

# Becoming

(a summary by Pat Evert)

## • **Becoming Me**

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 was the First Lady of the United States of America.

My family lived in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, in a tidy brick bungalow that belonged to Robbie, my mother's aunt, and her husband, Terry. Robbie was our community's resident piano teacher. This was the tail end of the 1960s on the South Side of Chicago. The Kennedys were dead. Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed standing on a balcony in Memphis. My father went to work every day dressed in the blue uniform of a city laborer, but at night he showed us what it meant to love jazz and art. My brother, Craig, got interested in basketball. I was about four when I decided I wanted to learn piano. We were two households living under one not very big roof.



In 1950, fifteen years before my parents moved to South Shore, the neighborhood had been 96 percent white. By the time I'd leave for college in 1981, it would be about 96 percent Black. South Shore hadn't yet tilted the way other neighborhoods had—with the better-off people long departed for the suburbs, the neighborhood businesses closing one by one, the blight setting in—but the tilt was clearly beginning. Basketball, for my brother, seemed to unlock every frontier - something that had long been a credo of my dad's—that most people were good people if you just treated them well. The color of our skin made us vulnerable. It was a thing we'd always have to navigate. Before I finished elementary school, my father's cane would become a crutch and soon after that two crutches. Whatever was eroding inside my father, withering his muscles and stripping his nerves, he viewed it as his own private challenge, as something to silently withstand. Decline can be a hard thing to measure. At first it felt as if just the white families were leaving, but then that changed, too. It soon seemed that anyone who had the means to go was now going. Much of the time, the departures went unannounced and unexplained. My father was a withstander, a man who never complained about small things or big, who cheerily ate liver when it was served to him, who had a doctor give him what amounted to a death sentence and then just carried on. He had multiple sclerosis.

by Michelle Obama

My grandfather like many highly intelligent, able-bodied men were denied access to stable high-paying jobs, which in turn kept them from being able to buy homes, send their kids to college, or save for retirement. It pained them, I know, **to be cast aside**, to be stuck in jobs that they were overqualified for, to watch white people leapfrog past them at work, sometimes training new employees they knew might one day become their bosses. And it bred within each of them at least a basic level of resentment and mistrust.

Racial and economic sorting in the South Shore neighborhood continued through the 1970s, meaning that the student population only grew Blacker and poorer with each year. Failure is a feeling long before it becomes an actual result. It's vulnerability that breeds with self-doubt and then is escalated by fear. My mother maintained the sort of parental mind-set that I now recognize as brilliant and nearly impossible to emulate—a kind of unflappable Zen neutrality. She wasn't quick to judge and she wasn't quick to meddle. When things were bad, she gave us only a small amount of pity. When we'd done something great, we received just enough praise to know she was happy with us, but never so much that it became the reason we did what we did. We were not over-managed. Her goal was to push us out into the world. "I'm not raising babies," she'd tell us. "I'm raising adults." She and my dad offered guidelines rather than rules.

My Dad drove me to Princeton in the summer of 1981. 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.** Graduated! You're back where you started, in the city where you were born, only now you go to work on the forty-seventh floor in a downtown building with a wide plaza and a sculpture out front. You used to pass by it as a South Side kid riding the bus to high school, peering mutely out the window at the people who strode like titans to their jobs. Now you're one of them. You've worked yourself out of that bus and across the plaza and onto an upward-moving elevator so silent it seems to glide. You've joined the tribe. At the age of twenty-five, you have an assistant. You make more money than your parents ever have. Your co-workers are polite, educated, and mostly white. You wear an Armani suit and sign up for a subscription wine service. You make monthly payments on your law school loans and go to step aerobics after work.

Parts of the South Side had become desolate as businesses shut down and families continued to move out. The crack epidemic was only just reaching Chicago. Gangs battled for market share, recruiting young boys to run their street-corner operations, which, while dangerous, was far more lucrative than going to school. The city's murder rate was starting to tick upward—a sign of even more trouble to come. Barack was the first person I'd met at Sidley who had spent time in the barbershops, barbecue joints, and Bible-thumping Black parishes of the Far South Side. Before going to law school, he'd worked in Chicago for three years as a community organizer. Despite my resistance to the hype that had preceded him, I found myself admiring Barack for both his self-assuredness and his earnest demeanor.

• **Becoming Us**

Barack's mother had a brief marriage with a Kenyan with the same name. In 1971, Ann Dunham sent her son back to Oahu to attend private school and live with her parents. She was a free spirit who would go on to spend years moving between Hawaii and Indonesia. But skepticism didn't bother Barack, the same way long odds didn't seem to bother him. He was a unicorn, after all—shaped by his unusual name, his odd heritage, his hard-to-pin-down ethnicity, his missing dad, his unique mind. He was used to having to prove himself, pretty much anywhere he went. Barack graduated from Harvard and I from Princeton. We both started our careers as attorneys.

He'd been elected president of the Harvard Law Review for the coming academic year. He steered himself with a certainty I found astounding. All this inborn confidence was admirable, of course, but honestly, try living with it. For me, coexisting with Barack's strong sense of purpose—sleeping in the same bed with it, sitting at the breakfast table with it—was something to which I had to adjust, not because he flaunted it, exactly, but because it was so alive. His sense of purpose seemed like an unwitting challenge to my own. The first thing was that I hated being a lawyer. I wasn't suited to the work. I felt empty doing it, even if I was plenty good at it. The second was that I was deeply, delightfully in love with a guy whose forceful intellect and ambition could possibly end up swallowing mine. He saw marriage as the loving alignment of two people who could lead parallel lives but without forgoing any independent dreams or ambitions. For me, marriage was more like a full-on merger, a reconfiguring of two lives into one, with the well-being of a family taking precedence over any one agenda or goal.

My father was just fifty-five when he died. My friend, Suzanne had been twenty-six. 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. It was okay to make my leap into the unknown, the unknown wasn't going to kill me. I said yes to Barack, and shortly after that I said yes to Valerie Jarrett, accepting her offer to come work at city hall.

Barack and I got married. As we stood there with our future still unwritten, with every unknown still utterly unknown, just gripping each other's hands as we said our vows. Whatever was out there, we'd step into it together. Our honeymoon was meant to be restful, a low-key road trip in Northern California, involving wine, sleep, mud baths, and good food. We bought a condo on South Euclid Avenue. With Barack's encouragement, I took another risk and switched jobs again. This time to explore the kind of nonprofit work that had always intrigued me, finding a leadership role that would give me a chance to grow. Barack finished a book he was writing.

Dreams from My Father was published in the summer of 1995. A senate seat was vacant. If Barack believed he could do something in politics, who was I to get in his way? Who was I to stomp on the idea before he'd even tried it? With my new position at Public Allies, I had the chance to try to lower some walls, to get more students involved with the city and more city residents with the university, was one I found inspiring. And Malia Ann Obama dropped into our world. And then Sasha. We had two kids, three jobs, two cars, one condo, and what felt like no free time. I accepted the new position at the hospital; Barack continued teaching and legislating.

Barack Obama to speak to an audience of millions had been a mighty gamble. And yet, in his curious and roundabout way, he seemed destined for exactly this moment. "Must've been a good speech" became my refrain afterward. It was a joke between me and Barack, one I repeated often and with irony following that night—July 27, 2004. He was a little nervous and so was I, though we were both determined not to show it. This was how Barack operated anyway. The more pressure he was under, the calmer he seemed to get. It was seventeen minutes of Barack's deft and easy way with words, seventeen minutes of his deep, dazzling optimism on display. Looking back, I think it was then that I quietly began to let go of the idea that there was any reversing his course, that he'd ever belong solely to me and the girls. What was happening to us? I almost couldn't track it. In November, Barack was elected to the U.S. Senate, winning 70 percent of the vote statewide. Barack was flying back and forth to D.C. all the time now. He had a Senate office and an apartment in a shabby building on Capitol Hill. I lay alone in bed, feeling as if it were me against the world. I wanted Barack for our family. Everyone else seemed to want him for our country. I said yes because I believed that Barack could be a great president. **He was self-assured in ways that few people are. He had the intellect and discipline to do the job, the temperament to endure everything that would make it hard, and the rare degree of empathy that would keep him tuned carefully to the country's needs.** Barack was a Black man in America, after all. I didn't really think he could win.

We were asking for an investment of their faith, and now we had to deliver on what they'd brought us, carrying that enthusiasm through twenty months and fifty states and right into the White House. I had fifteen thousand more reasons to want Barack to win. Beginning in May, Barack had been assigned **Secret Service protection. It was the earliest a presidential candidate had been given a protective detail ever**, a full year and a half before he could even become president-elect, which said something about the nature and the seriousness of the threats against him. Barack now traveled in sleek black SUVs provided by the government and was trailed by a team of suited, ear-pieced men and women with guns. At home, an agent stood guard on our front porch. I was biased, of course, and personally I still would've been content to lose the election and reclaim some version of our old lives, but I also was feeling that as a country we truly needed his help. It was time to stop thinking about something as arbitrary as skin color. **We'd be foolish at this point not to put him in office. Still, he would inherit a mess.**

• **Becoming More**

Exactly on cue, something massive came around the corner: a snaking, vehicular army that included a phalanx of police cars and motorcycles, a number of black SUVs, two armored limousines with American flags mounted on their hoods, a hazmat mitigation truck, a counterassault team riding with machine guns visible, an ambulance, a signals truck equipped to detect incoming projectiles, several passenger vans, and another group of police escorts. The presidential motorcade. It was at least twenty vehicles long, moving in orchestrated formation, car after car after car, before finally the whole fleet rolled to a quiet halt, and the limos stopped directly in front of Barack's parked plane. "Every day for his entire presidency, yes," he said. "It's going to look like this all the time." I didn't know that he'd also, at all times, have a nearby helicopter ready to evacuate him, that sharpshooters would position themselves on rooftops along the routes he traveled, that a personal physician would always be with him in case of a medical problem, or that the vehicle he rode in contained a store of blood of the appropriate type in case he ever needed a transfusion. I was now married to one of the most heavily guarded human beings on earth. It was simultaneously relieving and distressing. The White House, with 132 rooms, 35 bathrooms, and 28 fireplaces spread out over six floors, all of it stuffed with more history than any single tour could begin to cover. We later visited the queen and found that Buckingham Palace is big—so big that it almost defies description. It has 775 rooms and is fifteen times the size of the White House. We lived in a kind of bubble now, sealed off at least partially from the everyday world. I couldn't remember the last time I'd run an errand by myself or walked in a park just for fun. All movements first required a discussion about both security and schedule. With a regular police escort, our vehicles no longer stopped at traffic lights. We rarely walked in or out of a building's front door when we could be rushed through a service entrance or loading dock on a side street. From the Secret Service's point of view, the less visible we could be, the better.

He now had about fifty staffers reading and answering his mail. He had Marine helicopter pilots standing by to fly him anywhere he needed to go, and a six-person team that organized thick briefing books so he could stay current on the issues and make educated decisions. Most amusing to me was the fact that he now had three personal military valets whose duties included standing watch over his closet, making sure his shoes were shined, his shirts pressed, his gym clothes always fresh and folded. Life in the White House was very different from life in the Hole. As an added bonus, he was showing up for dinner on time. On the day he took office, according to some indicators, the American economy was collapsing as fast as or faster than it had at the onset of the Great Depression. Nearly 750,000 jobs had been lost that January alone.

Sometimes Barack wanted to talk about work, though more often than not he avoided it. So much of his job was just plain grueling, the challenges huge and often seemingly intractable. General Motors was days away from filing for bankruptcy. North Korea had just conducted a nuclear test, and Barack was soon to leave for Egypt to deliver a major address meant to extend an open hand to Muslims around the world. Both of us,

it seemed, craved glimpses of regular life. We could, as First Couple, feel close and connected, enjoying a meal and a show in a city we both loved. The harder part was seeing the selfishness inherent in making that choice, knowing that it had required hours of advance meetings between security teams and local police. It had involved extra work for our staffers, for the theater, for the waiters at the restaurant, for the people whose cars had been diverted off Sixth Avenue, for the police on the street. It was part of the new heaviness we lived with. There were just too many people involved, too many affected, for anything to feel light. At the time Barack took office, nearly a third of American children were overweight or obese. Over the previous three decades, rates of childhood obesity had tripled. Kids were being diagnosed with high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes at record rates. Even military leaders were reporting that obesity was one of the most common disqualifiers for service.

When you're married to the president, you come to understand quickly that the world brims with chaos, that disasters unfurl without notice. The news could never be ignored: An earthquake devastates Haiti. A gasket blows five thousand feet underwater beneath an oil rig off the coast of Louisiana, sending millions of barrels of crude oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico. Revolution stirs in Egypt. A gunman opens fire in the parking lot of an Arizona supermarket, killing six people and maiming a U.S. congresswoman. **Two binders got delivered every evening, one for me and a much thicker, leather-bound one for Barack.** Each contained papers from our respective offices, which we were meant to read overnight. He had a hard and lonely job—the hardest and loneliest in the world, it often seemed to me—but he knew that he had an obligation to stay open, to shut nothing out. On the first Sunday in May 2011, After months of high-level intelligence gathering and weeks of meticulous preparation, after security briefings and risk assessments and a final tense decision, seven thousand miles from the White House and under cover of darkness, an elite team of U.S. Navy SEALs had stormed a mysterious compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, looking for Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden had been killed. No American lives had been lost. Barack had taken an enormous risk—one that could have cost him his presidency—and it had all gone okay.

We got to visit as a family Nelson Mandela near the end of his life. Surviving twenty-seven years of deprivation and isolation as a prisoner, having had many of his friends tortured and killed under the apartheid regime, Mandela managed **to negotiate—rather than fight**—with government leaders, brokering a miraculously peaceful transition to a true democracy in South Africa and ultimately becoming its first president. Mandela had gone to jail for his principles. He'd missed seeing his kids grow up, and then he'd missed seeing many of his grandkids grow up, too. All this without bitterness. All this still believing that the better nature of his country would at some point prevail. He'd worked and waited, tolerant and undiscouraged, to see it happen. I flew home propelled by that spirit.

As we moved toward Barack's reelection year in 2012, I felt that I couldn't and shouldn't rest. Barack and I both knew that the months of campaigning ahead would involve extra travel, extra strategizing, and extra worry. **Life was teaching me that progress and change happen slowly.** On Election Day—November 6, 2012—my fears sat with me quietly. I'd watched with wifely concern as he tried to do everything—soothe the worriers, finish out the campaign, and govern the nation all at once, including responding to a terrorist attack on American diplomats in Benghazi, Libya, and managing a massive federal response to Hurricane Sandy, which tore up the Eastern Seaboard just a week before the election. Five weeks later, a gunman walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and started killing children, twenty first graders and six educators torn apart by a semiautomatic rifle. In nearly four years as First Lady, I had consoled often. I'd prayed with people whose homes had been shredded by a tornado in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, huge swaths of the town turned to matchsticks in an instant. I'd put my arms around men, women, and children who'd lost loved ones to war in Afghanistan, to an extremist who'd shot up an Army base in Texas, and to violence on street corners near their own homes. In the previous four months, I'd paid visits to people who'd survived mass shootings at a movie theater in Colorado and inside a Sikh temple in Wisconsin. It was devastating, every time. **You belong. You matter. I think highly of you.**

It was possible, I knew, to live on two planes at once—to have one's feet planted in reality but pointed in the direction of progress. For more than six years now, Barack and I had lived with an awareness that we ourselves were a provocation. As minorities across the country were gradually beginning to take on more significant roles in politics, business, and entertainment, our family had become the most prominent example. Our presence in the White House had been celebrated by millions of Americans, but it also contributed to a reactionary sense of fear and resentment among others. On June 26, 2015—the Supreme Court of the United States issued a landmark decision, affirming that same-sex couples had the right to marry in all fifty states. Our staff had planned to illuminate the White House in the rainbow colors of the pride flag. The north drive was filled with government staff who'd stayed late to see the White House transformed in celebration of marriage equality. The deeper I got into the experience of being First Lady, **the more emboldened I felt to speak honestly and directly about what it meant to be marginalized** by race and gender. I tried to communicate the one message about myself and my station in the world that I felt might really mean something. Which was that I knew invisibility. I'd lived invisibility. I came from a history of invisibility. **Dominance, even the threat of it, is a form of dehumanization.** American voters had elected Donald Trump to succeed Barack as the next president of the United States. I wanted to not know that fact for as long as I possibly could. I just wish more people had turned out to vote. And I will always wonder about what led so many women, in particular, to reject an exceptionally qualified female candidate and instead choose a misogynist as their president. But the result was now ours to live with. We were the forty-fourth First Family and only the eleventh family to spend two full terms in the White House. The most enduring mark,

however, lay outside the walls. The garden had persisted through seven and a half years now, producing roughly two thousand pounds of food annually. And we had results. Forty-five million kids were eating healthier breakfasts and lunches; eleven million students were getting sixty minutes of physical activity every day through our Let's Move! Active Schools program. Through my work with Jill Biden on Joining Forces, we'd helped persuade businesses to hire or train more than 1.5 million veterans and military spouses. On education, Barack and I had leveraged billions of dollars to help girls around the world get the schooling they deserve. More than twenty-eight hundred Peace Corps volunteers were now trained to implement programs for girls internationally. Barack, meanwhile, had managed to reverse the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression. He'd helped to broker the Paris Agreement on climate change, brought tens of thousands of troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan, and led the effort to effectively shut down Iran's nuclear program. Twenty million more people had the security of health insurance. And we'd managed two terms in office without a major scandal. I loved my country for all the ways its story could be told. For almost a decade, I'd been privileged to move through it, experiencing its bracing contradictions and bitter conflicts, its pain and persistent idealism, and above all else its resilience. The joy of watching the unsung and invisible find some light.

• **Epilogue**

Barack and I walked out of the White House for the last time on January 20, 2017, accompanying Donald and Melania Trump to the inauguration ceremony. That day, I was feeling everything all at once—tired, proud, distraught, eager.