

Michelle Obama (b. 1964) was the first lady of the United States from 2009 to 2017. She is married to the former president Barack Obama.

Michelle Obama

Becoming

Preface

March 2017

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

So far in my life, I’ve been a lawyer. I’ve been a vice president at a hospital and the director of a nonprofit that helps young people build meaningful careers. I’ve been a working-class black student at a fancy mostly white college. I’ve been the only woman, the only African American, in all sorts of rooms. I’ve been a bride, a stressed-out new mother, a daughter torn up by grief. And until recently, I was the First Lady of the United States of America – a job that’s not officially a job, but that nonetheless has given me a platform like nothing I could have imagined. It challenged me and humbled me, lifted me up and shrank me down, sometimes all at once. I’m just beginning to process what took place over these last years – from the moment in 2006 when my husband first started talking about running for president to the cold morning this winter when I climbed into a limo with Melania Trump¹, accompanying her to her husband’s inauguration. It’s been quite a ride.

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

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

¹ *Melania Trump*: the current first lady of the United States, married to Donald Trump

made fun of my butt. I've been hurt. I've been furious. But mostly, I've tried to laugh this stuff off.

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

For eight years, I lived in the White House, a place with more stairs than I can count – plus elevators, a bowling alley, and an in-house florist. I slept in a bed that was made up with Italian linens. Our meals were cooked by a team of world-class chefs and delivered by professionals more highly trained than those at any five-star restaurant or hotel. Secret Service agents, with their earpieces
45 and guns and deliberately flat expressions, stood outside our doors, doing their best to stay out of our family's private life. We got used to it, eventually, sort of – the strange grandeur of our new home and also the constant, quiet presence of others.

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

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

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

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

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

I was thinking instead about how in a few minutes I would go back inside my house, wash my plate
in the sink, and head up to bed, maybe opening a window so I could feel the spring air – how
glorious that would be. I was thinking, too, that the stillness was affording me a first real opportunity
95 to reflect. As First Lady, I'd get to the end of a busy week and need to be reminded how it had
started. But time is beginning to feel different. My girls, who arrived at the White House with their
Polly Pockets²: (here) dolls, a blanket named Blankie, and a stuffed tiger named Tiger, are now
teenagers, young women with plans and voices of their own. My husband is making his own
adjustments to life after the White House, catching his own breath. And here I am, in this new place,
100 with a lot I want to say.

(2018)

² *Polly Pockets*: (here) dolls