

MARRIAGE, PARENTHOOD, AND WORK

A key aspect of *Becoming* is Michelle Obama's discussion of how her life has been shaped by dueling priorities—that of being a wife, a mother, and someone who wants to be fulfilled professionally. She recounts the ways in which she juggles these commitments, but at the same time, she emphasizes that there is no one right way to do so. Ultimately, Michelle demonstrates that no matter what, anyone juggling these priorities will be forced to make many compromises. Michelle acknowledges that she is unable to assume all of these responsibilities without making some sacrifices, but she can learn to prioritize the things that are most important to her personally—and she suggests that readers can learn to do the same for themselves.

Michelle first confronts the battle of priorities when she marries Barack. She understands that marriage is built on love, but it is maintained through compromise and understanding of each other's needs. Michelle and Barack have largely united outlooks and opinions, but there are aspects of their characters that appear to be in opposition. For example, Barack doesn't mind a mess and feels "no compunction to fold his clothes," while Michelle prefers order over chaos. These differing attitudes towards life, however trivial, require them to be understanding of one another's values. Their marriage also brings up other basic values that require compromise. When Michelle lives in Chicago and Barack is attending Harvard Law School, Michelle demands that they speak on the phone often in order to keep their connection to each other. Though Barack admits that he's "not much of a phone guy," Michelle is adamant about making sure that they are able to hear each other's voices. Just after their wedding and honeymoon, Barack has a deadline to finish a book to help pay off some of his debt. Realizing he needs time and space to accomplish this, his mother rents a cabin for him for six months in Indonesia so that he can get it done. Michelle has a hard time losing Barack for this amount of time just after their wedding, but this event quickly makes her aware that they will both have to make sacrifices in their marriage for the sake of their jobs. When Michelle and Barack start to have difficulties because Barack is constantly away as an Illinois State Senator in Springfield, he agrees to couple's counseling despite the fact that he is reluctant at first, knowing that compromise is important in making their marriage work.

After their older daughter Malia is born, Michelle and Barack learn how parenting also requires compromises—compromises that aren't always fulfilling. At the time, Michelle is working at the University of Chicago as an associate dean. She whittles down her job to be part-time, thinking that she'll be getting the best of both worlds. But, she writes, "to me, it felt like a sanity-warping double bind. I battled guilt when I had to take work calls at home. I battled a different sort of guilt when I sat at my office distracted by the idea that Malia might be allergic to peanuts. Part-time work was meant to give me more freedom, but mostly it left me feeling as if I were only half doing everything." Beyond just making compromises, Michelle finds that she also has to learn how to make those compromises feel meaningful and effective. Barack also experiences this when they take a trip to Hawaii and Malia gets sick, forcing Barack to miss voting on an important crime bill. He chooses taking care of his daughter over an important vote, which later has serious political costs. But he understands that there are times when his child must take precedence, and he knows that sacrifices have to be made in his career in order to do that. After the

Obamas' younger daughter Sasha's birth, Michelle makes it clear to potential employers that she will be juggling priorities. She interviews for a job as the executive director of the hospital at the University of Chicago and brings Sasha along, showing her interviewer very clearly that she has responsibilities as a parent and requires compromise from her job as well. But at the same time, Michelle points out that when Barack is finishing up at the White House, their daughters are just about to graduate from high school—he has sacrificed a great deal of family time during his daughters' most formative years in order to run the country. In many ways, Barack makes the opposite choice from Michelle. While Michelle rededicates herself to taking care of their daughters while in the White House, Barack (by necessity) focuses more on work. But Michelle doesn't make any kind of judgement about her family's priorities. Instead, she argues that everyone has different priorities and means for being fulfilled, and that everyone must make different sacrifices in order to find meaning and balance in their lives.

Certainly Michelle makes difficult choices about the kind of mother, worker, and spouse that she wants to be. But she makes clear throughout the book that there is no right way to make these choices, and that everyone has to evaluate their own priorities and desires in life. And in keeping with her optimism and her view on how people continue to grow, change, and "become," she also emphasizes that these priorities can (and often must) evolve over time.

POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

When *Becoming* author Michelle Obama and her husband Barack are whisked into the White House following his first presidential election, they are thrust into a world of luxury, one-of-a-kind experiences, and the unique privileges afforded a first family. However, Michelle emphasizes that with this ease comes an immense amount of responsibility. Despite the fact that many of their day-to-day worries are taken care of, Michelle makes it a point to stay grounded and above all to understand the political obligation that her family has to the American people. Thus, Michelle makes the case that while power like her family's brings with it a great degree of privilege, it also comes with the weight of vast responsibility.

Michelle describes the many advantages and luxuries that her family is afforded when they arrive at the White House, illustrating the intimate link between power and privilege. Living in the White House immediately propels the family into a degree of luxury that they've never had before. Michelle writes, "I understood how lucky we were to be living this way. The master suite in the residence was bigger than the entirety of the upstairs apartment my family had shared when I was growing up on Euclid Avenue." In addition to the sheer abundance of space, the Obamas have access to previously inaccessible levels of lavishness: Monet and Degas paintings hang on the walls of the White House; they have private cars and private planes (though mostly for safety); they stay with royalty on foreign trips; and their favorite foods are stocked in the kitchens. Additionally, they suddenly have a great deal of personnel helping them: staff members cater to their every need, such as cooking, cleaning, and shopping. Michelle makes an effort to stay humble amidst this luxury by getting to know the White House staff as much as she is able, acknowledging that it is necessary not to become too separate from the average American—her family owes Americans the responsibility of leading the country *and* considering the needs of citizens.

In particular, Michelle acknowledges a large responsibility that comes with all this privilege: the responsibility of staying safe. The White House, with all its amenities, is designed to keep the first family safe so that Barack is able to run the country effectively. This constant need for safety limits the Obamas' freedom of movement. Michelle understands the necessity of these limitations, and though she and Malia and Sasha sometimes try to get the Secret Service to bend their rules, they acknowledge their personal duty to err on the side of safety and caution.

Michelle also recognizes a different kind of responsibility that comes with presidential privilege: the political and emotional responsibility they owe to the American people. Michelle and Barack are quickly initiated into coping with unthinkable disasters. Michelle recounts several in quick succession: an earthquake in Haiti; an oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico; revolution in Egypt. In each of these cases, Barack (and sometimes Michelle) have to face the nation, "absorbing and responding to whatever came our country's way." They are thus responsible for addressing these disasters quickly on both an emotional level and a political one. Perhaps this responsibility is clearest when a shooter walks into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, killing twenty first-graders and six teachers. Barack and Michelle are both deeply affected by these events: as Michelle puts it, "staying upright after Newtown was probably the hardest thing he'd ever had to do." Still, Barack understands that it is his responsibility to console a grieving nation and take steps to prevent these kinds of events from ever happening again: he champions gun control measures in the following months (though Congress does not pass this legislature).

Michelle finds that much of the time, she shoulders a sense of responsibility that matches Barack's. Over her years at the White House, Michelle visits military hospitals where American troops are recovering from war. She is awed by the "fortitude and loyalty" that she encounters from veterans and their families, even after they have been gravely wounded. When she visits one man whose body has been severely burned, he tries to get out of bed even though he is clearly in agony. Michelle

realizes that he is trying to salute his commander in chief's wife. Feeling a responsibility toward this man and the many others that she meets, Michelle starts a program called Joining Forces along with Jill Biden, to help support the military community through finding them job opportunities, aiding with mental health, and helping colleges and universities better understand the needs of military children. Throughout, Michelle understands that alongside the privileges that come with the White House, she and Barack have a responsibility to all of the American people to help improve their lives in tangible ways, and she suggests that all forms of significant power also come with this same combination of privilege and responsibility.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PIANO

The piano represents Michelle's desire to work hard and overcome adversity with the help of caring adults. Michelle begins learning piano at age four from her great-aunt Robbie, who lives downstairs from Michelle and her family and teaches piano. Michelle constantly hears other students playing piano growing up, and when she is finally able to learn herself, she dedicates herself to practicing in order to get better. She is encouraged by the fact that the more she practices, the better she is able to play. And she is also excited to see the pleasure Robbie gets when Michelle can play a song without making a mistake. Thus, Michelle's experience learning the piano sets up a maxim that Michelle returns to again and again: children will work hard if they feel like someone is invested in their success, and Michelle knows that she owes a lot to the fact that she had caring adults who encouraged her to work hard.

The piano also shows Michelle some of the inequality of the world. When she attends her first piano recital, she cannot find Middle C, because Robbie's battered piano had a chipped Middle C that always helped Michelle find her place. When Michelle realizes this, she starts to panic, not knowing where to place her hands. This shows how, oftentimes, those who are at a disadvantage don't know what they don't know and have to work twice as hard to figure out how to put themselves on a level playing field—an idea that Michelle also understands when she attends Princeton. But during the recital, Robbie comes to rescue her and points out Middle C; Michelle regains her confidence and plays the piano perfectly. This episode reinforces the value of caring adults invested in the success of children, and how that care sets them up to want to work hard and succeed.

THE GARDEN

The garden that Michelle plants in the White House represents her optimism, and how she uses that optimism to find personal growth and fulfillment. The garden itself is an optimistic endeavor; when she and Sam Kass plan the garden, they aren't sure whether the garden will actually grow anything. They worry that it could be a huge (and very public) failure. Yet they know that the garden is a worthwhile venture, and they put their faith in the effort.

Fortunately, the garden grows beautifully, and Michelle uses it to find fulfillment in other ways. It helps her begin many initiatives or efforts that she is passionate about: she gets kids from a local elementary school involved in its planting and harvesting; she donates a portion of each harvest to help feed the local homeless population; and it helps spark her signature initiative, Let's Move! This children's health initiative eventually garners pledges from companies to make their meals healthier, raises awareness about child obesity and the importance of eating healthy and being active, and helps pass legislation making school lunches healthier. The entire venture is underscored by the garden, a symbol of health and nutrition. Thus, the garden shows how Michelle's optimism and efforts pay off: it allows her to do meaningful work, perhaps even beyond what she thought might have been possible.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Crown Publishing edition of *Becoming* published in 2018.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Robbie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Michelle opens *Becoming* with this description of being a young girl and constantly hearing the sounds of her great-aunt Robbie's piano students from the apartment below.

The first key word of Michelle's description is the word "striving," a word that will become essential to Michelle's own character. "Striving" implies two ideas: hard work, and hope that that hard work might pay off into improvement (which is to say, optimism). These two ideas define Michelle better than anything else, as the book demonstrates her incredible work ethic and her unflagging optimism. Throughout the memoir, Michelle is driven and works tirelessly to achieve as much as she can—and so it is apt that the memoir begins with the same idea, of other students plodding their way through exercises and songs so that one day they will be able to play the piano beautifully.

> The issue was that I wasn't used to flawless. In fact, I'd never once in my life encountered it. My experience of the piano came entirely from Robbie's [...] less-than-perfect upright, with its honky-tonk patchwork of yellowed keys and its conveniently chipped middle C. To me, that's what a piano was—the same way my neighborhood was my neighborhood, my dad was my dad, my life was my life. It was all I knew.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Michelle's father, Robbie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

When Michelle is four years old, she starts to learn piano from her great aunt Robbie, who lives in the apartment downstairs from Michelle's family. Michelle's lessons happen on Robbie's piano, which is very old and battered, and the middle C key has a chip on the edge, allowing Michelle to find it easily. But when she performs at a piano recital, the grand piano there is pristine, and this causes Michelle to panic, because she doesn't know how to find middle C without the chip.

This anecdote that Michelle recounts is vital, as it is the first time in which Michelle is able to fully identify some of the disparities and inequities among people. Michelle had only ever known the tattered piano, a neighborhood that was slowly sliding into poverty, and a father quickly declining due to M.S. But she doesn't fully realize these facts until she sees the broader world and becomes aware of the fact that some people are born with more privileges than others—some people are born practicing on pristine pianos, and some are not. Yet at the same time, this story shows Michelle's immense resilience and hard work even in the face of inequality. Just as Michelle starts to panic, Robbie comes over and helps Michelle find middle C, allowing her to play her piece. With the help of a community and family trying to lift her up, Michelle is able to achieve what any other student might have been able to—a lesson that she carries throughout her life as she tries to combat the inequality among children.

Chapter 2 Quotes

> Now that I'm an adult, I realize that kids know at a very young age when they're being devalued, when adults aren't invested enough to help them learn. Their anger over it can manifest itself as unruliness. It's hardly their fault. They aren't "bad kids." They're just trying to survive bad circumstances.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Michelle's mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

When Michelle begins second grade, she describes being in a class led by an incompetent teacher. As a result, the children are unruly, since they have no structure. This, in turn, lets the teacher simply write off the students as being bad kids, when in fact, they are simply (as Michelle writes) "trying to survive bad circumstances."

Michelle's musings here highlight the immense importance of investment in children and their educations. Michelle's mother, hearing her complain about her teacher, gets Michelle placed into a bright third grade classroom with a good teacher. This leads Michelle to not only get a better education, but also to want to work hard, knowing that if she does so, she will gain more and more benefit from that education. But this does not remedy the underlying problem: that all children deserve investment, and without it, they have no incentive to work hard. This becomes crucial to Michelle later in her life when she makes efforts to ensure that all students feel like someone cares about their achievements and guides them to want better opportunities.

He'd been promptly picked up by a police officer who accused him of stealing it, unwilling to accept that a young black boy would have come across a new bike in an honest way. (The officer, an African American man himself, ultimately got a brutal tongue-lashing from my mother, who made him apologize to Craig.) What had happened, my parents told us, was unjust but also unfortunately common. The color of our skin made us vulnerable. It was a thing we'd always have to navigate.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Michelle's father, Michelle's mother, Craig

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Michelle describes how her parents treated her and Craig like adults, never talking down to them. When her brother gets picked up by the police simply because he is a black boy with a new bike, they refuse to sugar coat what is happening. Thus, Michelle begins to understand the institutional racism in America early, and it is knowledge that she will carry with her throughout her life. She recognizes pervasive racism while she is at Princeton, and while she is receiving racially-motivated criticism on the campaign trail, and while she is at the White House and does not have the same presumed grace that white First Ladies have.

However, Michelle makes a point of acknowledging that while the color of their skin made their family vulnerable, they work hard not to allow it to hinder them. As Michelle notes later in the book, she is able to overcome her less privileged background, and she hopes to be a role model for others to recognize that they might be able to do the same.

Chapter 3 Quotes

At one point, one of the girls, a second, third, or fourth cousin of mine, gave me a sideways look and said, just a touch hotly, "How come you talk like a white girl?"

The question was pointed, meant as an insult or at least a challenge, but it also came from an earnest place. It held a kernel of something that was confusing for both of us. We seemed to be related but of two different worlds.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

When Michelle is young, she visits a distant relative and one of her cousins asks her why she speaks like a white girl. The question plays into both stereotypes and expectations, as Michelle's cousin has a hard time squaring what Michelle looks like with how she speaks. Michelle describes how her parents had always emphasized proper grammar and diction with her, but to some this is perceived as a betrayal of their community.

This is a difficulty that Michelle, and later Barack, will experience again and again, as people criticize them and place them outside of their own community. As Michelle describes later, some people will view Barack as light-skinned, and some will view him as dark-skinned, as people have a difficult time understanding his background. This is Michelle's first experience of the same type of disapproval, and she will be criticized by some throughout her life as being too elitist, the product of her Ivy-League education. All of these criticisms, Michelle shows, are still a produce of racial bias, as she and Barack face extra scrutiny both growing up and on the campaign trail for their race.

Chapter 4 Quotes

As I was entering seventh grade, the *Chicago Defender*, a weekly newspaper that was popular with African American readers, ran a vitriolic opinion piece that claimed Bryn Mawr had gone, in the span of a few years, from being one of the city's best public schools to a "run-down slum" governed by a "ghetto mentality." Our school principal, Dr. Lavizzo, immediately hit back with a letter to the editor, defending his community of parents and students and deeming the newspaper piece "an outrageous lie, which seems designed to incite only feelings of failure and flight."

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Michelle's mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Michelle explores over the course of several chapters how, as she is growing up, her neighborhood is slowly being abandoned by its white and wealthy residents. While this certainly results in declining funding for schools and communities as a whole, Michelle also recognizes that the

ideas expressed in this *Chicago Defender* piece are inaccurate, and they only heighten the racism being experienced by her community.

The opinion piece uses racially-charged language against the school, as the principal points out. This not only ends up reinforcing bad stereotypes that cause people to continue to leave the community, but also strips people of hope in their own community. Fortunately, as Michelle describes, her mother recognizes these scare tactics and understands that her daughter is still getting a good education; she also understands the importance of facing down this racism, prevailing over harmful stereotypes, and maintaining optimism in a community.

Chapter 5 Quotes

He toured the country, mesmerizing crowds with thundering calls for black people to shake off the undermining ghetto stereotypes and claim their long-denied political power. He preached a message of relentless, let's-do-this self-empowerment. "Down with dope! Up with hope!" he'd call to his audiences.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama, Reverend Jesse Jackson (speaker), Santita Jackson, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

When Michelle is in high school, she becomes friends with Santita Jackson, the daughter of the Reverend Jesse Jackson, a "firebrand Baptist preacher" who had worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr. and who gained national prominence as a politician by founding an organization called Operation PUSH, which focused on the rights of underserved African Americans. By using this quote, Michelle invites comparisons between the Reverend and Barack's eventual campaign, which also trades on optimism and hope as a means for progress, particularly for minorities who have long been disappointed and often disenfranchised by politicians.

While the Reverend's eventual presidential run—only the second serious national campaign run by an African American—would prove unsuccessful, the Reverend's political views pave the way for Barack's own thinking. His own campaign also runs on a message of optimism as a means by which the country can progress and grow.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Your passion stays low, yet under no circumstance will you underperform. You live, as you always have, by the code of effort/result, and with it you keep achieving until you think you know the answers to all the questions—including the most important one. *Am I good enough? Yes, in fact I am.*

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

After Michelle graduates from college, she immediately goes to Harvard Law School and becomes a corporate lawyer at a firm called Sidley & Austin, despite the fact that she's not truly passionate about the work. Instead, she is driven by validation and the fact that it feels, to her, like a good use of her education. This is the compromise, she believes, between investment and fulfillment. At first, Michelle believes, like her parents before her, that it is better to invest in the future, putting aside her immediate needs and desires and instead simply trying to set aside money for the future.

But gradually, Michelle realizes that passion and fulfilment are a necessary part of her journey. This realization is in part prompted by Barack, who arrives at Sidley & Austin as a summer associate a year after Michelle arrives. She sees in him a deep desire to do something purposeful with his life, to continue to do more not only for himself but for the people around him. Though it takes Michelle a bit longer, she also comes to understand that she is constantly progressing, looking for the thing that will be the most fulfilling to her.

Chapter 9 Quotes

But listening to Barack, I began to understand that his version of hope reached far beyond mine: It was one thing to get yourself out of a stuck place, I realized. It was another thing entirely to try and get the place itself unstuck.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

After Michelle and Barack start dating, a friend of his asks him to lead a community organizing session at a black Parish in Roseland, a town on the South Side. Michelle watches as Barack inspires the people who attend the session to do more for their communities. Though Michelle has always considered herself an optimistic person, she recognizes during this episode how sweeping Barack's vision is. Michelle views her background as something she overcame, but Barack intends to try to get the neighborhood to progress as a whole. At this point, he has not yet thought about being a politician, and so he tries to make change on the ground level. This ground-level optimism, and hope for progress, truly inspires the people of Roseland to try to pick up their community, and Michelle will see the same kind of inspiration hit people across the country when Barack runs for president.

❝ I informed Barack that if our relationship was going to work, he'd better get comfortable with the phone. "If I'm not talking to you," I announced, "I might have to find another guy who'll listen." I was joking, but only a little.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Michelle and Barack begin dating, Barack returns to Harvard for his second year at law school, while Michelle remains working in Chicago at Sidley & Austin. At first, Barack suggests that they write letters, claiming that he doesn't usually like to speak on the phone. But for Michelle, being able to speak to someone is fundamental to a relationship—she enjoys talking to her family and wants to make sure that she can speak to Barack over the phone.

Talking on the phone versus letter writing is not only a distinction of preference. Talking on the phone (especially at this time, in the eighties) means a coordination of schedules and a larger effort made to talk to one another. This becomes an early example of the ways Michelle and Barack must both adapt to one another's styles. Here, Barack acknowledges the importance of speaking on the phone to Michelle and makes an effort to do so. Later in the book, some of Michelle's priorities become compromised by Barack's ambitions and career. Ultimately, Michelle understands, relationships can only work when they involve these kinds of small and large sacrifices.

❝ I regretted not coming earlier. I regretted the many times, over the course of our seesawing friendship, that I'd insisted she was making a wrong move, when possibly she'd been doing it right. I was suddenly glad for all the times she'd ignored my advice. I was glad that she hadn't over-worked herself to get some fancy business school degree. That she'd gone off for a lost weekend with a semi-famous pop star, just for fun. I was happy that she'd made it to the Taj Mahal to watch the sunrise with her mom. Suzanne had lived in ways that I had not.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Suzanne Alele

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

After Michelle's friend Suzanne is diagnosed with an aggressive form of lymphoma, Michelle is shocked by the news, and simply tries to deny it. She continues to do her work at Sidley & Austin, sometimes sending a friend of hers who lives near Suzanne to check up on her. Eventually, however, that friend tells Michelle that Suzanne has been hospitalized, and Michelle immediately gets on a plane to visit.

Seeing Suzanne in a coma, and then going through losing her, sparks a shift in Michelle's own thinking. While she had previously been very critical of Suzanne's desire to have fun and find instant fulfillment rather than think practically or long-term, now Michelle starts to understand the value of the decisions that Suzanne had been making. After Suzanne's death (and particularly after the death of Michelle's father shortly thereafter), Michelle starts to look for jobs outside of the corporate world, intent on finding something that will help her feel more purposeful and fulfilled.

Chapter 10 Quotes

"I'm just not fulfilled," I said.

I see now how this must have come across to my mother, who was then in the ninth year of a job she'd taken primarily so she could help finance my college education, after years of *not* having a job so that she'd be free to sew my school clothes, cook my meals, and do laundry for my dad, who for the sake of our family spent eight hours a day watching gauges on a boiler at the filtration plant.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Suzanne Alele, Barack Obama, Michelle's father, Michelle's mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

The summer after Suzanne's death, Michelle starts to feel more and more disappointed at work. One day, driving in the car with her mother, she reveals that she doesn't feel fulfilled in her job. Michelle's mother's advice is to make money now and worry about happiness later, but Michelle understands that money and saving for the future is not the only value she has.

Thus, Michelle is caught between two priorities: she feels guilty that her relative privilege allows her to think about fulfillment, rather than simply trying to save as much money as she can for her children (as her parents did for her). She recognizes how much her own parents sacrificed and how her own mother both worked and did not work in order to best serve her children. This recognition is part of the reason why Michelle waits a bit longer to leave her job, guilty from her mother's advice. But at the same time, Michelle understands that fulfillment and personal growth are necessary endeavors, because finding something meaningful to a person can change one's own life and the lives of others. Without the pursuit of passion, Michelle might only have remained a corporate lawyer throughout her life and never changed the lives of the children and military members that her initiatives support.

Chapter 11 Quotes

I had never been one to hold city hall in high regard. Having grown up black and on the South Side, I had little faith in politics. Politics had traditionally been used against black folks, as a means to keep us isolated and excluded, leaving us undereducated, unemployed, and underpaid. I had grandparents who'd lived through the horror of Jim Crow laws and the humiliation of housing discrimination and basically mistrusted authority of any sort.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Southside, Dandy, Valerie Jarrett, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

When Michelle decides to leave Sidley & Austin definitively, she interviews with Valerie Jarrett, a young black woman working at city hall who had also given up a job as a corporate lawyer. Michelle is skeptical of politics, explaining the underlying racism that many of America's largest institutions have been steeped in for so long. Even after the abolition of slavery (the most concrete and catastrophic form of American political oppression), African Americans still faced discrimination in the law, within communities, and from those in positions of power. In other chapters, Michelle references how her grandfather Dandy came north during the Great Migration but was unable to find a steady, well-paying job because of hiring discrimination, and how her other grandfather Southside who lived through the Jim Crow south.

This is also part of the reason why Michelle is eventually so hesitant about Barack getting involved in politics, yet at the same time, she recognizes the importance of a black man holding the highest political office in the country, since he could actively work to counteract some of the institutional racism that still exists in the country.

Chapter 12 Quotes

It sounds a little like a bad joke, doesn't it? What happens when a solitude-loving individualist marries an outgoing family woman who does not love solitude one bit?

The answer, I'm guessing, is probably the best and most sustaining answer to nearly every question arising inside a marriage, no matter who you are or what the issue is: You find ways to adapt. If you're in it forever, there's really no choice.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Ann Dunham, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

After Michelle and Barack get married, they go on a honeymoon together to California. But when they return, Barack discovers that, having blown the deadline to write his book, the publisher is asking for its $40,000 advance back. Instead of panicking, Barack decides to hole up in a cabin for a few months to finish the manuscript and sell it to another publisher, and his mother Ann finds a cabin in Indonesia for him.

Although Michelle highlights some of the compromises and sacrifices that the couple has made for each other in prior chapters, this is Michelle's first big recognition of the fact that marriage means adapting to Barack, which she will have to do again and again as both of their career paths zigzag and his eventually ends up consuming hers. Just as she ultimately recognizes when her daughters are born, she argues here that marriage inevitably comes with a certain degree of compromise for it to be successful.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ None of this was his fault, but it wasn't equal, either, and for any woman who lives by the mantra that equality is important, this can be a little confusing. It was me who'd alter everything, putting my passions and career dreams on hold, to fulfill this piece of our dream. I found myself in a small moment of reckoning. Did I want it? Yes, I wanted it so much. And with this, I hoisted the needle and sank it into my flesh.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Malia Obama, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

When Michelle and Barack are having trouble getting pregnant, their doctor recommends they try in vitro fertilization. Michelle is frustrated by the fact that this process, and the process of becoming and being pregnant as a whole, is deeply imbalanced between her and Barack, as she has to go to daily ultrasounds, blood drawings, and cervix inspections, while Barack simply has to provide some sperm. She recognizes the inherent, biological inequality of being a woman, and how so much of the inequality between women and men result from this specific inequality.

While Barack and Michelle will both have to make compromises and sacrifices for their daughters, it is Michelle who will have to take time off from work and put the rest of her life on hold. Michelle will bear the brunt of responsibility for taking care of her daughters, and will even at times consider not working at all because of the expense of childcare. Still, she understands that this is something she deeply wants, and will also be a part of her life that makes her feel more fulfilled, and so the sacrifices, she knows, are necessary.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ In the end, the year 2000 arrived without incident. After a couple of days of rest and some antibiotics, what indeed had turned out to be a nasty ear infection for Malia cleared up, returning our toddler to her normal bouncy state. Life would go on. It always did. On another perfect blue-sky day in Honolulu, we boarded a plane and flew home to Chicago, back into the chill of winter and into what for Barack was shaping up to be a political disaster.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Malia Obama, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

When Malia is about eighteen months old, Michelle and Barack take a vacation to Hawaii with her over Christmas. Barack is called back to the state senate for an important crime bill vote, but before they can cut their vacation short, Malia becomes very sick. Barack tells his aide that he will have to miss the vote to stay with his daughter, but he is later intensely criticized for missing it.

This is one of the earliest and largest sacrifices that Barack makes between work and being a parent, prioritizing his daughter's health and safety (and both her and Michelle's need to have him by their side) over an important piece of legislation. This begins an ongoing struggle for Barack: he has a responsibility to his daughters, but his decisions also affect the lives of his constituents. And so, despite the fact that his presence would not have ultimately changed the outcome of the vote, the symbolic action of remaining with

his family draws deep criticism. The fact that Barack is so criticized for this action demonstrates how unforgiving politics can be in terms of focusing on anything that isn't work, which Barack will experience several times over the course of his presidency.

Somewhat brazenly, I suppose, I laid all this out in my interview with Michael Riordan, the hospital's new president. I even brought three-month-old Sasha along with me, too. I can't remember the circumstances exactly, whether I couldn't find a babysitter that day or whether I'd even bothered to try. Sasha was little, though, and still needed a lot from me. She was a fact of my life—a cute, burbling, impossible-to-ignore fact— and something compelled me almost literally to put her on the table for this discussion. *Here is me*, I was saying, *and here also is my baby*.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Malia Obama, Sasha Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

After Sasha is born, Michelle is unsure whether she can keep up the pace of being a mother to two children and having a full-time job—she even considers giving up work entirely because of the cost of childcare. But when Michelle gets a call to interview for a position at the University of Chicago Medical Center, she brings Sasha along to make her needs clear.

This quote demonstrates the ways in which Michelle is learning to navigate the compromise between parenthood and working. Previously, she had been completely overwhelmed when taking care of Malia and trying to scale back her full-time job to a part-time one. Here, Michelle understands that she needs to make a different kind of compromise: a full-time job that allows her to afford childcare and then use her free time to have more meaningful time with her kids rather than worry if she'll have time to take care of them. While Michelle has already learned that being a mother comes with a degree of compromise, making her priorities known demonstrates Michelle's continued growth and her ability to fight for the parts of her life that make her feel most fulfilled.

Chapter 16 Quotes

Crazy rumors swirled about Barack: that he'd been schooled in a radical Muslim madrassa and sworn into the Senate on a Koran. That he refused to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. That he wouldn't put his hand over his heart during the national anthem. That he had a close friend who was a domestic terrorist from the 1970s.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

As Barack's presidential campaign continues, he starts to experience a different sort of criticism from many of the other candidates. The examples that Michelle cites here show the racism that Barack encounters from critics, due to the fact that he is an African American man. Many of the examples are xenophobic, particularly the critiques of his being Muslim. Even though Barack is not Muslim, the fact that this alone might somehow disqualify him from becoming president is also religious discrimination.

The critiques overall imply that just because a person is not white, or is not Christian, or has a name that sounds unusual to American ears, that person is also unpatriotic, un-American, and unworthy of becoming President. Barack's eventual win demonstrates, fortunately, that most Americans do not believe these rumors, but the fact that they exist proves the enduring racism in American politics, which certainly does not disappear with Barack's election.

Chapter 17 Quotes

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.*

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

Like Barack, Michelle experiences her own forms of discrimination along the campaign trail, particularly after a video surfaces of her that strips away the context of a quote from one of her speeches, leaving only the words, "for the first time in my adult life, I'm really proud of my country." As a result, Michelle faces a flood of criticism, which, like the criticism of Barack, often plays on harmful tropes and racist ideas. The "expected level of grace" refers to the impression that people don't view Michelle by the same measuring stick as they do the white spouses of the other political candidates, or the white First Ladies who came before her. She understands that this is an extension of the trope of the "angry black woman," a trope she notes elsewhere is particularly frustrating because criticism like this can only make a person more upset and angry, and thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Yet at the same time, Michelle's exploration of these issues comes with a lesson—early on in the campaign, perhaps earlier than any other potential First Lady before her, Michelle becomes adept at dodging these kinds of "punches," as she calls them. The criticisms that Michelle endures only give her an extra fortitude in facing them, and she is able to carry that fortitude all the way through to the White House.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ "On this day," he said, "we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord."

I saw that truth mirrored again and again in the faces of the people who stood shivering in the cold to witness it. There were people in every direction, as far back as I could see. They filled every inch of the National Mall and the parade route. I felt as if our family were almost falling into their arms now. We were making a pact, all of us. You've got us; we've got you.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama, Barack Obama (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

As Michelle watches Barack give his inauguration speech in front of the White House, she recognizes clearly something she started to understand when Barack announced his candidacy for President. Even before she experiences the many perks and privileges that come with living in the White House, she starts to understand the responsibility that she and Barack owe to their supporters, and indeed to all American people.

Michelle and Barack have entered into a contract with their supporters: they asked for their hope and optimism, and for their belief that Barack can really make a difference. Now that that optimism has paid off, Michelle and Barack in turn owe their political power to the people. This is the contract of any politician running for office in a democracy, but because Barack has made this an explicit part of his message, it feels even more salient.

This inauguration is a landmark for the country's progress—an affirmation of the idea that, if a black man can be elected President of the United States, despite the historic oppression of African Americans in America, then we're closer to all people being equal. Thus, the moment's hope is tangible and it represents change that is real.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ I understood how lucky we were to be living this way. The master suite in the residence was bigger than the entirety of the upstairs apartment my family had shared when I was growing up on Euclid Avenue. There was a Monet painting hanging outside my bedroom door and a bronze Degas sculpture in our dining room. I was a child of the South Side, now raising daughters who slept in rooms designed by a high-end interior decorator and who could custom order their breakfast from a chef.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Sasha Obama, Malia Obama, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

After Michelle and Barack move into the White House, Michelle starts to recognize its perks, comparing the experience to living in a hotel with no other guests. The details she cites her are examples of the height of the luxury they experience. But it is valuable for Michelle to remember her own humble beginnings, and to recognize that much of this privilege is temporary. Additionally, particularly because Michelle does not come from an affluent family, it is imperative for her to impart the same humility and recognition of privilege to Malia and Sasha. She wants to ensure that they remain grounded, and do not become too

separate from the average American because they owe Americans the responsibility of understanding their everyday issues.

This is one of the reasons that Michelle works so hard to make sure others share in that privilege. She uses her power to invest in other kids, not only her own, and tries to make the White House and its various events more accessible to the local community.

There are pieces of public life, of giving up one's privacy to become a walking, talking symbol of a nation, that can seem specifically designed to strip away part of your identity. But here, finally, speaking to those girls, I felt something completely different and pure—an alignment of my old self with this new role. *Are you good enough? Yes, you are, all of you.* I told the students of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson that they'd touched my heart. I told them that they were precious, because they truly were. And when my talk was over, I did what was instinctive. I hugged absolutely every single girl I could reach.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 320

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Barack's inauguration, she and Barack take a trip to London to visit Queen Elizabeth and attend the G20 summit. While there, Michelle visits the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School for girls, an inner-city school in London where 90 percent of the school's students are from an ethnic minority. Looking at the girls and seeing how so many of them have similar backgrounds and also a similar drive to Michelle, she starts to recognize how to find a new sense of fulfillment as First Lady.

Whereas many previous First Ladies came from affluent backgrounds, Michelle grew up on the South Side of Chicago. She recognizes how this background, coupled with the political power she now has, allows her to relate to the girls in a unique way. She understands, perhaps more than anyone, the value of an adult who looks like these girls coming in to tell them that they are good enough to do anything they want to. Even though she recognizes that not all of them may be able to overcome the discrimination and hardships that they might face and find social mobility, Michelle hopes to inspire them to see that there is a path, and that working hard can get them there.

Chapter 21 Quotes

We were taking on a huge issue, but now I had the benefit of operating from a huge platform. I was beginning to realize that all the things that felt odd to me about my new existence—the strangeness of fame, the hawkeyed attention paid to my image, the vagueness of my job description—could be marshaled in service of real goals. I was energized. Here, finally, was a way to show my full self.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Malia Obama, Sam Kass

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 339

Explanation and Analysis

The garden that Michelle and Sam have planned begins to grow, their hope in its ability to thrive paying off. But the garden is not only a symbol of optimism and healthy living. Michelle also uses it as a jumping off point to start a conversation about child obesity and the need for better nutrition. This is something that she had been passionate about ever since Malia's pediatrician had alerted her to Malia's rising body mass index when she was younger.

Michelle works hard on her new initiative, laying a lot of groundwork with different companies, executives, and politicians to support her cause when she announces Let's Move! Her ability to marry the issues that she cares about with the power of her new role shows how Michelle is taking advantage of this new phase of her life. True to the thesis of *Becoming*, Michelle continues to find ways to grow in her life and find fulfillment in whatever she takes on.

Chapter 23 Quotes

Later that day, Barack held a press conference downstairs, trying to put together words that might add up to something like solace. He wiped away tears as news cameras clicked furiously around him, understanding that truly there was no solace to be had. The best he could do was to offer his resolve—something he assumed would also get taken up by citizens and lawmakers around the country—to prevent more massacres by passing basic, sensible laws concerning how guns were sold.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 378

Explanation and Analysis

Following the massacre at Sandy Hook elementary school, in which a gunman killed twenty first-graders and six educators, Barack must brief the nation on what has occurred. This is a quintessential example of how, along with the power of the presidency, Barack owes a great deal of emotional responsibility to the American people. He must "absorb and respond" to what is happening, and begin a process of healing for the country despite the tragedies and the horrors that he has been briefed on.

Michelle also describes the political responsibility that Barack has to the American people. Even though, as Michelle recognizes, there is no solace to find in the situation, the only way that Barack can see to move forward is to pass sensible gun laws in hopes of preventing these kinds of incidents. But Barack is not the only one who owes a responsibility to the people, which is what makes their inability to pass any kind of gun control measure so frustrating to Michelle. Barack is attempting to fulfill his responsibility as best he can and protect the country's children, but without the aid of Congress, he can only serve as a consoler. Barack and Michelle will end up taking on this role many times throughout his second term as more and more tragedies involving gun violence occur, only highlighting the emotional weight that Barack experiences and the inability of Congress to act.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ He was a good father, dialed in and consistent in ways his own father had never been, but there were also things he'd sacrificed along the way. He'd entered into parenthood as a politician. His constituents and their needs had been with us all along.

It had to hurt a little bit, realizing he was so close to having more freedom and more time, just as our daughters were beginning to step away. But we had to let them go. The future was theirs, just as it should be.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Malia Obama, Sasha Obama, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 406

Explanation and Analysis

In their last year at the White House, Michelle and Barack attend Malia's high school graduation. As Michelle looks at Barack, she recognizes the ways in which both she and he have made sacrifices between work and parenthood. Michelle had often tried to prioritize spending time with Malia and Sasha, which had come with its own sacrifices as she often felt that she couldn't put her full energy into her work in the same way she had prior to having children.

On the other hand, Barack had (necessarily) prioritized work and the needs of the country during his time as president. Michelle understands that there is no one way to balance work and family, but she sees that there is a bittersweet irony to the fact that Barack finishes his presidency just as his daughters start to leave home. No matter what one's choices have been, balance will always come with a degree of compromise.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ For me, becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn't end. I became a mother, but I still have a lot to learn from and give to my children. I became a wife, but I continue to adapt to and be humbled by what it means to truly love and make a life with another person. I have become, by certain measures, a person of power, and yet there are moments still when I feel insecure or unheard.

Related Characters: Michelle Obama (speaker), Malia Obama, Sasha Obama, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 406

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of her book, Michelle describes how she is beginning to take stock of her life and how it has changed—but she also explains that she is not done growing or reaching. As she has shown throughout her book and summarizes here, "becoming," to her, does not have a stopping point. She is continuing to find the balance between being a parent and working, particularly now that Malia and Sasha are starting to enter into adulthood. She is continuing to navigate the compromises that she and Barack make for each other, and will continue to do so now that his job is no longer all-consuming. She will continue to claim the power she has as a recognizable and inspirational

woman of color, and also find ways to share that power with other people whose voices and issues need to be heard.

Michelle's use of the word reaching here echoes her use of the word striving in the beginning of the book: it is again an active word that implies both hard work and optimism, and a continuousness of action. Becoming is not about finishing a certain goal; it is instead about continuously setting goals that will enable one to become fulfilled.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Much of Michelle Obama's childhood is spent listening to the sound of "striving." Her family lives in a second-floor apartment on the South Side of Chicago, while her great-aunt Robbie and great-uncle Terry live on the floor below. Robbie teaches **piano** in her home, and Michelle grows up listening to a multitude of students plunk out their songs.

The opening passage of Becoming *exemplifies one of its key themes: optimism. The word "striving," as Michelle uses here, highlights a core value that she will carry with her for the rest of her life. Striving implies that someone is working hard and also that they have optimism that the future can be better. This word perfectly fits with Michelle's ideals.*

The sounds of the **piano** fill Michelle's bedroom and the living room, the only respite coming when her father turns on the Cubs game on TV. Michelle writes that America is "in the midst of a massive and uncertain shift" at the tail end of the 1960s—the Kennedys are dead, Martin Luther King Jr. has been assassinated, the Vietnam War is beginning, and white families are moving out of Chicago in droves.

Even at the very beginning of the book, Michelle starts to slip in allusions to the racism that permeates American society and politics. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination is very foreboding, considering his position as a groundbreaking black man. The specter of his assassination will worry Michelle as Barack rises to greater and greater prominence, which opens him up to greater and greater criticism and hate.

Michelle is largely ignorant of the politics around her, as she is only a young girl at the time. Her family is "the center of everything." Michelle's mother teaches her to read early; her father teaches her and her older brother Craig to love jazz and art. Michelle and Craig are about two years apart, and they are very close.

The closeness of Michelle's family becomes crucial to her development, as both her parents and her older brother demonstrate and instill in Michelle a love of learning and the value of working hard.

The neighborhood in which Michelle lived as a baby was designed to "ease a post-World War II housing shortage for black working-class families." But the neighborhood would later "deteriorate under the grind of poverty and gang violence, becoming one of the city's more dangerous places to live." Now, as a young girl, Michelle lives in a nicer neighborhood on Euclid Avenue. Her family's upstairs apartment, she writes, was probably meant for one or two people, but her family finds a way to make it work. There is sometimes friction between the upstairs and downstairs: she and Craig are noisy and young, while Robbie and Terry are older and a little grouchy, Michelle thinks.

Michelle's description of the deterioration of her neighborhood provides another example of how institutional racism (building a neighborhood for black working-class families but not helping to ease the issues of poverty) had turned the neighborhood into a dangerous place. Michelle recognizes a pattern not only in this neighborhood, but in many neighborhoods in Chicago, as white families feel threatened by the prospect of their neighborhood turning into a "ghetto" and flee.

But, Michelle acknowledges, Robbie and Terry had grown up in a different era. Robbie had once sued Northwestern University for discrimination, when she tried to take a music workshop there and had been denied a room in the women's dorm. Terry had once been a Pullman porter on overnight passenger rail lines, a profession made up entirely of black men who kept their appearance "immaculate" while tending to the needs of train passengers. Michelle sees how the job had made him perpetually subservient, "never asserting himself in any way."

Michelle explores some of the racism that her older relatives experienced when they were younger. Robbie's experience had cut her off from an education and a community, while Terry's experience had pigeonholed him into a servile role that hadn't progressed very far from the legacy of slavery.

Michelle decides to learn **piano** at four years old. By this point, she feels like she already has learned piano, if only by osmosis. She sees Robbie as someone to win over, as Robbie demands "excellence from every kid" who sits at her piano bench. Robbie teaches Michelle how to find middle C on the piano—helpfully, on Robbie's very old and battered piano, middle C has a corner missing.

Robbie is another good example of how Michelle's family and broader community play a key part in her success. Without Robbie's high standards, Michelle may not have acquired the same drive and the same appreciation for hard work.

Piano comes naturally to Michelle, as she comes from a very musical family. Her grandfather, whom she and Craig call Southside, is particularly influential, introducing her to the music in his vast record collection. Southside doesn't trust a lot about the world: he doesn't trust dentists, the police, and often doesn't trust white people, being the grandson of a Georgia slave and growing up in Alabama during the time of Jim Crow. Music, Michelle writes, is an antidote to his worries. He buys Michelle her first album and keeps a special shelf at his house for her favorite records.

Southside provides yet another example, like Robbie and Terry, of how racism had affected the generations above Michelle, and how the legacy of that racism (the effects of slavery, the past transgressions at the hands of doctors and police and white people in general) has come to play a part in her family's life. While Michelle doesn't have these same experiences, she continues to see throughout her life how that legacy still affects her.

At home, Michelle continues to work at **piano**. She acknowledges that she is "no less fumbling" but that she is more driven than other students. She is encouraged by the fact that the more she practices, the more she achieves. And she is excited when Robbie is pleased by her ability to play a song perfectly.

Michelle finds a joy not only in working hard, but also in the payoff of improving. At many times throughout her life, she will realize that she must make a change in order to improve her situation, and the seeds of that desire are planted here.


Michelle and Robbie might have continued their lessons very pleasantly, except that Michelle starts to peek ahead in the book and attempt new songs during her practice sessions. This makes Robbie angry, chastising Michelle for going ahead. Michelle, in turn, is stubborn, and asks why she can't learn new songs. Michelle's mother and father are amused by her feud with Robbie. Michelle explains that they usually don't intervene in matters outside school; they appreciate her "feistiness" and she is glad that they keep that flame lit.

This exchange demonstrates that even though Robbie has a way that she intends for Michelle to practice, Michelle's desire to learn and to grow completely outpaces her instruction. Additionally, the "feistiness" and independence that Michelle's parents appreciate will ultimately help her resilience in the face of political criticism down the road.


Once a year, Robbie holds a "fancy recital" for her students at a nice rehearsal hall, and Michelle's father drives her there. Michelle writes about her father's devotion to his car, which he calls the "Deuce and a Quarter." He keeps the car immaculate and the family loves driving together. Years later, Michelle realizes what the car truly represents to her father. In his thirties, Michelle's father began to feel the effects of multiple sclerosis, a neurological disease that involves a "a long and probably painful slide toward immobility." And so, to her father, the car epitomizes a kind of freedom and the relief of being mobile.

The Deuce and a Quarter becomes Michelle's father's own way of keeping optimistic and finding fulfillment in the face of his M.S., because the car gives him the mobility that he cannot have otherwise. Later, Michelle will wonder whether this was his way of denying what was happening, but she doesn't judge her father for it: she recognizes he should be able to find joy in something that counteracts his disease.

At the recital, Michelle is nervous, and when it is her turn she walks to the front of the room to find a pristine baby grand **piano**. She is ready to play; she's practiced her song rigorously. But, she realizes, she can't find middle C. The piano is too perfect; it doesn't have a conveniently chipped key. Michelle grows almost panicked, unable to start, but then she sees Robbie coming towards her. Robbie lays one finger on middle C and smiles encouragingly.

This story is a simple, critical first lesson for Michelle of how inequality can affect a child's mindset and ability to succeed. Michelle is almost unable to play, never having played on a pristine piano before. But the story also again highlights the importance of mentors and a supportive community: with Robbie's help, Michelle is able to avoid feelings of failure and is able to continue on.

CHAPTER 2

In 1969, Michelle begins kindergarten at Bryn Mawr Elementary School. She already knows how to read and likes school right away. In class, Michelle's teacher holds a kind of spelling bee, asking each student to stand and read colors off of a card. If they get one wrong, they are asked to sit down. Michelle recognizes that there is a "subtle sorting" happening. Kids who have had a head start at home are deemed bright at school, which only compounds their confidence and advantages.

Michelle's observations reinforce the importance of a supportive community and family, even from a very young age. Because of Michelle's early head start, she is deemed bright right away and therefore she feels the rewards of learning. However, Michelle's sense of justice is immediately apparent: she knows she isn't inherently better than the other students—she just had advantages that they didn't, such as a mom who taught her to read very young. That one advantage will snowball into more and more advantages as she grows.

When it is Michelle's turn, she reads the colors at first with ease, and then with some effort. When she sees "white," she gets completely stumped. But as she sits down, she immediately realizes what the word was. That night, she is plagued by feelings of failure and stupidity, worried that she wasn't able to achieve as much as some of the other students. The next day, she demands that the teacher give her a do-over and she gets all of the words right.

Even in kindergarten, Michelle understands the value of trying to grow. She remains optimistic that she can improve and she works hard to make sure that she doesn't make the same mistake twice.

Michelle's neighborhood on Euclid Avenue is "middle-class and racially mixed." It is undergoing an immense transition: in 1950, twenty years prior, the neighborhood was 96 percent white. In 1981, it would be 96 percent black. Michelle feels the effects of this transition in school. Her second grade class is unruly, and the teacher is incompetent. In the teacher's eyes, Michelle writes, they are a "class of bad kids." Michelle goes home and complains about her teacher to her mother.

Michelle hints at the racism of the teacher (implying that as the student body grows more racially diverse, the teacher deems them "bad kids"). But while the teacher assumes that the kids are incapable of learning, in actuality it is the teacher that seems unable to provide them with structure.

Michelle's mother listens, taking her daughter's frustrations seriously, and then goes to the school and gets Michelle and a few other high-performing kids pulled out of class and placed in a bright and orderly third-grade class. Michelle calls this a "small but life-changing move." At the time, she doesn't ask what might happen to the kids who were left in the second grade class. Now, as an adult, Michelle realizes that "kids know at a very young age when they're being devalued, when adults aren't invested enough to help them learn."

Michelle (speaking as her adult self in the present) recognizes in recounting the story how crucial her mother was in enabling her to get a good education. Without her investment, Michelle might have remained in the second grade class with the other students. This reflection is what ultimately motivates Michelle to try to invest in other children and ensure that anyone can have the opportunity to get a good education.

As time goes on, Michelle's mother starts to push Michelle to engage with more kids in the neighborhood, rather than remaining at home and playing with dolls. Craig is an example for Michelle: he is a "growing sensation" on the basketball court. Basketball shows him how to approach strangers to play a pickup game, and also reinforces the idea that most people are good people if others treat them well, debunking myths about the "sketchy guys" in the neighborhood.

Michelle's mother's care for her daughter is revealed once again. As a result of her mother's encouragement, she becomes more socially active. This ultimately leads Michelle to find fulfillment in jobs that help other people, and helps her connect to many different kinds of people when she joins Barack on the campaign trail.

Michelle starts to explore the neighborhood, meeting kids from other schools. She goes to one housing community called Euclid Parkway, where two girls named DeeDee and Deneen live. Deneen is friendly and popular, but DeeDee doesn't really like Michelle, and often makes cutting remarks whenever Michelle shows up. One day, when Michelle is fed up with being picked on, she lunges for DeeDee and the two fight. When they are pulled apart, Michelle sees that she's earned DeeDee's respect and has become a part of the "neighborhood tribe."

In exploring the neighborhood, Michelle continues to grow. She keeps her optimism in dealing with these two girls, even though one of them makes fun of her, because she wants to find more fulfilling relationships. The willingness to fight DeeDee and stand up for herself is what ultimately earns her the respect of the two girls.

Michelle's mother and father treat Michelle and Craig very maturely, almost like adults. As they grow, they speak about drugs and sex and life choices, and don't sugarcoat the "harder truths" of life. One summer, when Craig gets a new bike, he gets picked up by a police officer (who is also African American) who accuses him of stealing it, "unwilling to accept that a young black boy would have come across a new bike in an honest way." His parents make the officer apologize to Craig, but they confess afterward that this type of treatment is unjust but unfortunately common.

After explaining how racism affected her older relatives in the first chapter, Michelle continues to describe how racism affects her and her brother as they grow up. The officer's inherent bias exemplifies the kind of prejudice that kids like Craig and Michelle continue to face. What makes it even more tragic is the fact that the officer was also African American, demonstrating how this discrimination has infiltrated even the mindsets of the people experiencing such discrimination.

Sometimes Michelle's father would drive around a nicer area to the south called Pill Hill; Michelle thinks this was meant to show her and Craig what a good education could yield. Both of her parents had attended community college, but had abandoned school before completing their degrees. Her mother decided to be a secretary; her father had simply run out of money and joined the Army instead. He had no one to convince him to return to school. Now, Michelle's father is focused on saving for his kids.

Michelle uses her parents' stories to demonstrate what often happens without the kind of community and familial support that she has experienced: her mother and father did not finish their education, and therefore did not have the same kind of upward mobility that Michelle experienced in her life.

Michelle's family sustains itself on simple luxuries, like pizza as a reward for good grades, or hand-packed ice cream. Each July, Michelle's father takes a week off from his job tending boilers and they go to a resort near Lake Michigan. There they barbecue, play cards, and swim, which Michelle's father particularly enjoys because his diminished mobility is less of a liability.

As Michelle's father battles his multiple sclerosis, he too tries to maintain a sense of optimism and find activities that will provide him with a sense of joy—such as swimming with his children.

Each year in elementary school, Craig and Michelle find fewer and fewer white kids. "For Sale" signs pop up often, at first just for the white families, but then it seemed that anyone "who had the means to go" was going, including a close friend of Michelle's mother, Velma Stewart.

This mass migration of white and wealthy people from the city to the suburbs creates a cycle of poverty for black communities in cities, because those communities become drained of resources and their property values decline.

The Stewarts, Michelle writes, are "the lightest-skinned black people" that she's ever met, and they invite Michelle's family to visit their new neighborhood. The two families have a pleasant day together, with Craig playing basketball, her parents having a catch-up with the adults, and Michelle following the Stewarts' teenage daughter Pamela around. They enjoy the space and the quiet of the suburbs.

Michelle's pointing out that the Stewarts are light-skinned becomes important, as Michelle seems to posit that they were only accepted into the community because people did not know that they were black, once again demonstrating some of the racism that exists in white suburban communities.

But at the end of the day, Michelle's father finds that someone had keyed a gash across the side of his car, and Michelle's mother wonders if anyone knew that the Stewarts were black before they visited. Her father gets in the car, barely acknowledging it. The family rides back to Chicago without much discussion, and the next day, Michelle's father drives the car to a body shop and has the gash erased.

The reaction of Michelle's family to this hateful vandalism highlights their resolve and resilience in the face of this negativity. Michelle's father simply accepts this as a part of life, his only desire to move on and erase all evidence of this hatred.

CHAPTER 3

As Michelle grows up, Craig starts to accumulate a variety of unfounded fears: going blind, going deaf, losing an arm. His most realistic, Michelle writes, is a house fire, and he starts to run evacuation drills with the rest of the family. He practices hauling Michelle's father over to the stairwell, knowing that his father probably wouldn't be able to run or jump from a window given his disability.

Craig's dedication to making sure his family can be safe is another, if slightly less conventional, example of how one's community can push one to work harder. Craig's fear of something happening to his family gets him to work hard and be prepared for any potential disaster.

Simultaneously, Michelle becomes more social and spontaneous, more willing to explore the "messes of the wider world." Michelle's mother's relatives gather mostly at Southside's house, and Michelle enjoys visiting for the music, for the exuberant environment that includes many cousins, and for the dog that Southside bought for her (which Michelle's mother insisted could not live at their house).

Michelle's family not only helps instill in her the values of working hard and getting a good education, but also learning to explore life more fully and take risks—being open to its messiness. This is something that will help Michelle as she leaves her law firm job later in life and tries to adjust to the messiness of less stable jobs.

Michelle's father's family, on the other hand, lives throughout the wider Chicago area. On Sunday afternoons, Michelle's family drives to Parkway Gardens to eat dinner with her father's parents, whom they call Dandy and Grandma, as well as his three youngest siblings. Dandy is somewhat bitter and irritated by everything. He frequently yells at Michelle's grandmother, and her passivity in the face of this treatment grates on Michelle. She tells Dandy to stop, asking why he's so mad all the time.

Michelle understands some of the inherent sexism of the gender dynamic between her grandfather and grandmother, as she remains passive while he is sometimes emotionally abusive. But at the same time, Michelle quickly learns some of the racial underpinnings of Dandy's resentment, as she goes on to explain.

Michelle (as her adult self) acknowledges that Dandy is angry for a multitude of reasons. He was born in 1912 in South Carolina and was the grandson of two slaves. He was bright and had set his sights on going to college. But he was black, poor, and grew up during the Great Depression. He worked at a lumber mill after high school, but when the mill closed, he joined many other African Americans in his generation and moved north to Chicago, joining the Great Migration.

As Michelle explores her grandfather's background, she acknowledges how slavery continues to affect African Americans from generation to generation, because of institutionalized racism that continued (and continues) to permeate American society. Moving north to avoid the shadow of slavery, only to face the same kinds of discrimination, is an example of this.

When Dandy arrived in Chicago in the early 30s, jobs were hard to come by, and factories often hired European immigrants over African Americans. He gave up on the idea of college, and many jobs were unavailable to him without a union card—which was incredibly difficult to get as a black man. This form of discrimination, Michelle writes, "altered the destinies of generations of African Americans," including her own family. They were denied access to high-paying jobs, which kept them from being able to save for the future. This is why Dandy continues to live with bitterness and anger.

Michelle explains that, in the factories and in the labor unions, African Americans were not afforded the same opportunities as their white counterparts. This kind of discrimination was difficult to escape, and has ramifications on entire generations of families because they do not receive the same opportunities, nor can they achieve the same kind of social mobility.

Only over time does Michelle learn that her questions for Dandy are "hard and unanswerable." She is forced to face some of these kinds of questions herself. When visiting some distant relative, one of the girls Michelle is playing with asks her why she talks "like a white girl." Michelle protests, but she understands what the girl means. Her parents had emphasized the importance of using proper diction, but to other black people, this was often perceived as a "betrayal," or a denial of one's culture. Michelle sees this same confusion play out years later, as Barack steps onto the national stage and people across the country have a hard time squaring his ethnicity with his persona.

Michelle explores the complexity of race within this interaction with one of her distant cousins. Michelle acknowledges that because her family has given up some of the markers of black culture (such as a distinct way of speaking), it seems as though they are playing into a racist ideal—that they believe speaking more like a white person is better than speaking like a black person. In this way, Michelle, and later Barack, are criticized from both angles, unsure of what kind of community they fit into.

The rest of the day, Michelle feels uneasy about the exchange. She is frustrated by the girl's hostility, but also wants to seem genuine. She thinks to herself that everyone else around her seems to fit in except for her. Looking back on this exchange, Michelle recognizes the "more universal challenge of squaring who you are with where you come from and where you want to go."

Ultimately, Michelle understands that even though this critique is one of race, in actuality it is a question of growing into one's own. Michelle ultimately "becomes" who she really is; she doesn't try to "become" something that is untrue to herself or try to adhere to some previously held expectations—something that continues to confound people as the Obamas enter the White House.

CHAPTER 4

Michelle's elementary school, Bryn Mawr, falls "somewhere between a bad school and a good school." The population, Michelle writes grows "blacker and poorer with each year." When Michelle is in seventh grade, a newspaper popular with African American readers run an article claiming that the school had in just a few short years become a "run-down slum." The school principal fights back with a letter, arguing that this is a lie, the only purpose of which is to incite "feelings of "failure."

Michelle explores a larger cultural shift that is happening in the U.S. as a whole, wherein economic and racial stratification is becoming more apparent. This is due to the fact that the more wealthy, white families, driven by fear of being stuck in a "ghetto" move out of city communities, which only accelerates the draining of resources from those communities.

Michelle acknowledges the truth in the principal's statements. There are "feelings of failure everywhere in her neighborhood, in the form of parents and children who are simply unable to get ahead. The word "ghetto" is used like a threat in her neighborhood, and better-off neighbors are leaving for the suburbs in droves.

Michelle demonstrates how entire communities that aren't invested in can quickly be given up on, deemed unworthy of investment and therefore doomed to be left behind. This echoes the students left behind in Michelle's second grade class, whose futures seemed uncertain because nobody was invested in their education.

Michelle's mother doesn't buy into these fear tactics. But, she does become heavily involved in Bryn Mawr, raising money for equipment and lobbying for the creation of a multi-grade classroom designed for high-performing students. Michelle becomes a beneficiary of this classroom for her final three years at Bryn Mawr, given special opportunities like field trips, independent work, and dedicated teachers.

This again reinforces how invested parents and teachers can really make a difference in a child's education and life. Because Michelle's mother pushes for these special programs, Michelle is able to get more specialized learning opportunities that push her even further ahead.

Michelle realizes (looking back) that she doesn't know what her mother might have thought about being a homemaker. Her mother is the caretaker of the home. Her projects consist of cooking for the family, lending a hand at her children's schools when needed, and improving the house and making it feel new on a tight budget.

Michelle realizes that in her childhood, she did not fully understand everything her mother did and never questioned whether or not she might be happy doing these things. This contemplation is eventually explored in greater depth at the end of this chapter, and in later chapters with regards to Michelle herself.

Michelle explains that her mother's parenting style is an "unflappable Zen neutrality," not quick to judge and not quick to meddle. She loves her children, but she is pragmatic and doesn't overmanage them. Her goal, Michelle writes, is to enable them to make responsible decisions, and to handle adult situations with maturity.

Michelle appreciates her mother's parenting style, acknowledging how it helped her to grow into a fulfilled adult. This style also contains a great deal of optimism, in hoping and believing that her children can make their own decisions and take care of themselves.

At fourteen, Michelle begins to think of herself as a grown-up. She starts wearing bras, she eats in school with her classmates, she gossips and tries on makeup and clothes at friends' houses. As Michelle moves around the neighborhood with more independence, she also starts to become "aware of the liabilities of [her] body," learning to fix her gaze firmly ahead anytime she passes groups of men on the street.

Michelle realizes, even at a relatively young age, some of the sexism that she will have to deal with in the world as a young woman. The additional scrutiny on her body becomes particularly harmful when she (and her fashion choices) are thrust into the national spotlight later in her life.

Now teenagers, Michelle and Craig get separate rooms in their house, including their own phone extensions. Michelle arranges her first real kiss over the phone, with a boy named Ronell who was a friend of one of Michelle's classmates. They had decided they liked each other and mutually agreed to meet by her house one day and "give kissing a try." Michelle had already understood the fun of being around boys by watching Craig's basketball games.

Again, even at a young age, Michelle is already learning how to take control of her own sense of satisfaction and put herself on the path that will allow her to grow. She's not shy about exploring new things in the name of self-fulfillment, as when she decides that she wants to give kissing a try with a boy.

Michelle grows more interested in boys, but never thinks about marriage. She takes the steadiness of her parents' union for granted, but years later, her mother explains that every spring, she thought about leaving Michelle's father. Michelle understands, as an adult, that marriage can be difficult and it is "best renewed and renewed again, even quietly and privately—even alone." She wonders what alternate life her mother might have been dreaming of, perhaps on a tropical island, or with a corner office somewhere. But, she notes, each time, her mother made the choice to stay.

While as a teenager she simply assumed that her parents' marriage was a stable and stagnant thing, later it becomes clear to her that her mother made a lot of sacrifices and compromises both for her marriage and for her kids. However, each spring, her mother also affirmed that these choices and this life were fulfilling to her—another thing that Michelle deems as important.

CHAPTER 5

When Michelle begins high school, her mother goes back to work—a "welcome shift in routine," but also a financial necessity, given the fact that Craig is soon to start college. He has been recruited by an expensive Catholic school to play on their basketball team, and by the end of his junior year, he is being courted by many Division I schools. But still, Michelle's mother and father encourage him to keep his options open and get into the best school he can—letting them worry about the cost.

Michelle demonstrates how her parents' investment in both her and Craig was not only an emotional one (instilling the value of hard work) but also a financial one. They want to make sure that money will not be the obstacle to prevent Michelle or Craig from getting the best education possible, even sacrificing some of their own needs in order to do so.

Michelle tests into Chicago's first magnet high school, Whitney M. Young High School, which has quickly become one of the best public schools in the city. The school was designed to foster equal opportunity, and about 80 percent of the students are nonwhite. The school is a long bus ride away, but it represents a new frontier for Michelle.

Michelle's ability to place into a good high school already proves how the investment that her parents and educators have made has already paid off in giving her better opportunities.

Whitney Young High School makes Michelle feel like a small fish in a big pond. She worries that she might not be good enough. At Bryn Mawr, she had been known as Craig's little sister, and he had created a strong precedent for her and enabled her to be confident. But here, she worries that she is in competition with the other kids, all of whom have been selected for their intelligence. She worries that being the best student in "a middling, mostly black school" might not have prepared her for this next step.

Michelle introduces a core tension that she feels throughout her life—the idea of not being good enough. This idea is also informed by the fact that she faces discrimination in many respects: based on her race, gender, and economic status. Yet it is also a testament to her character that, in the face of this discrimination, she simply works hard and keeps hope that she can achieve as much as those with more privilege.


Michelle spends nearly three hours on the bus every day and observes how big Chicago really is. This is echoed by her experience in school. Most of her friends are black, but that doesn't translate to the exact same background. Many of the black students knew each other through an African American social club called Jack and Jill, and had been on ski vacations and international trips that Michelle had never experienced. She describes how this gives her a glimpse of "the apparatus of privilege and connection."

Becoming friends with black students of a different economic background opens Michelle's eyes to some of the economic inequality in her world. This disparity in privilege is something that Michelle remains conscious of throughout her life, especially when she is given many privileges when she and Barack move to the White House.

Michelle gets good grades throughout her first year, and she builds up some confidence. She's not a straight A student, but she's close, and she understands that the more hours of studying she puts in, the more she can achieve. Craig, meanwhile, enrolls at Princeton. Michelle's parents never talk about the stress of paying for college, but she understands it is there.

Michelle's growing self-assurance can not only be attributed to her hard work paying off, but also the fact that she never gave up hope that she might be able to keep pace with the other students in her class, despite the fact that she wasn't very confident about her situation at the beginning of the year.

Michelle tries to relieve her parents of some of the burden by not asking for anything more than she needs. When her French teacher announces that there will be an optional class trip to Paris on a break, Michelle doesn't bring it up at home. But when Michelle's parents learn of the trip, they tell her not to worry about the money that it will cost. Michelle knows that her parents have never taken trips like this—all of their money goes into their kids. She feels guilty and unsure of what to say. A few months later, she takes the trip to Paris with her friends.

Even as a teenager, Michelle understands the sacrifices that her parents have made to give her opportunities and the fact that they always put her and Craig over themselves. Even when Michelle tries to alleviate some of their financial weight, they insist on giving her everything they can because they understand how valuable their investment in her future can be.


Michelle becomes friends with a girl in her class named Santita Jackson, who is the oldest child of Reverend Jesse Jackson. He worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. and was a mesmerizing political celebrity. He called for black people to "shake off the undermining ghetto stereotypes and claim their long-denied political power." He preaches a message of hope, and wants communities to remain involved and invested in the future.

Michelle's observations of Jesse Jackson bear striking similarities with the messages that Barack campaigns on, first as a Senator and then as a presidential candidate. In both of their campaigns, the crux of their messages is hope: retaining optimism and working toward a better future for the country in general and for black people in particular.

Being around the Jackson home gives Michelle an early glimpse into the world of politics: schedules and plans rarely seem to stick. She watches as Jesse Jackson enters a vortex of politics, as he is at this point only a few years from formally launching a Presidential campaign. This involves making connections, raising money, and laying a groundwork of support. He would be only the second African American to run a serious national presidential campaign. Michelle quickly understands, even viewing it at a relative distance, that this chaotic life is not one that she particularly enjoys.

Along with the hopeful nature of politics, Michelle is also introduced to some of the less pleasant aspects of political life—including the many sacrifices that one has to make in terms of time and money, and also the extra critical eye that comes with being a minority candidate. All of these remain important lessons when Barack runs for President in 2008.

Michelle begins to look at colleges, and she and Santita both focus on schools on the East Coast. Michelle visits Craig at Princeton, and it quickly becomes her top choice without much thought—she figures that anything Craig can do, she can do as well. When Michelle brings this up to a college counselor at Whitney Young, however, the woman tells her that she might not be "Princeton material." Michelle is disheartened by this dismissive statement. "Had I decided to believe her," she writes, "her pronouncement would have toppled my confidence all over again, reviving the old thrum of *not enough, not enough*."

Just as encouragement and optimism can lift a kid up, immediate and unfounded criticism can do just the opposite. For a kid less confident, who had less of a drive to prove the guidance counselor wrong, it is easy to see how someone else in Michelle's shoes might have let this seed grow into feelings of doubt and failure that would have prevented Michelle's illustrious future.

Even though Michelle is disappointed by this presentiment of failure, she does not let it rattle her. Instead, she seeks help from an assistant principal who knows her well, who agrees to write her a recommendation letter. She gets back to work, focusing on getting good grades and telling her personal story in her college essay. Ultimately, she proves the guidance counselor wrong, as several months later, she gets an acceptance letter from Princeton. She doesn't stop in to tell the college counselor she was wrong—she had only been proving her capabilities to herself.

Fortunately, Michelle's optimism wins over the feelings of failure. She continues to work hard and seeks out the people that will lift her up, rather than focusing on the critiques meant to tear her down. In the end, she relies on her own drive and personal story when applying to college, and that story is a winning one: that of a person reaching to fulfill an achievement that others might think is beyond her, and succeeding anyway.

CHAPTER 6

When Michelle arrives at Princeton, she is accompanied by her father and her boyfriend, David. She is excited and fully ready to leave her hometown behind, especially because she had been working in a factory over the summer to make money—a good reminder of why college was important. She is excited to start her life as an independent adult.

Michelle understands that Princeton represents the next step in her growth process. She is not sentimental about leaving her childhood (and her high school boyfriend) behind in order to find fulfillment in other areas of her life.

The one hitch in Michelle's plan is David. The two of them have been dating for over a year (he is two years older than Michelle and already in college) but haven't discussed how her departure for Princeton might change their relationship. She enjoys her time with David, but isn't in love with him. She hopes that someday she will be swept off her feet by someone who will completely rearrange her life—but that person isn't David. Michelle says a final goodbye to him the next evening, knowing that it is best to make a clean break.

Michelle's hope that she will be swept off her feet by someone in the future is an ideal set-up for her later relationship with Barack. Their relationship causes Michelle to reevaluate her priorities and "rearrange her life"—eventually causing her to make major compromises in her own career in order to buoy his career.

Michelle describes the culture shock of Princeton, which is "extremely white and very male." She describes feeling like a "glaring anomaly," never having been a part of a predominantly white community before. But she quickly adapts—learning unfamiliar academic terms, the concept of extra-long bedsheets, and the jargon of new sports like lacrosse and crew. She also has an advantage in that, once again, she is known as Craig's little sister, and she quickly fits into his communities.

The fact that Princeton is made up mostly of white, male students reinforces the concept that elitist institutions can create a racist cycle of privilege—white men can pass down that privilege to more white men. Michelle represents an anomaly, or a break from this convention.

One community becomes particularly important to Michelle: the Third World Center, which is a student center with a mission to support students of color. The TWC becomes a home base for Michelle, and she makes many "instant friends" there. One of them is Suzanne Alele, whom Michelle admires for her ease in social situations and her willingness to take risks simply because they make her happy.

However, even with Michelle feeling like an outsider, she is able to find a community in the Third World Center (which is in and of itself a somewhat insensitively named student community center) and therefore find people who want to support her and who lift each other up.

Michelle describes how her black friends are crucial to her success. Like her, many of them had arrived without even understanding their disadvantages—like going to her first **piano** recital and realizing that she's never played on a perfect instrument. "You're asked to adjust and overcome, to play your music the same as everyone else," Michelle explains.

Michelle demonstrates how societal problems affect both her and other minority students at Princeton: they come in at a distinct disadvantage simply because of their circumstances growing up as compared to their white and wealthy peers, but are expected to perform at the same level.

Michelle also details how it is challenging and energy draining to be the only nonwhite person in a class, or trying out for a play, or joining a team. It takes an extra level of confidence. This is why, she writes, it is a relief to hang out with friends who experience the same challenges.

Michelle's argument here emphasizes the need for a supportive and confidence-inspiring community, but also how being a minority demands extra resilience in the face of hardship and being set apart from one's peers.

Michelle also tells one additional story that surfaces years later about one of her white roommates (who is perfectly nice, she writes). Her roommate's mother had grown up in an extremely racist home and was "horrified" that her daughter had been placed with a black roommate. Thus, she had asked the university to reassign her daughter. Michelle explains that she did not know at the time why her roommate moved out midway through the year, and is happy that she didn't know the real reason.

Michelle's story serves as another example of how racism affected her life, in big and small ways. And true to form, Michelle acknowledges the harm in the attitude of her roommate's mother, yet at the same time keeps a positive outlook. She is glad that she didn't have to deal with the added insecurity of understanding why her roommate moved out. This shows that sometimes the biggest harm in racism is the attack on the mindset of students of color, or the belief that they might not be good enough.

Michelle gets a work-study job at the TWC, as the assistant to the director of the center, Czerny Brasuell. Czerny is a thirty-year-old black woman who grew up in New York, and Michelle describes her as an "über-mentor." Czerny sees potential in Michelle and constantly expands Michelle's horizons. She suggests new reading material, makes Michelle question some of her assumptions regarding Princeton's policies, takes her on trips to New York, and always pushes her to think bigger.

Czerny and the TWC become another type of community and form of family that allows Michelle to excel and grow. Czerny constantly pushes both the boundaries of the world that Michelle knows, and the academic boundaries of the kind of work and critical thinking to which Michelle has been exposed.

Michelle is learning all the time: how to write efficiently, think critically, how to budget time and energy to get all of her work done. Still, she writes, it is "impossible to be a black kid at a mostly white school and not feel the shadow of affirmative action." She feels some students and even some professors doubt that she has earned her place. But Michelle simply takes this as "a mandate to overperform" and proves them wrong by holding steady and getting good grades.

Michelle's description of "the shadow of affirmative action" also exemplifies the harm of institutionalized racism. When schools like Princeton try to acknowledge that the student body should be more diverse, minority students are questioned despite the fact that Michelle's story has shown her to work just as hard, if not harder, than her peers.

Michelle also learns a lot from her friend Suzanne, who often veers between many different activities and quickly changes direction when things aren't fun. Suzanne is disorganized but passionate, while Michelle is fastidious and responsible—and they are able to coexist together in their sophomore dorm.

Suzanne's vacillation between many different kinds of activities initially shocks Michelle, who is much steadier in her path. But Michelle ultimately acknowledges that sometimes it is good to sacrifice some steadiness in order to pursue one's passion.

Michelle starts an after-school program for kids at the Third World Center. This is prompted by Czerny; Michelle has been babysitting Czerny's son often, and Czerny suggests that she could look after other faculty members' children at the same time to make extra money. Michelle quickly gains several children to look after. The hours with the kids fly by and are extremely gratifying for Michelle.

This after-school care program foreshadows two important ways Michelle eventually finds fulfillment in her own life: first, through her own daughters, Malia and Sasha, and also through her efforts to support children's nutrition and educational opportunities.

About once a week, Michelle calls home and tells her mother and father every detail of what's happening at school. They, in turn, talk about their own lives—that Michelle's mother is taking care of Robbie, who is now widowed and has several health issues. He does not mention his own deterioration, however. But when Michelle's parents visit Princeton for one of Craig's basketball games, she sees the reality: her father in a wheelchair. He always insists, however, that he feels good.

Michelle still relies on her family for emotional support as she enters college and starts to face new challenges, giving her advice as she navigates new terrain. She isn't fully able to acknowledge her father's M.S., however, and the toll that it is taking on him. Instead, she is misled by her father's own optimism and his insistence that he feels fine.


CHAPTER 7

Chicago starts to feel more and more distant to Michelle, though she keeps up with a few friends including Santita Jackson. Santita is at Howard University, a college whose population is almost entirely black, and Michelle envies her for not being isolated based on her race.

Michelle draws a distinction between her and Santita's experience to reinforce how the racism that has led Princeton to be a primarily white institution adds an extra layer of difficulty to college that Michelle has to overcome.

Michelle majors in sociology and is making good grades in her sophomore year. She constantly remarks on how different the world she lives in is from the world where she's from. When people ask Michelle where she's from, she says "Chicago," adding, "the South Side." She knows that this probably conjures bad stereotypes of a ghetto or gang violence, but she feels it is important to represent a different piece of the South Side to people.

Even among the racist stereotypes and preconceptions that people have of Michelle's neighborhood, she is insistent on educating people and shattering those stereotypes. This will become an important quality for her later when she is forced to confront the stereotypes that people have of her and Barack nationwide.

Michelle has one relative in Princeton, Dandy's younger sister whom she calls Aunt Sis. Aunt Sis, she writes, never truly lost her South Carolina roots, where Michelle had visited a few times. Michelle describes loving and hating the South because it is so different from what she knows. But she also has an innate understanding that the South is a part of her heritage—a "deep familiarity that sat atop a deeper and uglier legacy." Michelle and Craig visit Aunt Sis a few times a year for dinner on the other side of Princeton, grateful for the hearty South Carolina meal.

Though Michelle acknowledges how the legacy of slavery has affected her older family members in previous chapters, this is the first time that Michelle addresses how she feels it is intertwines with her own life and history. Michelle understands the importance of recognizing one's history in order to be able to progress and grow from it.

Michelle recounts up a memory: during her sophomore year, she and her boyfriend Kevin, who is a football player, go driving together on a warm, clear day. Kevin stops near an open field with straw-like grass. He suggests they run through the field together, and they dash from one side to the other, shouting cheerfully like children. It is a small memory, but Michelle acknowledges that it stays with her because the moment allowed her to shed her very serious agenda of trying to check every box for success.

Bringing up this memory is important, particularly as it pertains to the next few chapters, because it demonstrates how infrequently Michelle lets go of her seriousness and quest for success and actually allows herself to feel happy and passionate.

Kevin is much less serious than Michelle. He graduates at the end of Michelle's sophomore year, and sets out to be a mascot for the Cleveland Browns. In the end, Michelle says, he ultimately becomes a doctor, but at the time Michelle seriously judges him for this abrupt decision to do something that she sees as unserious. Michelle, on the other hand, is already thinking about law school, viewing it as a practical way to spend time and make money. Even though Michelle is "burned-out" by school, she views herself as the smart, analytical type of person who could quickly become a successful lawyer.

Michelle's judgment of Kevin is not unlike her judgment of Suzanne. Unlike the two of them, Michelle puts the desire for traditional "success" over her desire to do something that she loves or feels passionate about. Kevin, on the other hand, actively pursues something that will make him happy, even if he eventually chooses to do something else. In many ways, Michelle takes the opposite path: going for the corporate job before finding the thing that she loves.

Michelle decides to attend Harvard Law School; she's not truly passionate about the work, but it provides her with validation and the certainty of future rewards. After Michelle graduates from law school, she gets a job in a high-end law firm in Chicago named Sidley & Austin. She makes more money than her parents ever have, and feels as though she's "climbed the mountain." She doesn't start to question her path until she volunteers to mentor an incoming summer associate, whom she doesn't know much about other than the fact that he is also black, also goes to Harvard, and has an unusual name.

Putting herself on the path to law school sets Michelle onto a track that she does not move from for many years, until she ultimately realizes that this isn't what she wanted in the first place. At the same time, even though this job might not have made her happy, it leads her to some of the most rewarding parts of her life: the jobs that come after, marrying Barack, and thus ultimately ending up as First Lady of the United States. Thus, it is not that the steps along the way were not worth it—instead, they allowed Michelle to grow and "become" something that she never thought she would be.

CHAPTER 8

Barack Obama is late on his very first day of work. Michelle, a first-year lawyer, is busy working on various memos and documents. Michelle has started to feel frustrated in her job, as it doesn't involve much interaction with clients. She spends seventy hours a week in her office, from which she can see the South Side in the distance. The neighborhood has recently become "desolate," ravaged by the crack epidemic and gangs, while families continue to move out.

Michelle's introduction to her life at her firm sets the stage for the next few chapters: that she doesn't feel fulfilled in her current role, and that Barack will ultimately shake up her career path by supporting her in finding something that suits her better.

Michelle makes good money, and she saves money by living in the apartment where she grew up. Her mother and father moved down into Robbie and Terry's old space after Robbie passed away and left her apartment to them. Michelle pays her share of the utilities, which they insist is plenty. Despite the fact that she has her own entrance to her apartment, she checks in with her parents daily.

Michelle again continues to be financially supported by her parents, which continues to allow her to make the most out of her job and save even more. Without this support, Michelle would not be able to maintain the same kind of lifestyle.

In the office, Michelle grows frustrated with Barack's lateness, seeing it as a sign of hubris. Barack has already created a stir in the firm: word has gotten around that he is an exceptional law student (only after finishing his first year at Harvard), but Michelle is skeptical of his hype. When Barack arrives, he sheepishly apologizes for being late. Michelle is surprised by his appearance: taller and thinner, with a deeper voice than she imagined, and seemingly unaware of his "whiz-kid reputation." She gives him a tour before introducing him to his supervisor. Later, she takes him to lunch. As his advisor, she is meant to be a "social conduit" for him at the firm.

Barack's tendency towards lateness will be one of many ways that Michelle has to find a degree of compromise in her partnership, because she makes it a priority to be organized and on time. Yet despite Michelle's initial judgement of his lateness, Michelle quickly recognizes the brilliance and the humility which will become foundational to her attraction to him.

Michelle quickly realizes Barack will need very little of her advice. He is three years older than she is and worked for several years after finishing college at Columbia. He is very assured of his direction in life, despite the fact that he had a very unusual upbringing. He is the son of a black Kenyan father and a white mother from Kansas who had had a short-lived marriage. He was born and raised in Honolulu but spent four years in Indonesia in his childhood. After high school, he spent two years at Occidental College before transferring to Columbia. Michelle describes him as "breezy in his manner but powerful in his mind."

Michelle will be consistently astounded by the fact that, despite Barack's zig-zagging childhood and education, he has a clear sense of purpose, an understanding of what will help him grow, and a knowledge of what will make him feel fulfilled. Additionally, his unusual background will also be the source of much criticism and bias, from white and black people alike, as they try to understand his identity and ethnicity.

Michelle is also surprised with how well Barack knows Chicago. Before starting at Harvard, he worked in Chicago for three years as a community organizer, trying to help rebuild neighborhoods and bring back jobs. It was difficult, but he'd won some small victories there. He started law school in order to put himself in the position to make more sweeping societal change. Despite her initial skepticism, Michelle admires him.

Michelle is impressed with Barack due to the fact that he is bent on larger political change. He also has a great deal of optimism, believing that he can make real and lasting change and orienting his life around making that change happen.

Over the next few weeks, Michelle and Barack start to become friendly. They chat in the afternoons, sharing easy banter and similar mind-sets. Barack also has a growing reputation at the firm. He is quickly asked to sit in on high-level meetings and give input. He also writes instantly legendary memos, notorious because they are so thorough and cogent.

Michelle and Barack's like-mindedness is the foundation for their partnership and eventual marriage. Although marriage is largely about compromise, Michelle also demonstrates how having common ground on many things is essential to creating a good relationship.

Michelle and Barack share a weekly lunch and they learn more and more about each other. She learns that his father died in a car crash, that he spends all his money on books, and that he'd had plenty of girlfriends in the past, but didn't have one now. Michelle tries to fix this situation by setting him up with a few different friends, but she quickly realizes that he's a little too "cerebral" for most people.

Michelle's implicit understanding that Barack is a little too cerebral for most of the friends that she introduces him to shows how she understands how his mind works. Her willingness to accept his braininess is part of what enables their long partnership.

Barack is unlike most people Michelle knows. While they are concerned with their own upward mobility and wealth, Barack is more concerned about "hope and the potential for mobility" in a broader way that goes beyond his own success. He is on "some sort of quest," Michelle understands.

Michelle introduces Barack's vision for the country, even though he hasn't fully formulated it yet—a vision based on optimism, which will ultimately fuel his presidential campaign.

Michelle explains that, as a kid, her parents were habitual smokers, even though they knew that it was bad for them. It bothered her and Craig so much that they would try to hide or destroy their cigarettes. Barack smokes the same way that her parents did, prompting Michelle to ask him, "Why would someone as smart as you do something as dumb as that?" He shrugs; there's no logic to his smoking.

Michelle's dislike of Barack's smoking introduces a first small example of how Michelle must learn to compromise in a relationship. Even though she hates Barack's smoking, she accepts it because she likes being friends with him and being around him (though she doesn't hesitate to criticize him).

Things start to change between Michelle and Barack, as she starts to realize that she has developed some latent feelings for him. She tries to ignore them, however, to avoid drama at the firm. Barack on the other hand, doesn't. He pointedly asks her out, saying that they're compatible, available, and no one at the firm would care if they dated. Michelle brushes the idea off with a laugh.

In some respects, even the beginning of Michelle and Barack's partnership has a degree of compromise (although they don't initiate their relationship here). Michelle wants to remain professional, but Barack convinces her that their dating would not bring drama.

Later in the summer, the firm organizes an outing to Les Misérables, and Michelle and Barack both go and sit next two each other. Neither of them enjoys the show, and at intermission Barack suggests that they go to a bar. They slip out of the theater, and as they walk—Michelle in front and Barack behind— Michelle slows her pace to talk to him. She writes how she is interested in him, but is worried that he might upset the balance of her life: he is "like a wind that threaten[s] to unsettle everything."

Michelle's idea of Barack brings several worries, but perhaps the most pressing here is that she will be forced to make compromises in her own life to accommodate to his, whereas before she had been very driven and solely focused on her career. Even though this does become true, Michelle also acknowledges that no true partnership can come without a degree of compromise.

A few days later, Michelle and Barack drive together to another firm social event, a barbecue at a partner's home. She watches him play a pick-up basketball game, observing how he is friendly with everyone around him. She recognizes that he's a good person. As Michelle and Barack drive home, she is saddened knowing that Barack will soon be leaving to return to Harvard for the fall. When they stop in front of his building, he suggests getting some ice cream together. As they sit on the curb in the heat, Michelle decides to stop thinking about her concerns and "just live." He asks to kiss her, and Michelle leans in to kiss him back.

This small gesture initiates Michelle and Barack's relationship. Even though Michelle is initially hesitant about the idea, she starts to find a degree of fulfillment in being with him. Additionally, Barack's self-assuredness is on display here, which will become important soon: Michelle starts to understand that Barack's sense of purpose does not match her own, and so he also threatens to unsettle her life in the way that she realizes she needs to find something more fulfilling.

CHAPTER 9

Michelle's feelings for Barack quickly surge, particularly because he is due back at Harvard in a month. She begins spending nights at Barack's apartment. He is unlike anyone she's dated before: openly affectionate, unafraid of showing fear or weakness, never talking about material things but instead putting most of his money towards books. She often asks what he's thinking and he'll say political topics like income inequality.

Michelle's description of how Barack's mind works is in sync with her fuller picture of him as the book goes on: someone who is self-assured on his path, and also who is constantly thinking about a better path for society as a whole. This idea of optimism will become a central tenet for him throughout his entire political career.

Michelle and Barack try to keep their relationship under wraps at work. Work feels like a distraction, however, from spending time with each other and learning more about each other. Barack is intrigued by Michelle's upbringing, the sameness of life on Euclid Avenue. Michelle is interested in the fact that Barack is rather nontraditional, viewing marriage as an "unnecessary and overhyped convention."

Even early in their relationship, Michelle already understands how she has to adjust to balancing priorities at work with balancing the time that she gets to spend with Barack. Additionally, their differing views on marriage will be a point of contention up until Barack allows for his own compromise and proposes to Michelle.

Barack's family was very unlike Michelle's. His mother, Ann Dunham, and his father, a Kenyan student named Barack Obama Sr., had met in college in Hawaii. Their marriage was brief: they divorced and Ann married a Javanese geologist and moved to Jakarta with six-year-old Barack.

Even though Barack's family and upbringing is very different from Michelle's, she goes on to show how his family—like hers—invested a lot in their child in order to help him get a good education.

Barack enjoyed his time in Indonesia, but Ann was concerned about his education, and so she sent Barack back to Oahu to attend private school and live with her parents and Barack's half-sister Maya. His mother split her time between Oahu and Jakarta. Even though Barack had had far less stability than Michelle, his family life "had left him self-reliant and curiously hard-wired for optimism."

Michelle demonstrates, to some degree, that there is a correlation between having a loving family and having an optimistic outlook—again highlighting the importance of family investment for children.

One evening that summer, a community organizer colleague asks a favor of Barack: to lead a training at a black parish in Roseland, on the South Side. Michelle accompanies him. Barack introduces himself to the parish before asking people to share their stories and concerns about their neighborhood. He then tells them that even a tiny group of people inside a church could make change. They are skeptical, but he isn't put off by this skepticism.

This episode is Michelle's first introduction to Barack's intense optimism—organizing communities on a grassroots level in order to show that even they can make change for their own community. It is this kind of optimism that propels Barack's political career in the future, as particularly during his presidential campaign he relies on the same kind of grassroots organizing.

Barack tries to show the people how to think positively, amid their "disenfranchisement and sinking helplessness." Michelle writes that she'd always been raised to think positively, in order to overcome her circumstances. But Barack's version of hope, she notes, is different: "It was one thing to get yourself out of a stuck place, I realized. It was another thing entirely to try and get the place itself unstuck." As Barack speaks more and more intensely and inspiringly, the people in the room nod in approval and yell "Amen!"

Michelle emphasizes how Barack's view of hope and optimism even outreaches her own. Michelle is a good example of the idea that anyone can work hard and overcome their circumstances –yet at the same time, Michelle had advantages like invested parents and the ability to get a good education. Barack's idea of hope is to provide everyone with those same opportunities.

When the summer ends, Barack returns to Harvard. Both he and Michelle would be busy the following year: she would be trying to make partner at the law firm, and he was chosen as an editor of the prestigious Harvard Law Review in addition to his studies. And despite their very intimate relationship, they would be 900 miles away from each other. Barack says he's "not much of a phone guy," but Michelle insists that they make time for each other to speak on the phone.

This is a good, if small, example of how many couples must compromise in a relationship. Despite Barack's protests, he understands that it is important to Michelle (and to their relationship) to speak on the phone when they can, and so he makes that compromise for her.

Michelle is part of the recruiting team, and she interviews students for summer associate jobs. She makes it a priority to bring in law students who are smart and driven but also "something other than male and white." She insists that the firm cast a wider net to search for students, not only from Ivy League schools, but also from state schools and historically black colleges like Howard University.

Michelle begins what is a lifelong passion in order to afford more people from diverse backgrounds the same opportunities that she was afforded. She understands the inherent handicap that women and students of color have, and she works to try to even the playing field and get them interviews at her firm.

That Christmas, Michelle and Barack go to Honolulu together, and Barack introduces her to some of his family and the places where he grew up. She meets Ann and Barack's grandparents, finding them not unlike her own middle-class family. She understands that this explains some of the ease between them—that despite their dissimilar experiences growing up, they both had very supportive families.

Michelle continues to highlight the idea that supportive family members were instrumental not only in her own upbringing, but also in Barack's—and this support is one of the key reasons that she and Barack are both so successful and so similar.

Michelle notes that many of her friends judge potential partners "from the outside in," focusing on looks and financial prospects and then looking to see if their personalities match. But Michelle sees immediately that Barack has long-lasting relationships with friends, isn't self-conscious about fear or weakness, and is both humble and truthful. They talk, somewhat hypothetically, about places to live, children, and what their future might look like.

Although Michelle later highlights some of the compromises and sacrifices that marriage and parenthood necessitate, she also emphasizes the importance of her and Barack's similarities, particularly their shared values and integrity. She determines that finances or looks are not nearly as important as personality and compatibility, and Barack appears to agree.

Michelle is still in touch with many friends from school. Suzanne, in particular, is still on a zig-zagging path, trying to optimize the fun in her life. Michelle views these choices (like turning down an Ivy League business school to go to a state program because it would be easier) as "an affront to [Michelle's] way of doing things." But, she realizes now, this is unfair judgement. Just before she starts school, Suzanne returns from a round-the-world adventure and discovers that she has cancer.

Michelle at first views the choices of her friend as impractical, and perhaps even a bit selfish, since she seems to want to put her own happiness in front of improved future prospects. But soon after Suzanne's cancer diagnosis, Michelle starts to grasp more fully that time is short, and that it's important to also focus on creating a fulfilling life for oneself.

Suzanne's cancer, an aggressive form of lymphoma, is the first thing that shakes Michelle's view that a person can work their way out of any problem. In response, Michelle simply denies the gravity of the situation. By June, another of Michelle's friends calls her and tells her that Suzanne has been hospitalized. Michelle flies to see Suzanne, though she is in a coma when Michelle arrives. Michelle regrets not coming earlier, and also regrets the many times she thought Suzanne was making the wrong move by focusing on fun rather than long-term goals. She watches as Suzanne's breathing grows more and more ragged, until she passes away. Michelle is angry, baffled by the unfairness of someone getting sick and dying at twenty-six.

With Suzanne's illness and death, Michelle starts to understand that hard work and "checking boxes," which she often describes herself as doing, are not the only important values in her life. She also recognizes the need for passion and fulfillment like the kind that Suzanne had during her life. This is one of Michelle's turning points, as she slowly starts on a path to find work that she cares more deeply about.

CHAPTER 10

That summer, Barack returns to Chicago and moves into Michelle's apartment, quickly becoming accepted by her family. Barack has accepted a summer associate job with a law firm, and he has also been chosen as president of the Harvard Law Review (the first African American president in the publication's 103-year history). It is an honor that easily opens up high-paying corporate jobs, but instead he aspires to practice civil rights law, to write a book about race in America, and to find work that aligns with his values.

Michelle looks to Barack as another role model for both working hard and finding fulfillment in one's life. Despite the fact that Barack could easily become a corporate lawyer, he chooses to do something that he is more passionate about. This decision will put him on a path to change the country and spur progress when he becomes president.

While Barack is very confident in his future, Michelle writes in a sporadically-used journal that she feels very confused about the direction of her life. Michelle recognizes, looking back on her words, that she was trying to tell herself that she hated being a lawyer, but could not admit this to herself because of the time and money she had put into her education.

Michelle views herself in contrast with Barack, who feels very assured of his passions and his direction in life. Michelle struggles with her path because she doesn't know exactly what would be most fulfilling—she only knows that being a lawyer isn't right for her.

Suzanne's sudden death awakens a desire for more joy and meaning in Michelle's life. She makes a list of the issues that interest her, knowing that a more "virtuous" job would earn less money. She asks about opportunities in other fields, though she doesn't know where to begin. She laments that in all of her years of education, she never explored her passions.

Michelle also offers these thoughts as a kind of warning: that in addition to doing well in school, it is also necessary to find the things that interest a person, which would actually require prioritizing fun, as Suzanne did.

After a business trip to D.C., Michelle's mother picks Michelle up from the airport and she confesses to her mother that she doesn't feel "fulfilled" at work. Reflecting on these words in the present, Michelle realizes how this must have come across to her mother, who had at times worked to fund Michelle's college education, and who also had not worked in order to take care of the family at home. Her mother had just driven an hour to pick her up from the airport, and she is letting her daughter live rent-free while taking care of a disabled husband on top of it all. Michelle realizes that fulfillment must have "struck her as a rich person's conceit." Michelle's mother tells Michelle blankly to make money first and worry about happiness later.

Michelle's mother reinforces Michelle's initial idea that fulfillment is somewhat selfish, given the fact that she has sacrificed so much for her children. In some ways, she expects Michelle to do the same, and this is likely where Michelle learned this value. Michelle has long understood the value of hard work, and she will continue to understand the value of sacrifice, but she is also starting to learn the importance of finding something that makes her happy. Even though she doesn't immediately start along this path, after she quits the law firm, she makes sure that every subsequent job has some meaning to her.

Michelle continues to work at Sidley for the next six months, trying to focus on the aspects of her work she finds most meaningful. Meanwhile, at home, her father's feet have inexplicably started to swell, though he insists as always that he's fine. She tries to get him to go to the doctor, but he insists that doctors never bring good news and wants to avoid a visit.

While Suzanne's death is the first spark that causes Michelle to try to find more meaningful work, her dad's decline and eventual death is what truly gives her the sense of the importance of not wasting time in life on things that one is not passionate about.

Michelle's father continues to avoid the doctor over the coming months. He takes particular pride in never missing a shift at work despite his growing slowness to get ready. Michelle and her mother don't know what to do—despite his assurances, they can see his exhaustion, weakness, and a new swelling in his neck. One night, they stage an intervention, with Michelle telling him that he owes it to them to go to the doctor. He agrees, begrudgingly, to go.

Whereas growing up, Michelle's father had invested in Michelle, now, in some ways, the dynamic has flipped. Michelle works hard to make sure that her dad knows the importance of going to the doctor and getting treatment, otherwise they could lose him very quickly.

The next morning, Michelle's father gets up for work yet again. He makes it out the door, but when Michelle peers out the peephole, she sees that he has only made it partway down the stairs. It is "a moment of pure defeat." She waits for him to return, trying not to hurt his dignity. But when she looks out again several minutes later, he is gone. He is not giving in.

Despite his family's worries, Michelle's father is adamant about continuing to work hard so that he can support them. Even though he is slowly deteriorating, he has his own kind of optimism and determination to do the things that he wants to do.

Michelle and Barack begin to speak about their views on marriage. For Michelle, getting married has always been a given. But Barack had always experienced marriage as something temporary, and to him, love is a more important foundation than marriage. Barack sees marriage as the alignment of two lives that are still maintained separately. Michelle sees marriage as a "full-on merger" of two lives into one. She likes the steadiness of the marriage that her parents have.

Michelle introduces the idea that even the concept of marriage is a kind of compromise between her and Barack, as he sees marriage as unnecessary in a loving relationship and she sees it as a crucial commitment to a partnership.

Before Michelle can make her father's doctor appointment, he is rushed to the hospital. The doctors tell him that his endocrine system is going "fully haywire." Michelle, Craig, and Michelle's mother visit him. When Michelle visits her father ten days into his hospital stay, he is unable to speak. She puts her hand in his, and he kisses it. She knows what he is trying to say: that he is proud of her, that he loves her, and that he knows that he should have gone to the doctor sooner. He is saying goodbye. Michelle leaves the hospital for the night, and when she wakes up, she discovers that her father had a heart attack in the middle of the night and passed away.

Michelle's sadness over her father's goodbye and death demonstrates his importance in her life. He sacrificed so much for his children and worked so hard in order to help her succeed. Acknowledging that he is proud of her—even silently—shows that in some way her success provided him with a sense of fulfillment, as well, despite his understanding that he could have done more to live longer.

CHAPTER 11

Michelle, Craig, and her mother reel from her father's death. Losing her father makes Michelle realize even more how much she wants to change her life path and take advantage of the time she has. She reaches out to as many different foundations and companies as she can, trying to speak to them about job openings.

Michelle's father's death is another shock to Michelle. Just like Suzanne's death, it makes her more and more aware of the little time she has and the fact that she needs to find her own sense of fulfillment in her life.

One afternoon, Michelle visits the office of Art Sussman, the in-house legal counsel for the University of Chicago. Michelle had never once visited the school—it seemed too elite for her growing up on the South Side. Art is surprised to hear this, and Michelle feels a small twinge of purpose: she could recognize community issues with the University that Art never could.

Michelle's background makes her uniquely suited to help the University of Chicago improve its community outreach—and this is one of the things that makes her feel passionate and optimistic about the work. Even though she doesn't take a job there immediately, her eventual position at the university makes her happy because she is improving lives in a way that only she can.

Art passes along Michelle's resume to a few people, which eventually leads her to a woman named Valerie Jarrett—the newly appointed deputy chief of staff to the mayor of Chicago. She had, like Michelle, realized that law was not for her after spending some time working at a law firm. She was drawn to city hall by Harold Washington, the first African American mayor of Chicago who was elected in 1983. He had kindled a "larger spirit of progressivism" and had won the office by a hair.

Harold Washington campaigned on progressive ideals and the belief that Chicago politics could change for the better. Comparisons are easily made to Barack himself, who also campaigns on progressive policies and optimism that the country can continue to get better.

Valerie was thirty when she joined Washington's staff, but only a few months later, Washington tragically had a heart attack, and Richard M. Daley was elected to replace him—a move that many saw as "a swift and demoralizing return to the old white ways of Chicago politics."

Parallels can also be made here between Barack and Washington. After Barack leaves office and Donald Trump takes over, the dynamic is not dissimilar from what Michelle describes as occurring when Richard M. Daley took office.

When Michelle visits Valerie at city hall for the first time, she is "simultaneously taken aback and completely enthralled by the clunky, controlled chaos of the place." She is immediately smitten with Valerie, and she is grateful to talk to someone with a similar background but who is a few years ahead in her career path. She also asks Valerie many questions, trying to determine whether she is suited for this kind of work. It would also mean a drastic pay cut and a change in lifestyle.

Michelle's first visit to city hall reveals her desire to find out what she is passionate about, as she asks Valerie many questions and makes sure that the lifestyle change is right for her. But her description of being "enthralled" by the place foreshadows how suited she is to interacting with people in a government setting, which will serve her throughout her life.

Michelle acknowledges that she, like many people around her growing up, had little faith in politics, which had "traditionally been used against black folks." Still, she is intrigued when Valerie offers her a job. Michelle says she has to think about it, but she asks a final question: whether she can introduce Valerie to Barack.

Michelle once again makes the point that politics have often been used to take advantage of and perpetuate racism in America, which is why she is so hesitant for Barack to run for office when he begins to think about it.

Barack had finished school a few months after Michelle's father passed away, and he moved back to Chicago afterward. He and Michelle relish being a "short-distance couple" after two long years apart. Barack sells an idea for a nonfiction book about race and identity to a New York publisher and is given an advance and a year to complete the manuscript. He is also fielding many job offers, such as a job at Sidley & Austin, a fellowship at the University of Chicago, and positions at smaller public interest firms.

Michelle and Barack, meanwhile, start to build their own life together—the seeds of their marriage are beginning to grow. Additionally, Barack starts on his own path towards his progressive vision and his desire to improve the lives of others. Eventually he does finish this book on race and take a position at a public interest firm, rather than going the corporate or academic route.


Michelle admires how Barack believes his opportunities are endless and doesn't worry about whether they will dry up. He is also the lone voice telling Michelle to go for the job at city hall, amid all of Michelle's doubts and her parents' advice.

Barack, again with his eternal optimism, highlights for Michelle the importance of finding fulfillment in one's work, insisting that other options are always to be had if a particular job stops being fulfilling.

Three years earlier, Michelle had sat for the bar exam: a two-day, twelve-hour exam meant to prove a lawyer's knowledge. But after Michelle took the test, she opened the exam results to find that she had failed. Michelle was shocked at her failure. She felt she'd let down everyone who had ever taught or encouraged her. In the aftermath, she buckled down and studied for a second test, passing it "handily," but the sting of the first failure remains with her. This is why Michelle regards Barack's studying (or lack of it) with curiosity. She knows that he'll pass the bar, but she's a little annoyed with how confident he is.

Because Michelle attributes so much of her success to the people in her life who have invested in her, she also views her failures as disappointing those same people, as if she did not do enough hard work to make their investment worth it. But she again reinforces the value of working hard and not being discouraged by studying even more for her second attempt at the test.

Barack and Michelle celebrate his achievement on the day he completes the exam, going to a nice restaurant. At dinner, the topic of marriage arises, and Barack confesses that he doesn't really see the point. They debate over why they should or shouldn't get married, until the waiter comes around with the dessert plate. When he lifts the cover, Michelle sees a small box instead of dessert. She realizes that his whole debate was meant to bait her—to argue one final time. Barack drops to one knee and asks if Michelle would marry him. She says yes.

Even though Barack plays a joke on her, his proposal demonstrates his own willingness to compromise by marrying Michelle, even though he doesn't assign as much importance to the tradition as she does. This compromise sets them up for the kind of compromise and sacrifices that they'll have to make over the course of their marriage.

Shortly after Michelle accepts Barack's proposal, she accepts the job at city hall. Barack accepts a position at a public interest law firm. Before they start at their respective jobs, they take a vacation together to Kenya. She feels completely foreign there, but she is welcomed by Barack's family. Barack had visited once before, and so he was more at home than Michelle. Michelle writes that "the in-betweenness" of being African American in Africa gives her a feeling of sadness, as if she belongs in neither place. Still, she is happy to spend time with Barack and his family in a world completely foreign to her own.

Michelle hints at some of the deeper sadness of feeling "othered" in America, noting that she doesn't feel like she fully belongs in either Africa or America. She and Barack both strive in later years to demonstrate to young kids especially that a person does not have to be white and male in order to become important to America's history or its progress.

CHAPTER 12

Michelle and Barack marry in the summer of 1992, surrounded by their families—Michelle's from the South Side, and Barack's from both Hawaii and Kenya. The mood is joyful, although Michelle feels the loss of her father. At the church, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright speaks about what it means to form a union and have it witnessed by a caring community. At that moment, Michelle is struck by the fact that "whatever [is] out there," they "would step into it together."

Michelle communicates her readiness to form this partnership and to join their two families. In her description here, she also suggests that Barack's optimism helps to lift her up, allowing her to believe that the two of them can celebrate whatever success they might experience and overcome challenges they might face in the future.

Michelle and Barack take a honeymoon in northern California. They are more than ready to take a vacation: Barack had put his job at the law firm and his book on hold to work as a part of an organization called Project VOTE, which made efforts to register new voters in states with low minority turnout. Barack took a job running the Illinois office, and he threw himself into the work. He spent a lot of time speaking with community groups and unregistered voters in order to convey that there is power in voting.

Barack's delay in starting his job at the law firm, in favor of working directly with voters and convincing people of the power of voting, again emphasizes his inherent faith in the political system. That he focuses on low minority turnout also shows how he intends to make sure that people who have been largely disregarded by the current political system find their voice in it.

Michelle, meanwhile, has been fully steeped in government. She says that government issues are "elaborate and unending." She has been meeting with department heads and city commissioners, and she follows up on personal complaints received by the mayor, like fallen trees and garbage collection.

Michelle, like Barack, is able to find a more fulfilling line of work. City hall allows her to relate to people and makes her feel like she is tangibly improving lives, a value that she carries with her throughout her time in the White House, as well.

Michelle has been closely watching Valerie Jarrett and another co-worker at city hall, Susan Sher, who are "women who knew their own voices and were unafraid to use them." They are also, importantly, working moms. Michelle observes that they never hesitate to prioritize their family when necessary.

Even though Michelle doesn't yet have children, she starts to observe how other women around her balance and make compromises between handling their work life and their home life.

Michelle and Barack return from California to good news and bad. The good news is the result of the November elections: Bill Clinton won overwhelmingly in Illinois, and Carol Moseley Braun became the first African American woman to hold a Senate seat. Project Vote had registered 110,000 new voters, and for the first time in a decade, over half a million black voters in Chicago went to the polls. All of this is heartening for Barack.

This is the first of many affirmations that putting faith in voting can actually enact change, particularly when minority voters turn out for a candidate they are passionate about. Parallels will arise between this race and Barack's own presidential run in 2008.

The bad news is that Barack has completely missed his book deadline, the publisher has canceled his contract, and Barack now has to pay back his 40,000 dollar advance. Instead of panicking, Barack resolves to finish the book and sell it to a different publisher. He plans to spend a few months alone writing the book—in a cabin his mother Ann finds for him, on the Indonesian island of Bali. Six weeks after their wedding, Barack heads off to the cabin, while Michelle remains home. She explains that all she can do in the face of this development is learn to adapt.

Barack's easy optimism and ability not to panic helps him achieve his goals throughout his life, and is what also eventually makes him a confidence-inspiring leader for many people. This episode in their marriage also highlights an immediate compromise and sacrifice that Michelle and Barack both have to make. Barack sacrifices spending time with Michelle for his work, and Michelle compromises by being understanding of his having to go away to complete his book.

Michelle writes about the word "wife," which feels loaded to her. It represents an idea of a white woman who lived inside the television sitcoms Michelle watched growing up, women who rarely had lives outside of the domestic sphere. She acknowledges, however, that her parents' dynamic was just as traditional. Michelle preferred *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* growing up. Mary was independent and funny, and had conversations that weren't about children or homemaking. Michelle, likewise, has been raised to "be confident and see no limits." And so she wants to have a work life and a home life, but "with some promise that one would never fully squelch the other."

Michelle explores some of the sexism existing within the institution of marriage, where in the past (and still sometimes in the present), women were confined to the domestic sphere while men worked. Yet Michelle is part of the next generation of women learning how to find a compromise between working and also spending time with their families—a break from what she experienced growing up with a home-making mother.

Barack returns home with a basically finished book and sells the manuscript to a new publisher within months. Quickly, he and Michelle return to their easy rhythm. The months go by—they live and work and laugh and plan together, buying a condo in the spring. Michelle switches jobs once more to explore nonprofit work. There is a lot she hasn't yet figured out about her life, but for the time being, she is happy.

Being able to freely explore her passions and pursue another job demonstrates how Michelle has grown. Whereas she had been so worried about giving up her job at Sidley & Austin, now it is much easier for her to see that she can find a job more fulfilling than the one she had at city hall.

CHAPTER 13

Michelle is nervous in her new job as the executive director for the Chicago chapter of a company called Public Allies. Public Allies recruits young people and gives them intensive training and mentorship before placing them in apprentice positions in community organizations and public agencies. The hope is that it will give the young recruits—the Allies—the experience and drive to continue working in the public sector.

Public Allies is a company that appeals to Michelle for two key reasons: the first is that its model is inherently optimistic, hoping that by investing in the next generation of community leaders, they will then stick with the work. In addition, it allows Michelle to invest in young people in a way that she has always felt was crucial to her own success, providing them with a path to find their own sense of fulfillment.

When Michelle was offered the job, the salary was far below what she had been paid at city hall, and she literally could not afford to accept it. She starts to realize that for the people who work at non-profits like this one, often their virtue is "discreetly underwritten by privilege." Michelle, on the other hand, can't "be shy or embarrassed about [her] needs," and when she expresses those needs, the organization is able to secure new funding.

Michelle begins to see how oftentimes political success, and the ability to be involved in politics at all, is underwritten by a degree of privilege. That privilege begets political power, which in turn grants more privilege. This is why, when Michelle and Barack enter the White House, she aims to make sure that more people can enjoy the same privileges that she experiences there.

Michelle works tirelessly to set up an office and hire a small staff to support the new Allies. She also speaks with every connection Barack has to find donors and people who can support the program, including those who can host an Ally in their organization. For Michelle, the most exciting part is finding the Allies: visiting college campuses, community colleges, and urban high schools.

Michelle begins what ends up becoming a lifetime pursuit of investing in young people, a way to pay back the many educators, and her parents, who have so deeply believed in her success. Here Michelle wants to pass on that opportunity to future community leaders, bent on making their societies better.

Quickly, Michelle recruits twenty-seven Allies. Michelle hosts development workshops and helps the Allies sort through any issues they might be having at their new positions. She celebrates their progress and when they're late or not taking their work seriously, she lets them know she expects better. Over Michelle's several years in the job, she is amazed to see how many people have remained in the non-profit world, and that Public Allies is still going strong. She feels that the work is truly meaningful.

Michelle provides key investment personally to the Allies—holding them accountable for their mistakes and lauding their success, in order to encourage their hard work. And, by investing in these young people, Michelle is able to find her own sense of growth and fulfillment because she sees these young people perpetuating the optimism that she finds so crucial in the world.

Barack, meanwhile, finds his own purpose. He teaches a class on racism and the law at the University of Chicago Law School and works during the day at his law firm. He is also writing the second draft of his book. *Dreams from My Father* is published in the summer of 1995. It gets good reviews but sells only modestly. Still, it allows Barack to come to a kind of peace with his own scattered identity.

Dreams from My Father *will become much more popular when Barack's political career becomes more nationally recognized, but its publication this early in his life serves as an important benchmark, demonstrating how much thought Barack has already put into questions of race and politics.*

In Chicago, political chatter starts to kick up. A sitting U.S. Congressman is under investigation for sex crimes, and a state senator named Alice Palmer intends to run, leaving her own seat vacant. Barack asks Michelle what she thinks about his running for the seat. She writes that, as with every time he asks her this question, the answer is largely the same. She doesn't appreciate politicians and doesn't love the idea of Barack becoming one, thinking that he is too good of a person to get muddled in politics.

Again, Michelle's dislike of politics is reflective of the fact that minorities have largely been marginalized by politicians and their policies. Additionally, at this point in the country's history, politicians are (and will continue to be) mostly white and male, and often appear more interested in power than in progress, which is the true opposite of Barack.

Michelle doesn't want to dissuade Barack from his belief that he enact change, however, so she gives her approval. Barack is elected to the Illinois state senate in November 1996, though during the campaign, tragedy struck. Barack's mother Ann died quite unexpectedly, and his inability to say goodbye to her had "crushed him." Michelle describes how Ann had introduced him to "the richness of literature and the power of a well-reasoned argument."

Michelle again highlights how Barack's mother, just like her own parents, played an important role in Barack's education and his success. She invested her own love of learning and arguing in him, which led him to be so successful in law school and beyond.

After Barack is elected, every Monday through Thursday he stays at a hotel in Springfield before returning for the weekend and having a date night with Michelle on Friday. Michelle sees this as "a golden time" for the balance in their marriage, when they both are pursuing their own interests and sense of purpose.

Michelle's description of this period as "a golden time" in the balance of their partnership foreshadows the eventual change in this dynamic, when Michelle must compromise a lot more of her life for Barack's political ambitions.

Barack is an eager state senator, quickly introducing many new bills that get picked off by the Republican-controlled chamber. Still, Michelle sees that he is "strangely suited to the tussle of lawmaking." He remains hopeful that some part of his vision will manage to win out.

Barack's optimism not only becomes a key part of his platform and the reason he gains supporters, but it also enables him to remain hopeful through his political losses when he governs.

As Barack gets accustomed to politics, Michelle takes a new job at the University Chicago, where Art Sussman is looking for an associate dean to focus on community relations. Having grown up on the South Side, Michelle knows that it is important work to try to make the university more accessible to the neighborhood and vice versa.

Michelle, who now lives a life of relative privilege compared to the one she had growing up, understands that she has a responsibility to make some of that privilege more accessible to those who do not have it.

In addition to the sense of purpose Michelle gets from the job, there are also more practical reasons to take it: better pay, more reasonable hours, and good health-care benefits. This will prove particularly important, because Michelle and Barack are trying to get pregnant, and it isn't going well.

Taking the job for better health-care benefits signals Michelle's first real effort to balance her work priorities (and what she wants out of a job) with her priority of becoming a mother.

As months go on and Michelle and Barack are unable to get pregnant, they try to make adjustments in their schedules to optimize their chances. But nothing seems to work. They have one pregnancy test come back positive, but Michelle has a miscarriage shortly after. She comments on the fact that many women have miscarriages, but there is so much silence around the issue because it can feel like a personal failure—which, she assures readers, it is not.

The stigma around both the inability to get pregnant and having a miscarriage is yet another form of gender inequality, one which exacerbates the emotional toll of trying to get pregnant. Michelle understands that many women feel a sense of personal failure for having a miscarriage or not getting pregnant, despite that these issues are quite common and are not anyone's fault.

Michelle and Barack see a fertility doctor, who says he cannot discern any biological issues. He then recommends in vitro fertilization, which Michelle largely undergoes alone because of Barack's schedule. Michelle is frustrated, feeling "the acute burden of being female." Barack only has to provide some sperm, but Michelle has to go in to the doctor for daily ultrasounds, blood drawings, and cervix inspections. They both want a family, but it is Michelle who will have to put her passions and career on hold. Still, she knows, this is the sacrifice that is required to get something else that she desperately wants: children.

As the couple tries to get pregnant—and eventually does—Michelle understands how the compromises and sacrifices that each of them will have to make are not equal because of their respective sexes. Michelle will have to compromise a lot more between her career and the desire to have kids because she is a woman. She finds this frustrating, particularly as someone who feels strongly about gender equality.

Eight weeks later, Michelle becomes pregnant. All resentment Michelle felt is gone, and she even feels that pregnancy is a privilege: "the gift of being female." She and Barack are both bright with optimism and promise for the baby that she is carrying. Michelle has baby Malia on July 4, 1998.

Even though having children forces Michelle to make some sacrifices, she and Barack both know that they are sacrifices she truly wants to make. Michelle also demonstrates how having children is an inherently optimistic endeavor, as doing so comes with the "promise" of a new life.

CHAPTER 14

Motherhood becomes Michelle's motivator. She becomes completely consumed by taking care of Malia, as does Barack. They are, she writes, "obsessive and a little boring." Several months after Malia is born, she returns to work at her job part-time, finding a baby-sitter named Glorina Casabal.

In this chapter, Michelle starts to more fully understand the compromises she will have to make between work and being a mother, as she learns what kind of balance feels most fulfilling to her.

Michelle realizes quickly that a part-time job, as a scaled down version of a previously full-time job, is often a trap. She grapples with the same responsibilities, but has to fit them into a twenty-hour work week and with half the salary. She feels as if she is "only half doing everything," not spending enough time at work nor enough time with Malia. Barack, on the other hand, hardly misses a stride. He is reelected to a four-year term in the state senate. He also decides to run for Congress.

Michelle tries to find a balance between her work and home life that feels satisfying, but she hasn't yet found the kind of compromise that works best for her. And once again, she feels the inherent inequality between her and Barack—that he can easily come and go from his job, and the burden is largely on her to make the sacrifices.

At the end of 1999, when Malia is about eighteen months, Michelle and Barack plan to travel to Hawaii over Christmas. But politics intervene: the state senate is hung up on a vote on a major crime bill, and Barack says they have to delay their trip a few days. When they get to Hawaii, the legislature still hasn't found a resolution on the bill. But Michelle and Barack spend a nice Christmas with his grandmother.

Even though Barack feels the compromise between family and work less than Michelle does, this episode is a good demonstration of the fact that he has compromises that he needs to make, too—and at first, he largely compromises family time for his work.

A few days before the new year, Barack gets a call, saying that the senate is abruptly going back into session to finish work on the bill. Barack leaps into action, knowing that the vote is an important one, and Michelle understands that they have to go back. But then, overnight, Malia spikes a high fever, and Michelle knows that she can't fly. After discussing different options, Barack calls his legislative aide and explains that he will miss the vote on the bill.

Even though Barack feels a political duty to his constituents, he recognizes the responsibility he owes to the health and safety of his daughter. This decision signifies the first major instance Michelle relays in which Barack makes the decision to put family over his political responsibility.

Malia gets better after a few days' rest and some antibiotics, but Barack's campaign takes a beating for his absence (even though the vote was lost by five). Michelle notes that, although the news mentions Barack's vacation in Hawaii, no one mentions that he's from Hawaii, that he was visiting his grandmother, or that his daughter had fallen ill. Michelle is shocked by people's easy questioning of his character.

Michelle recognizes some of the nastiness of political coverage early: that it only highlights the details that are convenient for its arguments. She also recognizes the hypocrisy of constituents wanting candidates who are part of loving families, while criticizing those same candidates for prioritizing their families.

Michelle is also surprised to see opponents try to target Barack by drumming up fear and mistrust amongst African American voters. One opponent calls Barack "the white man in blackface in our community"—arguing, in essence, that he is not part of the community. They call him elitist, which bothers Michelle because he exemplifies everything that parents on the South Side say they want for their kids. Barack takes it all in stride, but ends up losing the Democratic primary.

Barack and Michelle also become quickly familiar with the extra level of scrutiny that Barack experiences because of his race. He not only has critics who play on racist stereotypes, but he also faces criticism that he is not actually a member of the African American community. These two kinds of critics together work to place him outside of any group.

In 2001, Sasha is born, also as a result of IVF. Michelle's hope for her two daughters is to grow up "bright and energetic, optimistic like their father and hard-driving like their mom." After Sasha is born, Michelle debates whether to return to her job, or if it might be easier on the family's finances, and on her stress level, if she simply stayed home.

Michelle's attempts to balance her work and home life (and the financial implications that come with that balance) become so difficult that she wonders whether to give up on her career completely, reflecting how difficult it can be to be a working mother.

But then, Michelle gets a call—the president of the University of Chicago Medical Center is looking for an executive director for community affairs. Michelle knows it's a great opportunity, but she had just talked herself into the idea that everyone is better off with her at home. Michelle relies on a set of friendships that she has made—professional women who juggle motherhood and work in many different ways. From seeing their various parenting methods, she sees that there is "no formula for motherhood." She decides to interview for the hospital job.

Through her friends, Michelle understands that there is not one way to balance being a mother with being a working professional. She realizes more and more that her career is equally important to her, and that she would lose a deep sense of fulfillment if she gave it up altogether. And so, instead of giving up, she continues to evolve and find the kind of balance that is right for her.

Michelle goes to the interview with her goals in sight: a full time job and a competitive salary to be able to afford child care. And time with her daughters, which she emphasizes by bringing Sasha with her to the interview. The hospital president, Michael Riordan, seems to understand, and he offers her the job.

Michelle, just like when she was interviewing for Project Allies, proves the importance (and often the remarkable success) of standing up for oneself and one's needs. She makes clear to her interviewer that she has children to balance with her work, and it is important for her to be fulfilled doing both things.

Life continues with a new rhythm: two kids, three jobs (Barack is teaching as well as legislating), two cars, one condo, and no free time. George W. Bush is president, and the country has just endured the tragedy of 9/11. At some point, Barack raises the idea of running for the Senate to Michelle. Michelle isn't particularly pleased with this idea, as his schedule has been starting to grate on her.

As America endures a national tragedy, which would go on to spark a series of wars, Barack continues to have faith in his ability to make a difference in the country, despite his previous failed run for Congress—and despite the fact that Michelle already feels like Barack isn't making enough time for their family.

Michelle becomes officially frustrated with Barack's regularly arriving home so late, when Sasha and Malia's eyes are already drooping, and with waiting alone for dinner. She is let down by the fact that Barack is always overly optimistic about the time he'll be home. At home, their frustrations grow intensely, like a "knot [they] couldn't loosen."

Michelle starts to become frustrated that she is the only one in the relationship who is caring for their daughters and their home in general throughout the workweek, and she wants Barack not to sacrifice his family life as much.

Michelle suggests couple's counseling, and Barack agrees to go despite some hesitation. Counseling helps Michelle realize that there are ways she can be happier that don't rely on Barack quitting politics, like making time for herself to exercise and not spending energy stewing over whether Barack will make it home for dinner. As for dinner, it would be at 6:30pm every night, with baths at 7:00pm and then reading, with lights out at 8:00pm. This puts the weight of responsibility on Barack to make it home—it's now his job to catch up with the girls.

Barack does, however, begin to compromise—both by attending couples counseling, and by taking some responsibility for trying to be home more to see his daughters. At the same time, Michelle understands the necessity of being less negative and finding other ways to be fulfilled that don't involve Barack or her kids.

CHAPTER 15

When Michelle is forty years old, with children who are three and six, she is sometimes amazed at her own energy and efficiency and what she is able to accomplish at work. At the hospital, Michelle aims to undo the barriers between the academics and hospital administrators and the surrounding areas. She institutes programs to take hospital staff and trustees into the neighborhoods. Local kids come in to shadow hospital employees.

Michelle continues her quest of trying to make institutions of power and privilege more accessible to those without it. Also, in trying to give local kids a view into hospital work, she is investing in them in a way that she hopes inspires them to work hard towards their own goals. All of this enables Michelle to feel like she is working toward her own fulfillment.

Michelle also observes the issue of how residents get medical treatment. They are a population disproportionately affected by the chronic conditions that tend to afflict the poor, and are also largely uninsured. Thus, they jam the hospital's emergency room—an expensive and inefficient system for getting treatment. She sets up a program to hire and train patient advocates—people who will sit with patients in the ER and help them set up follow-up appointments to get decent and affordable care.

Michelle recognizes how lacking privilege can become a cycle, as people wait to get care and then are forced to get more expensive care because they have waited so long. This cycle makes apparent the need for a better healthcare system (Barack's signature achievement) and Michelle's own recognition of how those in power need to recognize how to help those without it.

Michelle is happy at her job, but also understands that there are trade-offs: projects she does not follow through on, or people she could have mentored better. She tries to maintain stability and normalcy at home. Barack, meanwhile, comes and goes with his schedule but makes the most of the time he is home. He is also thinking about campaigning for the U.S. Senate, having grown increasingly frustrated by the pace of state government.

Just as Michelle continues her own path to growth and fulfillment, so too does Barack put himself on the path to being more fulfilled. He hopes that being a part of the Senate and working on a national level will enable him to make change at a faster pace and a larger scale.

Barack, Michelle, Valerie Jarrett, and a few close friends meet to discuss Barack's running. Barack explains that he feels he has a real shot: the incumbent is a conservative Republican in an increasingly Democratic state. After more discussion, Valerie agrees to be the finance chair for the campaign, some friends agree to donate time and money, and Michelle agrees to let him run—on the condition that if he loses, he will move on from politics.

Barack's defining characteristic is again on display here. Just as he believes that the country can always improve, he is also optimistic and confident in himself that he is a person who can help enact that change. Additionally, he can get others to believe in his success and optimism.

Barack gets a few lucky twists along the campaign. The incumbent decides not to run, and both the Democratic front-runner in the primary and the Republican nominee become involved in scandals. Barack wins the nomination running an excellent campaign, and a few months before the election, Barack doesn't even have a Republican opponent.

Although Barack does get a few lucky breaks during the race, he also runs a good campaign and shows that his optimism pays off. Only by having faith in himself and deciding to run could he have won the Senate race.

Then, John Kerry invites Barack to give the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Barack is still a "complete nobody"—he had never used a teleprompter or been live on prime-time television. And yet, he seems "destined for exactly this moment." He had been building a big vision, and is ready to speak to a fifteen-thousand-person crowd.

Even though Barack has never spoken to a crowd this large, his optimism again shines through here. He had always had faith in the idea that he could change people's minds and inspire them to work toward a better future.

Barack speaks for seventeen minutes that night, explaining who he is and where he comes from: his grandfather, who had fought in World War II; his father, who had herded goats in Kenya; his parents' improbable love and their faith in a good education for their son. He casts himself as "a literal embodiment of the American story," calling for hope over cynicism. His optimism is "dazzling." The crowd roars to its feet when he finishes.

This speech has roots in Barack's time in the black parish in Roseland, but it demonstrates how Barack's optimism and inspiration can be amplified on a national stage. This optimism, combined with the fact that he does represent a more modern vision of America, is what draws so many supporters to him so quickly.

The media response to the speech is "hyperbolic." One pundit comments, "I've just seen the first black president." Barack's phone rings non-stop. People stop him on the street, asking for his autograph. Journalists ask him for his opinion on national issues. *Dreams from My Father* gets a paperback reissue and lands on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Barack is elected in November with 70 percent of the vote.

Barack's instant celebrity only affirms how powerful his optimism is to people across the country, to the point where they want to know about his childhood and want to know his thoughts on national issues. And this power is again affirmed by the incredibly wide margin of his victory.

Barack starts flying back and forth to D.C. all the time, while Michelle sticks to her routine in Chicago. One day, Michelle gets a call from the wife of another senator inviting her to a club of wives of important people in Washington. Michelle politely declines, saying that she's decided to remain in Chicago. The senator's wife warns her that that can be "very hard on a marriage." Michelle is put off by her judgement, thanking her and hanging up.

Again, Michelle is frustrated by the judgement placed on her and the expectation that she and her daughters should be forced to make more sacrifices in their lives (by uprooting themselves and moving to Washington) than Barack should be forced to make sacrifices in his.


Michelle does visit Washington for Barack's orientation as a senator. The "decorous traditions" of Washington confuse Michelle, as it appears catered to whiteness and maleness. She realizes that the phrase "Mrs. Obama" is starting to take on a new meaning for her—diminishing her. She can feel this diminishing deepen as people start to ask Barack whether he might run for president in 2008. Barack waves these questions away, but Michelle can see that he is already thinking about it.

Michelle slowly becomes initiated into a very different world from the one that she knows in Chicago: one filled with rarefied power and privilege. She sees firsthand how that power and privilege has largely been used to buoy the same kinds of people who have always held that power. This fact, that Washington has always been filled with mostly white men, makes it even more important that Barack might think about running for president.


Barack starts to write *The Audacity of Hope*, thinking through his vision of the country. Then, Hurricane Katrina blasts the Gulf Coast, stranding people—mostly black people—on the rooftops of their home. It exposes the country's structural divides, and Michelle knows that if a similar disaster hit Chicago, many of her relatives might have experienced a similar fate.

As Michelle and Barack start to become more and more familiar with the responsibility placed on people who govern at the national level, they also begin to realize the greater responsibility they have to the more vulnerable populations of the United States.

In the summer of 2006, Barack's political clout rises with the publication of *The Audacity of Hope*. His unofficial poll numbers are even with or ahead of Al Gore and John Kerry, though Hillary Clinton is decidedly the frontrunner. Michelle worries that it's happening too quickly, wishing that he would wait until the girls are older. And, for herself, she worries about losing her career and life to his ambition, as she has a job that matters to her.

Michelle begins to see that she will not only be forced to make her own compromises between her job and her family, but that she might also be forced to make sacrifices of her own passions and ambitions so that Barack can follow his own political quest.

Despite many reservations, Michelle and Barack talk through the idea of his running for present. Their conversations are sometimes "angry and tearful," sometimes "earnest and positive." It requires them to examine who they are and what matters to them, she writes. In the end, Michelle says yes—not only because she loves him and has faith in him, but also because she knows he could help millions of people. Still, she is uncertain he can win—Barack is "a black man in America, after all."

It speaks to the racism that America still harbors that Michelle believes that the simple fact of Barack's race is enough to disqualify him from the presidency, despite the fact that he is incredibly intelligent, qualified, and well-suited for the role. But her assumption isn't unfounded: up until this point, America had only ever had white, male presidents.

CHAPTER 16

Barack announces his campaign in Springfield, Illinois, but his announcement is inadvertently scheduled on the same day as the State of the Black Union. The leader of this forum suggests that the move shows a disregard for the African American community. Then, a day before the announcement, *Rolling Stone* publishes a piece entitled "The Radical Roots of Barack Obama," quoting from an angry sermon that the Reverend Jeremiah Wright had delivered many years earlier intimating that Americans cared more about maintaining white supremacy than they did about God.

Michelle again expresses frustration that they are facing criticism from both white people and black people, judged once again as though they are not part of either community. This kind of scrutiny demonstrates the inherent racism of America's political institutions, as it is an extra level of scrutiny that other candidates do not have to face.

Michelle starts to understand the stakes of what they're about to do: literally climbing (as a family) onto the national stage. She's nervous as she steps onstage, but her nerves vanish immediately, seeing more than fifteen thousand people turn out for his announcement speech. What she feels instead is an immense sense of responsibility: that she and Barack owe something to each and every person in that audience.

Michelle begins to feel the sense of responsibility that will be placed on both her and Barack's shoulders when he enters the White House. Where they live and the power they wield will be a privilege, and yet here she acknowledges that it also comes with the duty to serve every person in the country, both those who support them and do not support them.

Hilary Clinton is a formidable opponent, having a commanding lead. On name recognition alone, she could win, particularly when going up against a black man named Barack Hussein Obama. Even in the black community, they struggle, with many not yet believing that he can win. The scrutiny on Barack will be extra intense, she knows, and he will have to do everything twice as well.

Again, the idea that Barack might be disqualified on his name or race alone emphasizes how much entrenched racism remains in the country, and how that racism prevents even supporters from fully investing in a candidate like Barack.

Barack's campaign staff understand that they either have to win Iowa or stand down. Michelle visits Iowa almost weekly, as a "surrogate" for Barack. She also hires two people for her own staff: Melissa Winter as a chief of staff, and Katie McCormick Lelyveld as her communications director.

Michelle starts to take on a different kind of role: one that fully supports (and even stands in for) Barack. She shares his message of optimism, and it allows her to begin a new phase of her life and gives her a new perspective on the passions she wants to pursue.

Michelle's first solo campaign event in Iowa takes place in early April in a modest home in Des Moines. Realizing that people would quickly understand if she wasn't being genuine, Michelle simply tells her own story—of where she grew up, of her hardworking parents, of the values that they'd instilled, and the faith she had in her husband to make a better world (despite her distaste for politics).

Michelle recognizes the value in her own story, and how her family and her hard work reflects a traditional idea of the American Dream. She shares Barack's optimism, but knows that part of their goal is to make sure that everyone can have the same opportunity that they had.

As the weeks go by, Michelle visits more and more towns in Iowa and tells the same story. Along the way, Michelle frequently fields questions from reporters wondering what it's like to be an Ivy-educated black woman speaking to rooms of mostly white Iowans. Michelle dislikes the question because it seems so counter to the common ground she is finding with people she meets.

Even though the question is meant innocently, the idea that Michelle can't relate to white, middle-class people is simply untrue, and it reinforces a harmful idea that people of different races and backgrounds wouldn't be able to find ways to relate to one other.

Around this time, Malia's pediatrician tells Michelle that her body mass index is starting to creep up. She understands what has been happening: she's been home less and cooking less, and ordering food or going to McDonald's more. She hires a young man named Sam Kass to help cook some dinners for the family. Sam does not only that, but also educates them on how the food industry markets processed food as cheaper and more convenient and the public health consequences of this marketing. One evening Michelle and Sam discuss that if Barack makes it to the White House (still a long shot), Sam could help Michelle with a children's health initiative.

Michelle recognizes some of the ways in which she needs to ensure Malia and Sasha are eating healthy. This plants the seeds of one of Michelle's own initiatives in the White House, a children's health initiative called Let's Move!. That it is borne out of an issue that she and her daughters face herself shows how Michelle takes issues that are important to her and tries to make measurable improvements to the lives of others.

Michelle continues the race of each day, juggling work (though only part time now), the commitments of the campaign, and trying to cling to normalcy for her daughters. Michelle starts to get recognized more and more, and she worries about being known as someone's wife. She is hurt by a column written by Maureen Dowd suggesting that she is "emasculating" Barack by speaking publicly about his not picking up his socks or putting the butter back in the fridge.

Michelle starts to experience more and more of the sexism of politics: she worries that she is starting to be viewed only in relation to her husband, and is frustrated by the critiques from another professional woman, writing for the New York Times, *who criticizes her for speaking about her husband in everyday ways.*

Rumors swirl around Barack as well: that he had been "schooled in a radical Muslim madrassa and sworn into the Senate on a Koran"; that he didn't recite the Pledge of Allegiance or that he didn't put his hand over his heart during the national anthem. Michelle worries about his safety, but reminds herself that he could be shot "just going to the gas station" as a black man in America.

Barack also experiences his own biased form of criticisms, as so many are founded on xenophobia and racism—playing into a harmful belief that he is not American and that he is unpatriotic. Once again, people are finding ways to view him as being outside his own community.

Despite the ups and downs, Michelle remembers that first year of the campaign fondly, particularly when they are able to travel as a whole family—getting to go to a state fair or drive around in an RV the campaign had rented. Through most of the year, Barack is still significantly behind both Hillary Clinton and John Edwards. Yet Michelle's instincts tell her the polls are wrong, particularly because their campaign has so much youth on its side, energetically and idealistically connecting to voters.

Despite the changes and the challenges that the Obamas face over the first year of the campaign, they are still able to find ways to be a family together. As they enter a new phase of their lives, they continue to grow as a family and find fulfillment with one another.

Barack has one final chance to change up the race in Iowa at the Jefferson-Jackson dinner. Every candidate gives a speech and brings as many supporters as possible. For Barack, that means about three thousand people who have driven in from all over the state—more than anyone thought. Barack is the last to speak, delivering a rousing defense of the idea that America can move beyond polarized politics and move into the future together. The auditorium thunders.

Despite Barack's underdog status, his policies and his ideals speak to people in a way that inspires. His desire to move past divisiveness and to find common ground and progress throughout the country starts to resonate with many people, regardless of their socioeconomic or ethnic background.

About eight weeks later, in January, Barack wins the Iowa caucuses. Michelle is overjoyed, and starts to believe that perhaps everything that Barack had hoped for is really possible. Many new people had turned out for the caucuses—now, they hoped, the same could be true of the rest of the country.

Barack's win in Iowa becomes the first affirmation that he has the ability to defeat much larger political opponents, largely by capitalizing on a new, hopeful young energy that he himself is carrying.

CHAPTER 17

When Michelle was in first grade, a boy in her class punched her in the face one day, for no reason. The boy got a talking to, and adults discussed the situation. Michelle's mother tells her, "that boy was just scared and angry about things that had nothing to do with you […] He's dealing with a whole lot of problems of his own."

This chapter recounts much of the criticism that Michelle faces throughout Barack's campaign. She uses this opening story to convey how much the criticism hurts her, and also how those criticisms often reveal more issues within the person lobbing the critiques than they do about Michelle.

Michelle spends a lot of 2008 trying to dodge the same kinds of punches. Barack had spent the winter and spring of 2008 battling over every state with Hillary Clinton. In June, Clinton acknowledged that she lacked the delegate count to win. And so, in July, Barack begins courting not only Democratic voters but the entire country. The race now between him and Republican Senator John McCain. On the Fourth of July (which is also Malia's tenth birthday), the Obamas visit Butte, Montana, a state which had gone to George W. Bush but which had elected a Democratic governor.

The Obamas continue to try to juggle their commitment to their daughters with their new commitment to the campaign, and on no day is that balance more difficult than July 4th (Malia's birthday), as they understand the necessity of having both an individual celebration for her and a more general celebration of the country.

When they arrive, Michelle is heartened by signs along Main Street reading "Happy Birthday, Malia!" People are kind to Malia and Sasha and respectful toward Michelle and Barack, even though many admit that voting for a Democrat would be a "crazy departure from tradition" for them. The family attends a campaign picnic together.

Michelle also begins to recognize that, regardless of people's political affiliations, if Barack were president, he would bear a responsibility towards all Americans—not only the people who voted for him.

Michelle realizes how her life has slowly changed around her: she's never alone, people start getting things for her at the store rather than letting her get it herself. If she wants to speak to Barack, she has to ask a young staffer. Before the afternoon in Butte ends, the family does a TV interview together. The innocent comments that Sasha and Malia make immediately endear them to people, but Michelle and Barack instantly regret pushing them even more into the public eye than they already were.

Michelle starts to experience how being in the public eye comes with a degree of privilege (like having other people take care of basic aspects of one's life), but how this can also be a burden. It is an extra responsibility, placed on all four of them, to constantly be aware of their appearance, their words, and their body language.

Michelle understands living in the public eye already. Oprah sends her encouraging texts. Stevie Wonder shows up to play at campaign events and jokes with her and Barack. But at the same time, her every action or word is subject to intense scrutiny and criticism. Michelle learns this when she makes a speech in Milwaukee in early 2008. Afterward, she learns that the context has been stripped away from a quote in which she says, "for the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm really proud of my country."

Michelle again highlights the two contrasting aspects of being in the public eye: being in contact with some of her idols and having once-in-a-lifetime experiences, but also facing a backlash after off-handed comments are taken out of context.

People immediately pounce on these words, saying that Michelle is not a patriot. When Michelle gets home and calls Barack, he tells her not to worry. She's only getting this criticism because people see how big a force she's become in the campaign. He tells her he loves her and assures her that it'll blow over. In some ways, it does, as Barack wins the Wisconsin primary by a good margin, but Cindy McCain immediately takes a shot at Michelle by saying that she's proud of her country at a rally.

Barack also links the two sides of power: the fact that Michelle is popular means that people want to try to take that power away from her and turn the public against her. This negativity is particularly frustrating for Michelle because of her inherently optimistic attitude, and the fact (as she explains shortly) that so many criticisms are racially motivated.


Michelle understands that "a pernicious seed has been planted": the idea that she is hostile and lacks the expected level of grace of other political wives. The criticism of her and the rumors around Barack always carry "less-than-subtle messaging about race, meant to stir up the deepest and ugliest kind of fear." More ghosts from the past start to surface, like cherry-picked clips of Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermons, all of which show resentment towards white people, or Michelle's senior thesis at Princeton, which is treated like "some secret black-power manifesto" by conservative media.

Michelle also addresses the ways in which so many of the criticisms directed at herself and Barack are due to their race. She sees that many Americans assume the worst in her (and in Barack and some of their friends, like the Reverend) as a result. This kind of othering is a way of turning Americans against them, even if they have already become too powerful to ignore or cast as invisible.

Michelle continues to speak about optimism and unity, but the conservative outlets continue their rage against Barack. A photo of Barack wearing a turban and Somali clothing on a senate visit revives rumors of his being Muslim. Another unfounded theory surfaces that Barack was born in Kenya and not Hawaii, making him ineligible to become president.

Despite their attempts to stay positive, they continue to experience more and more examples of racist rumors, which only fuel harmful misinformation to the point where many people believe that the rumors are true.

For Michelle, she feels that there is some different version of her wreaking havoc in the news: "a too-tall, too-forceful, ready-to-emasculate Godzilla of a political wife named Michelle Obama." Even friends call her with worry when they hear rumors that a videotape exists of Michelle referring to white people as "whitey." She explains that she feels that she can't win: that the stereotype of the "angry black woman" being thrust upon her is a terrible catch-22 from which she cannot escape.

Again, Michelle's word choice here picks out both racist and sexist stereotypes that she has encountered. The racist trope of the "angry black woman" puts anyone who is pegged by that trope in a difficult bind, because it is understandable that one might get upset when facing negative and hurtful criticism (thereby reinforcing the "angry" part).

Michelle goes to Barack, upset and feeling overwhelmed by the negative criticism that often follows her media appearances. She wants to be supportive, but doesn't want to hurt the campaign. He assures her that she's much more of an asset than a liability, and he gets David Axelrod and Valerie to coach Michelle on her body language and expressions so that she doesn't seem too serious or severe.

Yet, in the face of negativity and criticism, Michelle does what she has always done. She goes to the people within her own support system and works hard to make sure that she can avoid making some of the mistakes that she's made in the past.


Michelle explains that, even though Hillary Clinton was Barack's primary opponent, she sees that Clinton has her own difficulty with pundits making gendered critiques about her. She is called "domineering, a nag, a bitch," with a "screechy" voice and a "cackle" for a laugh. Michelle admires her ability to fight the misogyny.

Michelle also recognizes that she and Barack are not the only ones who must defy biased criticism. She understands that so many of the critiques and questions that Hillary Clinton must face are sexist.

And so, in the final months of the campaign, Michelle adds a scheduler/personal aide, and a communications specialist who counsels her to talk about the things she loves and not to shy away from her inclination towards humor. Michelle gains a new ease this way, beginning to enjoy herself and feeling more and more optimistic as she continues to meet other hopeful Americans.

Michelle also starts to recognize that the more she is able to be her optimistic and good-natured self, the easier her interviews are. And she sees how that optimism resonates with other Americans, which connects them both to her and to Barack.

At the Democratic National Convention, Michelle gives a seventeen minute speech in front of twenty thousand people. She speaks of her father, her family, and Barack's "noble heart." When she finishes, people applaud and applaud, and she hopes that perhaps she's finally done something to change people's perception of her.

As Michelle makes more and more of an effort to craft her public image, she starts to grow into the role and feels happier in it. She, like Barack, uses her evolution and remarkable trajectory to connect with average Americans, because she, too, was once an average American.

But, Michelle admits, she still lives for the unrehearsed in-between moments when nobody is performing. She flashes back to Butte, Montana, on Malia's birthday, worrying that she and Barack had come up short in terms of celebrations. They feel like they haven't made the day festive or enough about their daughter. But Malia sees it differently—she had spent the day outdoors with Sasha, surrounded by people that love her. She had seen a parade, and she now had a cake. She declares it, "the best birthday ever," and Michelle and Barack start to tear up.

As Barack and Michelle get more and more deeply entrenched in the campaign and their work, they worry about sacrificing their family's priorities for the country. But, as Michelle discovers, one of the beautiful things about children is that they, too, are always optimistic and they see the world from a simpler perspective.

CHAPTER 18

Four months later, on November 4, 2008, Michelle casts her vote for Barack. As she stands in the booth, she is amazed that, after years of campaigning, this is the last thing she has to do. When she pauses, contemplating, Barack jokingly wonders if she needs a little more time to make up her mind.

This day is another turning point for Michelle: she doesn't have the same kind of pressure placed on her after election day. But at the same time, her responsibility to Barack and the American people is only beginning.

The polls show Barack ahead, but Michelle worries about the Bradley effect, named for an African American candidate named Tom Bradley who had been leading in the polls for a California governor race but had lost on election day. The theory is that, for minority candidates, voters often hide their prejudice from pollsters, expressing it only in the voting booth.

Although the Bradley effect does not end up coming into play during Barack's election, Michelle will turn to it when she points out how sexism affected the 2016 election, when prejudice plays a deep role in electing Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton.

The general campaign had not been as grueling as the primaries. John McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin, had become a national lightning rod, and disaster had struck when the U.S. economy began to spiral out of control. Michelle knows that Barack is the right person to take on the job at this moment, but he will inherit a mess.

Barack knows that while he will immediately be thrust into a position of both power and privilege, he will have the responsibility of fixing a sinking economy that is decimating many people's personal finances.

Michelle catches a moment for herself and sneaks upstairs—only to find Barack. He had received news only the day before that his grandmother, Toot, had passed away in Hawaii after being sick for months. He assures Michelle that he's doing okay, and Michelle tells him that she's proud of him, no matter what happens.

Barack is also quickly discovering, and will continue to discover, how any aspect of his personal life will quickly be consumed by his duty to the American people. Despite his deep sadness at his grandmother's passing, he must continue to hold himself up on election day.

The results start coming in at 6:00pm. A few states go for McCain, but more start to go to Barack. Illinois goes to Barack. Michelle, Malia, Sasha, and Michelle's mother wait with Barack as the updates trickle in. They are both struck by the fact that he is about to be elected leader of the free world, yet he is still only human—a vulnerable man about to become very lonely.

Just like Michelle, Barack has gone through his own personal evolution. Even though he has always been optimistic, this election represents an enormous step of growth for him as he takes the weight of the nation on his shoulders. Michelle describes how he finds immense fulfillment in the role, but it is also a heavy burden to bear.

At ten o'clock, the networks begin to announce that Barack will become the forty-fourth president. Everyone starts to cheer and yell. It is surreal. They drive to Grant Park for his speech, shocked to see that the Secret Service has cleared the street (standard only for a president). When they arrive, 200,000 people have come to see him speak. Barack, Michelle, Malia, and Sasha walk out onto the stage, standing before "a giant, jubilant mass of Americans who were also palpably reflective." And they had also been waiting—they had been waiting "a long, long time."

Despite their worries and the immense amount of criticism that the pair of them faced, Barack's election does represent something incredibly symbolic. Even though it does not signify the beginning of a "postracial era," as some commentators declare, Barack's election as the first black president does symbolize a degree of progress that many—including Michelle, at first—did not believe was possible at the time.

CHAPTER 19

There is no handbook for incoming first ladies—it is not technically a job, nor an official government title. Michelle wonders quickly how she might use the position, and she reflects on how she understood others to have used it. She knows immediately that she will be measured differently than others—she will not have the same "presumed grace assigned to [her] white predecessors."

Entering yet another new phase of life, Michelle now has to find a way to find fulfillment within this role. However, she also understands that this role still maintains the scrutiny and extra criticism that she experienced on the campaign.

Michelle knows that the role will not be easy—over the days between the election and the inauguration, she thinks about how to shape her goals. She wants to focus on military families, children's health, and nutrition on a larger scale. But first, she has to begin finding Malia and Sasha a new school.

Just as she did when figuring out the next steps after Sidley & Austin, Michelle thinks about the issues that she is most passionate about so she can find fulfillment in whatever she decides to do—but her children remain her priority, more than this newfound job.

Michelle fills out her staff, and Barack fills out his cabinet and meets with experts on how to rescue the economy. Michelle can see from Barack's demeanor after these meetings that the situation is more dire than most Americans understand.

Barack, meanwhile, has other priorities, now that he has the power (and a deep responsibility) to rescue Americans from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Meanwhile, their lives shift in large ways: secret service protections, giant motorcades, bulletproof everything. Michelle is now married to one of the most heavily guarded human beings on earth, which is both "relieving and distressing." Michelle had visited the White House once before: when Barack was in the senate, she, Malia, and Sasha had taken a tour. It was massive and opulent, with 132 rooms spread over six floors. Now, visiting once more while looking for schools, she sees it as her soon-to-be home.

Michelle starts to become initiated into the luxury of the White House, but she also quickly realizes that this luxury comes with a great responsibility: the responsibility to stay safe so that Barack can run the country effectively.

Michelle and Barack meet George W. Bush and Laura Bush, who supported McCain but vow to make their transition the smoothest in history. Laura gives Michelle a tour of the private areas, showing her a particular view from her dressing room into the Oval Office, where she can get a sense of what her husband was doing. Eight years earlier, Hillary Clinton had shown Laura Bush the same view. Michelle feels connected to all of the women that have come before her, and over the coming months, they will all reach out to support her and give her advice.

Michelle feels connected to the legacy and the history of her country, recognizing that she will be continuing the tradition of many women who came before her. However, as she relays at the end of her memoir, it is also important to her to make a new mark at the White House and update some of its traditions, so that people recognize and understand their more modern legacy as the first black First Family.

The Obamas move to Washington right after their Christmas holiday so that Sasha and Malia can start school just as their new classmates return from winter break. Both kids will need to commute by motorcade and Secret Service agents will remain posted outside their classes, following them everywhere. They now live in "a kind of bubble," sealed off from everyone around them. Michelle drops both of her daughters off, hoping that they will have a semi-normal first day of school.

The necessity of remaining safe also comes with a great deal of sacrifice for the entire family. Malia and Sasha now live largely sealed off from the world, and the reputation of who their father is precedes them. Although they gradually are able to assimilate to these new lives, they live with a degree of publicity and responsibility that is elevated beyond most kids their age.

The pace of the transition doesn't slow down, as Barack and Michelle are caught up in several simultaneous projects: redecorating the White House, planning the inauguration, and adjusting to their new roles. Michelle also understands the extra scrutiny that they will experience as the first African American family in the White House, being viewed as "representatives of [their] race."

Michelle understands that people will criticize how their entire family comports itself in the White House. For many Americans, the Obamas do stand in for their race because they are the first African Americans in the White House, and thus they become extremely visible role models.

Michelle is relieved that Malia and Sasha both come home happy after the first day of school, and the next few days. After a week, the girls feel comfortable enough to be escorted only by Michelle's mother, which makes their ride less of a production. Michelle's mother has come to Washington to help the family adjust to life there—but she ends up staying for the next eight years.

Michelle's mother, for her own part, continues to make an enormous numberof sacrifices for her daughter and granddaughters, again investing so much of her own life into making sure that they can be comfortable and have support.

Inauguration Day is freezing, but this doesn't seem to affect turnout: nearly two million people flood the National Mall. The ceremony itself has an enormous weight to it—particularly, Michelle acknowledges, to those who had been part of the civil rights movement. Barack makes a point of including figures from the movement, like the Tuskegee Airmen and the nine black students who, in 1957, had been among the first to test the Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education decision.

Barack's inauguration is symbolic of a degree of progress in the country concerning race. But at the same time, Barack makes sure to acknowledge all of the people who came before him and won their own victories, which helped to pave the way for his own.

Barack is sworn in on Abraham Lincoln's Bible, vowing to protect the U.S. Constitution and agreeing to lead the country. His inaugural speech once again calls for "hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord." Michelle sees this truth reflected in the faces of the people who witness the ceremony.

Barack continues to call back to history but also keeps an eye on the future. His calls for optimism and hope echo so many of his campaign speeches, but now they know for certain that the country shares this hope, too.


After the ceremony, Michelle and Barack (alongside Joe and Jill Biden) lead the inaugural parade back to the White House. They return inside at 7:00pm to find that the staff has completely flipped the residence, moving out the Bushes' belongings and moving in their own. Michelle prepares for the Inaugural Balls, slipping on a white gown that revives her thoughts about how much her family, and her life, has transformed.

At yet another turning point in Michelle's life, her reflection on how much her life has changed speaks to a primary theme in her book: ever since she was young, she has always been growing and evolving, trying to become more and more fulfilled. She also understands that this is not the end point: that this is simply a new phase of her journey.

Michelle and Barack attend ten Inaugural Balls that evening, slow dancing to "At Last" (their "first dance" song) at each one. They return to the White House for a party of their close friends at 2:00am, but by that point Michelle is exhausted. People swarm her to talk, but she simply walks away and finds the elevator to the residence, falling into her new bed.

Even on the first day as being the future First Lady, Michelle fulfills the necessary responsibilities but also understands when she needs to take moments for herself, knowing that the next four years will move at the same breakneck pace.

CHAPTER 20

When people ask what it's like to live in the White House, Michelle responds that it's like living in a fancy hotel with no other guests. The rooms are big, the place is kept clean, fresh flowers are brought in every day. There are ushers, chefs, housekeepers, florists, electricians, painters, and plumbers. She understands how lucky they are to be living this way, particularly given the fact that her entire apartment growing up could now fit into her master suite.

Michelle recognizes the luxury that comes with Barack's new seat of power and the privileges that her family now lives with. At the same time, coming from a humble background, she also knows how to truly appreciate it, and it spurs her to make these luxuries more accessible to other people.

Michelle understands that this luxury is afforded to them for one reason: to optimize the "well-being, efficiency, and overall power" of the president. Barack himself has fifty staffers reading and answering mail. He has a helicopter pilot standing by to fly him anywhere.

In addition to understanding the privilege that they now have, Michelle also recognizes that these privileges come with many responsibilities. They don't have to go to the grocery store because they have to remain safe; Barack doesn't have to do his laundry because he has to rescue the country from economic crisis. The job comes with perks, but she reminds readers again and again that those perks come with a huge weight.

In his first month in office, Barack signs the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which protects workers from wage discrimination based on gender, race, or age. He orders the end of the use of torture and overhauls ethics rules governing White House employees. He manages to pass an economic stimulus bill through Congress. The change he had promised is becoming real.

It is apt that Barack's first bill in office is a bill that prevents discrimination, since both he and Michelle care deeply about trying to counteract this kind of bias. It serves as an example of how putting progressive politicians from more marginalized backgrounds in office can help to counteract that marginalization for all people.

The family starts to get into a routine, with Michelle constantly monitoring what's happening in the White House and with her daughters. She tries to get to know some of the parents of the girls' new friends, in part because she knows that a lot of the security concerns around her daughters can make things awkward with their friends or their friends' parents.

Even with her new role and responsibility, Michelle makes sure to prioritize her daughters as they become accustomed to this new life. Being First Lady comes at the cost of having a job outside the home, but she tries hard to care of her daughters.

Michelle is responsible for planning social events like the Governor's Ball and the Easter Egg Roll, which she feels sometimes are distractions from more impactful work, but she tries to modernize them a little. The same goes for the White House, where Barack and Michelle try to hang more abstract art and works by African American artists on the walls. Barack swaps out a bust of Winston Churchill and replaces it with a bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. They try to make the place more accessible to outsiders.

Again, Michelle recognizes the privilege of being in the White House, but she also recognizes how she can use that privilege to accomplish more and more of her goals, elevating African American artists and politicians. It is a symbolic acknowledgement of how their family is trailblazing a path, and creating a way for other African Americans to join them on that path.

Michelle also begins the project of planting a **garden** at the White House. On the surface, a garden feels apolitical, but she also plans to use the garden to start a public conversation about nutrition, which she knows could be controversial for corporations in the food and beverage industry. She and Sam Kass take the first steps to plan the garden.

Michelle also starts to get accustomed to her new role, at first trying to create a simple symbol of healthy living. But, in hoping that the garden can then spark an initiative, she has to balance advocacy with the political concerns that attach to even the most banal of the First Family's actions and interests.

Michelle's optimism in these first few months is tempered by one thing: divisive politics. Republicans seem bent on preventing Barack from trying to stanch the economic crisis, refusing to support measures that would cut taxes or save jobs. At a joint session of Congress, Barack makes a speech that tries to balance the grim state of the economy and the wars alongside his trademark optimism. Michelle watches how the Republicans are obstinate and angry, their only goal is to see Barack fail, despite the fact that a Republican had governed the country into this dire state.

Michelle is particularly disheartened by the fact that Barack pushed to overcome partisan politics and yet partisanship is still a central obstacle to succeeding as president. Faith in compromise is essential to Barack's agenda. Thus, when the Republicans don't seem to share this hopeful view of the country's path, Michelle becomes frustrated.

Michelle starts to understand the White House more and more—how the many people that work there are not so different from them. She tries to ensure that they never feel invisible. She grows friendly with the staff, who instinctively know when to chat and when to give her privacy. Interacting genuinely with each person gives the White House a little more humanity.

Michelle tries to overcome some of the privilege of the White House in small ways, in part by knowing that the people who take care of her home are human beings, too. Thus, she makes sure to get to know her staff and treat them with kindness, knowing that kindness from a powerful person can go a long way.

In April, Michelle and Barack visit the Queen during the G20 summit (a meeting of leaders representing the world's largest economies). They discover the true meaning of having an "over the top" home, as Buckingham Palace is fifteen times the size of the White House. They attend banquets in the ballroom, eating with gold forks and knives.

Even with their own relative luxury, Michelle and Barack begin to recognize that, in contrast with someone like the Queen (who experiences luxury for life), the American presidency is a temporary lease on an extravagant lifestyle. Thus, they quickly learn to appreciate it and use the power to put forth messages that they care about.

After the summit, Michelle and Barack attend a palace reception. Towards the end of the party, she finds that Queen Elizabeth has wandered towards her. She comments on how tall Michelle is, and how her shoes are hurting her. They commiserate with a laugh, and Michelle instinctively lays a hand across the Queen's shoulder. Michelle later learns that this is an "epic faux pas," reviving the speculation that she lacks the "standard elegance of a First Lady," even though the Queen returned the gesture by placing a hand on Michelle's back.

The public's outcry at Michelle touching the Queen shows some of the racial bias in critiques of Michelle. While many Americans, in that position, might have unknowingly violated a social taboo, Michelle is under extra scrutiny because any faux pas will be interpreted not just as a one-off mistake, but as proof that African Americans are not suited to high political office.

The next day, Michelle visits the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School for girls, an inner-city secondary school where 90 percent of the school's students are from an ethnic minority. At the school, Michelle can see that the young girls "would need to work hard to be seen," pushing back against stereotypes. Their faces, however, are nothing but hopeful. She recognizes herself in the girls.

Michelle, in seeing these girls, who are not so different from herself as a child, recognizes both their optimism and their drive. She also understands that they might not have the same feeling of others being invested in them that she had growing up, and so she works to remedy that in her speech.


Michelle gives a speech at the school, throwing away her prepared notes and explaining to them that she is much more like them than they know. She is also from a working-class neighborhood, raised in modest means. However, she explains to them, she realized early on that school is where she could define herself, and that education could spring her forward in the world. She hugs every girl she can.

By instilling in the girls the value of hard work and a good education, she is trying to show a degree of investment in them, and trying to prove that if they invest in their own education, they might have a trajectory as extraordinary as Michelle's own.

Back in Washington, Michelle and Sam begin planting their **garden**, although the idea was initially met with resistance. Michelle hosts a group of students from a local elementary school and they do the planting together. They plant vegetables, berry bushes, and herbs. Michelle knows that in some way, the garden is a gamble, as they don't actually know whether anything will grow. All they can do is hope that their effort will pay off.

The garden that Michelle and Sam plant is, in essence, a symbol of optimism, growth, and fulfillment. They aren't completely sure whether anything will actually come to fruition in the garden, but they hope that their hard work might pay off and in turn spark a conversation about children's health and further Michelle's goals in the White House.

CHAPTER 21

One Saturday evening at the end of May, Barack takes Michelle on a date to New York City. They go to a restaurant, trying to talk about things other than work. So much of Barack's job is grueling—General Motors filing for bankruptcy, North Korea conducting a nuclear test, and Barack flying off to Egypt to deliver a major address—that it's better not to talk about it. They both crave "glimpses of regular life."

While the previous chapter focused on the family's new, luxurious lifestyle, in this chapter Michelle shows the flipside of that life. The power that they have gained also comes with a great deal of responsibility, as they sacrifice some of their freedom for the sake of the country and take on the weight of the nation's greatest trials.

That evening in New York, Michelle and Barack eat, drink, and talk, reveling in the fact that they are able to escape for a bit. The White House sometimes feels like a form of confinement for Michelle. At dinner, they talk about their daughters, Michelle's mom, and their new dog Bo. After dinner, they attend a show, and when they return, they face a harsh backlash of criticism calling their date "extravagant and costly to taxpayers."

Michelle expands on some of the difficulties of their new lifestyle. Despite its perks, their movement is strictly limited and personal aspects of their lives, like their date nights, are viewed in the context of how they affect average Americans—a type of scrutiny and duty that very few other Americans face.

In late June, the **garden** has grown, and Michelle and the elementary students have their first harvest—pea pods and lettuce and garden berries. The garden is wholesome, but Michelle also understands that she is being watched by many women who are critical of the fact that Michelle has buried her education and management experience to take on a more traditional role.

Michelle's, Sam's, and the students' optimism pays off: they are able to grow food in the garden. This not only gives Michelle a sense of accomplishment and her own legacy in the White House, but it also leads her to her first fulfilling initiative: Let's Move!

Michelle understands, however, that no matter what she chooses to do, she will disappoint someone. When Michelle uses the phrase "mom in chief" in the press to describe herself, some Americans embrace it, knowing the amount of work it takes to raise children. But some are "vaguely appalled" and believe it to be anti-feminist.

Michelle recognizes that, to some, she is compromising her education too much and becoming too much of a homemaker. Yet Michelle understands her unique position: had she used her education to become more involved in politics, she would also be criticized (as Hillary Clinton was). Thus, she has to make a compromise to a certain degree with the American people.

In addition to growing the **garden**, Michelle quietly puts together a larger plan to take on the issue of child obesity. Over the previous three decades, the rates of childhood obesity have tripled. The problem has various sources, from the high price of healthy fruit to the cuts in funding for sports programs. Meanwhile, portion sizes are increasing. Michelle feels it is the right time to push for change.

Despite the fact that many people view the garden as a light endeavor, Michelle uses it as a jumping off point for her first big initiative. Thus, she is able to make a compromise in this way as well: retaining some of the more domestic aspects of the First Lady role in keeping up the garden, while also pushing for an issue that she cares about and working towards concrete goals to reduce child obesity.


Over the summer of 2009, Michelle takes Sasha and Malia on trips together around their new city, rather than putting them in day camps. She knows that this is somewhat irksome to the Secret Service and the other people enjoying the various locations and activities, but she wants her daughters to be able to experience the world in the same way other kids do.

Although Michelle knows that her daughters are growing up in relative privilege, she wants them to be able to experience the world as relatively normal kids to ensure they can continue to be grounded.

At a certain point, people start paying attention to and opining on Michelle's fashion choices—the "brave" choice of white for her inaugural gown, or her lack of dignity for getting off Air Force One (in 106 degree heat) in a pair of shorts. It gets to the point where sometimes people focus on that aspect of her life more than they focus on what she has to say.

The fact that people focus on Michelle's clothes more than her intellect or her initiatives speaks to society's (and the media's) double standard concerning gender, as women are judged based on their clothes far more than men are.

Michelle tries to use the power inside this situation, hoping that if she appears in fashion magazine profiles, people might also read what she has to say about children's health or supporting military spouses. She also recognizes the importance of appearing on a magazine cover as a woman of color, and of supporting less well-known designers. She tries to mix up her choices, knowing that she will be criticized no matter what she wears—either for being too "showy and high end" or "too casual."

Rather than trying to fight how the public perceives her, however, Michelle tries to use this focus to her advantage—in providing opportunities to designers who are less well-known, or in being an important role model for young women of color, who rarely see powerful women who look like them on the front of magazines.


Michelle depends heavily on Meredith Koop, who works with Michelle as a personal aide and wardrobe stylist, as well as Johnny Wright (her hairdresser) and Carl Ray (her makeup artist). They work with her to craft a look every day, knowing that any slipup will lead to "a flurry of ridicule and nasty comments." Michelle also reports that every woman in public life has some version of these three people supporting them, "a built-in fee for our societal double standard."

Again, Michelle touches on the implicit sexism within political institutions and in society more generally. All women in the public eye (politicians, celebrities, CEOs) have to spend extra money and time on fashionable outfits, makeup, and hair, and in paying the people that help create those looks.

Barack's team is also keen on maintaining appearances—particularly when the economy is in such rough shape, they guard against any image coming out of the White House that might be seen as "frivolous or light." Michelle pushes back on this when it comes to the kids, hosting a Halloween party despite pushback from David Axelrod (now a senior advisor) and Press Secretary Robert Gibbs. She is delighted to hand out treats to more than two thousand local kids, knowing the optics are "just right."

Michelle understands the gravity of the country's economic situation, but she also recognizes the value of positive energy, especially when coming from kids. And, in making their home more accessible to local kids, she is also working to share some of the privilege of the White House with others.

The **garden** continues to grow through every season, "a symbol of diligence and faith." Michelle enjoys the fruits of her labor and also donates a portion of every harvest to a local nonprofit serving the homeless. Michelle also gets ready to take on the issues of children's health, attempting to provide better information to parents, create healthier schools, improve access to nutritious food, and find more ways for young people to be active.

Through the garden, Michelle is not only growing food, but growing her own contribution to issues that she cares about. This is evident in her use of the garden to help feed the homeless, but also in using it to spark the conversation on children's health, a topic she's been passionate about since Malia's pediatrician alerted her to it.

Michelle announces her new initiative, Let's Move! Her goal is to speak to parents and kids directly: she hula-hoops on the South Lawn to show that exercise can be fun, and she does interviews with health magazines. Barack signs a memorandum to create a federal task force on childhood obesity.

Michelle understands that she will be criticized for being too involved in making policy. Thus, she uses the power of her celebrity instead, bringing the issue to the fore with media appearances instead.

Michelle has also done a lot of prep work with outside organizations for the initiative. Three major corporate suppliers of school lunches announce that they will cut the amount of salt, sugar, and fat in their meals. The American Beverage Association promises to improve the clarity of its ingredient labels. They persuade Disney, NBC, and Warner Bros. to air PSAs encouraging kids to make healthy lifestyle choices. She aims to redesign the aging food pyramid to be more accessible and current. Michelle benefits from her platform, but she realizes now how it can be "marshaled in service of real goals."

Additionally, even though Michelle leaves the policy making to Barack, she also leverages her power in a quieter way. Behind the scenes, she has quietly garnered commitments from major companies in order to get tangible results on an issue that she is passionate about. This, to her, is how she can find fulfillment within the often-confining and often-criticized role she plays for the nation.

CHAPTER 22

One spring morning, a petting zoo of big cats (lions, cheetahs, panthers) arrives at the White House, and they are let free on the lawn. When Michelle, Barack, Sasha, and Malia go out to see them, assured that they have bene sedated, the cats lunge the family. The Secret Service runs out, tranquilizer guns in hand, but they miss the lions and hit Sasha. Michelle then bolts upright in bed, having had a very bad dream.

The lions are a metaphorical example of some of the issues that Michelle goes on to discuss in this chapter. Being in the White House puts Michelle and her family closer to danger and tragedy, and she and Barack constantly feel the weight of responsibility to absorb and respond to that tragedy.

Michelle constantly feels vulnerable, and she is newly aware of the chaos and tragedy of the world: an earthquake in Haiti, an oil rig explosion, revolution in Egypt. She understands both Barack's and her responsibility to remain calm in the face of tragedy, hardship, and confusion. After the BP oil spill is cleaned up, many Americans are wary of swimming in the Gulf of Mexico. So the family takes a vacation to Florida to swim in the water, a symbolic gesture that the water is safe.

These national and global emergencies are the literal examples of what the lions had stood in for in Michelle's dream. Not only is it Barack's obligation to address these issues both nationally and internationally, but he must also constantly create plans of action to remedy such catastrophes, or at the very least find ways to bolster the spirits of the American people.

In the midst of tragedy, Michelle also sees, there is resilience. She visits military members and their families in hospitals, quickly realizing that often the last thing that they needed was "anyone's pity." One sign outside a door instructs visitors not to feel sorry for him, as he got his injuries serving a country he loves. Michelle writes that she's never seen the "fortitude and loyalty" that she found during these visits—describing an instance when a severely injured young man had seen Michelle and tried to stand up to salute the wife of his commander in chief.

Michelle recognizes the optimism inherent to military personnel and their families, where even in the midst of their own personal tragedies, they work hard to not let their injuries or losses define them. As this sign on the door implies, their injuries are the sacrifice that they made in order to do something they loved and felt passionate about.

Despite the weight on Barack's shoulders, he manages to be "admirably present and undistracted" when he is with Michelle and the girls. Michelle and Barack try not to speak about work, instead focusing on tales and updates from their daughters' lives.

Michelle and Barack demonstrate that while they now have become the face of a nation, they also have to juggle this position with prioritizing their daughters.

A year after launching Let's Move!, Michelle and her team see results. They have installed six thousand salad bars in school cafeterias. Walmart has pledged to cut the amount of sugar, salt, and fat in its food products and reduced prices on produce. Five hundred mayors in towns across the country have committed to tackling childhood obesity on the local level.

Throughout the first year of her initiative, Michelle finds different ways to grow the program. Her faith in the idea that people and companies will want to join the initiative pays off, and she garners a lot of support to help fulfill her goals.

Michelle had also worked hard in 2010 to push a new child nutrition bill through Congress, wading into politics for the first time. The law expands healthy food in public schools and regulates junk food that is sold to children via vending machines. The bill passes just before Republicans gain control of the House after the midterms. She proudly watches as Barack signs it into law, knowing that she is responsible not only for this but also for creating a network of advocates speaking up for children's health.

Even though Michelle dislikes politics, she understands the unique position she is in, particularly having the support of Barack and the Democrats in Congress. Thus, she takes advantage of her position of power in order to push for an initiative she knows is vital to kids nationwide.

Michelle takes on a second initiative with Jill Biden called Joining Forces. They identify concrete ways to support military families, like reaching out to powerful CEOs and getting them to commit to hire "a significant number of veterans and military spouses." They get pledges from universities to train teachers and professors to better understand the needs of military children. And they try to fight the stigma surrounding mental health issues that many troops experience when returning home.

Even with her many successes on Let's Move!, Michelle refuses to simply rest on her laurels. In a testament to her desire to continue to find personal growth and fulfillment by helping other people, she begins another initiative that helps army veterans and their families. As she writes at the end of the book, she hopes to always continue to grow and do more for others.

While the issues that Michelle takes on are somewhat compact and manageable, Barack's are not. She observes how he consumes as much information as possible to make informed decisions about the country's future. The last thing he does each night is read ten letters from Americans, selected by a staffer from the fifteen thousand that pour in each day. Some are positive and some are critical, but he views it as part of the responsibility that comes with the office to know what Americans are experiencing.

While Michelle works to fulfill her own responsibility to the American people, she emphasizes that so too does Barack. Not only does he tackle the larger political issues, but he also tries to stay informed of the more personal, individual concerns of average Americans. He does not shy away from criticism; like Michelle, he always works to improve.

In the winter of 2011, Michelle and Barack begin hearing that reality-show host and New York real-estate developer Donald Trump is thinking about running for president. He often gives "yammering, inexpert critiques of Barack's foreign policy decisions" and openly questions Barack's American citizenship, giving new life to the so-called "birthers." Michelle writes that this theory's "underlying bigotry and xenophobia" are "hardly concealed," but on top of that it is dangerous, fueling hatred and threats made against Barack.

Even though Donald Trump does not run for president against Barack in the 2012 election, this foreshadows his eventual run and win in 2016 against Hillary Clinton. Michelle emphasizes how his politics represent not only a return to the whiteness and maleness that has been typical of past Washington politics, but also an open embrace of the racism that has undergirded the political system for so long.

A few months after the birther rumors resurface, a man parks his car close to the White House and fires a semi-automatic rifle at the top floors. A bullet hits one of the windows in a room where Michelle likes to have tea. No one is hurt, but Michelle's mother and Sasha were home. For weeks Michelle looks at the crater in the bulletproof glass in the window, knowing how vulnerable they are.

This story demonstrates how Trump's words and the ideas behind them are not harmless: for many people, including the Obamas, the racism of many people who think like Trump is actively dangerous and often life-threatening to them.

Michelle has been concerned for her family's safety for years, and many people openly and earnestly express their concerns for her family's safety, as well. Once, a mother of another student asked Malia, practicing on the tennis courts at her school, if she was afraid to be out in the open. Malia responded, "If you're asking me whether I ponder my death every day, the answer is no." The mother later wrote a note apologizing to Michelle for putting stress on a child who could do nothing about it.

The fact that so many people "openly and earnestly" worry about the safety of the Obamas only emphasizes how real the danger is, and how people understand that they are especially vulnerable because of their race. Yet Malia's response to this mother's words also emphasizes their resilience in the face of this kind of hatred and worry.

Though Michelle sees the challenges her daughters face, she knows that they have a great deal of advantage in their lives. Michelle feels that she has a larger obligation to children in general, to give them some of the opportunity she experienced in her life. She realizes that her accomplishments were largely owed to the "many small ways [she'd] been buttressed over the years, and the people who'd helped build [her] confidence over time."

Michelle again recognizes the importance for children to know that they have an adult who cares about them and wants to invest in them. Michelle thus sees giving back to other children as not only a means of helping to spread the privilege that her own daughters experience, but also paying back her own family and the mentors who'd supported her.

With this in mind, Michelle starts a leadership and mentoring program at the White House, choosing twenty high school girls from around D.C. and pairing them with a female mentor, coming to the white house for monthly get-togethers like informal chats, field trips, and sessions on things like choosing a career. She hopes that they go on to feel comfortable and confident in any room, raising their voice anywhere.

Michelle thus uses her passion for investing in children to give back in her own way—also by making the White House more accessible to those high schoolers, who would not have had that opportunity otherwise. Michelle finds it important for them to know that they, too, can make it to the White House, despite politics being a predominantly male field.

Two years after arriving at the White House, Michelle and Barack continue to try to ease the formality of the place by inviting more people, and especially children, when foreign dignitaries or artists visit. She wants to highlight the importance of exposing kids to the arts, knowing how the arts have contributed to her own development. She recalls when a young composer named Lin-Manuel Miranda attended the first White House poetry and spoken-word event and debuted a song from a project he was just beginning, a musical about former Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton.

Michelle includes this reference to Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton, *a work that recasts the founding fathers as young people of color, in order to call back to it later when she sees the complete work. The work promotes the idea that both the America of the past and the America of today are built by a wide variety of people, not just the white men that have largely dominated the country's highest offices.*

Over the years, Michelle has learned to keep her true friends close—she is still greatly connected to the group of mothers that she became a part of several years earlier. In 2011, Michelle makes an effort to reinvest in those friendships, and to recognize that sometimes it's okay to prioritize herself and her friends, especially when she is so used to sacrificing so much for kids and spouses. She organizes getaway trips for herself and these friends.

While Michelle has spent much of the book demonstrating how being a wife, a mother, and a working woman at the same time requires both compromises and sacrifices, she makes it a point to acknowledge that sometimes it is necessary to take time for herself, rather than giving all of her energy others.

On the first Sunday in May 2011, Michelle goes out to dinner on a particularly busy weekend. She arrives home to discover that Barack is about to address the nation. Michelle catches Barack in the hallway of the residence. "We got him," he says, "and no one got hurt." This is how Michelle learns that a team of U.S. Navy SEALs had stormed a compound in Pakistan and killed Osama bin Laden. That evening, people take to the streets, linked both by patriotism and the grief that had been borne on 9/11. America gets a chance to "feel its own resilience."

After being elected by the American people based on the promise they saw in Barack's hope and optimism, Americans have a moment of seeing that hope and optimism come home to roost. For a country that faced a national tragedy in 2001, followed by several wars and an economic crisis, Michelle acknowledges that bin Laden's death is a benchmark for the country's ability to recover and progress in spite of hardship.

CHAPTER 23

Each day, month, and year in the White House is "packed," to the point where Michelle often finds it difficult to process in hindsight how she might visit several states in a day, or speak to twelve thousand people, or do jumping jacks with kids during the day only to put on a ballgown in the evening.

The slipperiness of time in the White House highlights the privilege of enjoying so many different experiences, but also the responsibility of those experiences and the lack of time for oneself.

As Barack's reelection year nears, Michelle continues to put pressure on herself not to rest. She's "haunted" by the way she's been criticized and works to counteract those criticisms. She rehearses her speeches again and again. She makes sure that her events run smoothly and on time. She continues to grow the reach of Let's Move! and Joining Forces.

Although Michelle is deeply affected by her criticisms, she doesn't let them stop her—instead, she takes them to heart and tries to grow, work harder, and do more for others.

Michelle knows that the months of campaigning leading up to the election will be extra difficult. The summer of 2011 is "especially bruising" for Barack. A group of congressional Republicans refuses to raise the debt ceiling (a relatively routine process) until he makes a series of cuts to programs like Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare. Meanwhile, the economy has grown, but not fully recovered—for which many people blame Barack.

Michelle explains how, despite the fact that many things are out of Barack's control (like the Republicans' decisions in Congress, or the speed of the recovery of the economy), he is blamed for them. This again speaks to the loneliness of the office, because Barack is often viewed as being solely responsible for the well-being of the country.

As the summer begins, Michelle flies to South Africa with Sasha and Malia. She meets health workers, tours the Apartheid museum, and is introduced to Desmond Tutu. The most surreal moment, however, is when Nelson Mandela invites them to his home. He is ninety-two at the time and had been hospitalized earlier that year with lung issues.

Michelle's visit to South Africa touches on another government, whose system of Apartheid was also a deeply-rooted racist form of political oppression. But, as Michelle goes on to speak about Nelson Mandela, she sees how hope and optimism ultimately triumphed over that system.

To Michelle, there is no one else alive who has had a more meaningful impact on the world than Mandela, who boldly challenged the all-white South African government. Mandela spent 27 years in prison for his activism and was 71 when he was released, only to then transition the country to a true democracy and become its first president. Michelle is honored to interact with a man who has so deeply inspired his country and the world. She flies home "propelled by that spirit" of tolerance and resilience and optimism. He is a lesson that progress happens slowly.

Michelle's discussion of Mandela again shows the power of optimism in helping one achieve one's goals and in helping a country improve as a whole—not unlike Barack's own vision for America. Michelle's conclusion that progress happens slowly also bolsters her at a time when it feels like the Republicans want to stop all progress for the country.

Barack proposes three bills over the fall of 2011 to create thousands of jobs for Americans by giving states money to hire more teachers and first responders. Republicans block them each time. Senator Mitch McConnell declared to a reporter a year earlier that "the single most important thing [they] want to achieve [...] is for President Obama to be a one-term president." Michelle finds this "demoralizing" and "infuriating."

Michelle is perhaps particularly infuriated by Mitch McConnell's statement (he is the Senate Minority Leader at the time), because it seems so counter to the optimism and desire for progress that Barack espouses. Instead, they simply focus on projecting all of their negative energy onto him, rather than thinking about what is best for the country.

Despite this opposition, there is a lot to feel hopeful about. By the end of 2011, American soldiers have left Iraq and are gradually leaving Afghanistan. The Affordable Care Act has largely gone into effect. Michelle and Barack also return to the campaign trail, excited to speak with supporters as a kind of "salve" for the frustrations in Washington.

Despite the opposition, Barack is still making progress, and that progress and optimism is still resonant with many supporters that Barack and Michelle meet on his campaign trail for reelection.

Michelle continues to do work for Let's Move! As a result, the company behind Olive Garden and Red Lobster pledges to revamp its menus to be healthier. Michelle is also learning how to connect her message to her image, doing an on-air push-up contest with Ellen DeGeneres to raise awareness about Let's Move! She sits down with influential "mommy bloggers" and finds ways to harness new social media tools.

Michelle takes to heart the idea that she can never stop growing and finding more ways to do fulfilling work—once again using her power and status as an icon to draw attention to issues that matter to her.

On Election Day, November 6, 2012, Michelle is nervous that their time and effort might not have been enough. This election in particular feels "more fraught than any other," seeming to her like a referendum on Barack's political performance, the state of the country, and on his character. Michelle deliberately doesn't watch the news that night, and just as she starts to panic, Barack finds her and tells her that they've won. Barack wins among young people, minorities, and women. His win means four more years of being symbols for the nation, responding to whatever comes at the country.

Despite the difficulties of being the First Lady and the weight on Barack's shoulders, Michelle's nerves about Barack not being reelected prove her dedication to improving the country in spite of the challenges. And, as Michelle goes on to demonstrate, the responsibility that she and Barack bear to the nation does not get any easier.

Five weeks later, a gunman walks into Sandy Hook Elementary school, shooting and killing twenty first-graders and six educators. As the news unfolds, Barack asks for Michelle to come to the Oval Office—the only time in eight years he's request her presence in the middle of a workday. They huddle silently together in sadness, Barack already briefed on the "graphic, horrid crime scene" at Sandy Hook. She knows, however, that their grief is nothing compared to the parents of the children who have died.

Perhaps there is no other time in Barack's presidency when he feels the weight of responsibility for the country, as well as the weight of its pain, so acutely as after the Sandy Hook shooting. His need to connect with Michelle shows that, despite his usual ability to remain calm and sober during many similar tragedies, he is still just a human being trying to support a nation.

Barack briefs the nation on what has happened, wiping away tears as he does so. He understands that there is "no solace to be had," and that the best he can offer is his resolve to prevent more massacres by passing sensible gun control laws. For Michelle, though she has consoled many people in her four years as First Lady, she is so shaken that she cannot go to the vigil being held for the victims. Instead, she clings to her own children—the day of the vigil Sasha is performing in *The Nutcracker*, and Michelle is grateful to be able to watch her.

Barack's vulnerability demonstrates how this massacre, perhaps more than any other, completely demolishes the optimism that Barack usually espouses. Instead of hope, he tries to take on the responsibility of moving the country forward in the only way he knows how: by working to prevent similar massacres from happening again.

Michelle acknowledges that America is not a simple place, and the outcome of its stories are not always positive. Barack's second Inauguration Day comes and goes. Later, Michelle wishes that she could have caught sight of one person in particular at the inaugural parade—a young black girl named Hadiya Pendleton who was in the marching band of a school from the South Side. Eight days after the inauguration, Hadiya is shot and killed in a public park in Chicago, mistaken for a gang member.

The gun violence that affects children is not isolated to a single incident, Michelle acknowledges, and as more and more stories and tragedies accumulate over Barack's term, he comes to understand the gravity of the responsibility he has to try to stop this epidemic, particularly now that he has been afforded a second term.

Michelle attends to Hadiya's funeral, hoping that she can "turn the gaze towards the many innocent kids being gunned down in city streets almost every day," and that this incident, coupled with Newtown, might prompt Americans to demand reasonable gun laws. Hadiya was fifteen, an honor student, and liked to tell people that she wanted to go to Harvard. Michelle acknowledges that she could have been Hadiya once, and that Hadiya could have been her. Instead, Hadiya was the thirty-sixth person in Chicago killed by gun violence that year—and it was only January 29.

The stories of Newtown and Hadiya Pendleton are tragedies that are part of a larger epidemic of gun violence wreaking havoc on the nation—a crisis that Michelle and Barack try to remedy. They are particularly disturbed by the fact that so many children are killed by gun violence amid everyday, innocent activities, such as walking in the park and going to school. Michelle acknowledges that, had she not been killed, Hadiya could have gotten the education that Michelle had and worked her way up to do something extraordinary, but her potential is squashed by guns.

It is important to Michelle not only to be a consoler, but to try to build relationships with the people she meets, especially those who do not have access to her privilege. She keeps up her relationships with the girls from the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in London, bringing a group of them to visit Oxford and hosting a few of them at the White House. She starts a new initiative called Reach Higher, encouraging kids to get to and stay in college.

Michelle once again aims to invest in children, and her new initiative (like Let's Move!) aims to support kids who did not have the same kind of supportive family that Michelle had. She tries to support them not merely in a superficial way, but in a way that will give them tangible goals and a sense of accomplishment.

An economist from a British university later puts out a study that finding that the test performances of the students at the school jumped significantly after Michelle started to connect with them. She insists that the credit for that improvement belongs to the girls, but this also affirms the idea that "kids will invest more when they feel they're being invested in."

Michelle reiterates why investment is so important: it gives kids the faith in themselves to work hard and succeed when they have people behind them who believe in their success, as well.

After Hadiya's funeral, she directs her chief of staff Tina to rally support for gun violence prevention in Chicago. She works with Chicago business leaders, philanthropists, and mayor Rahm Emanuel to expand community programs for at-risk youth across the city. Her efforts yield 33 million dollars in pledges in a few weeks, and this prompts Michelle to return to the city.

While Congress flounders, Michelle takes matters into her own hands and pursues the things that make her feel most fulfilled. Her faith in the idea that she can make a tangible difference pays off, as she garners an enormous amount of political and monetary support for the most vulnerable populations in Chicago.

Michelle meets students from Harper Senior High School, a school on the South Side. In the previous year, twenty-nine of the school's current and recent students were shot, eight fatally. Urban schools are dealing with "epidemic levels of gun violence." The students are eager to talk to her, describing a fear of gangs and violence, and some have absent or addicted parents. Nearly every kid there has lost someone they know to a bullet.

This single school's heartbreaking statistics underscore the epidemic of gun violence occurring in the United States, and demonstrate how much the government is failing in its responsibility to protect its citizens (and particularly young people) from gun violence.

One student asks Michelle, quite candidly, what she can do about the issue. Michelle acknowledges that Congress seems adamant about not raising the taxes required to fund an education investment, and that, even after Newtown, Congress seems determined to block measures that could help keep guns out of the wrong hands, as many representatives receive campaign funds from the National Rifle Association.

While Barack understands the responsibility of power and the debt he owes to his constituents, Michelle also makes clear that power can be corrupted, and that organizations take advantage of those who don't prioritize their responsibility to the people they serve.

Instead, Michelle tells the students, they should use the education they are getting to their advantage. Their stories already show they have persistence and self-reliance. Their school is filled with committed and caring adults who want to see them to succeed. And six weeks later, thanks to donations from local businesspeople, a group of these students will visit the White House and spend time at Howard University, hopefully giving them a glimpse of a path to success.

Michelle knows that she, alone, cannot remedy the issues that these students face. But she does her best to remain optimistic with them and help them see that they have access to a path that can improve their lives. She again hopes that by investing in them, and showing that they have the ability to succeed, that at least some of them will work hard and follow that path.

CHAPTER 24

In the spring of 2015, sixteen-year-old Malia attends her junior prom. Her date "gamely" drives up to the South Lawn and shakes Michelle and Barack's hand. They take a few pictures before heading off to dinner and the dance. Michelle takes comfort in the fact that Malia's security detail will remain on duty throughout the night. Michelle usually tries not to check in with the agents on Malia and Sasha's whereabouts, wanting to make sure that the girls trust their agents. She knows her girls are responsible—that they've had to learn to be, because their mistakes would make headlines.

Malia and Sasha have now spent almost eight years—half their lives—in a place with an enormous amount of privilege. But growing up in the White House also comes with a responsibility that other kids do not have to experience. Michelle knows that this is unfair, and she later mentions that she is proud of the fact that her family never experienced a major scandal while living in the White House.

Sasha and Malia come of age in a unique time. The iPhone was released four months before Barack announced his candidacy for president. A billion of them are sold by the end of his second term. And so, Sasha and Malia have to contend with the public snapping pictures of them or requesting selfies. Barack and Michelle try to keep them out of sight, and the Secret Service dresses less conspicuously with the girls to better blend in with the crowd.

Malia and Sasha not only have a responsibility to make smart decisions, but also to contend with their relative celebrity. In many ways, they are forced to sacrifice some of their normalcy, and their ability to just be regular kids, for Barack's work.

As Barack's second term winds down, Michelle starts to take stock of how drastically her life has been altered. She thinks about her first kiss with Barack after ice cream, to giving up her job at her law firm, to the church basement in Roseland where Barack had envisioned "the world as it should be."

At a moment of reflection, Michelle is able to see how the optimism Barack carried even so many years ago was able to transform her life, and also the country as a whole. Even amidst the chaos and the criticism, Michelle was able to find fulfillment in the First Lady role.

Michelle also thinks about the country's progress: fewer servicemembers overseas, childhood obesity rates leveling off, the Supreme Court's decision to uphold key parts of the Affordable Care Act, the economy racking up five years of continued growth. But still, America's progress is not always so clear. Bin Laden is gone, but ISIS has arrived; Congress has not passed a single gun-control measure; there are a series of incidents involving unarmed black men being shot by police. The last example is evidence of something "pernicious and unchanging in America" despite the fact that when Barack was first elected, commentators declared that the country was entering a "postracial era."

Michelle goes on to recount how that optimism has helped shape the country, and she touches on issues that both Barack and she herself helped to improve. But at the same time, she recognizes that there is still more work to be done and progress to be made in the country. She acknowledges that Congress still bears a responsibility to the country concerning gun laws, and that Barack's election alone will not solve the issue of racism in politics, nor in the country as a whole.

Late in June 2015, Barack and Michelle go to Charleston, South Carolina, to sit with a grieving community where nine people were killed in a racially motivated shooting at an African Methodist Episcopal church. The victims, all African Americans, had invited a young white man to their bible study group, and he sat with them for a while before standing up and shooting them. At the funeral, Barack delivers a moving eulogy before leading the congregation in a rendition of "Amazing Grace"—a "simple invocation of hope."

The end of Barack's presidency continues to be plagued by a series of tragedies, particularly those involving gun violence. But while Barack cannot remedy racism, nor can he get Congress to budge on passing gun control laws, he continues to provide whatever shred of hope that he can for the people that have been affected by these tragedies.

The same day as this funeral service, the Supreme Court issues a landmark decision affirming that same-sex couples have the right to marry in all fifty states. Many Americans are overjoyed by this news, and when Barack and Michelle return home, they see the White House illuminated in the colors of the rainbow flag. Hundreds of people have gathered to see the lights, and Michelle and Malia flout protocols to go outside and see the lights and the celebration.

Once again, the whirlwind nature of the presidency is on display, when in the same day Barack and Michelle mourn a hate crime and celebrate a civil rights win. But one thing that is common to both of these experiences is hope and the idea that progress is possible.

By the fall of 2015, the next presidential campaign has already begun. The Republican side is crowded, while the Democrats are essentially choosing between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. Donald Trump announces his candidacy early in the summer, standing inside Trump Tower and calling Mexican immigrants "rapists" and the people running the country "losers." Michelle thinks he only wants attention; nothing in how he conducts himself suggests he is serious about governing.

Michelle views Donald Trump's campaign as the antithesis of Barack's: not only a return to more explicit racism in politics, but also a return to negativity and fear-mongering over promoting positivity and optimism. It is so antithetical to the current president that Michelle believes Trump must not be serious about running.

Michelle doesn't follow the campaign very closely, instead working on her fourth initiative, Let Girls Learn, which focuses on helping girls around the world obtain better access to education. She met Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teenager and education activist who'd been brutally attacked by the Taliban, and she was horrified when 276 Nigerian schoolgirls were kidnapped by Boko Haram, prompting Michelle to sub in for Barack in his weekly address to the nation and talk about the importance of protecting girls worldwide.

Instead of dwelling on the negativity, Michelle instead continues to work hard and invest in kids—particularly girls—aiming to combat the global sexism that often prevents girls from receiving a full education, or which means they face violence and abuse at a young age.

Barack leverages hundreds of millions of dollars from USAID and the Peace Corps, as well as the Departments of State, Labor, and Agriculture. They also lobby other countries' governments to help fund programming for girls' education. Michelle rallies the power of celebrities to raise the cause's visibility, and Michelle sings on late-night host James Corden's "Carpool Karaoke" series.

Michelle and Barack exhibit the expertise that they have developed over seven years in the White House. They are now proficient at leveraging some of their political power and their cultural clout in order to fight for issues that they care about.

After Christmas 2015, the clock starts to tick on their final year in the White House. A "long series of 'lasts'" begins. In the spring, Michelle gives a round of commencement speeches at schools that don't normally land high-profile speakers. She tries to communicate that, as the great-great-granddaughter of a slave, and as someone who has been marginalized by race and gender, she is a testament to the idea that it is possible to overcome that kind of marginalization.

In her commencement speeches, Michelle acknowledges the racism and sexism she has faced—both in politics and in her everyday life. But in her speeches, she also emphasizes that working hard (as these graduating students have done) and remaining hopeful allowed her to overcome the struggles that she faced.

The last commencement Michelle attends that spring is for Malia, graduating from high school. Malia is about to go off on a gap year, then enroll at Harvard. Sasha is spending the summer on Martha's Vineyard and will work her first job in a snack bar. She is proud of the whole family for almost finishing this crazy adventure. Michelle looks at Barack, tears in his eyes, and knows that he has sacrificed along the way, as well. Just as he starts having more free time, his daughters will begin to step away.

In some ways, Barack made the opposite decision from Michelle. While she prioritized taking care of her daughters, Barack needed to prioritize work over everything else. And thus, he compromised, too—often sacrificing spending time with his daughters as they were growing up.

In late July, Michelle flies to the Democratic National Convention, this time giving a speech in support of Hillary Clinton, who now knows she will be running against Donald Trump. Michelle talks about how she trusts Hillary because she understands the demands of the presidency, has the temperament to lead, and because she is extremely qualified. Michelle also speaks out against bullying, giving her now-famous quote: "When they go low, we go high."

Michelle's maxim here is a perfect encapsulation of her optimism and her desire to work hard. She (and many other people who face discrimination and extra scrutiny) knows that she has to hold herself to a higher standard, but also knows that a higher standard is more fulfilling.

Two months later, a tape surfaces of Donald Trump in 2005 bragging about sexually assaulting women, putting media outlets in a bind as to how to quote it without violating standards of decency. In the end, Michelle writes, "the standards of decency [are] simply lowered in order to make room for the candidate's voice." She is stunned by his words. She knows that women endure "entire lifetimes of these indignities—in the form of catcalls, groping, assault, and oppression." In a speech, Michelle calls the comments "disgraceful" and "intolerable."

In addition to the racism inherent in Donald Trump's words and proposed policies, Michelle also points out how his comments are sexist and perpetuate the misogyny that she and other women experience for their entire lives. Again his words feel like a repudiation of all the ideals that Michelle holds, and she is shocked that they seem acceptable to some Americans.

On election night, Michelle is somewhat relieved to have no role to play in the evening, but as the results come in, she is filled with dread. Hillary Clinton wins nearly three million more votes than Donald Trump, but he captures the Electoral College thanks to "fewer than eighty thousand votes spread across Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan." She wishes that more people had turned out, and she wonders why so many women rejected an exceptionally qualified female candidate and chose a misogynist instead.

Michelle grapples with not only how Donald Trump could so brazenly put forth a campaign based on racism and sexism, but how so many of the American people could have chosen this platform—or at least how so many people had not tried harder to repudiate it, particularly women.

The next morning—a dreary, wet morning—Barack addresses the nation once more. He calls, as always, for unity, dignity, and respect. In the White House, many people are in tears. Michelle's team is made up largely of women and minorities, and several from immigrant families. They feel vulnerable and exposed. Michelle tries to tell them that one election can't wipe away eight years of change, and that it is important to "keep our feet pointed in the direction of progress."

Barack and Michelle recognize that hardships lie ahead for the many people who do not feel represented or supported by Trump's policies. But at the same time, both Barack and Michelle call for their signature optimism, knowing that the country will continue to progress despite policies that seem to aim to take the country to a past state.

Michelle looks back at her family's legacy in the White House. She wants to make sure that they have a lasting mark within the White House's history. They redecorate the Old Family Dining Room, giving it a more modern look and opening it to the public for the first time. On the room's north wall, they hang an abstract painting by Alma Thomas, the first work of art by a black woman to be added to the White House's permanent collection.

As Michelle looks back, she recognizes how she used her temporary privilege to lift others up and make the White House feel more inclusive—both in the kinds of work that is displayed there, and in the ability for more people to have access to the building itself.

Michelle's most enduring mark is the **garden**. It has survived seven and a half years and produces roughly two thousand pounds of food annually. Now it has expanded to twenty-eight hundred square feet, more than double its original size. One fall afternoon, Michelle officially dedicates the garden, joined by supporters and advocates who'd helped their children's health efforts over the years.

The garden's evolution and literal growth serves as a symbol for Michelle's own optimism, growth, and achievement. Despite the fact that she did not know whether the garden was going to grow, she put faith in it anyway, and it ended up not only exceeding everyone's expectations, but also helped her to get involved with something she was passionate about.

Michelle feels grateful for all of her team's efforts, surrounded by so many people who had her back over the years. She has watched them blossom both professionally and personally. And together, they have gotten results: 45 million kids are eating healthier meals; Joining Forces helped persuade businesses to hire or train 1.5 million veterans; Barack and Michelle have leveraged billions of dollars to help girls around the world receive an education; in the U.S., her team has helped more young people go to college.

Michelle reflects on not only her own growth, but also how much the people around her have been able to grow, and how much they have been able to achieve together. Michelle's sense of fulfillment in this context is understandable, given how many tangible results she was able to accomplish.

Over the course of his presidency, Barack had reversed the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression, brokered the Paris Agreement on climate change, brought tens of thousands of troops home, and led the effort to shut down Iran's nuclear program. Twenty million more people have health insurance. And they made it through two terms in office without a major scandal.

Michelle is not the only one who improved the lives of Americans, as she demonstrates how Barack's own optimism and search for fulfillment has led the country to a better place, as well.

During their time in the White House, Lin-Manuel Miranda finished his musical *Hamilton*—which Michelle calls "the best piece of art in any form that [she'd] ever encountered." The musical is a celebration of America's history and diversity, and she particularly appreciates it because it affirms that there is more than one way to be American, and more than one way to tell America's story. Michelle had grown up with a disabled father in a failing neighborhood, but also had love and music and a good education—it depends on how she tells the story. Despite its bitter conflicts, she also sees the country's resilience and progress, and knows that even more is possible for the next generation.

Michelle's reference to Hamilton *emphasizes the idea that, while it is true that America's past politicians have largely been white men, that doesn't mean that they are the only ones worth celebrating. In creating a musical in which a young, racially diverse cast plays the founding fathers, Hamilton emphasizes that even those who have been marginalized can feel proud of the history of their country and feel like it's their history, too.*

EPILOGUE

Barack and Michelle leave the White House on January 20, 2017, accompanying Donald and Melania Trump. They are determined to transition with "grace and dignity." At the inauguration, Michelle sees that the "vibrant diversity" of the previous two inaugurations is no longer there, replaced by an "overwhelmingly white and male tableau." Someone in Barack's administration might have said that the optics were bad, that it didn't reflect the president's ideals—but Michelle realizes that the stage might exactly represent the new president's ideals. Michelle stops trying to smile.

Michelle once again highlights how Donald Trump's politics, unlike Barack's, do not focus on inclusion and uplifting minority groups. Thus, the "optics" of his events return to the old, predominantly white and male standard of politics that has dominated America for so long. This is perhaps one of the only instances in which Michelle stops trying to appear hopeful and demonstrates the gravity of the situation.

Michelle is now in a new phase of life, released from any obligation as a political spouse. She is able to think differently about what comes next, and believes that she is still "in progress." She writes that "becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim"; instead it is a way of reaching "continuously toward a better self."

As Michelle points out here, fulfillment is a process, not something one achieves at a certain point. Thus, Michelle looks to continue to grow beyond the White House, and hopes she can find more and more ways to "become" fulfilled—referencing the title of her book.

Michelle does clarify one thing: she will never run for political office. But, she writes, she still cares deeply about the future, and since Barack left office, she has been extremely distressed and frustrated at stories she's read in the news. She won't allow herself to become cynical, however, and reminds herself that optimism is a force that's more potent than "any one election, or leader, or news story."

Many people continue to recognize the power of Michelle's own intelligence and capacity, and despite her explicit statement that she will not be running for political office, the power of her optimism continues to inspire people not to give up on progress for the country—even though, to her and many others, it feels as though the country is going backwards.

Michelle has seen optimism throughout her life, particularly in children. She writes that adults owe it to them to stay strong and continue to work towards a more humane world. She thinks about her portrait hanging in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, and how no one looking at her childhood could have ever guessed where she would end up. It matters most to her that young people can see her picture and have a different notion of what one must look like to be considered important.

Michelle recognizes the power, particularly for children, of being the first African American First Lady. Despite the many criticisms she endured along the way for both her race and gender, she understands that her and Barack's trailblazing will endure much longer, and will perhaps provide an easier path for the next black president.

Michelle concludes by writing, "I'm an ordinary person who found herself on an extraordinary journey." She has spent her life trying to connect with people and hopes to continue to do so in sharing her story. Lastly, she asks readers to "invite one another in," to let go of divisive stereotypes and biases, and to embrace the ways in which people are the same. "It's not about being perfect," she says, it's about "where you get yourself in the end." That is what becoming means to her.

Michelle concludes with one more call for optimism and hope—this time directly addressing her readers—to ask that they try to find a shared humanity between them, rather than maintaining harmful divides. This process, she says, is "becoming"—a word that is steeped in the belief that progress is never-ending.

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