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A B2 BOOK

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CHICAGO

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At fifty-four, I am still in progress, and I hope that I always will be. 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.

— MICHELLE OBAMA

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Introduction

Michelle Obama is optimistic about America—though she would be the first to admit it’s not always an easy attitude to maintain. As the first Black First Lady of the United States, she had a unique vantage point from which to witness what America is capable of, both good and bad. With a family history that traces a line from slavery through emancipation and the Great Migration to the pinnacle of power in the United States, her story reflects tragic American injustices alongside the American hope of overcoming them.

In 1964 on Chicago’s South Side, Michelle LaVaughn Robinson was born to Marian Robinson, a secretary, and Fraser Robinson III, a city water plant worker who put in long hours despite struggling with multiple sclerosis. The family was working-class and lived in a small apartment where Michelle and her older brother Craig shared a room split by a wooden divider. It was a childhood full of warmth and freedom, with long days spent playing outside and a tradition of family meals. Marian and Fraser encouraged the children to explore and ask questions. Michelle recalls demanding why she had to eat eggs for breakfast, which she didn’t like. When her parents said it was because she needed protein, she lobbied, strategically, for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as a replacement—and won.

Her parents were frank about what it would take for a Black girl like Michelle to succeed—that along with her talent and intelligence, she would need exceptional perseverance to reach her goals. The Robinsons set their expectations high, both for her schoolwork and her responsibilities to her family and community. Michelle, who took her parents’ work ethic as a model, read by age four and was enrolled in a gifted program by sixth grade. She went on to attend Chicago’s first public magnet high school, where she was a member of the National Honor Society and served as student council treasurer.

Her diligence paid off. Despite the doubts of at least one college counselor, who told Michelle “I’m not sure you’re Princeton material,” she graduated as the salutatorian and was admitted to Princeton with a work-study scholarship. There, though she excelled in class, she often felt alienated at the majority-white school and sought refuge in her connections to the small group of other Black students. She carried these experiences with her to Harvard Law School, where she worked to increase diversity on campus.

After Harvard, Michelle returned to Chicago and took a position at the prestigious law firm Sidley Austin. Soon she was assigned to mentor a summer associate named

Barack Obama. Barack showed immediate interest in her, but she always declined, wary of dating a coworker. When she finally agreed to a date, the relationship quickly grew serious. Three years later, they were married.

Michelle, who had begun to question her satisfaction with corporate law, left the firm for public service roles in city government and nonprofits. These changes were due partly to Barack's encouragement to take risks and pursue her interests. But it was also the loss of her father, who died in 1991 at age 55, that caused her to reconsider her priorities. Her father had taught her the value of keeping your word and showing up for other people. She wanted to honor his memory by keeping these values at the center of her life and work.

Barack, in his own search for meaningful work, had set his sights on politics. Michelle was less than thrilled. She had a long-held skepticism about politicians, whom she felt acted mainly out of self-interest. But she trusted Barack and didn't want to stand in his way. Cautiously, she supported him through his successful campaign for Illinois State Senate in 1996.

The demands of Barack's political schedule became more difficult after the birth of their first daughter, Malia, in 1998. Three years after their second daughter, Sasha, was born in 2001, as Barack eyed a United States Senate seat, Michelle made him promise that if he lost the race, he would get out of politics altogether. But he didn't lose. Michelle juggled her own career with caring for the children in Chicago while Barack commuted to Washington. As his popularity increased following a speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Michelle was swayed by the idea that the truths he stood for could be put into action on the national political stage. Even so, she agreed to his presidential campaign without really believing he would win.

As she scaled back her career to accompany Barack on the campaign trail, Michelle's own fame grew. Though many voters responded to her humor and honesty, she was intensely scrutinized by the press and political opponents. Animosity has always been present in politics, but race played a large role in the attacks levied against the Obamas, which often implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—painted Michelle as the stereotype of the “angry Black woman.” Nevertheless, with the support of a broad and energetic coalition of voters, the Obamas were carried to the White House.

Michelle Obama carefully considered what kind of First Lady she would be. Despite the pressures of the public eye, she made it her mission to continue to present her authentic self. Aspects that made her unusual among first ladies—her race, her working-class upbringing, her prominent career path, her education (she was the third First Lady in history with a graduate degree)—allowed her to speak in a personal way to women of color, working mothers, girls who dreamed big, families who struggled to make ends meet, and so many others. Her two young daughters were always her priority in the White House, and being “mom-in-chief” also informed her public projects. The Let's Move! initiative, which aimed to provide children with access to and education about nutritious food, arose from the memory of her own difficulties ensuring Malia and Sasha had healthy meals while she worked full-time. Similarly, through Let Girls Learn, she

connected her hopes for her daughters' education to educational justice work for girls all over the world.

During her time in the White House, Michelle Obama's approval ratings often outstripped her husband's. As a private citizen, her popularity has remained high. In her memoir, *Becoming*, she shared her successes and struggles in more detail, hoping her story would be an inspiration. Despite being repeatedly nudged toward a political career, her focus remains on serving the public outside of elected office, by lending her name to get out the vote campaigns and starting new initiatives to fight for the causes close to her heart. Michelle carries no illusions about the difficulty of making change, especially for those whom society leaves most vulnerable. But she argues that it is precisely for this reason that optimism is a commitment worth making—that our faith in a better future is what helps us achieve it.

Part I



I Had Nothing or I Had Everything

PART ONE: PERSONAL LIFE

Growing Up in Chicago

CHICAGO IS THE city that taught me what it means to give back.

—Instagram, May 31, 2019

EVEN THOUGH OUR family was crammed into a tiny apartment, one of the greatest gifts [my mom] gave me was the freedom to explore and develop into my own person.

—Instagram, May 10, 2019

DANDY AND GRANDMA raised a beautiful family of five children, and to this day, their stories are woven together with my own; their sacrifices and successes are braided into everything I've become.

—Instagram, September 8, 2019

MY FATHER GAVE us absolutely everything. The laughs and lessons, the hugs, the heartache from losing him—they're all still there with me, every minute.

—Instagram, April 14, 2019

YEAH, I WENT to Princeton and Harvard, but the lens through which I see the world is the lens that I grew up with. I am the product of a working-class upbringing. I grew up on the South Side of Chicago in a working-class community.

—“Michelle Obama on Elitism,” *The New York Times*,
April 15, 2008

[GRANDMA] WAS PERHAPS my first example of a professional woman, showing me that being graceful and being in command weren't mutually exclusive.

—Instagram, September 8, 2019

TOGETHER, IN OUR cramped apartment on the South Side of Chicago, my family helped me see the value in our story, in my story, and in the larger story of our country.

—Instagram, May 22, 2018

EVERY PARENT'S FIRST job is to keep their kids safe. But sometimes that instinct can get out of hand.... No one understood that better than my mother, Marian Robinson. She gave my brother, Craig, and me the freedom to roam—not just in our neighborhood, but within our own minds and burgeoning moral codes.

—*The National, Amtrak, August/September 2019*

FOR AS LONG as I can remember, my big brother Craig has always had my back. He’s still one of my best friends today.

—Instagram, April 10, 2019

MY BROTHER AND I shared a bedroom that was divided in half by a wooden partition, giving us each our own little tiny rooms that fit just a twin bed and a small desk. So we didn’t have much space, but we had a whole lot of love.

—Let Girls Learn in London, June 16, 2015

WE WOULD PLAY outside all day long, from morning until the street lights came on.

—“First Lady: Nation’s Health ‘Starts With Our Kids’,” *Talk of the Nation*, June 12, 2012

WHEN I WAS still in elementary school, my dad bought my brother a pair of boxing gloves. But when he came home from the store, he was carrying not one, but two pairs of gloves. He wasn’t going to teach his son to punch without making sure his daughter could throw a left hook, too.

—*Vogue*, July 29, 2019

FROM AN EARLY age, [my mom] saw that I had a flame inside me, and she never tempered it. She made sure that I could keep it lit.

—Instagram, May 12, 2019

WHEN I SAW my grandparents and heard about their sacrifice, my notion was, ‘Oh, little girl, you better get that gold star. They’re counting on you.’

—*O, The Oprah Magazine*, December 2018

WE CONSTANTLY FELT the struggle to balance our family responsibilities and the schoolwork, the activities, and the goals that we had for ourselves. And through it all, my parents fully expected us to do both—to achieve our dreams, and be there for our family.

—Let Girls Learn in London, June 16, 2015

MY PARENTS TOLD me every day I could do anything—I could grow up to be a doctor, a lawyer, a scientist, whatever—but only if I worked as hard as I could to succeed in

school.

—**Let Girls Learn in London, June 16, 2015**

OUR VOICES HAD real value in our house. There's some people who raise kids and they use the philosophy 'kids are to be seen and not heard,' and it was just the opposite for us.

—**"Meet the Author: Michelle Obama," *Virgin*, December 11, 2018**

AS MY MOTHER used to say, 'Sometimes you just need to get out there and live your life, and have your mistakes where I can't see them, because I'm tired of watching you walk into the wall.'

—**"Oprah's 2020 Vision Tour Visionaries: Michelle Obama Interview," February 12, 2020**

WHEN I THINK of [Euclid Avenue, Chicago], when I think of our childhood, I think of music. Music was the backdrop of everything. We didn't do anything without music, and that's because our father was a big jazz lover and had a huge jazz album collection that he cherished.

—**"Growing Up Robinson with Craig and Michelle," *The Michelle Obama Podcast*, August 19, 2020**

THE MUSIC OF Motown is one of the great joys of my life—I love the soul, the beat, the energy.

—**Twitter, December 12, 2019**

DID YOU KNOW that Stevie Wonder is my favorite?

—**Carpool Karaoke, *The Late Late Show with James Corden*, July 20, 2016**

WHAT I SAW in our father was that nothing replaces getting on the phone and calling somebody, showing up for somebody.

—**"Growing Up Robinson with Craig and Michelle," *The Michelle Obama Podcast*, August 19, 2020**

THERE WERE VICTORY gardens everywhere. Families that were poor—folks that came from large families, like my parents, where there were six, seven kids each—you relied heavily on those gardens to incorporate vegetables. And that was a tradition.

—***Cooking Light*, February 6, 2015**

MY DAD WAS a shift worker, so there were some dinner times when he was at work, but whenever he was there we would sit around the table with the plastic tablecloth, and that's when we would catch up and we'd talk about what we were eating, talk about what was going on in the day.

—*Cooking Light*, February 6, 2015

MY BROTHER HAS been my hero from day one.

—“Michelle Obama says her brother is still their mother's favorite,” *Good Morning America*, November 13, 2018

[CRAIG'S] LIKE 6'6". He's my big brother, and it's hard to be much taller than me, but I look up to my brother.

—“Michelle Obama on Childhood Fire Drills and Taming Barack Obama's Tardiness,” *The Tonight Show*, December 19, 2018

I ADORED MY brother. I have been 'Craig Robinson's little sister' for most of my life. And I could have an attitude about it, but I am a fan too.

—“Michelle Obama says her brother is still their mother's favorite,” *Good Morning America*, November 13, 2018

UNLIKE MY MOM, we didn't learn how to cook. That wasn't something my mother stressed for me. We came from the generation where my mom wanted me to go to college and law school, and she always said, 'You'll learn how to cook,' but that's not something she pressed.

—*Cooking Light*, February 6, 2015

MY DAD, HE'S our rock. To grow up with a dad with a disability, who never complained, went to work every day, didn't miss a day of work. Never remember Dad being sick or talking about being sick. When you grow up with that kind of drive and those values, we just never wanted to disappoint him.

—“Michelle Obama says her brother is still their mother's favorite,” *Good Morning America*, November 13, 2018

I AM AND always will be a Robinson. That means a lot of things, but maybe most of all, it means I show my love by sharing stories. We are a soulful, boisterous bunch of South Siders, always at our best when crowded around a kitchen table, cracking jokes and catching each other up on the ups and downs of our lives.

—*The National*, Amtrak, August/September 2019

I GREW UP with a disabled dad in a too-small house with not much money in a starting-to-fail neighborhood, and I also grew up surrounded by love and music in a diverse city in a country where an education can take you far. I had nothing or I had everything. It depends on which way you want to tell it.

—*Becoming*, p. 416, November 2018

CHICAGO MADE ME who I am.

—Instagram, November 13, 2018