ALSO BY BARACK OBAMA

Dreams from My Father
The Audacity of Hope

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PREFACE

I BEGAN WRITING THIS BOOK shortly after the end of my presidency—after Michelle and I had boarded Air Force One for the last time and traveled west for a long-deferred break. The mood on the plane was bittersweet. Both of us were drained, physically and emotionally, not only by the labors of the previous eight years but by the unexpected results of an election in which someone diametrically opposed to everything we stood for had been chosen as my successor. Still, having run our leg of the race to completion, we took satisfaction in knowing that we'd done our very best—and that however much I'd fallen short as president, whatever projects I'd hoped but failed to accomplish, the country was in better shape now than it had been when I'd started. For a month, Michelle and I slept late, ate leisurely dinners, went for long walks, swam in the ocean, took stock, replenished our friendship, rediscovered our love, and planned for a less eventful but hopefully no less satisfying second act. And by the time I was ready to get back to work and sat down with a pen and yellow pad (I still like writing things out in longhand, finding that a computer gives even my roughest drafts too smooth a gloss and lends half-baked thoughts the mask of tidiness), I had a clear outline of the book in my head.

First and foremost, I hoped to give an honest rendering of my time in office—not just a historical record of key events that happened on my watch and important figures with whom I interacted but also an account of some of the political, economic, and cultural crosscurrents that helped determine the challenges my administration faced and the choices my team and I made in response. Where possible, I wanted to offer readers a sense of what it's like to *be* the president of the United States; I wanted to pull the curtain back a bit and remind people that, for all its power and pomp, the presidency is still just a job and our federal government is a human enterprise like any other, and the men

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and women who work in the White House experience the same daily mix of satisfaction, disappointment, office friction, screw-ups, and small triumphs as the rest of their fellow citizens. Finally, I wanted to tell a more personal story that might inspire young people considering a life of public service: how my career in politics really started with a search for a place to fit in, a way to explain the different strands of my mixed-up heritage, and how it was only by hitching my wagon to something larger than myself that I was ultimately able to locate a community and purpose for my life.

I figured I could do all that in maybe five hundred pages. I expected to be done in a year.

It's fair to say that the writing process didn't go exactly as I'd planned. Despite my best intentions, the book kept growing in length and scope—the reason why I eventually decided to break it into two volumes. I'm painfully aware that a more gifted writer could have found a way to tell the same story with greater brevity (after all, my home office in the White House sat right next to the Lincoln Bedroom, where a signed copy of the 272-word Gettysburg Address rests beneath a glass case). But each time that I sat down to write—whether it was to describe the early phases of my campaign, or my administration's handling of the financial crisis, or negotiations with the Russians on nuclear arms control, or the forces that led to the Arab Spring—I found my mind resisting a simple linear narrative. Often, I felt obliged to provide context for the decisions I and others had made, and I didn't want to relegate that background to footnotes or endnotes (I hate footnotes and endnotes). I discovered that I couldn't always explain my motivations just by referencing reams of economic data or recalling an exhaustive Oval Office briefing, for they'd been shaped by a conversation I'd had with a stranger on the campaign trail, a visit to a military hospital, or a childhood lesson I'd received years earlier from my mother. Repeatedly my memories would toss up seemingly incidental details (trying to find a discreet location to grab an evening smoke; my staff and I having a laugh while playing cards aboard Air Force One) that captured, in a way the public record never could, my lived experience during the eight years I spent in the White House.

Beyond the struggle to put words on a page, what I didn't fully anticipate was the way events would unfold during the three and a half years after that last flight on Air Force One. As I sit here, the country

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remains in the grips of a global pandemic and the accompanying economic crisis, with more than 178,000 Americans dead, businesses shuttered, and millions of people out of work. Across the nation, people from all walks of life have poured into the streets to protest the deaths of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of the police. Perhaps most troubling of all, our democracy seems to be teetering on the brink of crisis—a crisis rooted in a fundamental contest between two opposing visions of what America is and what it should be; a crisis that has left the body politic divided, angry, and mistrustful, and has allowed for an ongoing breach of institutional norms, procedural safeguards, and the adherence to basic facts that both Republicans and Democrats once took for granted.

This contest is not new, of course. In many ways, it has defined the American experience. It's embedded in founding documents that could simultaneously proclaim all men equal and yet count a slave as three-fifths of a man. It finds expression in our earliest court opinions, as when the chief justice of the Supreme Court bluntly explains to Native Americans that their tribe's rights to convey property aren't enforceable since the court of the conqueror has no capacity to recognize the just claims of the conquered. It's a contest that's been fought on the fields of Gettysburg and Appomattox but also in the halls of Congress, on a bridge in Selma, across the vineyards of California, and down the streets of New York—a contest fought by soldiers but more often by union organizers, suffragists, Pullman porters, student leaders, waves of immigrants, and LGBTQ activists, armed with nothing more than picket signs, pamphlets, or a pair of marching shoes. At the heart of this long-running battle is a simple question: Do we care to match the reality of America to its ideals? If so, do we really believe that our notions of self-government and individual freedom, equality of opportunity and equality before the law, apply to everybody? Or are we instead committed, in practice if not in statute, to reserving those things for a privileged few?

I recognize that there are those who believe that it's time to discard the myth—that an examination of America's past and an even cursory glance at today's headlines show that this nation's ideals have always been secondary to conquest and subjugation, a racial caste system and rapacious capitalism, and that to pretend otherwise is to be complicit in a game that was rigged from the start. And I confess that there have

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been times during the course of writing this book, as I've reflected on my presidency and all that's happened since, when I've had to ask myself whether I was too tempered in speaking the truth as I saw it, too cautious in either word or deed, convinced as I was that by appealing to what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature I stood a greater chance of leading us in the direction of the America we've been promised.

I don't know. What I can say for certain is that I'm not yet ready to abandon the possibility of America—not just for the sake of future generations of Americans but for all of humankind. For I'm convinced that the pandemic we're currently living through is both a manifestation of and a mere interruption in the relentless march toward an interconnected world, one in which peoples and cultures can't help but collide. In that world—of global supply chains, instantaneous capital transfers, social media, transnational terrorist networks, climate change, mass migration, and ever-increasing complexity—we will learn to live together, cooperate with one another, and recognize the dignity of others, or we will perish. And so the world watches America—the only great power in history made up of people from every corner of the planet, comprising every race and faith and cultural practice—to see if our experiment in democracy can work. To see if we can do what no other nation has ever done. To see if we can actually live up to the meaning of our creed.

The jury's still out. By the time this first volume is published, a U.S. election will have taken place, and while I believe the stakes could not be higher, I also know that no single election will settle the matter. If I remain hopeful, it's because I've learned to place my faith in my fellow citizens, especially those of the next generation, whose conviction in the equal worth of all people seems to come as second nature, and who insist on making real those principles that their parents and teachers told them were true but perhaps never fully believed themselves. More than anyone, this book is for those young people—an invitation to once again remake the world, and to bring about, through hard work, determination, and a big dose of imagination, an America that finally aligns with all that is best in us.

August 2020

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PART ONE

THE BET

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CHAPTER 1

OF ALL THE ROOMS and halls and landmarks that make up the White House and its grounds, it was the West Colonnade that I loved best.

For eight years that walkway would frame my day, a minute-long, open-air commute from home to office and back again. It was where each morning I felt the first slap of winter wind or pulse of summer heat; the place where I'd gather my thoughts, ticking through the meetings that lay ahead, preparing arguments for skeptical members of Congress or anxious constituents, girding myself for this decision or that slow-rolling crisis.

In the earliest days of the White House, the executive offices and the First Family's residence fit under one roof, and the West Colonnade was little more than a path to the horse stables. But when Teddy Roosevelt came into office, he determined that a single building couldn't accommodate a modern staff, six boisterous children, and his sanity. He ordered construction of what would become the West Wing and Oval Office, and over decades and successive presidencies, the colonnade's current configuration emerged: a bracket to the Rose Garden north and west—the thick wall on the north side, mute and unadorned save for high half-moon windows; the stately white columns on the west side, like an honor guard assuring safe passage.

As a general rule, I'm a slow walker—a Hawaiian walk, Michelle likes to say, sometimes with a hint of impatience. I walked differently, though, on the colonnade, conscious of the history that had been made there and those who had preceded me. My stride got longer, my steps a bit brisker, my footfall on stone echoed by the Secret Service detail trailing me a few yards back. When I reached the ramp at the end of the colonnade (a legacy of FDR and his wheelchair—I picture

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him smiling, chin out, cigarette holder clenched tight in his teeth as he strains to roll up the incline), I'd wave at the uniformed guard just inside the glass-paned door. Sometimes the guard would be holding back a surprised flock of visitors. If I had time, I would shake their hands and ask where they were from. Usually, though, I just turned left, following the outer wall of the Cabinet Room and slipping into the side door by the Oval Office, where I greeted my personal staff, grabbed my schedule and a cup of hot tea, and started the business of the day.

Several times a week, I would step out onto the colonnade to find the groundskeepers, all employees of the National Park Service, working in the Rose Garden. They were older men, mostly, dressed in green khaki uniforms, sometimes matched with a floppy hat to block the sun, or a bulky coat against the cold. If I wasn't running late, I might stop to compliment them on the fresh plantings or ask about the damage done by the previous night's storm, and they'd explain their work with quiet pride. They were men of few words; even with one another they made their points with a gesture or a nod, each of them focused on his individual task but all of them moving with synchronized grace. One of the oldest was Ed Thomas, a tall, wiry Black man with sunken cheeks who had worked at the White House for forty years. The first time I met him, he reached into his back pocket for a cloth to wipe off the dirt before shaking my hand. His hand, thick with veins and knots like the roots of a tree, engulfed mine. I asked how much longer he intended to stay at the White House before taking his retirement.

"I don't know, Mr. President," he said. "I like to work. Getting a little hard on the joints. But I reckon I might stay long as you're here. Make sure the garden looks good."

Oh, how good that garden looked! The shady magnolias rising high at each corner; the hedges, thick and rich green; the crab apple trees pruned just so. And the flowers, cultivated in greenhouses a few miles away, providing a constant explosion of color—reds and yellows and pinks and purples; in spring, the tulips massed in bunches, their heads tilted toward the sun; in summer, lavender heliotrope and geraniums and lilies; in fall, chrysanthemums and daisies and wildflowers. And always a few roses, red mostly but sometimes yellow or white, each one flush in its bloom.

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Each time I walked down the colonnade or looked out the window of the Oval Office, I saw the handiwork of the men and women who worked outside. They reminded me of the small Norman Rockwell painting I kept on the wall, next to the portrait of George Washington and above the bust of Dr. King: five tiny figures of varying skin tones, workingmen in dungarees, hoisted up by ropes into a crisp blue sky to polish the lamp of Lady Liberty. The men in the painting, the groundskeepers in the garden—they were guardians, I thought, the quiet priests of a good and solemn order. And I would tell myself that I needed to work as hard and take as much care in my job as they did in theirs.

With time, my walks down the colonnade would accumulate with memories. There were the big public events, of course—announcements made before a phalanx of cameras, press conferences with foreign leaders. But there were also the moments few others saw—Malia and Sasha racing each other to greet me on a surprise afternoon visit, or our dogs, Bo and Sunny, bounding through the snow, their paws sinking so deep that their chins were bearded white. Tossing footballs on a bright fall day, or comforting an aide after a personal hardship.

Such images would often flash through my mind, interrupting whatever calculations were occupying me. They reminded me of time passing, sometimes filling me with longing—a desire to turn back the clock and begin again. This wasn't possible on my morning walk, for time's arrow moved only forward then; the day's work beckoned; I needed to focus on only those things to come.

The night was different. On the evening walk back to the residence, my briefcase stuffed with papers, I would try to slow myself down, sometimes even stop. I'd breathe air laced with the scent of soil and grass and pollen, and listen to the wind or the patter of rain. I sometimes stared at the light against the columns, and the regal mass of the White House, its flag aloft on the roof, lit bright, or I'd look toward the Washington Monument piercing the black sky in the distance, occasionally catching sight of the moon and stars above it, or the twinkling of a passing jet.

In moments like these, I would wonder at the strange path—and the idea—that had brought me to this place.

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I DON'T COME from a political family. My maternal grandparents were midwesterners from mostly Scots-Irish stock. They would have been considered liberal, especially by the standards of the Depression-era Kansas towns they were born in, and they were diligent about keeping up with the news. "It's part of being a well-informed citizen," my grandmother, whom we all called Toot (short for Tutu, or Grandma, in Hawaiian), would tell me, peering over the top of her morning *Honolulu Advertiser*. But she and my grandfather had no firm ideological or partisan leanings to speak of, beyond what they considered to be common sense. They thought about work—my grandmother was vice president of escrow at one of the local banks, my grandfather a life insurance salesman—and paying the bills, and the small diversions that life had to offer.

And anyway, they lived on Oahu, where nothing seemed that urgent. After years spent in places as disparate as Oklahoma, Texas, and Washington State, they'd finally moved to Hawaii in 1960, a year after its statehood was established. A big ocean now separated them from riots and protests and other such things. The only political conversation I can recall my grandparents having while I was growing up had to do with a beachside bar: Honolulu's mayor had torn down Gramps's favorite watering hole in order to renovate the beachfront at the far end of Waikiki.

Gramps never forgave him for it.

My mother, Ann Dunham, was different, full of strong opinions. My grandparents' only child, she rebelled against convention in high school—reading beatnik poets and French existentialists, joyriding with a friend to San Francisco for days without telling anyone. As a kid, I'd hear from her about civil rights marches, and why the Vietnam War was a misguided disaster; about the women's movement (yes on equal pay, not as keen on not shaving her legs) and the War on Poverty. When we moved to Indonesia to live with my stepfather, she made sure to explain the sins of government corruption ("It's just stealing, Barry"), even if everyone appeared to be doing it. Later, during the summer I turned twelve, when we went on a month-long family vacation traveling across the United States, she insisted we watch the Watergate hearings every night, providing her own running

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commentary ("What do you expect from a McCarthyite?").

She didn't just focus on headlines either. Once, when she discovered I had been part of a group that was teasing a kid at school, she sat me down in front of her, lips pursed with disappointment.

"You know, Barry," she said (that's the nickname she and my grandparents used for me when I was growing up, often shortened to "Bar," pronounced "Bear"), "there are people in the world who think only about themselves. They don't care what happens to other people so long as they get what they want. They put other people down to make themselves feel important.

"Then there are people who do the opposite, who are able to imagine how others must feel, and make sure that they don't do things that hurt people.

"So," she said, looking me squarely in the eye. "Which kind of person do you want to be?"

I felt lousy. As she intended it to, her question stayed with me for a long time.

For my mother, the world was full of opportunities for moral instruction. But I never knew her to get involved in a political campaign. Like my grandparents, she was suspicious of platforms, doctrines, absolutes, preferring to express her values on a smaller canvas. "The world is complicated, Bar. That's why it's interesting." Dismayed by the war in Southeast Asia, she'd end up spending most of her life there, absorbing the language and culture, setting up micro-lending programs for people in poverty long before micro-credit became trendy in international development. Appalled by racism, she would marry outside her race not once but twice, and go on to lavish what seemed like an inexhaustible love on her two brown children. Incensed by societal constraints put upon women, she'd divorce both men when they proved overbearing or disappointing, carving out a career of her own choosing, raising her kids according to her own standards of decency, and pretty much doing whatever she damn well pleased.

In my mother's world, the personal really was political—although she wouldn't have had much use for the slogan.

None of this is to say that she lacked ambition for her son. Despite the financial strain, she and my grandparents would send me to

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Punahou, Hawaii's top prep school. The thought of me not going to college was never entertained. But no one in my family would ever have suggested I might hold public office someday. If you'd asked my mother, she might have imagined that I'd end up heading a philanthropic institution like the Ford Foundation. My grandparents would have loved to see me become a judge, or a great courtroom lawyer like Perry Mason.

"Might as well put that smart mouth of his to use," Gramps would say.

Since I didn't know my father, he didn't have much input. I vaguely understood that he had worked for the Kenyan government for a time, and when I was ten, he traveled from Kenya to stay with us for a month in Honolulu. That was the first and last I saw of him; after that, I heard from him only through the occasional letter, written on thin blue airmail paper that was preprinted to fold and address without an envelope. "Your mother tells me you think you may want to study architecture," one letter might read. "I think this is a very practical profession, and one that can be practiced anywhere in the world."

It was not much to go on.

As for the world beyond my family—well, what they would see for most of my teenage years was not a budding leader but rather a lackadaisical student, a passionate basketball player of limited talent, and an incessant, dedicated partyer. No student government for me; no Eagle Scouts or interning at the local congressman's office. Through high school, my friends and I didn't discuss much beyond sports, girls, music, and plans for getting loaded.

Three of these guys—Bobby Titcomb, Greg Orme, and Mike Ramos—remain some of my closest friends. To this day, we can laugh for hours over stories of our misspent youth. In later years, they would throw themselves into my campaigns with a loyalty for which I will always be grateful, becoming as skilled at defending my record as anyone on MSNBC.

But there were also times during my presidency—after they had watched me speak to a big crowd, say, or receive a series of crisp salutes from young Marines during a base tour—when their faces would betray a certain bafflement, as if they were trying to reconcile the graying man in a suit and tie with the ill-defined man-child they'd

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once known.

That guy? they must have said to themselves. *How the hell did that happen?*

And if my friends had ever asked me directly, I'm not sure I'd have had a good answer.

—

I DO KNOW that sometime in high school I started asking questions—about my father's absence and my mother's choices; about how it was I'd come to live in a place where few people looked like me. A lot of the questions centered on race: Why did Blacks play professional basketball but not coach it? What did that girl from school mean when she said she didn't think of me as Black? Why were all the Black men in action movies switchblade-wielding lunatics except for maybe the one decent Black guy—the sidekick, of course—who always seemed to end up getting killed?

But I wasn't concerned only with race. It was class as well. Growing up in Indonesia, I'd seen the yawning chasm between the lives of wealthy elites and impoverished masses. I had a nascent awareness of the tribal tensions in my father's country—the hatred that could exist between those who on the surface might look the same. I bore daily witness to the seemingly cramped lives of my grandparents, the disappointments they filled with TV and liquor and sometimes a new appliance or car. I noticed that my mother paid for her intellectual freedom with chronic financial struggles and occasional personal chaos, and I became attuned to the not-so-subtle hierarchies among my prep school classmates, mostly having to do with how much money their parents had. And then there was the unsettling fact that, despite whatever my mother might claim, the bullies, cheats, and self-promoters seemed to be doing quite well, while those she considered good and decent people seemed to get screwed an awful lot.

All of this pulled me in different directions. It was as if, because of the very strangeness of my heritage and the worlds I straddled, I was from everywhere and nowhere at once, a combination of ill-fitting parts, like a platypus or some imaginary beast, confined to a fragile habitat, unsure of where I belonged. And I sensed, without fully

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understanding why or how, that unless I could stitch my life together and situate myself along some firm axis, I might end up in some basic way living my life alone.

I didn't talk to anyone about this, certainly not my friends or family. I didn't want to hurt their feelings or stand out more than I already did. But I did find refuge in books. The reading habit was my mother's doing, instilled early in my childhood—her go-to move anytime I complained of boredom, or when she couldn't afford to send me to the international school in Indonesia, or when I had to accompany her to the office because she didn't have a babysitter.

Go read a book, she would say. *Then come back and tell me something you learned.*

There were a few years when I lived with my grandparents in Hawaii while my mother continued her work in Indonesia and raised my younger sister, Maya. Without my mother around to nag me, I didn't learn as much, as my grades readily attested. Then, around tenth grade, that changed. I still remember going with my grandparents to a rummage sale at the Central Union Church, across the street from our apartment, and finding myself in front of a bin of old hardcover books. For some reason, I started pulling out titles that appealed to me, or sounded vaguely familiar—books by Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes, Robert Penn Warren and Dostoyevsky, D. H. Lawrence and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Gramps, who was eyeing a set of used golf clubs, gave me a confused look when I walked up with my box of books.

"Planning to open a library?"

My grandmother shushed him, finding my sudden interest in literature admirable. Ever practical, she did suggest I might want to focus on my class assignments before digging into *Crime and Punishment.*

I ended up reading all those books, sometimes late, after I got home from basketball practice and a six-pack with my friends, sometimes after bodysurfing on a Saturday afternoon, sitting alone in Gramps's rickety old Ford Granada with a towel around my waist to avoid getting the upholstery wet. When I finished with the first set of books, I went to other rummage sales, looking for more. Much of what I read I only dimly understood; I took to circling unfamiliar

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words to look up in the dictionary, although I was less scrupulous about decoding pronunciations—deep into my twenties I would know the meaning of words I couldn't pronounce. There was no system to this, no rhyme or pattern. I was like a young tinkerer in my parents' garage, gathering up old cathode-ray tubes and bolts and loose wires, not sure what I'd do with any of it, but convinced it would prove handy once I figured out the nature of my calling.

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MY INTEREST IN books probably explains why I not only survived high school but arrived at Occidental College in 1979 with a thin but passable knowledge of political issues and a series of half-baked opinions that I'd toss out during late-night bull sessions in the dorm.

Looking back, it's embarrassing to recognize the degree to which my intellectual curiosity those first two years of college paralleled the interests of various women I was attempting to get to know: Marx and Marcuse so I had something to say to the long-legged socialist who lived in my dorm; Fanon and Gwendolyn Brooks for the smooth-skinned sociology major who never gave me a second look; Foucault and Woolf for the ethereal bisexual who wore mostly black. As a strategy for picking up girls, my pseudo-intellectualism proved mostly worthless; I found myself in a series of affectionate but chaste friendships.

Still, these halting efforts served a purpose: Something approaching a worldview took shape in my mind. I was helped along by a handful of professors who tolerated my iffy study habits and my youthful pretensions. I was helped even more by a handful of mostly older students—Black kids from the inner city, white kids who had scratched their way into college from small towns, first-generation Latino kids, international students from Pakistan or India or countries in Africa that teetered on the edge of chaos. They knew what mattered to them; when they spoke in class, their views were rooted in actual communities, actual struggles. *Here's what these budget cuts mean in my neighborhood. Let me tell you about my school before you complain about affirmative action. The First Amendment is great, but why does the U.S. government say nothing about the political prisoners in my country?*

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The two years I spent at Occidental represented the start of my political awakening. But that didn't mean I believed in politics. With few exceptions, everything I observed about politicians seemed dubious: the blow-dried hair, the wolfish grins, the bromides and self-peddling on TV while behind closed doors they curried the favor of corporations and other monied interests. They were actors in a rigged game, I decided, and I wanted no part of it.

What did capture my attention was something broader and less conventional—not political campaigns but social movements, where ordinary people joined together to make change. I became a student of the suffragists and early labor organizers; of Gandhi and Lech Wałesa and the African National Congress. Most of all I was inspired by the young leaders of the civil rights movement—not just Dr. King but John Lewis and Bob Moses, Fannie Lou Hamer and Diane Nash. In their heroic efforts—going door-to-door to register voters, sitting down at lunch counters, and marching to freedom songs—I saw the possibility of practicing the values my mother had taught me; how you could build power not by putting others down but by lifting them up. This was true democracy at work—democracy not as a gift from on high, or a division of spoils between interest groups, but rather democracy that was earned, the work of everybody. The result was not just a change in material conditions but a sense of dignity for people and communities, a bond between those who had once seemed far apart.

This, I decided, was an ideal worth pursuing. I just needed focus. After my sophomore year I transferred to Columbia University, figuring it would be a new start. For three years in New York, holed up in a series of dilapidated apartments, largely shorn of old friends and bad habits, I lived like a monk—reading, writing, filling up journals, rarely bothering with college parties or even eating hot meals. I got lost in my head, preoccupied with questions that seemed to layer themselves one over the next. What made some movements succeed where others failed? Was it a sign of success when portions of a cause were absorbed by conventional politics, or was it a sign that the cause had been hijacked? When was compromise acceptable and when was it selling out, and how did one know the difference?

Oh, how earnest I was then—how fierce and humorless! When I look back on my journal entries from this time, I feel a great affection

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for the young man that I was, aching to make a mark on the world, wanting to be a part of something grand and idealistic, which evidence seemed to indicate did not exist. This was America in the early 1980s, after all. The social movements of the previous decade had lost their vibrancy. A new conservatism was taking hold. Ronald Reagan was president; the economy was in recession; the Cold War was in full swing.

If I were to travel back in time, I might urge the young man I was to set the books aside for a minute, open the windows, and let in some fresh air (my smoking habit was then in full bloom). I'd tell him to relax, go meet some people, and enjoy the pleasures that life reserves for those in their twenties. The few friends I had in New York tried to offer similar advice.

"You need to lighten up, Barack."

"You need to get laid."

"You're so idealistic. It's great, but I don't know if what you're saying is really possible."

I resisted these voices. I resisted precisely because I feared they were right. Whatever I was incubating during those hours spent alone, whatever vision for a better world I'd let flourish in the hothouse of my youthful mind, it could hardly withstand even a simple conversational road test. In the gray light of a Manhattan winter and against the overarching cynicism of the times, my ideas, spoken aloud in class or over coffee with friends, came off as fanciful and far-fetched. And I knew it. In fact, it's one of the things that may have saved me from becoming a full-blown crank before I reached the age of twenty-two; at some basic level I understood the absurdity of my vision, how wide the gap was between my grand ambitions and anything I was actually doing in my life. I was like a young Walter Mitty; a Don Quixote with no Sancho Panza.

This, too, can be found in my journal entries from that time, a pretty accurate chronicle of all my shortcomings. My preference for navel-gazing over action. A certain reserve, even shyness, traceable perhaps to my Hawaiian and Indonesian upbringing, but also the result of a deep self-consciousness. A sensitivity to rejection or looking stupid. Maybe even a fundamental laziness.

I took it upon myself to purge such softness with a regimen of self-

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improvement that I've never entirely shed. (Michelle and the girls point out that to this day I can't get into a pool or the ocean without feeling compelled to swim laps. "Why don't you just wade?" they'll say with a snicker. "It's fun. Here…we'll show you how.") I made lists. I started working out, going for runs around the Central Park Reservoir or along the East River and eating cans of tuna fish and hard-boiled eggs for fuel. I stripped myself of excess belongings—who needs more than five shirts?

What great contest was I preparing for? Whatever it was, I knew I wasn't ready. That uncertainty, that self-doubt, kept me from settling too quickly on easy answers. I got into the habit of questioning my own assumptions, and this, I think, ultimately came in handy, not only because it prevented me from becoming insufferable, but because it inoculated me against the revolutionary formulas embraced by a lot of people on the left at the dawn of the Reagan era.

Certainly that was true when it came to questions of race. I experienced my fair share of racial slights and could see all too well the enduring legacy of slavery and Jim Crow anytime I walked through Harlem or parts of the Bronx. But, by dint of biography, I learned not to claim my own victimhood too readily and resisted the notion held by some of the Black folks I knew that white people were irredeemably racist.

The conviction that racism wasn't inevitable may also explain my willingness to defend the American idea: what the country was, and what it could become.

My mother and grandparents had never been noisy in their patriotism. Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in class, waving small flags on the Fourth of July—these were treated as pleasant rituals, not sacred duties (their attitudes toward Easter and Christmas were pretty much the same). Even Gramps's service in World War II was downplayed; he told me more about eating K rations—"Terrible!"—than he ever told me about the glory of marching in Patton's army.

And yet the pride in being American, the notion that America was the greatest country on earth—that was always a given. As a young man, I chafed against books that dismissed the notion of American exceptionalism; got into long, drawn-out arguments with friends who insisted the American hegemon was the root of oppression worldwide.

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I had lived overseas; I knew too much. That America fell perpetually short of its ideals, I readily conceded. The version of American history taught in schools, with slavery glossed over and the slaughter of Native Americans all but omitted—that, I did not defend. The blundering exercise of military power, the rapaciousness of multinationals—yeah, yeah, I got all that.

But the *idea* of America, the *promise* of America: this I clung to with a stubbornness that surprised even me. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"—*that* was my America. The America Tocqueville wrote about, the countryside of Whitman and Thoreau, with no person my inferior or my better; the America of pioneers heading west in search of a better life or immigrants landing on Ellis Island, propelled by a yearning for freedom.

It was the America of Thomas Edison and the Wright brothers, making dreams take flight, and Jackie Robinson stealing home. It was Chuck Berry and Bob Dylan, Billie Holiday at the Village Vanguard and Johnny Cash at Folsom State Prison—all those misfits who took the scraps that others overlooked or discarded and made beauty no one had seen before.

It was the America of Lincoln at Gettysburg, and Jane Addams toiling in a Chicago settlement home, and weary GIs at Normandy, and Dr. King on the National Mall summoning courage in others and in himself.

It was the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, crafted by flawed but brilliant thinkers who reasoned their way to a system at once sturdy and capable of change.

An America that could explain me.

"Dream on, Barack" is how those arguments with my college friends would usually end, as some smug bastard dropped a newspaper in front of me, its headlines trumpeting the U.S. invasion of Grenada or cuts in the school lunch program or some other disheartening news. "Sorry, but *that's* your America."

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SUCH WAS MY state when I graduated in 1983: big ideas and nowhere to go. There were no movements to join, no selfless leader

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to follow. The closest I could find to what I had in mind was something called "community organizing"—grassroots work that brought ordinary people together around issues of local concern. After bouncing around in a couple of ill-fitting jobs in New York, I heard about a position in Chicago, working with a group of churches that were trying to stabilize communities racked by steel plant closures. Nothing grand, but a place to start.

I've recorded elsewhere my organizing years in Chicago. Victories were small and transitory in the mostly Black working-class neighborhoods where I spent my time; my organization was a bit player in its attempts to address the changes that were sweeping not just Chicago but cities across the country—the decline of manufacturing, white flight, the rise of a discrete and disconnected underclass even as a new knowledge class began to fuel gentrification in the urban core.

But if my own impact on Chicago was small, the city changed the arc of my life.

For starters, it got me out of my own head. I had to listen to, and not just theorize about, what mattered to people. I had to ask strangers to join me and one another on real-life projects—fixing up a park, or removing asbestos from a housing project, or starting an after-school program. I experienced failure and learned to buck up so I could rally those who'd put their trust in me. I suffered rejections and insults often enough to stop fearing them.

In other words, I grew up—and got my sense of humor back.

I came to love the men and women I worked with: the single mom living on a ravaged block who somehow got all four children through college; the Irish priest who threw open the church doors every evening so that kids had an option other than gangs; the laid-off steelworker who went back to school to become a social worker. Their stories of hardship and their modest victories confirmed for me again and again the basic decency of people. Through them, I saw the transformation that took place when citizens held their leaders and institutions to account, even on something as small as putting in a stop sign on a busy corner or getting more police patrols. I noticed how people stood up a little straighter, saw themselves differently, when they learned that their voices mattered.

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Through them, I resolved the lingering questions of my racial identity. For it turned out there was no single way to be Black; just trying to be a good man was enough.

Through them, I discovered a community of faith—that it was okay to doubt, to question, and still reach for something beyond the here and now.

And because I heard in church basements and on bungalow porches the very same values—honesty, and hard work, and empathy—that had been drilled into me by my mother and grandparents, I came to trust the common thread that existed between people.

I can't help but wonder sometimes what would have happened if I had stayed with organizing, or at least some version of it. Like many local heroes I've met over the years, I might have managed to build up an institution that could reshape a neighborhood or a portion of the city. Anchored deep in a community, I might have steered money and imagination to change not the world but just that one place or that one set of kids, doing work that touched the lives of neighbors and friends in some measurable and useful way.

But I didn't stay. I left for Harvard Law School. And here's where the story gets murkier in my mind, with my motives open to interpretation.

—

I TOLD MYSELF THEN—and like to tell myself still—that I left organizing because I saw the work I was doing as too slow, too limited, not able to match the needs of the people I hoped to serve. A local job-training center couldn't make up for thousands of steel jobs lost by a plant closing. An after-school program couldn't compensate for chronically underfunded schools, or kids raised by their grandparents because both parents were doing time. On every issue, it seemed, we kept bumping up against somebody—a politician, a bureaucrat, some distant CEO—who had the power to make things better but didn't. And when we did get concessions from them, it was most often too little, too late. The power to shape budgets and guide policy was what we needed, and that power lay elsewhere.

Moreover, I came to realize that just two years before I arrived, there *had* been a movement for change in Chicago, one that was both

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social and political—a deep swift current that I had failed to fully appreciate because it hadn't conformed to my theories. It was the movement to elect Harold Washington as the city's first Black mayor.

It seemed like it sprang out of nowhere, as grassroots a political campaign as anything modern politics had ever seen. A small band of Black activists and business leaders, tired of the chronic bias and inequities of America's most segregated big city, decided to register a record number of voters, and then drafted a rotund congressman of prodigious talent but limited ambition to run for an office that appeared well out of reach.

Nobody thought it had a chance; even Harold was skeptical. The campaign operated hand to mouth, staffed largely by inexperienced volunteers. But then it happened—some form of spontaneous combustion. People who had never thought about politics, people who had never even voted, got swept up in the cause. Seniors and schoolchildren started sporting the campaign's blue buttons. A collective unwillingness to keep putting up with a steady accumulation of unfairness and slights—all the bogus traffic stops and secondhand textbooks; all the times Black folks walked past a Park District field house on the North Side and noticed how much nicer it was than the one in their neighborhood; all the times they'd been passed over for promotions or denied bank loans—gathered like a cyclone and toppled city hall.

By the time I arrived in Chicago, Harold was halfway through his first term. The city council, once a rubber stamp for Old Man Daley, had divided into racial camps, a controlling majority of white aldermen blocking every reform that Harold proposed. He tried to wheedle and cut deals, but they wouldn't budge. It was riveting television, tribal and raw, but it limited what Harold could deliver for those who'd elected him. It took a federal court redrawing a racially gerrymandered aldermanic map for Harold to finally get the majority and break the deadlock. And before he could realize many of the changes he'd promised, he was dead of a heart attack. A scion of the old order, Rich Daley, ultimately regained his father's throne.

Far from the center of the action, I watched this drama unfold and tried to absorb its lessons. I saw how the tremendous energy of the movement couldn't be sustained without structure, organization, and

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skills in governance. I saw how a political campaign based on racial redress, no matter how reasonable, generated fear and backlash and ultimately placed limits on progress. And in the rapid collapse of Harold's coalition after his death, I saw the danger of relying on a single charismatic leader to bring about change.

And yet what a force he was for those five years. Despite the roadblocks, Chicago changed on his watch. City services, from tree trimming to snow removal to road repair, came to be spread more evenly across wards. New schools were built in poor neighborhoods. City jobs were no longer subject solely to patronage, and the business community at long last started paying attention to the lack of diversity in their ranks.

Above all, Harold gave people hope. The way Black Chicagoans talked about him in those years was reminiscent of how a certain generation of white progressives talked about Bobby Kennedy—it wasn't so much what he did as how he made you feel. Like anything was possible. Like the world was yours to remake.

For me, this planted a seed. It made me think for the first time that I wanted to someday run for public office. (I wasn't the only one thus inspired—it was shortly after Harold's election that Jesse Jackson would announce he was running for president.) Wasn't this where the energy of the civil rights movement had migrated—into electoral politics? John Lewis, Andrew Young, Julian Bond—hadn't they run for office, deciding this was the arena where they could make the most difference? I knew there were pitfalls—the compromises, the constant money chase, the losing track of ideals, and the relentless pursuit of winning.

But maybe there was another way. Maybe you could generate the same energy, the same sense of purpose, not just within the Black community but across racial lines. Maybe with enough preparation, policy know-how, and management skills, you could avoid some of Harold's mistakes. Maybe the principles of organizing could be marshaled not just to run a campaign but to govern—to encourage participation and active citizenship among those who'd been left out, and to teach them not just to trust their elected leaders, but to trust one another, and themselves.

That's what I told myself. But it wasn't the whole story. I was also

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struggling with narrower questions of my own ambitions. As much as I'd learned from organizing, I didn't have much to show for it in terms of concrete accomplishments. Even my mother, the woman who'd always marched to a different drummer, worried about me.

"I don't know, Bar," she told me one Christmas. "You can spend a lifetime working outside institutions. But you might get more done trying to change those institutions from the inside.

"Plus, take it from me," she said with a rueful laugh. "Being broke is overrated."

And so it was that in the fall of 1988, I took my ambitions to a place where ambition hardly stood out. Valedictorians, student body presidents, Latin scholars, debate champions—the people I found at Harvard Law School were generally impressive young men and women who, unlike me, had grown up with the justifiable conviction that they were destined to lead lives of consequence. That I ended up doing well there I attribute mostly to the fact that I was a few years older than my classmates. Whereas many felt burdened by the workload, for me days spent in the library—or, better yet, on the couch of my off-campus apartment, a ball game on with the sound muted—felt like an absolute luxury after three years of organizing community meetings and knocking on doors in the cold.

There was also this: The study of law, it turned out, wasn't so different from what I'd done during my years of solitary musing on civic questions. What principles should govern the relationship between the individual and society, and how far did our obligations to others extend? How much should the government regulate the market? How does social change happen, and how can rules ensure that everybody has a voice?

I couldn't get enough of this stuff. I loved the back-and-forth, especially with the more conservative students, who despite our disagreements seemed to appreciate the fact that I took their arguments seriously. In classroom discussions, my hand kept shooting up, earning me some well-deserved eye rolls. I couldn't help it; it was as if, after years of locking myself away with a strange obsession—like juggling, say, or sword swallowing—I now found myself in circus school.

Enthusiasm makes up for a host of deficiencies, I tell my daughters —and at least that was true for me at Harvard. In my second year, I

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was elected the first Black head of the *Law Review,* which generated a bit of national press. I signed a contract to write a book. Job offers arrived from around the country, and it was assumed that my path was now charted, just as it had been for my predecessors at the *Law Review*: I'd clerk for a Supreme Court justice, work for a top law firm or the Office of the United States Attorney, and when the time was right, I could, if I wanted to, try my hand at politics.

It was heady stuff. The only person who questioned this smooth path of ascent seemed to be me. It had come too quickly. The big salaries being dangled, the attention—it felt like a trap.

Luckily I had time to consider my next move. And anyway, the most important decision ahead would end up having nothing to do with law.

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CHAPTER 2

MICHELLE LAVAUGHN ROBINSON was already practicing law when we met. She was twenty-five years old and an associate at Sidley & Austin, the Chicago-based firm where I worked the summer after my first year of law school. She was tall, beautiful, funny, outgoing, generous, and wickedly smart—and I was smitten almost from the second I saw her. She'd been assigned by the firm to look out for me, to make sure I knew where the office photocopier was and that I generally felt welcome. That also meant we got to go out for lunches together, which allowed us to sit and talk—at first about our jobs and eventually about everything else.

Over the course of the next couple of years, during school breaks and when Michelle came to Harvard as part of the Sidley recruiting team, the two of us went out to dinner and took long walks along the Charles River, talking about movies and family and places in the world we wanted to see. When her father unexpectedly died of complications arising from multiple sclerosis, I flew out to be with her, and she comforted me when I learned that Gramps had advanced prostate cancer.

In other words, we became friends as well as lovers, and as my law school graduation approached, we gingerly circled around the prospect of a life together. Once, I took her to an organizing workshop I was conducting, a favor for a friend who ran a community center on the South Side. The participants were mostly single moms, some on welfare, few with any marketable skills. I asked them to describe their world as it was and as they would like it to be. It was a simple exercise I'd done many times, a way for people to bridge the reality of their communities and their lives with the things they could conceivably change. Afterward, as we were walking to the car, Michelle laced her arm through mine and said she'd been touched by my easy rapport with the women.

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"You gave them hope."

"They need more than hope," I said. I tried to explain to her the conflict that I was feeling: between working for change within the system and pushing against it; wanting to lead but wanting to empower people to make change for themselves; wanting to be in politics but not of it.

Michelle looked at me. "The world as it is, and the world as it should be," she said softly.

"Something like that."

Michelle was an original; I knew nobody quite like her. And although it hadn't happened yet, I was starting to think I might ask her to marry me. For Michelle, marriage was a given—the organic next step in a relationship as serious as ours. For me, someone who'd grown up with a mother whose marriages didn't last, the need to formalize a relationship had always felt less pressing. Not only that, but in those early years of our courtship, our arguments could be fierce. As cocksure as I could be, she never gave ground. Her brother, Craig, a basketball star at Princeton who had worked in investment banking before getting into coaching, used to joke that the family didn't think Michelle ("Miche," they called her) would ever get married because she was too tough—no guy could keep up with her. The weird thing was, I liked that about her; how she constantly challenged me and kept me honest.

And what was Michelle thinking? I imagine her just before we met, very much the young professional, tailored and crisp, focused on her career and doing things the way they're supposed to be done, with no time for nonsense. And then this strange guy from Hawaii with a scruffy wardrobe and crazy dreams wanders into her life. That was part of my appeal, she would tell me, how different I was from the guys she'd grown up with, the men she had dated. Different even from her own father, whom she adored: a man who had never finished community college, who had been struck by MS in his early thirties, but who had never complained and had gone to work every single day and made all of Michelle's dance recitals and Craig's basketball games, and was always present for his family, truly his pride and joy.

Life with me promised Michelle something else, those things that she saw she had missed as a child. Adventure. Travel. A breaking of

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constraints. Just as her roots in Chicago—her big, extended family, her common sense, her desire to be a good mom above all else—promised an anchor that I'd been missing for much of my youth. We didn't just love each other and make each other laugh and share the same basic values—there was symmetry there, the way we complemented each other. We could have each other's back, guard each other's blind spots. We could be a team.

Of course, that was another way of saying we were very different, in experience and in temperament. For Michelle, the road to the good life was narrow and full of hazards. Family was all you could count on, big risks weren't taken lightly, and outward success—a good job, a nice house—never made you feel ambivalent because failure and want were all around you, just a layoff or a shooting away. Michelle never worried about selling out, because growing up on the South Side meant you were always, at some level, an outsider. In her mind, the roadblocks to making it were plenty clear; you didn't have to go looking for them. The doubts arose from having to prove, no matter how well you did, that you belonged in the room—prove it not just to those who doubted you but to yourself.

—

AS LAW SCHOOL was coming to an end, I told Michelle of my plan. I wouldn't clerk. Instead, I'd move back to Chicago, try to keep my hand in community work while also practicing law at a small firm that specialized in civil rights. If a good opportunity presented itself, I said, I could even see myself running for office.

None of this came as a surprise to her. She trusted me, she said, to do what I believed was right.

"But I need to tell you, Barack," she said, "I think what you want to do is really hard. I mean, I wish I had your optimism. Sometimes I do. But people can be so selfish and just plain ignorant. I think a lot of people don't want to be bothered. And I think politics seems like it's full of people willing to do anything for power, who just think about themselves. Especially in Chicago. I'm not sure you'll ever change that."

"I can try, can't I?" I said with a smile. "What's the point of having a fancy law degree if you can't take some risks? If it doesn't work, it

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doesn't work. I'll be okay. We'll be okay."

She took my face in her hands. "Have you ever noticed that if there's a hard way and an easy way, you choose the hard way every time? Why do you think that is?"

We both laughed. But I could tell Michelle thought she was onto something. It was an insight that would carry implications for us both.

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AFTER SEVERAL YEARS of dating, Michelle and I were married at Trinity United Church of Christ on October 3, 1992, with more than three hundred of our friends, colleagues, and family members crammed happily into the pews. The service was officiated by the church's pastor, Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., whom I'd come to know and admire during my organizer days. We were joyful. Our future together was officially beginning.

I had passed the bar and then delayed my law practice for a year to run Project VOTE! in advance of the 1992 presidential race—one of the largest voter-registration drives in Illinois history. After returning from our honeymoon on the California coast, I taught at the University of Chicago Law School, finished my book, and officially joined Davis, Miner, Barnhill & Galland, a small civil rights firm that specialized in employment discrimination cases and did real estate work for affordable housing groups. Michelle, meanwhile, had decided she'd had enough of corporate law and made a move to the City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development, working there for a year and a half before agreeing to direct a nonprofit youth leadership program called Public Allies.

Both of us enjoyed our jobs and the people we worked with, and as time went on, we got involved with various civic and philanthropic efforts. We took in ball games and concerts and shared dinners with a widening circle of friends. We were able to buy a modest but cozy condo in Hyde Park, right across from Lake Michigan and Promontory Point, just a few doors down from where Craig and his young family lived. Michelle's mother, Marian, still lived in the family's South Shore house, less than fifteen minutes away, and we visited often, feasting on her fried chicken and greens and red velvet cake and barbecue made by Michelle's Uncle Pete. Once we were

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stuffed, we'd sit around the kitchen and listen to her uncles tell stories of growing up, the laughter louder as the evening wore on, while cousins and nephews and nieces bounced on the sofa cushions until they were sent out into the yard.

Driving home in the twilight, Michelle and I sometimes talked about having kids of our own—what they might be like, or how many, and what about a dog?—and imagined all the things we'd do together as a family.

A normal life. A productive, happy life. It should have been enough.

—

BUT THEN IN the summer of 1995, a political opportunity arose suddenly, through a strange chain of events. The sitting congressman from the Second District of Illinois, Mel Reynolds, had been indicted on several charges, including allegedly having sex with a sixteen-year-old campaign volunteer. If he was convicted, a special election would be promptly held to replace him.

I didn't live in the district, and I lacked the name recognition and base of support to launch a congressional race. The state senator from our area, Alice Palmer, however, was eligible to run for the seat and, not long before the congressman was convicted in August, she threw her hat into the ring. Palmer, an African American former educator with deep roots in the community, had a solid if unremarkable record and was well liked by progressives and some of the old-time Black activists who had helped Harold get elected; and although I didn't know her, we had mutual friends. Based on the work I'd done for Project VOTE! I was asked to help her nascent campaign, and as the weeks went by, several people encouraged me to think about filing to run for Alice's soon-to-be-vacant senate seat.

Before talking to Michelle, I made a list of pros and cons. A state senator wasn't a glamorous post—most people had no idea who their state legislators were—and Springfield, the state capital, was notorious for old-style pork-barreling, logrolling, payola, and other political mischief. On the other hand, I had to start somewhere and pay my dues. Also, the Illinois state legislature was in session only a few weeks out of the year, which meant I could continue teaching and working

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at the law firm.

Best of all, Alice Palmer agreed to endorse me. With Reynolds's trial still pending, it was difficult to know how the timing would work. Technically it would be possible for Alice to run for Congress while keeping the option of retaining her state seat if she lost the bigger race, but she insisted to me and others that she was done with the senate, ready to move on. Along with an offer of support from our local alderman, Toni Preckwinkle, who boasted the best organization in the area, my chances looked better than good.

I went to Michelle and made my pitch. "Think of it as a test run," I said.

"Hmph."

"Dipping our toes in the water."

"Right."

"So what do you think?"

She pecked me on the cheek. "I think this is something you want to do, so you should do it. Just promise me I won't have to spend time in Springfield."

I had one last person to check in with before I pulled the trigger. Earlier in the year, my mother had fallen sick and had been diagnosed with uterine cancer.

The prognosis wasn't good. At least once a day, the thought of losing her made my heart constrict. I'd flown to Hawaii right after she'd gotten the news and had been relieved to find that she looked like herself and was in good spirits. She confessed she was scared but wanted to be as aggressive as possible with her treatment.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said, "until you give me some grandchildren."

She received the news of my possible state senate run with her usual enthusiasm, insisting I tell her every detail. She acknowledged it would be a lot of work, but my mother was never one to see hard work as anything but good.

"Make sure Michelle's all right with it," she said. "Not that I'm the marriage expert. And don't you dare use me as an excuse not to do it. I've got enough to deal with without feeling like everybody's putting their lives on hold. It's morbid, understand?"

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"Got it."

Seven months after her diagnosis, the situation would turn grim. In September, Michelle and I flew to New York to join Maya and my mother for a consultation with a specialist at Memorial Sloan Kettering. Midway through chemo now, she was physically transformed. Her long dark hair was gone; her eyes looked hollow. Worse, the specialist's assessment was that her cancer was at stage four and that treatment options were limited. Watching my mother suck on ice cubes because her saliva glands had shut down, I did my best to put on a brave face. I told her funny stories about my work and recounted the plot of a movie I'd just seen. We laughed as Maya—nine years younger than me and then studying at New York University—reminded me what a bossy big brother I'd been. I held my mother's hand, making sure she was comfortable before she settled in to rest. Then I went back to the hotel room and cried.

It was on that trip to New York that I suggested my mother come stay with us in Chicago; my grandmother was too old to care for her full-time. But my mother, forever the architect of her own destiny, declined. "I'd rather be someplace familiar and warm," she said, looking out the window. I sat there feeling helpless, thinking about the long path she had traveled in her life, how unexpected each step along the way must have been, so full of happy accidents. I'd never once heard her dwell on the disappointments. Instead she seemed to find small pleasures everywhere.

Until this.

"Life is strange, isn't it?" she said softly.

It was.

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FOLLOWING MY MOTHER'S advice, I threw myself into my maiden political campaign. It makes me laugh to think back on what a bare-bones operation it was—not much more sophisticated than a campaign for student council. There were no pollsters, no researchers, no TV or radio buys. My announcement, on September 19, 1995, was at the Ramada Inn in Hyde Park, with pretzels and chips and a couple hundred supporters—probably a quarter of whom were related to Michelle. Our campaign literature consisted of an eight-by-four-inch

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card with what looked like a passport picture of me, a few lines of biography, and four or five bullet points that I'd tapped out on my computer. I'd had it printed at Kinko's.

I did make a point of hiring two political veterans I'd met working on Project VOTE! Carol Anne Harwell, my campaign manager, was tall and sassy, in her early forties and on loan from a West Side ward office. Although she came off as irrepressibly cheerful, she knew her way around Chicago's bare-knuckle politics. Ron Davis, a big grizzly bear of a man, was our field director and petition expert. He had a gray-flecked Afro, scraggly facial hair, and thick wire-rimmed glasses, his bulk hidden by the untucked black shirt he seemed to wear every single day.

Ron proved to be indispensable: Illinois had strict ballot access rules, designed to make life hard on challengers who didn't have party support. To get on the ballot, a candidate needed more than seven hundred registered voters who lived in the district to sign a petition that was circulated and attested to by someone who also lived in the district. A "good" signature had to be legible, accurately linked to a local address, and from a registered voter. I still remember the first time a group of us gathered around our dining room table, Ron huffing and puffing as he passed out clipboards with the petitions attached, along with voter files and a sheet of instructions. I suggested that before we talked about petitions, we should organize some meet-the-candidate forums, maybe draft some position papers. Carol and Ron looked at each other and laughed.

"Boss, let me tell you something," Carol said. "You can save all that League of Women Voters shit for after the election. Right now, the only thing that matters is these petitions. The folks you're running against, they're gonna go through these things with a fine-tooth comb to see if your signatures are legit. If they're not, you don't get to play. And I guarantee you, no matter how careful we are, about half of the signatures will end up being bad, which is why we got to get at least twice as many as they say we do."

"Four times as many," Ron corrected, handing me a clipboard.

Duly chastened, I drove out to one of the neighborhoods Ron had selected to gather signatures. It felt just like my early organizing days, going from house to house, some people not home or unwilling to

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open the door; women in hair curlers with kids scampering about, men doing yard work; occasionally young men in T-shirts and do-rags, breath thick with alcohol as they scanned the block. There were those who wanted to talk to me about problems at the local school or the gun violence that was creeping into what had been a stable, working-class neighborhood. But mostly folks would take the clipboard, sign it, and try as quickly as possible to get back to what they'd been doing.

If knocking on doors was pretty standard fare for me, the experience was new to Michelle, who gamely dedicated part of every weekend to helping out. And while she'd often collect more signatures than I did—with her megawatt smile and stories of growing up just a few blocks away—there were no smiles two hours later when we'd get back into the car to drive home.

"All I know," she said at one point, "is that I must really love you to spend my Saturday morning doing this."

Over the course of several months, we managed to collect four times the number of required signatures. When I wasn't at the firm or teaching, I visited block clubs, church socials, and senior citizen homes, making my case to voters. I wasn't great. My stump speech was stiff, heavy on policy speak, short on inspiration and humor. I also found it awkward to talk about myself. As an organizer, I'd been trained to always stay in the background.

I did get better, though, more relaxed, and slowly the ranks of my supporters grew. I rounded up endorsements from local officials, pastors, and a handful of progressive organizations; I even got a few position papers drafted. And I'd like to say that this is how my first campaign ended—the plucky young candidate and his accomplished, beautiful, and forbearing wife, starting with a few friends in their dining room, rallying the people around a new brand of politics.

But that's not how it happened. In August 1995, our disgraced congressman was finally convicted and sentenced to prison; a special election was called for late November. With his seat empty and the timeline officially set, others besides Alice Palmer jumped into the congressional race, among them Jesse Jackson, Jr., who had drawn national attention for the stirring introduction of his father at the 1988 Democratic National Convention. Michelle and I knew and liked

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Jesse Jr. His sister Santita had been one of Michelle's best friends in high school and the maid of honor at our wedding. He was popular enough that his announcement immediately changed the dynamics of the race, putting Alice at an enormous disadvantage.

And because the special congressional election was now going to take place a few weeks before petitions for Alice's senate seat had to be filed, my team started to worry.

"You better check again to make sure Alice isn't going to mess with you if she loses to Jesse Jr.," Ron said.

I shook my head. "She promised me she wasn't running. Gave me her word. And she's said it publicly. In the papers, even."

"That's fine, Barack. But can you just check again, please?"

I did, phoning Alice and once again getting her assurance that regardless of what happened with her congressional run, she still intended to leave state politics.

But when Jesse Jr. handily won the special election, with Alice coming in a distant third, something shifted. Stories started surfacing in the local press about a "Draft Alice Palmer" campaign. A few of her longtime supporters asked for a meeting, and when I showed up they advised me to get out of the race. The community couldn't afford to give up Alice's seniority, they said. I should be patient; my turn would come. I stood my ground—I had volunteers and donors who had already invested a lot in the campaign, after all; I had stuck with Alice even when Jesse Jr. got in—but the room was unmoved. By the time I spoke to Alice, it was clear where events were headed. The following week she held a press conference in Springfield, announcing that she was filing her own last-minute petitions to get on the ballot and retain her seat.

"Told ya," Carol said, taking a drag from her cigarette and blowing a thin plume of smoke to the ceiling.

I felt disheartened and betrayed, but I figured all was not lost. We had built up a good organization over the previous few months, and almost all the elected officials who'd endorsed me said they'd stick with us. Ron and Carol were less sanguine.

"Hate to tell you, boss," Carol said, "but most folks still have no idea who you are. Shit, they don't know who she is either, but—no offense, now—'Alice Palmer' is a hell of a lot better ballot name than

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'Barack Obama.' "

I saw her point but told them we were going to see things through, even as a number of prominent Chicagoans were suddenly urging me to drop out of the race. And then one afternoon Ron and Carol arrived at my house, breathless and looking like they'd won the lottery.

"Alice's petitions," Ron said. "They're terrible. Worst I've ever seen. All those Negroes who were trying to bully you out of the race, they didn't bother actually doing the work. This could get her knocked off the ballot."

I looked through the informal tallies Ron and our campaign volunteers had done. It was true; the petitions Alice had submitted appeared to be filled with invalid signatures: people whose addresses were outside the district, multiple signatures with different names but the same handwriting. I scratched my head. "I don't know, guys…"

"You don't know what?" Carol said.

"I don't know if I want to win like this. I mean, yeah, I'm pissed about what's happened. But these ballot rules don't make much sense. I'd rather just beat her."

Carol pulled back, her jaw tightening. "This woman gave you her *word,* Barack!" she said. "We've all been busting our asses out here, based on that promise. And now, when she tries to screw you, and can't even do *that* right, you're going to let her get away with it? You don't think they would knock you off the ballot in a second if they could?" She shook her head. "Naw, Barack. You're a good guy… that's why we believe in you. But if you let this go, you might as well go back to being a professor and whatnot, 'cause politics is not for you. You will get chewed up and won't be doing anybody a damn bit of good."

I looked at Ron, who said quietly, "She's right."

I leaned back in my chair and lit a cigarette. I felt suspended in time, trying to decipher what I was feeling in my gut. How much did I want this? I reminded myself about what I believed I could get done in office, how hard I was willing to work if I got the chance.

"Okay," I said finally.

"Okay!" Carol said, her smile returning. Ron gathered up his

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papers and put them in his bag.

It would take a couple of months for the process to play out, but with my decision that day, the race was effectively over. We filed our challenge with the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners and when it became clear the board was going to rule in our favor, Alice dropped out. While we were at it, we knocked several other Democrats with bad petitions off the ballot as well. Without a Democratic opponent and with only token Republican opposition, I was on my way to the state senate.

Whatever vision I had for a more noble kind of politics, it would have to wait.

I suppose there are useful lessons to draw from that first campaign. I learned to respect the nuts and bolts of politics, the attention to detail required, the daily grind that might prove the difference between winning and losing. It confirmed, too, what I already knew about myself: that whatever preferences I had for fair play, I didn't like to lose.

But the lesson that stayed with me most had nothing to do with campaign mechanics or hardball politics. It had to do with the phone call I received from Maya in Hawaii one day in early November, well before I knew how my race would turn out.

"She's taken a bad turn, Bar," Maya said.

"How bad?"

"I think you need to come now."

I already knew that my mother's condition had been deteriorating; I'd spoken to her just a few days before. Hearing a new level of pain and resignation in her voice, I had booked a flight to Hawaii for the following week.

"Can she talk?" I asked Maya now.

"I don't think so. She's fading in and out."

I hung up the phone and called the airline to reschedule my flight for first thing in the morning. I called Carol to cancel some campaign events and run through what needed to be done in my absence. A few hours later, Maya called back.

"I'm sorry, honey. Mom's gone." She had never regained consciousness, my sister told me; Maya had sat at her hospital bedside,

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reading out loud from a book of folktales as our mother slipped away.

We held a memorial service that week, in the Japanese garden behind the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii. I remembered playing there as a child, my mother sitting in the sun and watching me as I tumbled in the grass, hopped over the rock steps, and caught tadpoles in the stream that ran down one side. Afterward, Maya and I drove out to the lookout near Koko Head and scattered her ashes into the sea, the waves crashing against the rocks. And I thought about my mother and sister alone in that hospital room, and me not there, so busy with my grand pursuits. I knew I could never get that moment back. On top of my sorrow, I felt a great shame.

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UNLESS YOU LIVE at the southern tip of Chicago, the quickest route to Springfield is via I-55. During rush hour, heading out of downtown and through the western suburbs, traffic slows to a crawl; but once you get past Joliet things open up, a straight, smooth spread of asphalt cutting southwest through Bloomington (home of State Farm insurance and Beer Nuts) and Lincoln (named after the president, who helped incorporate the town when he was still just a lawyer) and taking you past miles and miles of corn.

For almost eight years I made this drive, usually alone, usually in about three and a half hours, trekking back and forth to Springfield for a few weeks in the fall and through much of the winter and early spring, when the Illinois legislature did the bulk of its work. I'd drive down Tuesday night after dinner and get back home Thursday evening or Friday morning. Cell phone service dropped about an hour outside of Chicago, and the only signals that registered on the dial after that were talk radio and Christian music stations. To stay awake, I listened to audiobooks, the longer the better—novels mostly (John le Carré and Toni Morrison were favorites) but also histories, of the Civil War, the Victorian era, the fall of the Roman Empire.

When asked, I'd tell skeptical friends how much I was learning in Springfield, and, for the first few years at least, it was true. Of all fifty states, Illinois best represented the demographics of the nation, home to a teeming metropolis, sprawling suburbs, farm country, factory towns, and a downstate region considered more southern than

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northern. On any given day, under the high dome of the capitol, you'd see a cross section of America on full display, a Carl Sandburg poem come to life. There were inner-city kids jostling one another on a field trip, well-coiffed bankers working their flip phones, farmers in seed caps looking to widen the locks that allowed industrial barges to take their crops to market. You'd see Latina moms looking to fund a new day-care center and middle-aged biker crews, complete with muttonchops and leather jackets, trying to stop yet another legislative effort to make them wear helmets.

I kept my head down in those early months. Some of my colleagues were suspicious of my odd name and Harvard pedigree, but I did my homework and helped raise money for other senators' campaigns. I got to know my fellow legislators and their staffers not just in the senate chamber but also on the basketball court and at golf outings and during the weekly bipartisan poker games we organized—with a two-dollar, three-raise limit, the room thick with smoke, trash talk, and the slow fizz of yet another beer can being opened.

It helped that I already knew the senate minority leader, a hefty Black man in his sixties named Emil Jones. He'd come up through the ranks of one of the traditional ward organizations under Daley Sr. and represented the district where I'd once organized. That's how we first met: I'd brought a group of parents to his office, demanding a meeting to get a college prep program funded for area youth. Rather than stiff-arm us, he invited us in.

"You may not know it," he said, "but I been waiting for y'all to show up!" He explained how he'd never had the chance to graduate from college himself; he wanted to make sure more state money was steered to neglected Black neighborhoods. "I'm gonna leave it up to you to figure out what we need," he told me with a slap on the back as my group left his office. "You leave the politics to me."

Sure enough, Emil got the program funded, and our friendship carried over to the senate. He took an odd pride in me and became almost protective of my reformist ways. Even when he badly needed a vote on a deal he was cooking up (getting riverboat gambling licensed in Chicago was a particular obsession), he would never squeeze me if I told him I couldn't do it—though he wasn't above uttering a few choice curses as he charged off to try someone else.

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"Barack's different," he once told a staffer. "He's going places."

For all my diligence and Emil's goodwill, neither of us could change one stark fact: We were in the minority party. Republicans in the Illinois senate had adopted the same uncompromising approach that Newt Gingrich was using at the time to neuter Democrats in Congress. The GOP exercised absolute control over what bills got out of committee and which amendments were in order. Springfield had a special designation for junior members in the minority like me —"mushrooms," because "you're fed shit and kept in the dark."

On occasion, I found myself able to shape significant legislation. I helped make sure Illinois's version of the national welfare reform bill signed by Bill Clinton provided sufficient support for those transitioning to work. In the wake of one of Springfield's perennial scandals, Emil assigned me to represent the caucus on a committee to update the ethics laws. Nobody else wanted the job, figuring it was a lost cause, but thanks to a good rapport with my Republican counterpart, Kirk Dillard, we passed a law that curbed some of the more embarrassing practices—making it impossible, for example, to use campaign dollars for personal items like a home addition or a fur coat. (There were senators who didn't talk to us for weeks after that.)

More typical was the time, toward the end of the first session, when I rose from my seat to oppose a blatant tax giveaway to some favored industry when the state was cutting services for the poor. I had lined up my facts and prepared with the thoroughness of a courtroom lawyer; I pointed out why such unjustified tax breaks violated the conservative market principles Republicans claimed to believe in. When I sat down, the senate president, Pate Philip—a beefy, white-haired ex-Marine notorious for insulting women and people of color with remarkably casual frequency—wandered up to my desk.

"That was a hell of a speech," he said, chewing on an unlit cigar. "Made some good points."

"Thanks."

"Might have even changed a lot of minds," he said. "But you didn't change any votes." With that, he signaled to the presiding officer and watched with satisfaction as the green lights signifying "aye" lit up the board.

That was politics in Springfield: a series of transactions mostly

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hidden from view, legislators weighing the competing pressures of various interests with the dispassion of bazaar merchants, all the while keeping a careful eye on the handful of ideological hot buttons—guns, abortion, taxes—that might generate heat from their base.

It wasn't that people didn't know the difference between good and bad policy. It just didn't matter. What everyone in Springfield understood was that 90 percent of the time the voters back home weren't paying attention. A complicated but worthy compromise, bucking party orthodoxy to support an innovative idea—that could cost you a key endorsement, a big financial backer, a leadership post, or even an election.

Could you get voters to pay attention? I tried. Back in the district, I accepted just about any invitation that came my way. I started writing a regular column for the *Hyde Park Herald,* a neighborhood weekly with a readership of less than five thousand. I hosted town halls, setting out refreshments and stacks of legislative updates, and then usually sat there with my lonesome staffer, looking at my watch, waiting for a crowd that never came.

I couldn't blame folks for not showing up. They were busy, they had families, and surely most of the debates in Springfield seemed remote. Meanwhile, on the few high-profile issues that my constituents did care about, they probably agreed with me already, since the lines of my district—like those of almost every district in Illinois—had been drawn with surgical precision to ensure one-party dominance. If I wanted more funding for schools in poor neighborhoods, if I wanted more access to primary healthcare or retraining for laid-off workers, I didn't need to convince my constituents. The people I needed to engage and persuade—they lived somewhere else.

By the end of my second session, I could feel the atmosphere of the capitol weighing on me—the futility of being in the minority, the cynicism of so many of my colleagues worn like a badge of honor. No doubt it showed. One day, while I was standing in the rotunda after a bill I'd introduced went down in flames, a well-meaning lobbyist came up and put his arm around me.

"You've got to stop beating your head against the wall, Barack," he said. "The key to surviving this place is understanding that it's a

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business. Like selling cars. Or the dry cleaner down the street. You start believing it's more than that, it'll drive you crazy."

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SOME POLITICAL SCIENTISTS argue that everything I've said about Springfield describes exactly how pluralism is supposed to work; that the horse trading between interest groups may not be inspiring, but it keeps democracy muddling along. And maybe that argument would have gone down easier with me at the time if it weren't for the life I was missing at home.

The first two years in the legislature were fine—Michelle was busy with her own work, and although she kept her promise not to come down to the state capital except for my swearing in, we'd still have leisurely conversations on the phone on nights I was away. Then one day in the fall of 1997, she called me at the office, her voice trembling.

"It's happening."

"What's happening?"

"You're going to be a daddy."

I was going to be a daddy. How full of joy the months that followed were! I lived up to every cliché of the expectant father: attending Lamaze classes, trying to figure out how to assemble a crib, reading the book *What to Expect When You're Expecting* with pen in hand to underline key passages. Around six a.m. on the Fourth of July, Michelle poked me and said it was time to go to the hospital. I fumbled around and gathered the bag I'd set by the door, and just seven hours later was introduced to Malia Ann Obama, eight pounds and fifteen ounces of perfection.

Among her many talents, our new daughter had good timing; with no session, no classes, and no big pending cases to work on, I could take the rest of the summer off. A night owl by nature, I manned the late shift so Michelle could sleep, resting Malia on my thighs to read to her as she looked up with big questioning eyes, or dozing as she lay on my chest, a burp and good poop behind us, so warm and serene. I thought about the generations of men who had missed such moments, and I thought about my own father, whose absence had done more to shape me than the brief time I'd spent with him, and I realized that

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there was no place on earth I would rather be.

But the strains of young parenthood eventually took their toll. After a blissful few months, Michelle went back to work, and I went back to juggling three jobs. We were lucky to find a wonderful nanny who cared for Malia during the day, but the addition of a full-time employee to our family enterprise squeezed the budget hard.

Michelle bore the brunt of all this, shuttling between mothering and work, unconvinced that she was doing either job well. At the end of each night, after feeding and bath time and story time and cleaning up the apartment and trying to keep track of whether she'd picked up the dry cleaning and making a note to herself to schedule an appointment with the pediatrician, she would often fall into an empty bed, knowing the whole cycle would start all over again in a few short hours while her husband was off doing "important things."

We began arguing more, usually late at night when the two of us were thoroughly drained. "This isn't what I signed up for, Barack," Michelle said at one point. "I feel like I'm doing it all by myself."

I was hurt by that. If I wasn't working, I was home—and if I was home and forgot to clean up the kitchen after dinner, it was because I had to stay up late grading exams or fine-tuning a brief. But even as I mounted my defense, I knew I was falling short. Inside Michelle's anger lay a more difficult truth. I was trying to deliver a lot of things to a lot of different people. I was taking the hard way, just as she'd predicted back when our burdens were lighter, our personal responsibilities not so enmeshed. I thought now about the promise I'd made to myself after Malia was born; that my kids would *know* me, that they'd grow up knowing my love for them, feeling that I had always put them first.

Sitting in the dim light of our living room, Michelle no longer seemed angry, just sad. "Is it worth it?" she asked.

I don't recall what I said in response. I know I couldn't admit to her that I was no longer sure.

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IT'S HARD, in retrospect, to understand why you did something stupid. I don't mean the small stuff—ruining your favorite tie because

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you tried to eat soup in the car or throwing out your back because you got talked into playing tackle football on Thanksgiving. I mean dumb choices in the wake of considerable deliberation: those times when you identify a real problem in your life, analyze it, and then with utter confidence come up with precisely the wrong answer.

That was me running for Congress. After numerous conversations, I had to concede that Michelle was right to question whether the difference I was making in Springfield justified the sacrifice. Rather than lightening my load, though, I went in the opposite direction, deciding I needed to step on the gas and secure a more influential office. Around this same time, veteran congressman Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther, challenged Mayor Daley in the 1999 election and got trounced, doing poorly even in his own district.

I thought Rush's campaign had been uninspired, without a rationale other than the vague promise to continue Harold Washington's legacy. If this was how he operated in Congress, I figured I could do better. After talking it over with a few trusted advisors, I had my staff jerry-rig an in-house poll to see whether a race against Rush would be viable. Our informal sampling gave us a shot. Using the results, I was able to persuade several of my closest friends to help finance the race. And then, despite warnings from more experienced political hands that Rush was stronger than he looked, and despite Michelle's incredulity that I would somehow think she'd feel better with me being in Washington instead of Springfield, I announced my candidacy for congressman from the First Congressional District.

Almost from the start, the race was a disaster. A few weeks in, the rumblings from the Rush camp began: *Obama's an outsider; he's backed by white folks; he's a Harvard elitist. And that name—is he even Black?*

Having raised enough money to commission a proper poll, I discovered that Bobby had 90 percent name recognition in the district and a 70 percent approval rating, whereas only 11 percent of voters even knew who I was. Shortly thereafter, Bobby's adult son was tragically shot and killed, eliciting an outpouring of sympathy. I effectively suspended my campaign for a month and watched television coverage of the funeral taking place at my own church, with Reverend Jeremiah Wright presiding. Already on thin ice at home, I

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took the family to Hawaii for an abbreviated Christmas break, only to have the governor call a special legislative session to vote on a gun control measure I supported. With eighteen-month-old Malia sick and unable to fly, I missed the vote and was roundly flayed by the Chicago press.

I lost by thirty points.

When talking to young people about politics, I sometimes offer this story as an object lesson of what *not* to do. Usually I throw in a postscript, describing how, a few months after my loss, a friend of mine, worried that I'd fallen into a funk, insisted that I join him at the 2000 Democratic National Convention in L.A. ("You need to get back on the horse," he said.) But when I landed at LAX and tried to rent a car, I was turned down because my American Express card was over its limit. I managed to get myself to the Staples Center, but then learned that the credential my friend had secured for me didn't allow entry to the convention floor, which left me to haplessly circle the perimeter and watch the festivities on mounted TV screens. Finally, after an awkward episode later that evening in which my friend couldn't get me into a party he was attending, I took a cab back to the hotel, slept on the couch in his suite, and flew back to Chicago just as Al Gore was accepting the nomination.

It's a funny story, especially in light of where I ultimately ended up. It speaks, I tell my audience, to the unpredictable nature of politics, and the necessity for resilience.

What I don't mention is my dark mood on that flight back. I was almost forty, broke, coming off a humiliating defeat and with my marriage strained. I felt for perhaps the first time in my life that I had taken a wrong turn; that whatever reservoirs of energy and optimism I thought I had, whatever potential I'd always banked on, had been used up on a fool's errand. Worse, I recognized that in running for Congress I'd been driven not by some selfless dream of changing the world, but rather by the need to justify the choices I had already made, or to satisfy my ego, or to quell my envy of those who had achieved what I had not.

In other words, I had become the very thing that, as a younger man, I had warned myself against. I had become a politician—and not a very good one at that.

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CHAPTER 3

AFTER GETTING DRUBBED BY Bobby Rush, I allowed myself a few months to mope and lick my wounds before deciding that I had to reframe my priorities and get on with things. I told Michelle I needed to do better by her. We had a new baby on the way, and even though I was still gone more than she would have preferred, she at least noticed the effort I was making. I scheduled my meetings in Springfield so that I'd be home for dinner more often. I tried to be more punctual and more present. And on June 10, 2001, not quite three years after Malia's birth, we experienced the same blast of joy—the same utter amazement—when Sasha arrived, as plump and lovely as her sister had been, with thick black curls that were impossible to resist.

For the next two years, I led a quieter life, full of small satisfactions, content with the balance I'd seemingly struck. I relished wriggling Malia into her first ballet tights or grasping her hand as we walked to the park; watching baby Sasha laugh and laugh as I nibbled her feet; listening to Michelle's breath slow, her head resting against my shoulder, as she drifted off to sleep in the middle of an old movie. I rededicated myself to my work in the state senate and savored the time spent with my students at the law school. I took a serious look at our finances and put together a plan to pay down our debts. Inside the slower rhythms of my work and the pleasures of fatherhood, I began to consider options for a life after politics—perhaps teaching and writing full-time, or returning to law practice, or applying for a job at a local charitable foundation, as my mother had once imagined I'd do.

In other words, following my ill-fated run for Congress, I experienced a certain letting go—if not of my desire to make a difference in the world, then at least of the insistence that it had to be done on a larger stage. What might have begun as a sense of resignation at whatever limits fate had imposed on my life came to feel

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more like gratitude for the bounty it had already delivered.

Two things, however, kept me from making a clean break from politics. First, Illinois Democrats had won the right to oversee the redrawing of state districting maps to reflect new data from the 2000 census, thanks to a quirk in the state constitution that called for a dispute between the Democrat-controlled house and the Republican senate to be settled by drawing a name out of one of Abraham Lincoln's old stovepipe hats. With this power, Democrats could reverse the Republican gerrymandering of the previous decade and vastly better the odds that senate Democrats would be in the majority after the 2002 election. I knew that with one more term, I'd finally get a chance to pass some bills, deliver something meaningful for the people I represented—and perhaps end my political career on a higher note than it was currently on.

The second factor was an instinct rather than an event. Since being elected, I'd tried to spend a few days each summer visiting various colleagues in their home districts across Illinois. Usually I'd go with my chief senate aide, Dan Shomon—a former UPI reporter with thick glasses, boundless energy, and a foghorn voice. We'd throw our golf clubs, a map, and a couple of sets of clothes in the back of my Jeep and head south or west, winding our way to Rock Island or Pinckneyville, Alton or Carbondale.

Dan was my key political advisor, a good friend, and an ideal road trip companion: easy to talk to, perfectly fine with silence, and he shared my habit of smoking in the car. He also had an encyclopedic knowledge of state politics. The first time we made the trip, I could tell he was a little nervous about how folks downstate might react to a Black lawyer from Chicago with an Arab-sounding name.

"No fancy shirts," he instructed before we left.

"I don't have fancy shirts," I said.

"Good. Just polos and khakis."

"Got it."

Despite Dan's worries that I'd be out of place, what struck me most during our travels was how familiar everything felt—whether we were at a county fair or a union hall or on the porch on someone's farm. In the way people described their families or their jobs. In their modesty and their hospitality. In their enthusiasm for high school basketball. In

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the food they served, the fried chicken and baked beans and Jell-O molds. In them, I heard echoes of my grandparents, my mother, Michelle's mom and dad. Same values. Same hopes and dreams.

These excursions became more sporadic once my kids were born. But the simple, recurring insight they offered stayed with me. As long as the residents of my Chicago district and districts downstate remained strangers to one another, I realized, our politics would never truly change. It would always be too easy for politicians to feed the stereotypes that pitted Black against white, immigrant against native-born, rural interests against those of cities.

If, on the other hand, a campaign could somehow challenge America's reigning political assumptions about how divided we were, well then just maybe it would be possible to build a new covenant between its citizens. The insiders would no longer be able to play one group against another. Legislators might be freed from defining their constituents' interests—and their own—so narrowly. The media might take notice and examine issues based not on which side won or lost but on whether our common goals were met.

Ultimately wasn't this what I was after—a politics that bridged America's racial, ethnic, and religious divides, as well as the many strands of my own life? Maybe I was being unrealistic; maybe such divisions were too deeply entrenched. But no matter how hard I tried to convince myself otherwise, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was too early to give up on my deepest convictions. Much as I'd tried to tell myself I was done, or nearly done, with political life, I knew in my heart that I wasn't ready to let go.

As I gave the future more thought, one thing became clear: The kind of bridge-building politics I imagined wasn't suited to a congressional race. The problem was structural, a matter of how district lines were drawn: In an overwhelmingly Black district like the one I lived in, in a community that had long been battered by discrimination and neglect, the test for politicians would more often than not be defined in racial terms, just as it was in many white, rural districts that felt left behind. *How well will you stand up to those who are not like us,* voters asked, *those who have taken advantage of us, who look down on us?*

You could make a difference from such a narrow political base;

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with some seniority, you could secure better services for your constituents, bring a big project or two back to your home district, and, by working with allies, try to influence the national debate. But that wouldn't be enough to lift the political constraints that made it so difficult to deliver healthcare for those who most needed it, or better schools for poor kids, or jobs where there were none; the same constraints that Bobby Rush labored under every day.

To really shake things up, I realized, I needed to speak to and for the widest possible audience. And the best way to do that was to run for a statewide office—like, for example, the U.S. Senate.

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WHEN I THINK back now on the brashness—the sheer chutzpah—of me wanting to launch a U.S. Senate race, fresh as I was off a resounding defeat, it's hard not to admit the possibility that I was just desperate for another shot, like an alcoholic rationalizing one last drink. Except that's not how it felt. Instead, as I rolled the idea around in my head, I experienced a great clarity—not so much that I *would* win, but that I *could* win, and that if I did win, I could have a big impact. I could see it, feel it, like a running back who spots an opening at the line of scrimmage and knows that if he can get to that hole fast enough and break through, there will be nothing but open field between him and the end zone. Along with this clarity came a parallel realization: If I didn't pull it off, it would be time to leave politics—and so long as I had given it my best effort, I could do so without regret.

Quietly, over the course of 2002, I began to test the proposition. Looking at the Illinois political landscape, I saw that the notion of a little-known Black state legislator going to the U.S. Senate wasn't totally far-fetched. Several African Americans had won statewide office before, including former U.S. senator Carol Moseley Braun, a talented but erratic politician whose victory had electrified the country before she was dinged up by a series of self-inflicted wounds involving financial ethics. Meanwhile, the Republican who'd beaten her, Peter Fitzgerald, was a wealthy banker whose sharply conservative views had made him relatively unpopular across our increasingly Democratic state.

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I began by talking to a trio of my state senate poker buddies—Democrats Terry Link, Denny Jacobs, and Larry Walsh—to see whether they thought I could compete in the white working-class and rural enclaves they represented. From what they'd seen during my visits, they thought I could, and all agreed to support me if I ran. So did a number of white progressive elected officials along Chicago's lakefront and a handful of independent Latino legislators as well. I asked Jesse Jr. if he had any interest in running, and he said no, adding that he was prepared to lend me his support. Congressman Danny Davis, the genial third Black congressman in the Illinois delegation, signed on too. (I could hardly fault Bobby Rush for being less enthusiastic.)

Most important was Emil Jones, now poised to be state senate president and hence one of the three most powerful politicians in Illinois. At a meeting in his office, I pointed out that not a single current U.S. senator was African American, and that the policies that we'd fought for together in Springfield really could use a champion in Washington. I added that if he were to help get one of his own elected to the U.S. Senate, it would surely gall some of the old-guard white Republicans in Springfield who he felt had always sold him short, which was a rationale I think he particularly liked.

With David Axelrod, I took a different tack. A media consultant who'd previously been a journalist and whose clients included Harold Washington, former U.S. senator Paul Simon, and Mayor Richard M. Daley, Axe had developed a national reputation for being smart, tough, and a skilled ad maker. I admired his work and knew that having him on board would lend my nascent campaign credibility not just around the state but with national donors and pundits.

I knew, too, that he'd be a tough sell. "It's a reach," he said on the day we met for lunch at a River North bistro. Axe had been one of many who'd warned me against taking on Bobby Rush. Between hearty bites of his sandwich, he told me I couldn't afford a second loss. And he doubted a candidate whose name rhymed with "Osama" could get downstate votes. Plus, he'd already been approached by at least two other likely Senate candidates—state comptroller Dan Hynes and multimillionaire hedge fund manager Blair Hull—both of whom seemed in much stronger positions to win, so taking me on as a client was likely to cost his firm a hefty sum.

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"Wait till Rich Daley retires and then run for mayor," he concluded, wiping mustard off his mustache. "It's the better bet."

He was right, of course. But I wasn't playing the conventional odds. And in Axe I sensed—beneath all the poll data and strategy memos and talking points that were the tools of his trade—someone who saw himself as more than just a hired gun; someone who might be a kindred spirit. Rather than argue campaign mechanics, I tried to appeal to his heart.

"Do you ever think about how JFK and Bobby Kennedy seemed to tap into what's best in people?" I asked. "Or wonder how it must have felt to help LBJ pass the Voting Rights Act, or FDR pass Social Security, knowing you'd made millions of people's lives better? Politics doesn't have to be what people think it is. It can be something more."

Axe's imposing eyebrows went up as he scanned my face. It must have been clear that I wasn't just trying to convince him; I was convincing myself. A few weeks later, he called to say that after talking it over with his business partners and his wife, Susan, he'd decided to take me on as a client. Before I could thank him, he added a proviso.

"Your idealism is stirring, Barack…but unless you raise five million bucks to get it on TV so people can hear it, you don't stand a chance."

With this, I finally felt ready to test the waters with Michelle. She was now working as the executive director for community affairs at the University of Chicago hospital system, a job that gave her more flexibility but still required her to juggle high-level professional responsibilities with coordinating the girls' playdates and school pickups. So I was a little surprised when instead of responding with a "Hell no, Barack!" she suggested we talk it through with some of our closest friends, including Marty Nesbitt, a successful businessman whose wife, Dr. Anita Blanchard, had delivered both our girls, and Valerie Jarrett, a brilliant and well-connected attorney who'd been Michelle's boss at the city's planning department and become like an older sister to us. What I didn't know at the time was that Michelle had already gotten to Marty and Valerie and assigned them the job of talking me out of my foolishness.

We gathered at Valerie's Hyde Park apartment, and over a long brunch, I explained my thought process, mapping out the scenarios

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that would get us to the Democratic nomination and answering questions about how this race would be different from the last. With Michelle, I didn't sugarcoat the amount of time I'd be away. But this was it, I promised, up or out; if I lost this one, we were done with politics for good.

By the time I finished, Valerie and Marty had been persuaded, no doubt to Michelle's chagrin. It wasn't a question of strategy for her, aside from the fact that the thought of another campaign appealed to her about as much as a root canal. She was most concerned with the effect on our family finances, which still hadn't fully recovered from the last one. She reminded me that we had student loans, a mortgage, and credit card debt to think about. We hadn't started saving for our daughters' college educations yet, and on top of that, a Senate run would require me to stop practicing law in order to avoid conflicts of interest, which would further diminish our income.

"If you lose, we'll be deeper in the hole," she said. "And what happens if you win? How are we supposed to maintain two households, in Washington and Chicago, when we can barely keep up with one?"

I'd anticipated this. "If I win, hon," I said, "it will draw national attention. I'll be the only African American in the Senate. With a higher profile, I can write another book, and it'll sell a lot of copies, and that will cover the added expenses."

Michelle let out a sharp laugh. I'd made some money on my first book, but nothing close to what it would take to pay for the expenses I was now talking about incurring. As my wife saw it—as most people would see it, I imagine—an unwritten book was hardly a financial plan.

"In other words," she said, "you've got some magic beans in your pocket. That's what you're telling me. You have some magic beans, and you're going to plant them, and overnight a huge beanstalk is going to grow high into the sky, and you'll climb up the beanstalk, kill the giant who lives in the clouds, and then bring home a goose that lays golden eggs. Is that it?"

"Something like that," I said.

Michelle shook her head and looked out the window. We both knew what I was asking for. Another disruption. Another gamble.

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Another step in the direction of something I wanted and she truly didn't.

"This is it, Barack," Michelle said. "One last time. But don't expect me to do any campaigning. In fact, you shouldn't even count on my vote."

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AS A KID, I had sometimes watched as my salesman grandfather tried to sell life insurance policies over the phone, his face registering misery as he made cold calls in the evening from our tenth-floor apartment in a Honolulu high-rise. During the early months of 2003, I found myself thinking of him often as I sat at my desk in the sparsely furnished headquarters of my newly launched Senate campaign, beneath a poster of Muhammad Ali posed triumphantly over a defeated Sonny Liston, trying to pep-talk myself into making another fundraising call.

Aside from Dan Shomon and a Kentuckian named Jim Cauley we'd recruited as campaign manager, our staff consisted mostly of kids in their twenties, only half of whom were paid—and two of whom were still undergraduates. I felt especially sorry for my lone full-time fundraiser, who had to push me to pick up the phone and solicit donations.

Was I getting better at being a politician? I couldn't say. In the first scheduled candidates' forum in February 2003, I was stiff and ineffectual, unable to get my brain to operate in the tidy phrases such formats required. But my loss to Bobby Rush had given me a clear blueprint for upping my game: I needed to interact more effectively with the media, learning to get my ideas across in pithy sound bites. I needed to build a campaign that was less about policy papers and more about connecting one-on-one with voters. And I needed to raise money—lots of it. We'd conducted multiple polls, which seemed to confirm that I could win, but only if I managed to improve my visibility with costly TV ads.

And yet, as snakebit as my congressional race had been, this one felt charmed. In April, Peter Fitzgerald decided not to run for reelection. Carol Moseley Braun, who would probably have locked up the Democratic nomination for her old seat, had inexplicably chosen to

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more often traveling with Jeremiah Posedel or Anita Decker, the two talented staffers running my operations there.

Talking to voters in the early days of the campaign, I tended to address the issues I was running on—ending tax breaks for companies that were moving jobs overseas, or promoting renewable energy, or making it easier for kids to afford college. I explained why I had opposed the war in Iraq, acknowledging the remarkable service of our soldiers but questioning why we had started a new war when we hadn't finished the one in Afghanistan while Osama bin Laden was still at large.

Over time, though, I focused more on listening. And the more I listened, the more people opened up. They'd tell me about how it felt to be laid off after a lifetime of work, or what it was like to have your home foreclosed upon or to have to sell the family farm. They'd tell me about not being able to afford health insurance, and how sometimes they broke the pills their doctors prescribed in half, hoping to make their medicine last longer. They spoke of young people moving away because there were no good jobs in their town, or others having to drop out of college just short of graduation because they couldn't cover the tuition.

My stump speech became less a series of positions and more a chronicle of these disparate voices, a chorus of Americans from every corner of the state.

"Here's the thing," I would say. "Most people, wherever they're from, whatever they look like, are looking for the same thing. They're not trying to get filthy rich. They don't expect someone else to do what they can do for themselves.

"But they *do* expect that if they're willing to work, they should be able to find a job that supports a family. They expect that they shouldn't go bankrupt just because they get sick. They expect that their kids should be able to get a good education, one that prepares them for this new economy, and they should be able to afford college if they've put in the effort. They want to be safe, from criminals or terrorists. And they figure that after a lifetime of work, they should be able to retire with dignity and respect.

"That's about it. It's not a lot. And although they don't expect government to solve all their problems, they do know, deep in their

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bones, that with just a slight change in priorities government could help."

The room would be quiet, and I'd take a few questions. When a meeting was over, people lined up to shake my hand, pick up some campaign literature, or talk to Jeremiah, Anita, or a local campaign volunteer about how they could get involved. And I'd drive on to the next town, knowing that the story I was telling was true; convinced that this campaign was no longer about me and that I had become a mere conduit through which people might recognize the value of their own stories, their own worth, and share them with one another.

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WHETHER IN SPORTS or politics, it's hard to understand the precise nature of momentum. But by the beginning of 2004 we had it. Axe had us shoot two television ads: The first had me speaking directly to the camera, ending with the tagline "Yes we can." (I thought this was corny, but Axe immediately appealed to a higher power, showing it to Michelle, who deemed it "not corny at all.") The second featured Sheila Simon, daughter of the state's beloved former senator Paul Simon, who had died following heart surgery days before he'd planned to publicly endorse me.

We released the ads just four weeks before the primaries. In short order, my support almost doubled. When the state's five largest newspapers endorsed me, Axe recut the ads to highlight it, explaining that Black candidates tended to benefit more than white candidates from the validation. Around this time, the bottom fell out of my closest rival's campaign after news outlets published details from previously sealed court documents in which his ex-wife alleged domestic abuse. On March 16, 2004, the day of the Democratic primary, we ended up winning almost 53 percent of the vote in our seven-person field—not only more than all the other Democratic candidates combined, but more than all the Republican votes that had been cast statewide in their primary.

I remember only two moments from that night: the delighted squeals from our daughters (with maybe a little fear mixed in for two-year-old Sasha) when the confetti guns went off at the victory party; and an ebullient Axelrod telling me that I'd won all but one of the

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majority white wards in Chicago, which had once served as the epicenter of racial resistance to Harold Washington. ("Harold's smiling down on us tonight," he said.)

I remember the next morning as well, when after almost no sleep I went down to Central Station to shake hands with commuters as they headed for work. A gentle snow had begun to fall, the flakes thick as flower petals, and as people recognized me and shook my hand, they all seemed to wear the same smile—as if we had done something surprising together.

—

"BEING SHOT FROM a cannon" was how Axe would describe the next few months, and that's exactly how it felt. Our campaign became national news overnight, with networks calling for interviews and elected officials from around the country phoning with congratulations. It wasn't just that we had won, or even the unexpectedly large margin of our victory; what interested observers was the way we'd won, with votes from all demographics, including from southern and rural white counties. Pundits speculated on what my campaign said about the state of American race relations—and because of my early opposition to the Iraq War, what it might say about where the Democratic Party was headed.

My campaign didn't have the luxury of celebration; we just scrambled to keep up. We brought on additional, more experienced staff, including communications director Robert Gibbs, a tough, quick-witted Alabaman who had worked on the Kerry campaign. While polls showed me with a nearly twenty-point lead over my Republican opponent, Jack Ryan, his résumé made me cautious about taking anything for granted—he was a Goldman Sachs banker who had quit to teach at a parochial school serving disadvantaged kids and whose matinee-idol looks sanded the edges off his very conventional Republican platform.

Fortunately for us, none of this translated on the campaign trail. Ryan was flogged by the press when, in an attempt to tag me as a big-spending, tax-hiking liberal, he used a series of charts showing numbers that turned out to be wildly and obviously wrong. He was later pilloried for having dispatched a young staffer who aggressively

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tailed me with a handheld camcorder, following me into lavatories and hovering even while I tried to talk to Michelle and the girls, hoping to catch me in a gaffe. The final blow came when the press got hold of sealed records from Ryan's divorce, in which his ex-wife alleged that he had pressured her to visit sex clubs and tried to coerce her into having sex in front of strangers. Within a week, Ryan withdrew from the race.

With just five months to go until the general election, I suddenly had no opponent.

"All I know," Gibbs announced, "is after this thing is all over, we're going to Vegas."

Still, I maintained a grueling schedule, often finishing the day's business in Springfield and then driving to nearby towns for campaign events. On the way back from one such event, I got a call from someone on John Kerry's staff, inviting me to give the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention being held in Boston in late July. That I felt neither giddy nor nervous said something about the sheer improbability of the year I'd just had. Axelrod offered to pull together the team to begin the process of drafting a speech, but I waved him off.

"Let me take a crack at it," I told him. "I know what I want to say."

For the next several days, I wrote my speech, mostly in the evenings, sprawled on my bed at the Renaissance Hotel in Springfield, a ball game buzzing in the background, filling a yellow legal pad with my thoughts. The words came swiftly, a summation of the politics I'd been searching for since those early years in college and the inner struggles that had prompted the journey to where I was now. My head felt full of voices: of my mother, my grandparents, my father; of the people I had organized with and folks on the campaign trail. I thought about all those I'd encountered who had plenty of reason to turn bitter and cynical but had refused to go that way, who kept reaching for something higher, who kept reaching for one another. At some point, I remembered a phrase I'd heard once during a sermon by my pastor, Jeremiah Wright, one that captured this spirit.

The audacity of hope.

Axe and Gibbs would later swap stories about the twists and turns

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leading up to the night I spoke at the convention. How we had to negotiate the time I would be allotted (originally eight minutes, bargained up to seventeen). The painful cuts to my original draft by Axe and his able partner John Kupper, all of which made it better. A delayed flight to Boston as my legislative session in Springfield dragged into the night. Practicing for the first time on a teleprompter, with my coach, Michael Sheehan, explaining that the microphones worked fine, so "you don't have to yell." My anger when a young Kerry staffer informed us that I had to cut one of my favorite lines because the nominee intended to poach it for his own speech. ("You're a state senator," Axe helpfully reminded me, "and they've given you a national stage….I don't think it's too much to ask.") Michelle backstage, beautiful in white, squeezing my hand, gazing lovingly into my eyes, and telling me "Just don't screw it up, buddy!" The two of us cracking up, being silly, when our love was always best, and then the introduction by the senior senator from Illinois, Dick Durbin, "Let me tell you about this Barack Obama…"

I've only watched the tape of my 2004 convention speech once all the way through. I did so alone, well after the election was over, trying to understand what happened in the hall that night. With stage makeup, I look impossibly young, and I can see a touch of nerves at the beginning, places where I'm too fast or too slow, my gestures slightly awkward, betraying my inexperience.

But there comes a point in the speech where I find my cadence. The crowd quiets rather than roars. It's the kind of moment I'd come to recognize in subsequent years, on certain magic nights. There's a physical feeling, a current of emotion that passes back and forth between you and the crowd, as if your lives and theirs are suddenly spliced together, like a movie reel, projecting backward and forward in time, and your voice creeps right up to the edge of cracking, because for an instant, you feel them deeply; you can see them whole. You've tapped into some collective spirit, a thing we all know and wish for—a sense of connection that overrides our differences and replaces them with a giant swell of possibility—and like all things that matter most, you know the moment is fleeting and that soon the spell will be broken.

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sandcastles, and watched the girls unwrap gifts. I tossed a flower lei into the ocean at the spot where my sister and I had scattered my mother's ashes and left one at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, where my grandfather was interred. After New Year's, the whole family flew to Washington. The night before my swearing in, Michelle was in the bedroom of our hotel suite getting ready for a welcome dinner for new members of the Senate when I got a call from my book editor. The convention speech had lifted my reissued book, which had been out of print for years, to the top of the bestseller list. She was calling to congratulate me on its success and the fact that we had a deal for a new book, this time with an eye-popping advance.

I thanked her and hung up just as Michelle came out of the bedroom in a shimmery formal dress.

"You look so pretty, Mommy," Sasha said. Michelle did a twirl for the girls.

"Okay, you guys behave yourselves," I said, kissing them before saying goodbye to Michelle's mother, who was babysitting that night. We were headed down the hall toward the elevator when suddenly Michelle stopped.

"Forget something?" I asked.

She looked at me and shook her head, incredulous. "I can't believe you actually pulled this whole thing off. The campaign. The book. All of it."

I nodded and kissed her forehead. "Magic beans, baby. Magic beans."

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TYPICALLY THE BIGGEST challenge for a freshman senator in Washington is getting people to pay attention to anything you do. I ended up having the opposite problem. Relative to my actual status as an incoming senator, the hype that surrounded me had grown comical. Reporters routinely pressed me on my plans, most often asking if I intended to run for president. When on the day I was sworn in a reporter asked, "What do you consider your place in history?" I laughed, explaining that I had just arrived in Washington, was ranked

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ninety-ninth in seniority, had yet to cast a vote, and didn't know where the restrooms were in the Capitol.

I wasn't being coy. Running for the Senate had felt like a reach as it was. I was glad to be there, and eager to get started on the work. To counteract any inflated expectations, my team and I looked to the example set by Hillary Clinton, who'd entered the Senate four years earlier to a lot of fanfare and had gone on to develop a reputation for diligence, substance, and attention to her constituents. To be a workhorse, not a show horse—that was my goal.

No one was temperamentally more suited to implement such a strategy than my new chief of staff, Pete Rouse. Almost sixty years old, graying, and built like a panda bear, Pete had worked on Capitol Hill for nearly thirty years. His experience, most recently as chief of staff to Tom Daschle, and his wide-ranging relationships around town led people to fondly refer to him as the 101st senator. Contrary to the stereotype of Washington political operatives, Pete was allergic to the spotlight, and—beneath a droll, gruff exterior—he was almost shy, which helped explain his long-term bachelorhood and doting affection for his cats.

It had required considerable effort to convince Pete to take on the job of setting up my rookie office. He was less concerned, he said, with the big step down in status than he was with the possibility that it wouldn't leave him enough time to help find jobs for all the junior staffers who, in the aftermath of Daschle's defeat, were now unemployed.

It was this unfailing decency and rectitude, as much as his knowledge, that made Pete a godsend. And it was on the basis of his reputation that I was able to recruit a topflight staff to fill out the ranks in my office. Along with Robert Gibbs as communications director, we enlisted veteran Hill staffer Chris Lu as legislative director; Mark Lippert, a sharp young naval reservist, as a foreign policy staffer; and Alyssa Mastromonaco, a top lieutenant on the Kerry presidential campaign whose baby face belied an unmatched talent for troubleshooting and organizing events, as director of scheduling. Finally we added a thoughtful, good-looking twenty-three-year-old named Jon Favreau. Favs, as he came to be known, had also worked on the Kerry campaign and was both Gibbs's and Pete's number one

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choice as our speechwriter.

"Haven't I met him before?" I asked Gibbs after the interview.

"Yep…he's the kid who showed up and told you that Kerry was stealing one of your lines at the convention."

I hired him anyway.

Under Pete's supervision, the team set up offices in Washington, Chicago, and several downstate locations. To emphasize our focus on voters back home, Alyssa put together an ambitious schedule of town hall meetings in Illinois—thirty-nine in the first year. We instituted a strict policy of avoiding national press and the Sunday morning shows, instead devoting our attention to Illinois papers and TV affiliates. Most important, Pete worked out an elaborate system for handling mail and constituent requests, spending hours with young staffers and interns who worked in the correspondence office, obsessively editing their responses and making sure they were familiar with all the federal agencies that dealt with lost Social Security checks, discontinued veterans' benefits, or loans from the Small Business Administration.

"People may not like your votes," Pete said, "but they'll never accuse you of not answering your mail!"

With the office in good hands, I could dedicate most of my time to studying the issues and getting to know my fellow senators. My task was made easier by the generosity of Illinois's senior senator, Dick Durbin, a friend and disciple of Paul Simon's, and one of the most gifted debaters in the Senate. In a culture of big egos, where senators generally didn't take kindly to a junior partner soaking up more press than them, Dick was unfailingly helpful. He introduced me around the Senate chambers, insisted that his staff share credit with us on various Illinois projects, and maintained his patience and good humor when—at the Thursday morning constituent breakfasts we jointly hosted—visitors spent much of the time asking me for pictures and autographs.

The same could be said for Harry Reid, the new Democratic leader. Harry's path to the Senate had been at least as unlikely as mine. Born dirt-poor in the small town of Searchlight, Nevada, to a miner and a laundress, he spent his early years in a shack without indoor plumbing or a telephone. Somehow, he had scratched and clawed his way into college and then George Washington University Law School, working as a uniformed United States Capitol Police officer

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between classes to help pay his way, and he was the first to tell you that he had never lost that chip on his shoulder.

"You know, Barack, I boxed when I was a kid," he said in his whispery voice the first time we met. "And gosh, I wasn't a great athlete. I wasn't big and strong. But I had two things going for me. I could take a punch. And I didn't give up."

That sense of overcoming long odds probably explained why, despite our differences in age and experience, Harry and I hit it off. He wasn't one to show much emotion and in fact had a disconcerting habit of forgoing the normal niceties in any conversation, especially on the phone. You might find yourself in mid-sentence only to discover he'd already hung up. But much as Emil Jones had done in the state legislature, Harry went out of his way to look out for me when it came to committee assignments and kept me apprised of Senate business, regardless of my lowly rank.

In fact, such collegiality seemed to be the norm. The old bulls of the Senate—Ted Kennedy and Orrin Hatch, John Warner and Robert Byrd, Dan Inouye and Ted Stevens—all maintained friendships across the aisle, operating with an easy intimacy that I found typical of the Greatest Generation. The younger senators socialized less and brought with them the sharper ideological edge that had come to characterize the House of Representatives after the Gingrich era. But even with the most conservative members, I often found common ground: Oklahoma's Tom Coburn, for example, a devout Christian and an unyielding skeptic of government spending, would become a sincere and thoughtful friend, our staffs working together on measures to increase transparency and reduce waste in government contracting.

In many ways, my first year in the Senate felt a bit like a reprise of my early years in the Illinois legislature, though the stakes were higher, the spotlight brighter, and the lobbyists more skilled at wrapping their clients' interests in the garb of grand principles. Unlike the state legislature, where many members were content to keep their heads down, often not knowing what the hell was going on, my new colleagues were well briefed and not shy with their opinions, which caused committee meetings to drag on interminably and made me far more sympathetic to those who'd suffered through my own verbosity in law school and Springfield.

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In the minority, my fellow Democrats and I had little say on which bills emerged from committee and got a vote on the Senate floor. We watched as Republicans put forward budgets that underfunded education or watered down environmental safeguards, feeling helpless beyond the declamations we made before a largely empty chamber and the unblinking eye of C-SPAN. Repeatedly we agonized over votes that were not designed to advance a policy so much as to undermine the Democrats and provide fodder for upcoming campaigns. Just as I had in Illinois, I tried to do what I could to influence policy at the margins, pushing modest, nonpartisan measures—funding to safeguard against a pandemic outbreak, say, or the restoration of benefits to a class of Illinois veterans.

As frustrating as certain aspects of the Senate could be, I didn't really mind its slower pace. As one of its youngest members and with a 70 percent approval rating back in Illinois, I knew I could afford to be patient. At some point, I thought I'd consider running for governor or, yes, even president, steered by the belief that an executive position would give me a better chance to set an agenda. But for now, forty-three years old and just starting out on the national scene, I figured I had all the time in the world.

My mood was further buoyed by improvements on the home front. Barring bad weather, the commute from D.C. to Chicago took no longer than the trip to and from Springfield. And once I was home, I wasn't as busy or distracted as I'd been during the campaign or while juggling three jobs, leaving me more time to shuttle Sasha to dance class on Saturdays or read a chapter of *Harry Potter* to Malia before I tucked her into bed.

Our improved finances also relieved a whole lot of stress. We bought a new house, a big, handsome Georgian across from a synagogue in Kenwood. For a modest price, a young family friend and aspiring chef named Sam Kass agreed to do grocery shopping and cook healthy meals that could stretch through the week. Mike Signator—a retired Commonwealth Edison manager who had served as a volunteer during the campaign—chose to stay on as my part-time driver, practically becoming a member of our family.

Most important, with the financial backstop we now could provide, my mother-in-law, Marian, agreed to reduce her hours at

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ONE FEATURE OF the Senate that excited me was the ability it gave me to influence foreign policy, something that the state legislature didn't afford. Since college, I'd been particularly interested in nuclear issues, and so even before my swearing in, I'd written to Dick Lugar, the chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, whose signature issue was nuclear nonproliferation, to let him know that I hoped to work with him.

Dick's response was enthusiastic. A Republican from Indiana and a twenty-eight-year veteran of the Senate, he was reliably conservative on domestic issues like taxes and abortion, but on foreign policy he reflected the prudent, internationalist impulses that had long guided mainstream Republicans like George H. W. Bush. In 1991, shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Dick had teamed up with Democrat Sam Nunn to design and pass legislation that allowed America to aid Russia and former Soviet states in securing and deactivating weapons of mass destruction. Nunn-Lugar, as it came to be known, proved a bold and durable achievement—more than 7,500 nuclear warheads would be deactivated over the next two decades—and its implementation helped facilitate relationships between U.S. and Russian national security officials that were critical in managing a dangerous transition.

Now, in 2005, intelligence reports indicated that extremist groups like al-Qaeda were scouring poorly guarded outposts throughout the former Soviet bloc, searching for remaining nuclear, chemical, and biological materials. Dick and I began discussing how to build on the existing Nunn-Lugar framework to further protect against such threats. Which is how in August that year I found myself with Dick on a military jet, headed for a weeklong visit to Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan. Though the need to monitor Nunn-Lugar's progress had made such visits routine for Dick, this was my first official foreign trip, and over the years I had heard stories about congressional junkets—the less than strenuous schedules, the lavish dinners and shopping sprees. If that was supposed to be the deal, though, Dick had not gotten the memo. Despite being in his seventies, he maintained a relentless pace. After a day full of meetings with Russian officials in Moscow, we flew a couple of hours southeast to Saratov and then drove another hour to

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visit a secret nuclear storage site where American funding had helped upgrade the security surrounding Russian missiles. (We were also treated to a meal of borscht and a type of fish gelatin, which Dick gamely ate while I spread it around my plate like a six-year-old.)

Visiting the city of Perm near the Ural Mountains, we wandered through a graveyard of SS-24 and SS-25 missile casings, the last remnants of tactical nuclear warheads once aimed at Europe. In Donetsk, in the eastern part of Ukraine, we toured an installation where warehouses of conventional weapons—ammunition, high-grade explosives, surface-to-air missiles, and even tiny bombs hidden in children's toys—had been collected from around the country and were now slated for destruction. In Kiev, we were taken by our hosts to a dilapidated, unguarded three-story complex in the center of town, where Nunn-Lugar was funding the installation of new storage systems for Cold War–era biological research samples, including anthrax and bubonic plague. It was sobering, all of it, proof of people's capacity to harness ingenuity in the service of madness. But for me, after so many years spent focused on domestic issues, the trip was also invigorating—a reminder of just how big the world was and of the profound human consequences of decisions made in Washington.

Watching Dick operate would leave a lasting impression. His gnomish face always fixed in a placid smile, he was tireless in answering my questions. I was struck by the care, precision, and mastery of facts he demonstrated anytime he spoke in meetings with foreign officials. I observed his willingness to endure not only travel delays but also endless stories and noontime vodka shots, knowing that common courtesy spoke across cultures and ultimately could make a difference in advancing American interests. For me, it was a useful lesson in diplomacy, an example of the real impact a senator could have.

Then a storm hit, and everything changed.

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OVER THE COURSE of the week I'd spent traveling with Dick, a tropical weather system that had formed over the Bahamas crossed Florida and deposited itself in the Gulf of Mexico, picking up energy over the warmer waters and aiming itself ominously at the southern

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shores of the United States. By the time our Senate delegation landed in London to meet with Prime Minister Tony Blair, a ferocious and full-blown catastrophe was under way. Making landfall with 125 mph winds, Hurricane Katrina had leveled entire communities along the Gulf Coast, overwhelmed levees, and left much of New Orleans underwater.

I stayed up half the night watching the news coverage, stunned by the murky, primordial nightmare washing across the television screen. There were floating corpses, elderly patients trapped in hospitals, gunfire and looting, refugees huddled and losing hope. To see such suffering was bad enough; to see the slow government response, the vulnerability of so many poor and working-class people, made me ashamed.

A few days later, I joined George H. W. and Barbara Bush, along with Bill and Hillary Clinton, in a visit to Houston, where thousands of people displaced by the hurricane had been bused to emergency shelters set up inside the sprawling Astrodome convention complex. Together with the Red Cross and FEMA, the city had been working around the clock to provide basic necessities, but it struck me as I moved from cot to cot that many of the people there, most of whom were Black, had been abandoned long before the hurricane—scratching out a living on the periphery without savings or insurance. I listened to their stories about lost homes and loved ones missing in the flood, about their inability to evacuate because they had no car or couldn't move an ailing parent, people no different from those I'd worked to organize in Chicago, no different from some of Michelle's aunts or cousins. I was reminded that no matter how my circumstances may have changed, theirs had not. The politics of the country had not. Forgotten people and forgotten voices remained everywhere, neglected by a government that often appeared blind or indifferent to their needs.

I felt their hardship as a rebuke, and as the only African American in the Senate, I decided it was time to end my moratorium on national media appearances. I hit the network news shows, arguing that while I didn't believe racism was the reason for the botched response to the Katrina disaster, it did speak to how little the ruling party, and America as a whole, had invested in tackling the isolation, intergenerational poverty, and lack of opportunities that persisted in large swaths of the

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country.

Back in Washington, I worked with my colleagues drafting plans to help rebuild the Gulf region as part of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. But life in the Senate felt different. How many years in that chamber would it take to actually make a difference in the lives of the people I'd met in Houston? How many committee hearings, failed amendments, and budget provisions negotiated with a recalcitrant chairman would be required to offset the misguided actions of a single FEMA director, Environmental Protection Agency functionary, or Department of Labor appointee?

Such feelings of impatience were compounded when, a few months later, I joined a small congressional delegation on a visit to Iraq. Nearly three years after the U.S.-led invasion, the administration could no longer deny the disaster the war had become. In disbanding the Iraqi military and allowing the Shiite majority to aggressively remove large numbers of Sunni Muslims from government positions, U.S. officials had created a situation that was chaotic and increasingly perilous—a bloody sectarian conflict marked by escalating suicide assaults, roadside explosions, and car bombs detonating on crowded market streets.

Our group visited U.S. military bases in Baghdad, Fallujah, and Kirkuk, and from the Black Hawk helicopters that carried us the entire country looked exhausted, the cities pockmarked by mortar fire, the roads eerily quiet, the landscape coated with dust. At each stop, we met commanders and troops who were smart and courageous, driven by the conviction that with the right amount of military support, technical training, and elbow grease, Iraq could someday turn the corner. But my conversations with journalists and with a handful of high-ranking Iraqi officials told a different story. Wicked spirits had been unleashed, they said, with the killings and reprisals between Sunnis and Shiites making the prospect of reconciliation distant, if not unattainable. The only thing holding the country together appeared to be the thousands of young soldiers and Marines we'd deployed, many of them barely out of high school. More than two thousand of them had been killed already, and many thousands more injured. It seemed clear that the longer the war dragged on, the more our troops would become targets of an enemy they often could not see and did not understand.

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Flying back to the United States, I couldn't shake the thought of those kids paying the price for the arrogance of men like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, who'd rushed us into war based on faulty information and refused, still, to fully consider the consequences. The fact that more than half of my Democratic colleagues had approved this fiasco filled me with an altogether different kind of worry. I questioned what might happen to me the longer I stayed in Washington, the more embedded and comfortable I became. I saw now how it could happen—how the incrementalism and decorum, the endless positioning for the next election, and the groupthink of cable news panels all conspired to chip away at your best instincts and wear down your independence, until whatever you once believed was utterly lost.

If I'd been on the edge of feeling content, thinking I was in the right job, doing the right thing at an acceptable pace, Katrina and my Iraq visit put a stop to all that. Change needed to come faster—and I was going to have to decide what role I would play in bringing it about.

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Chris Dodd, Evan Bayh, and, of course, Hillary Clinton—had laid the groundwork for a possible run. Some had run before; all had been preparing for years and had a seasoned cadre of staff, donors, and local officials lined up to help. Unlike me, most could point to a record of meaningful legislative accomplishments. And I liked them. They had treated me well, broadly shared my views on the issues, and were more than capable of running an effective campaign and, beyond that, an effective White House. If I was becoming convinced that I could excite voters in ways that they couldn't—if I suspected that only a wider coalition than they could build, a different language than they used, could shake up Washington and give hope to those in need—I also understood that my favored status was partly an illusion, the result of friendly media coverage and an over-stoked appetite for anything new. The infatuation could reverse itself in an instant, I knew, the rising star transformed into the callow youth, presumptuous enough to think he could run the country less than halfway through his first term.

Better to hold off, I told myself. Pay dues, collect chits, wait my turn.

On a bright spring afternoon, Harry Reid asked me to stop by his office. I trudged up the wide marble stairs from the Senate chamber to the second floor, the unsmiling, dark-eyed portraits of long-dead men staring down upon me with each step. Harry greeted me in the reception area and led me into his office, a big, high-ceilinged room with the same intricate moldings, tile work, and spectacular views that other senior senators enjoyed, but short on memorabilia or photos of handshakes with the famous that adorned other offices.

"Let me get to the point," Harry said, as if he were known for small talk. "We've got a lot of people in our caucus planning to run for president. I can hardly count them all. And they're good people, Barack, so I can't be out there publicly, taking sides…"

"Listen, Harry, just so you know, I'm not—"

"But," he said, cutting me off, "I think you need to consider running this cycle. I know you've said you wouldn't do it. And sure, a lot of people will say you need more experience. But let me tell you something. Ten more years in the Senate won't make you a better president. You get people motivated, especially young people, minorities, even middle-of-the-road white people. That's different,

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you see. People are looking for something different. Sure, it will be hard, but I think you can win. Schumer thinks so too."

He stood up and headed toward the door, making it clear the meeting was over. "Well, that's all I wanted to tell you. So think about it, okay?"

I left his office stunned. As good a relationship as I'd developed with Harry, I knew him to be the most practical of politicians. Walking down the stairs, I wondered if there was some angle to what he had said, some sophisticated game he was playing that I was too dim to recognize. But when I later talked to Chuck Schumer, and then to Dick Durbin, they delivered the same message: The country was desperate for a new voice. I would never be in a better position to run than I was now, and with my connection with young voters, minorities, and independents, I might broaden the map in a way that could help other Democrats down the ballot.

I didn't share these conversations beyond my senior staff and closest friends, feeling as if I had stepped into a minefield and shouldn't make any sudden moves. As I mulled it all over with Pete, he suggested I have one more conversation before I considered taking a more serious look at what a race would entail.

"You need to talk to Kennedy," he said. "He knows all the players. He's run himself. He'll give you some perspective. And at the very least, he'll tell you if he plans to support anyone else."

Heir to the most famous name in American politics, Ted Kennedy was by then the closest thing Washington had to a living legend. During more than four decades in the Senate, he'd been at the forefront of every major progressive cause, from civil rights to the minimum wage to healthcare. With his great bulk, huge head, and mane of white hair, he filled every room he walked into, and was the rare senator who commanded attention whenever he gingerly rose from his seat in the chamber, searching his suit pocket for his glasses or his notes, that iconic Boston baritone launching each speech with "Thank you, Madam President." The argument would unspool—the face reddening, the voice rising—building to a crescendo like a revivalist sermon, no matter how mundane the issue at hand. And then the speech would end, the curtain would come down, and he would become the old, avuncular Teddy again, wandering down the aisle to

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check on the roll call or sit next to a colleague, his hand on their shoulder or forearm, whispering in their ear or breaking into a hearty laugh—the kind that made you not care that he was probably softening you up for some future vote he might need.

Teddy's office on the third floor of the Russell Senate Office Building was a reflection of the man—charming and full of history, its walls cluttered with photographs of Camelot and models of sailboats and paintings of Cape Cod. One painting in particular caught my attention, of dark, jagged rocks curving against a choppy, white-capped sea.

"Took me a long time to get that one right," Teddy said, coming up beside me. "Three or four tries."

"It was worth the effort," I said.

We sat down in his inner sanctum, with the shades drawn and a soft light, and he began telling stories—about sailing, his children, and various fights he'd lived through on the Senate floor. Ribald stories, funny stories. Occasionally he drifted along some unrelated current before tacking back to his original course, sometimes uttering just a fragment of a thought, all the while both of us knowing that this was a performance—that we were just circling the real purpose of my visit.

"So…" he finally said, "I hear there's talk of you running for president."

I told him it was unlikely, but that I nevertheless wanted his counsel.

"Yes, well, who was it who said there are one hundred senators who look in the mirror and see a president?" Teddy chuckled to himself. "They ask, 'Do I have what it takes?' Jack, Bobby, me too, long ago. It didn't go as planned, but things work out in their own way, I suppose…"

He trailed off, lost in his thoughts. Watching him, I wondered how he took the measure of his own life, and his brothers' lives, the terrible price each one of them had paid in pursuit of a dream. Then, just as suddenly, he was back, his deep blue eyes fixed on mine, all business.

"I won't be wading in early," Teddy said. "Too many friends. But I can tell you this, Barack. The power to inspire is rare. Moments like this are rare. You think you may not be ready, that you'll do it at a more convenient time. But you don't choose the time. The time

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chooses you. Either you seize what may turn out to be the only chance you have, or you decide you're willing to live with the knowledge that the chance has passed you by."

—

MICHELLE WAS HARDLY oblivious to what was happening. At first she simply ignored the fuss. She stopped watching political news shows and waved off all the overeager questions from friends and co-workers about whether I planned to run. When one evening at home I mentioned the conversation I'd had with Harry, she just shrugged, and I did not press the issue.

As the summer wore on, though, the chatter began to seep through the cracks and crevices of our home life. Our evenings and weekends appeared normal so long as Malia and Sasha were swirling about, but I felt the tension whenever Michelle and I were alone. Finally, one night after the girls were asleep, I came into the den where she was watching TV and muted the sound.

"You know I didn't plan any of this," I said, sitting down next to her on the couch.

Michelle stared at the silent screen. "I know," she said.

"I realize we've barely had time to catch our breath. And until a few months ago, the idea of me running seemed crazy."

"Yep."

"But given everything that's happened, I feel like we have to give the idea a serious look. I've asked the team to put together a presentation. What a campaign schedule would look like. Whether we could win. How it might affect the family. I mean, if we were ever going to do this—"

Michelle cut me off, her voice choked with emotion.

"Did you say *we*?" she said. "You mean *you,* Barack. Not *we*. This is *your* thing. I've supported you the whole time, because I believe in you, even though I *hate* politics. I hate the way it exposes our family. You *know* that. And now, finally, we have some stability…even if it's still not normal, not the way I'd choose for us to live…and now you tell me you're going to run for *president*?"

I reached for her hand. "I didn't say I *am* running, honey. I just said

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we can't dismiss the possibility. But I can only consider it if you're on board." I paused, seeing that none of her anger was dissipating. "If you don't think we should, then we won't. Simple as that. You get the final say."

Michelle lifted her eyebrows as if to suggest she didn't believe me. "If that's really true, then the answer is no," she said. "I don't want you to run for president, at least not now." She gave me a hard look and got up from the couch. "God, Barack…When is it going to be enough?"

Before I could answer, she'd gone into the bedroom and closed the door.

How could I blame her for feeling this way? By even suggesting the possibility of a run, by involving my staff before I'd asked for her blessing, I had put her in an impossible spot. For years now, I'd asked Michelle for fortitude and forbearance when it came to my political endeavors, and she'd given it—reluctantly but with love. And then each time I'd come back again, asking for more.

Why would I put her through this? Was it just vanity? Or perhaps something darker—a raw hunger, a blind ambition wrapped in the gauzy language of service? Or was I still trying to prove myself worthy to a father who had abandoned me, live up to my mother's starry-eyed expectations of her only son, and resolve whatever self-doubt remained from being born a child of mixed race? "It's like you have a hole to fill," Michelle had told me early in our marriage, after a stretch in which she'd watched me work myself to near exhaustion. "That's why you can't slow down."

In truth, I thought I'd resolved those issues long ago, finding affirmation in my work, security and love in my family. But I wondered now if I could ever really escape whatever it was in me that needed healing, whatever kept me reaching for more.

Maybe it was impossible to disentangle one's motives. I recalled a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called "The Drum Major Instinct." In it, he talks about how, deep down, we all want to be first, celebrated for our greatness; we all want "to lead the parade." He goes on to point out that such selfish impulses can be reconciled by aligning that quest for greatness with more selfless aims. You can strive to be first in service, first in love. For me, it seemed a satisfying way to

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current of other people's expectations before I'd clearly defined my own. The temperature rose even higher when, a month later, just a few weeks before the midterm elections, my second book was released. I'd labored on it all year, in the evenings in my D.C. apartment and on weekends after Michelle and the girls had gone to sleep; even in Djibouti, where I'd scrambled for several hours trying to fax corrected page proofs to my editor. I had never intended the book to serve as a campaign manifesto; I just wanted to present my ideas about the current state of American politics in an interesting way and sell enough copies to justify my sizable advance.

But that wasn't how it was received, by the political press or the public. Promoting it meant I was on television and radio practically nonstop, and combined with my very visible barnstorming on behalf of congressional candidates, I looked more and more like a candidate myself.

On a drive down from Philly to D.C., where I was scheduled to appear the next morning on *Meet the Press,* Gibbs and Axe, along with Axe's business partner, David Plouffe, asked me what I planned to say when the show's host, Tim Russert, inevitably grilled me about my plans.

"He's going to run back the old tape," Axe explained. "The one where you say unequivocally you will not run for president in 2008."

I listened for a few minutes as the three of them began hashing out various ways to sidestep the question before I interrupted.

"Why don't I just tell the truth? Can't I just say that I had no intention of running two years ago, but circumstances have changed and so has my thinking, and I plan to give it serious thought after the midterms are over?"

They liked the idea, admitting that it said something about the strangeness of politics that such a straightforward answer would be considered novel. Gibbs also advised that I give Michelle a heads-up, predicting that a direct suggestion that I might run would cause the media frenzy to immediately intensify.

Which is exactly what happened. My admission on *Meet the Press* made headlines and the evening news. On the internet, a "Draft Obama" petition took off, gathering thousands of signatures. National columnists, including several conservative ones, penned op-eds urging

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me to run, and *Time* magazine published a cover story titled "Why Barack Obama Could Be the Next President."

Apparently, though, not everyone was sold on my prospects. Gibbs reported that when he stopped at a kiosk on Michigan Avenue to get a copy of *Time,* the Indian American vendor looked down at my picture and offered a two-word response: "*Fuuuuck* that."

We had a good laugh over this. And as the speculation about my candidacy grew, Gibbs and I would repeat the phrase like an incantation, one that helped maintain our grasp on reality and ward off the growing sense that events were moving beyond our control. The crowd at my final stop before the midterm elections, an evening rally in Iowa City in support of the Democratic candidate for governor, was especially raucous. Standing on the stage and looking out at the thousands of people gathered there, their breath rising like mist through the klieg lights, their faces turned up in expectation, their cheers drowning out my haggard voice, I felt as if I were watching a scene in a movie, the figure onstage not my own.

When I got home late that night, the house was dark and Michelle was already asleep. After taking a shower and going through a stack of mail, I slipped under the covers and began drifting off. In that liminal space between wakefulness and sleep, I imagined myself stepping toward a portal of some sort, a bright and cold and airless place, uninhabited and severed from the world. And behind me, out of the darkness, I heard a voice, sharp and clear, as if someone were right next to me, uttering the same word again and again.

No. No. No.

I jolted out of bed, my heart racing, and went downstairs to pour myself a drink. I sat alone in the dark, sipping vodka, my nerves jangled, my brain in sudden overdrive. My deepest fear, it turned out, was no longer of irrelevance, or being stuck in the Senate, or even losing a presidential race.

The fear came from the realization that I could win.

—

RIDING A WAVE of antipathy toward the Bush administration and the war in Iraq, Democrats swept just about every important contest in

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November, winning control of both the House and the Senate. As hard as we'd worked to help achieve these results, my team and I had no time to celebrate. Instead, starting the day after the election, we began charting a possible path to the White House.

Our pollster, Paul Harstad, went through the numbers and found me already among the first tier of candidates. We discussed the primary and caucus calendar, understanding that for an upstart campaign like mine, everything would depend on winning the early states, especially Iowa. We ran through what a realistic budget might look like, and how we'd go about raising the hundreds of millions of dollars it would take just to win the Democratic nomination. Pete and Alyssa presented plans for juggling my Senate duties with campaign travel. Axelrod wrote a memo outlining the themes of a potential campaign, and how —given voters' utter contempt for Washington—my message of change could compensate for my obvious lack of experience.

Despite how little time they'd had, everyone had carried out their assignments with thoroughness and care. I was especially impressed by David Plouffe. In his late thirties, slight and intense, with sharp features and a crisp yet informal manner, he had dropped out of college to work on a series of Democratic campaigns and also ran the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee before joining Axelrod's consulting firm. I sat listening one day as he mapped out how we might power a grassroots state-by-state organizing effort using both our volunteer base and the internet, and later I told Pete that if we did this, Plouffe seemed like the clear choice for campaign manager.

"He's excellent," Pete said. "It might take some convincing, though. He's got a young family."

This was one of the more striking things about our discussions that month: The entire team displayed an ambivalence that matched my own. It wasn't just that my candidacy remained a long shot; both Plouffe and Axelrod were blunt in saying that for me to beat Hillary Clinton, a "national brand," we would have to pitch close to a perfect game. No, what gave them more pause was the fact that, unlike me, they had seen presidential campaigns up close. They knew all too well the grueling nature of the enterprise. They understood the toll it would take not just on me and my family but on them and their families as well.

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We'd be on the road constantly. The press would be merciless in its scrutiny—"a nonstop colonoscopy" I believe Gibbs called it. I'd see very little of Michelle or the kids for a year at least—two years if we were lucky enough to win the primary.

"I'll be honest, Barack," Axe told me after one meeting. "The process can be exhilarating, but it's mostly misery. It's like a stress test, an EKG on the soul. And for all your talent, I don't know how you'll respond. Neither do you. The whole thing is so crazy, so undignified and brutal, that you have to be a little pathological to do what it takes to win. And I just don't know if you've got that hunger in you. I don't think you'll be unhappy if you never become president."

"That's true," I said.

"I know it is," Axe said. "And as a person, that's a strength. But for a candidate, it's a weakness. You may be a little too normal, too well-adjusted, to run for president. And though the political consultant in me thinks it would be a thrill to see you do this, the part of me that's your friend kind of hopes you don't."

Michelle, meanwhile, was also sorting out her feelings. She listened quietly during meetings, occasionally asking questions about the campaign calendar, what would be expected of her, and what it might mean for the girls. Gradually her resistance to the idea of me running had subsided. Perhaps it helped to hear the unvarnished truth of what a campaign entailed, her worst fears rendered concrete and specific and therefore more manageable. Maybe it was the conversations she'd had with Valerie and Marty, two of our most loyal friends, people whose judgment she implicitly trusted. Or the nudge she got from her brother, Craig—someone who had pursued his own unlikely dreams, first to play professional basketball and later to become a coach, even though it meant giving up a lucrative career in banking.

"She's just scared," he had told me over a beer one afternoon. He'd gone on to describe how Michelle and her mother used to watch his high school basketball games, but if the score got even a little close, they'd leave and go wait in the tunnel, the two of them too tense to stay in their seats. "They didn't want to see me lose," Craig said. "They didn't want to see me hurt or disappointed. I had to explain that it's part of competition." He was in favor of me taking my shot at the presidency and said he planned to talk it over with his sister. "I

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want her to see the bigger picture," he said. "The chance to compete at this level isn't something you can pass up."

One day in December, just ahead of our holiday trip to Hawaii, our team held what was to be the final meeting before I decided whether to move forward or not. Michelle patiently endured an hour-long discussion on staffing and the logistics of a potential announcement before cutting in with an essential question.

"You've said there are a lot of other Democrats who are capable of winning an election and being president. You've told me the only reason for you to run is if you could provide something that the others can't. Otherwise it's not worth it. Right?"

I nodded.

"So my question is why you, Barack? Why do *you* need to be president?"

We looked at each other across the table. For a moment, it was as if we were alone in the room. My mind flipped back to the moment seventeen years earlier when we first met, me arriving late to her office, a little damp from the rain, Michelle rising up from her desk, so lovely and self-possessed in a lawyerly blouse and skirt, and the easy banter that followed. I had seen in those round, dark eyes of hers a vulnerability that I knew she rarely let show. I knew even then that she was special, that I would need to know her, that this was a woman I could love. How lucky I had been, I thought.

"Barack?"

I shook myself out of the reverie. "Right," I said. "Why me?" I mentioned several of the reasons we'd talked about before. That I might be able to spark a new kind of politics, or get a new generation to participate, or bridge the divisions in the country better than other candidates could.

"But who knows?" I said, looking around the table. "There's no guarantee we can pull it off. Here's one thing I know for sure, though. I know that the day I raise my right hand and take the oath to be president of the United States, the world will start looking at America differently. I know that kids all around this country—Black kids, Hispanic kids, kids who don't fit in—they'll see themselves differently, too, their horizons lifted, their possibilities expanded. And that alone…that would be worth it."

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PART TWO

YES WE CAN

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CHAPTER 5

ON A BRIGHT FEBRUARY MORNING in 2007, I stood on a stage before the Old State Capitol in Springfield—the same spot where Abe Lincoln had delivered his "House Divided" speech while serving in the Illinois state legislature—and announced my candidacy for president. With temperatures in the low teens, we'd been worried that the cold might scare people off, but by the time I stepped up to the microphone, more than fifteen thousand people had gathered in the plaza and adjoining streets, all of them in a festive mood, bundled in parkas, scarves, ski caps, and earmuffs, many of them hoisting handmade or campaign-provided OBAMA signs, their collective breath hovering like patches of clouds.

My speech, carried live on cable TV, captured our campaign's big themes—the need for fundamental change; the need to tackle long-term problems like healthcare and climate change; the need to move past the tired Washington partisan divide; the need for an engaged and active citizenry. Michelle and the girls joined me onstage to wave at the roaring crowd when I was finished, the massive American flags hanging across nearby buildings making for a spectacular backdrop.

From there, my team and I flew to Iowa, where in eleven months the nation's first contest for the nomination would take place, and where we were counting on an early victory to catapult us past more seasoned opponents. At a series of town hall meetings, we were once again greeted by thousands of supporters and curiosity seekers. Backstage at an event in Cedar Rapids, I overheard a veteran Iowa political operative explain to one of the fifty or so national reporters who were following us that "this is not normal."

Looking at the footage from that day, it's hard not to get swept up in the nostalgia that still holds sway over my former staff and supporters—the feeling that we were kick-starting a magical ride; that

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over the course of two years we would catch lightning in a bottle and tap into something essential and true about America. But while the crowds, the excitement, the media attention of that day, all foreshadowed my viability in the race, I have to remind myself that nothing felt easy or predestined at the time, that again and again it felt as if our campaign would go entirely off the rails, and that, at the outset, it seemed not just to me but to many who were paying attention that I wasn't a particularly good candidate.

In many ways, my problems were a direct outgrowth of the buzz we'd generated, and the expectations that came with it. As Axe explained, most presidential campaigns by necessity start small—"Off-Broadway," he called it; small crowds, small venues, covered by local networks and small papers, where the candidate and his or her team could test lines, smooth out kinks, commit a pratfall, or work through a bout of stage fright without attracting much notice. We didn't have that luxury. From day one, it felt like the middle of Times Square, and under the glare of the spotlight my inexperience showed.

My staff's biggest fear was that I'd make a "gaffe," the expression used by the press to describe any maladroit phrase by the candidate that reveals ignorance, carelessness, fuzzy thinking, insensitivity, malice, boorishness, falsehood, or hypocrisy—or is simply deemed to veer sufficiently far from conventional wisdom to make said candidate vulnerable to attack. By this definition, most humans will commit five to ten gaffes a day, each of us counting on the forbearance and goodwill of our family, co-workers, and friends to fill in the blanks, catch our drift, and generally assume the best rather than the worst in us.

As a result, my initial instincts were to dismiss some of my team's warnings. On our way to our final stop in Iowa on announcement day, for example, Axe glanced up from his briefing book.

"You know," he said, "the town we're going to, it's pronounced 'Waterloo.' "

"Right," I said. "Waterloo."

Axe shook his head. "No, it's Water-*loo*. Not *Water*-loo."

"Do that for me again."

"Water-*loo,*" Axe said, his lips pursing just so.

"One more time."

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Axe frowned. "Okay, Barack…this is serious."

It didn't take long, though, to appreciate that the minute you announced your candidacy for president, the normal rules of speech no longer applied; that microphones were everywhere, and every word coming out of your mouth was recorded, amplified, scrutinized, and dissected. At the town hall in Ames, Iowa, on that first post-announcement tour, I was explaining my opposition to the war in Iraq when I got sloppy and said that the Bush administration's poorly-thought-out decision had resulted in more than three thousand of our young troops' lives being "wasted." The second I uttered the word, I regretted it. I'd always been careful to distinguish between my views on the war and my appreciation for the sacrifices of our troops and their families. Only a few press outlets picked up my blunder, and a quick mea culpa tamped down any controversy. But it was a reminder that words carried a different weight than before, and as I imagined how my carelessness might impact a family still grieving over the loss of a loved one, my heart sank.

By nature I'm a deliberate speaker, which, by the standards of presidential candidates, helped keep my gaffe quotient relatively low. But my care with words raised another issue on the campaign trail: I was just plain wordy, and that was a problem. When asked a question, I tended to offer circuitous and ponderous answers, my mind instinctively breaking up every issue into a pile of components and subcomponents. If every argument had two sides, I usually came up with four. If there was an exception to some statement I just made, I wouldn't just point it out; I'd provide footnotes. "You're burying the lede!" Axe would practically shout after listening to me drone on and on and on. For a day or two I'd obediently focus on brevity, only to suddenly find myself unable to resist a ten-minute explanation of the nuances of trade policy or the pace of Arctic melting.

"What d'ya think?" I'd say, pleased with my thoroughness as I walked offstage.

"You got an A on the quiz," Axe would reply. "No votes, though."

These were issues I could fix with time. Of greater concern, as we rolled into the spring, was the fact that I was grumpy. One reason for that, I realize now, was the toll of a two-year Senate campaign, a year

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of town halls as a senator, and months of travel on behalf of other candidates. Once the adrenaline of the announcement wore off, the sheer magnitude of the grind now before me struck with full force.

And it was a grind. When not in Washington for Senate business, I soon found myself in Iowa or one of the other early states, putting in sixteen-hour days, six and a half days a week—sleeping in a Hampton Inn or a Holiday Inn or an AmericInn or a Super 8. I'd wake up after five or six hours and try to squeeze in a workout at whatever facility we could find (the old treadmill in the back of a tanning salon was memorable), before packing up my clothes and gulping down a haphazard breakfast; before hopping into a van and making fundraising calls on the way to the first town hall meeting of the day; before interviews with the local paper or news station, several meet-and-greets with local party leaders, a bathroom stop, and maybe a swing by a local eatery to shake hands; before hopping back in the van to dial for more dollars. I'd repeat this three or four times, with a cold sandwich or a salad wedged in there somewhere, before finally staggering into another motel around nine p.m., trying to catch Michelle and the girls by phone before they went to bed, before reading the next day's briefing materials, the binder gradually slipping out of my hands as exhaustion knocked me out.

And that's not even counting the flights to New York or L.A. or Chicago or Dallas for fundraisers. It was a life of not glamour but monotony, and the prospect of eighteen continuous months of it quickly wore down my spirit. I'd staked my claim in the presidential race, involved a big team of people, begged strangers for money, and propagated a vision I believed in. But I missed my wife. I missed my kids. I missed my bed, a consistent shower, sitting at a proper table for a proper meal. I missed not having to say the exact same thing the exact same way five or six or seven times a day.

Fortunately, along with Gibbs (who had the constitution, experience, and general orneriness to keep me focused while on the road), I had two other companions to help me push through my initial funk.

The first was Marvin Nicholson, a half Canadian with an easy charm and unflappable demeanor. In his mid-thirties and a towering six foot eight, Marvin had held a variety of jobs, from golf caddy to

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ALL THE WHILE, I was learning a lot and quickly. I spent hours dutifully poring over the fat briefing books prepared by my staff, inhaling the latest studies on the value of early childhood education, new developments in battery technology that would make clean energy more accessible, and China's manipulation of its currency to boost its exports.

Looking back, I realize I was doing what most of us tend to do when we're uncertain or floundering: We reach for what feels familiar, what we think we're good at. I knew policy; I knew how to consume and process information. It took a while to figure out that my problem wasn't a lack of a ten-point plan. Rather, it was my general inability to boil issues down to their essence, to tell a story that helped explain an increasingly uncertain world to the American people and make them feel that I, as president, could help them navigate it.

My more seasoned opponents already understood this. I embarrassed myself early in their presence at a healthcare forum sponsored by the Service Employees International Union, held in Las Vegas on a Saturday evening late in March 2007. Plouffe had resisted my participation. In his view, such "cattle calls," where the candidates appeared before this or that Democratic interest group, played to the strengths of insiders and took time away from direct voter contact. I disagreed. Healthcare was an issue I felt strongly about—not only because I'd heard many devastating personal stories while campaigning but because I'd never forget my mother in her waning days, fretting not just about her chances of survival but about whether her insurance would keep her solvent during treatment.

As it turned out, I should have listened to Plouffe. My head was crammed with too many facts and too few answers. Before a large audience of health workers, I stumbled, mumbled, hemmed and hawed onstage. Under pointed questioning, I had to confess that I didn't yet have a definitive plan for delivering affordable healthcare. You could hear crickets in the auditorium. The Associated Press ran a story critiquing my showing at the forum—one that would promptly get picked up by outlets across the country—under the painful headline IS OBAMA ALL STYLE AND LITTLE SUBSTANCE?

My performance stood in sharp contrast to those of John Edwards and Hillary Clinton, the two leading contenders. Edwards, the

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handsome and polished former vice presidential candidate, had left the Senate in 2004 to be John Kerry's running mate, then made a show of starting a poverty center but really never stopped campaigning full-time for president. Though I didn't know him well, I'd never been particularly impressed with Edwards: Despite the fact that he had working-class roots, his newly minted populism sounded synthetic and poll-tested to me, the political equivalent of one of those boy bands dreamed up by a studio marketing department. But in Las Vegas I was chastened as I watched him lay out a crisp proposal for universal coverage, displaying all the gifts that had made him a successful trial lawyer back in North Carolina.

Hillary was even better. Like many people, I'd spent the 1990s observing the Clintons from afar. I'd admired Bill's prodigious talent and intellectual firepower. If I wasn't always comfortable with the specifics of his so-called triangulations—signing welfare reform legislation with inadequate protections for those who couldn't find jobs, the tough-on-crime rhetoric that would contribute to an explosion in the federal prison population—I appreciated the skill with which he had steered progressive policy making and the Democratic Party back toward electability.

As for the former First Lady, I found her just as impressive, and more sympathetic. Maybe it was because in Hillary's story I saw traces of what my mother and grandmother had gone through: all of them smart, ambitious women who had chafed under the constraints of their times, having to navigate male egos and social expectations. If Hillary had become guarded, perhaps overly scripted—who could blame her, given the attacks she'd been subjected to? In the Senate, my favorable opinion of her had been largely confirmed. In all our interactions, she came across as hardworking, personable, and always impeccably prepared. She also had a good, hearty laugh that tended to lighten the mood of everyone around her.

That I'd decided to run despite Hillary's presence in the race had less to do with any assessment of her personal shortcomings and more to do with my feeling that she just couldn't escape the rancor, grudges, and hardened assumptions arising out of the Clinton White House years. Fair or not, I didn't see how she could close America's political divide, or change how Washington did business, or provide the country with the fresh start it needed. Yet watching her speak

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passionately and knowledgeably about healthcare onstage that evening at the SEIU forum and hearing the crowd cheer enthusiastically after she was done, I wondered if I'd miscalculated.

That forum would hardly be the last time Hillary—or, for that matter, half the primary field—outperformed me, for it soon seemed as if we were gathered for a debate once every two or three weeks. I had never been particularly good in these formats myself: My long windups and preference for complicated answers worked against me, particularly onstage with seven savvy pros and a single timed minute to answer a question. During our first debate in April, the moderator called time at least twice before I was done speaking. Asked about how I'd handle multiple terrorist attacks, I discussed the need to coordinate federal help but neglected to mention the obvious imperative to go after the perpetrators. For the next several minutes, Hillary and the others took turns pointing out my oversight. Their tones were somber, but the gleam in their eyes said, *Take that, rookie.*

Afterward, Axe was gentle in his postgame critique.

"Your problem," he said, "is you keep trying to answer the question."

"Isn't that the point?" I said.

"No, Barack," Axe said, "that is *not* the point. The point is to get your message across. What are your values? What are your priorities? That's what people care about. Look, half the time the moderator is just using the question to try to trip you up. Your job is to avoid the trap they've set. Take whatever question they give you, give 'em a quick line to make it seem like you answered it…and then talk about what *you* want to talk about."

"That's bullshit," I said.

"Exactly," he said.

I was frustrated with Axe and even more frustrated with myself. But I realized his insight was hard to deny after watching a replay of the debate. The most effective debate answers, it seemed, were designed not to illuminate but to evoke an emotion, or identify the enemy, or signal to a constituency that you, more than anyone else on that stage, were and would always be on their side. It was easy to dismiss the exercise as superficial. Then again, a president wasn't a lawyer or an accountant or a pilot, hired to carry out some narrow,

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specialized task. Mobilizing public opinion, shaping working coalitions—that was the job. Whether I liked it or not, people were moved by emotion, not facts. To elicit the best rather than the worst of those emotions, to buttress those better angels of our nature with reason and sound policy, to perform while still speaking the truth—that was the bar I needed to clear.

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AS I WAS working to curb my screw-ups, Plouffe was running a seamless operation from our Chicago headquarters. I didn't see him often but was coming to realize that the two of us had much in common. We were both analytical and even-keeled, generally skeptical of convention and pretense. But whereas I could be absentminded, indifferent to small details, incapable of maintaining an orderly filing system, constantly misplacing memos, pens, and cell phones that had just been handed to me, Plouffe turned out to be a managerial genius.

From the start, he focused unapologetically and unswervingly on winning Iowa. Even when cable pundits and some of our supporters were calling us idiots for being so single-minded, he wouldn't let anyone waver an inch from the strategy, certain it was our only path to victory. Plouffe imposed a martial discipline, giving everyone on our team—from Axe to our most junior organizer—a level of autonomy while also demanding accountability and a strict adherence to process. He capped salaries as a way of eliminating needless staff dissent. He pointedly directed resources away from bloated consulting contracts and media budgets in order to give our field organizers what they needed on the ground. Obsessive about data, he recruited a team of internet savants who designed a digital program that was light-years ahead of those not just of other campaigns but many private corporations as well.

Add it all up, and in six months, from a standing start, Plouffe built a campaign operation strong enough to go toe-to-toe with the Clinton machine. It was a fact he quietly relished. This was another thing I came to realize about Plouffe: Beneath the low-key persona and deep convictions, he just plain liked the combat. Politics was his sport, and in his chosen endeavor he was as competitive as Reggie was in

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basketball. Later, I'd ask Axe if he'd anticipated just how good a campaign architect his then junior partner would turn out to be. Axe shook his head.

"A fucking revelation," he said.

In presidential politics, the best strategy means little if you don't have the resources to execute it, and this was the second thing we had going for us: money. Given that the Clintons had been cultivating a national donor base for nearly three decades, our working assumption had been that Hillary would have a tremendous fundraising advantage over us. But the hunger for change in America was proving to be stronger than even we had anticipated.

Early on, our fundraising followed a traditional pattern: Big donors from big cities wrote and collected big checks. Penny Pritzker, a businesswoman and longtime friend from Chicago, served as our campaign's national finance chair, bringing both organizational acumen and a vast network of relationships to the effort. Julianna Smoot, our tough-talking and experienced finance director, built an expert team and had a gift for alternately sweet-talking, shaming, and sometimes scaring me into engaging in the endless hustle for dollars. She had a great smile, but the eyes of a killer.

I grew accustomed to the drill, partly out of necessity, but also because as time went on, our donors came to understand and even appreciate my terms. This was about building a better country, I'd tell them, not about egos or prestige. I would listen to their take on an issue, especially if they had some expertise, but I wouldn't shade my positions to satisfy them. If I had a spare minute, the thank-you notes I wrote and the birthday calls I made would be directed not to them but to our volunteers and young staff out in the field.

And if I won, they could count on me raising their taxes.

This attitude lost us a few donors but helped develop a culture among supporters that wasn't about perks or status. And anyway, with each successive month, the makeup of our donor base was shifting. Small donations—in ten- or twenty- or hundred-dollar increments—started pouring in, most coming through the internet, from college students who pledged their Starbucks budget for the duration of the campaign, or grandmas who'd taken up a sewing circle collection. All told during primary season, we would raise millions from small donors,

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we'd have to convince a whole lot of likely Obama supporters—young people, people of color, independents—to overcome the various hurdles and hang-ups and participate in the caucus for the very first time. To do it, Tewes insisted on opening offices right away, covering all ninety-nine Iowa counties; and for each office we'd hire a young staffer who, with little pay or day-to-day supervision, would be responsible for engineering their own local political movement.

It was a big investment and an early gamble, but we gave Tewes the green light. He went to work, with an outstanding team of deputies who helped develop his plan: Mitch Stewart, Marygrace Galston, Anne Filipic, and Emily Parcell, all of them smart, disciplined, with experience on multiple campaigns—and under thirty-two years old.

I spent the most time with Emily, who was an Iowa native and had worked for former governor Tom Vilsack. Tewes figured she'd be especially helpful to me as I navigated local politics. She was twenty-six, one of the youngest in the group, with dark hair and sensible clothes, and diminutive enough to pass for a high school senior. I quickly discovered she knew just about every Democrat in the state and had no qualms about giving me very specific instructions at every stop, covering whom I should talk to and which issues the local community most cared about. This information was delivered in a deadpan monotone, along with a look that suggested a low tolerance for foolishness—a quality Emily may have inherited from her mom, who'd worked at the Motorola plant for three decades and still managed to put herself through college.

During the long hours we spent traveling between events in a rented campaign van, I made it my mission to coax a smile out of Emily—jokes, wisecracks, puns, stray observations about the size of Reggie's head. But my charm and wit invariably crashed on the rocks of her steady, unblinking gaze, and I settled on trying to do exactly what she told me to do.

Mitch, Marygrace, and Anne would later describe the particulars of their work—which included collectively screening all the unorthodox ideas Tewes routinely pitched at meetings.

"He'd have ten a day," Mitch would explain. "Nine were ridiculous, one would be genius." Mitch was a gangly South Dakotan

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who'd worked in Iowa politics before but had never encountered someone as passionately eclectic as Tewes. "If he brought up the same idea to me three times," he'd recall, "I figured there might be something there."

Enlisting Norma Lyon, Iowa's "Butter Cow Lady," who at the state fair each year sculpted a life-sized cow out of salted butter, to make a prerecorded call announcing her support for us, which we then blasted across the state—genius. (She later created a twenty-three-pound "butter bust" of my head—also likely a Tewes idea.)

Insisting that we put up billboards along the highway, with rhyming phrases unfolding in sequence like the old 1960s Burma-Shave ads (TIME FOR CHANGE...LET'S SHIFT GEARS...VOTE 4 THE GUY... WITH BIG EARS...OBAMA 08)—not so genius.

Promising to shave his eyebrows if the staff reached the unreachable goal of collecting one hundred thousand supporter cards —not genius, until very late in the campaign, when the team actually hit the mark, at which point it became genius. ("Mitch shaved his too," Marygrace would explain. "We have pictures. It was horrible.")

Tewes would set the tone for our Iowa operation—grassroots, no hierarchies, irreverent, and slightly manic. No one—including senior staff, donors, or dignitaries—was exempt from doing some door knocking. In the early weeks, he hung signs on every wall in every office with a motto he'd authored: RESPECT, EMPOWER, INCLUDE. If we were serious about a new kind of politics, he explained, then it started right there on the ground, with every organizer committed to listening to people, respecting what they had to say, and treating everybody—including our opponents and their supporters—the way we wanted to be treated. Lastly he stressed the importance of encouraging voters to get involved instead of just selling them a candidate like a box of laundry detergent.

Anyone who breached these values got scolded and sometimes pulled from the field. When, during our team's weekly conference call, a new organizer made a joke about why he'd joined the campaign, saying something about "hating pantsuits" (a reference to Hillary's favorite campaign attire), Tewes admonished him in a lengthy rant for all the other organizers to hear. "It's not what we stand for," he said, "not even in private."

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The team took this to heart, particularly because Tewes practiced what he preached. Despite the occasional intemperate outburst, he never failed to show people how much they mattered. When Marygrace's uncle died, Tewes declared National Marygrace Day, and had everyone in the office wear pink. He also had me record a message announcing that for that one day, he would have to do everything Marygrace said. (Of course, Marygrace had to put up with three hundred days of Tewes and Mitch chewing tobacco in the office, so the ledger never fully balanced.)

This kind of camaraderie permeated the Iowa operation. Not just at headquarters but, more important, among the close to two hundred field organizers we'd deployed across the state. All told, I would spend eighty-seven days in Iowa that year. I would sample each town's culinary specialty, shoot hoops with schoolkids on any court we could find, and experience every possible weather event, from funnel clouds to sideways sleet. Through it all, those young men and women, working endless hours for subsistence wages, were my able guides. Most were barely out of college. Many were on their first campaigns and far away from home. Some had grown up in Iowa or the rural Midwest, familiar with the attitudes and way of life of midsized towns like Sioux City or Altoona. But that wasn't typical. Assemble our organizers in a room and you'd find Italians from Philly, Jews from Chicago, Blacks from New York, and Asians from California; children of poor immigrants and children of the rich suburbs; engineering majors, former Peace Corps volunteers, military veterans, and high school dropouts. On the surface, at least, there seemed no way to connect their wildly varied experiences to the meat-and-potatoes folks whose votes we desperately needed.

And yet they did connect. Arriving in town with a duffel bag or a small suitcase, living in the spare bedroom or basement of some early local supporter, they would spend months getting to know a place—visiting the local barbershop, setting up card tables in front of the grocery store, speaking at the Rotary Club. They helped coach Little League, assisted local charities, and called their moms for a banana pudding recipe so they wouldn't show up to the potluck empty-handed. They learned to listen to their local volunteers—most of whom were much older, with their own jobs, families, and concerns—and got good at recruiting new ones too. They worked each day to

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exhaustion and fought off bouts of loneliness and fear. Month by month, they won people's trust. They were no longer strangers.

What a tonic these young kids in Iowa were! They filled me with optimism and gratitude and a sense of coming full circle. In them, I saw myself at twenty-five, arriving in Chicago, confused and idealistic. I remembered the precious bonds I'd made with families on the South Side, the mistakes and small victories, the community I found—similar to what our field organizers were now forging for themselves. Their experiences pointed me back to why I'd gone into government in the first place, toward the taproot idea that maybe politics could be less about power and positioning and more about community and connection.

Our volunteers across Iowa might believe in me, I thought to myself. But they were working as hard as they were mainly because of those young organizers. Just as those kids may have signed up to work for the campaign because of something I'd said or done, but now they belonged to the volunteers. What drove them, what sustained them, independent of their candidate or any particular issue, were the friendships and relationships, the mutual loyalty and progress born of joint effort. That and their cantankerous boss back in Des Moines, the one who was promising to shave his eyebrows if they succeeded.

—

BY JUNE, OUR campaign had turned a corner. Thanks to skyrocketing internet donations, our financial performance continued to far outstrip our projections, allowing us to go up early on Iowa TV. With school out for the summer, Michelle and the girls were able to join me more often on the road. Rumbling across Iowa in an RV, the sound of their chatter in the background as I made calls; seeing Reggie and Marvin taking on Malia and Sasha in marathon games of UNO; feeling the gentle weight of one daughter or another sleeping against me on an afternoon leg; and always the obligatory ice cream stops—all of it filled me with a joy that carried over into my public appearances.

The nature of those appearances changed as well. As the initial novelty of my candidacy wore off, I found myself speaking to more manageable crowds, a few hundred rather than thousands, which gave me the chance once again to meet people one-on-one and listen to

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their stories. Military spouses described the day-to-day struggles of running a household and fighting off the terror of possibly hearing bad news from the front. Farmers explained the pressures that led them to surrender their independence to big agribusiness concerns. Laid-off workers talked me through the myriad ways that existing job-training programs had failed them. Small-business owners detailed the sacrifices they'd made to pay for their employees' health insurance, until just one employee fell sick and everyone's premiums became unaffordable, including their own.

Informed by these stories, my stump speech became less abstract, less a matter of the head and more a matter of the heart. People heard their own lives reflected in these stories, learning that they were not alone in their hardship, and with that knowledge, more and more of them signed up to volunteer on my behalf. Campaigning on this more retail, human scale also offered the opportunity for chance encounters that made the campaign come alive.

That's what happened when I visited Greenwood, South Carolina, one day in June. Though most of my time was spent in Iowa, I was also paying regular visits to other states like New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina, whose primaries and caucuses would follow in quick succession. The trip to Greenwood was the result of a rash promise I'd made to an influential legislator who'd offered to endorse me, but only if I visited her hometown. As it turned out, my visit was poorly timed, coming during an especially rough week, amid bad poll numbers, bad stories in the papers, bad moods, and bad sleep. It didn't help that Greenwood was more than an hour from the nearest major airport, we were driving through torrential rains, and when I finally arrived at the municipal building where the event was supposed to be held, I found only twenty people or so gathered inside—all of them as damp as I was from the storm.

A wasted day, I thought to myself, mentally ticking off all the other work I could have been doing. I was going through the motions, shaking hands, asking people what they did for a living, quietly trying to calculate how fast I could get out of there, when suddenly I heard a piercing voice shout out.

"Fired up!"

My staff and I were startled, thinking maybe it was a heckler, but

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during a speech I mentioned that if I had Osama bin Laden in my sights within Pakistani territory, and the Pakistani government was unwilling or unable to capture or kill him, I would take the shot. This shouldn't have been particularly surprising to anyone; back in 2003, I had premised my opposition to the Iraq War partly on my belief that it would distract us from destroying al-Qaeda.

But such blunt talk ran counter to the Bush administration's public position; the U.S. government maintained the dual fiction that Pakistan was a reliable partner in the war against terrorism and that we never encroached on Pakistani territory in the pursuit of terrorists. My statement threw Washington into a bipartisan tizzy, with Joe Biden, the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Republican presidential candidate John McCain both expressing the view that I was not ready to be president.

In my mind, these episodes indicated the degree to which the Washington foreign policy establishment got things backward—taking military action without first testing diplomatic options, observing diplomatic niceties in the interest of maintaining the status quo precisely when action was called for. It also indicated the degree to which decision makers in Washington consistently failed to level with the American people. I would never fully convince the national pundits that I was right on these arguments, but a funny trend began to show up in the polls after each of these dustups—Democratic primary voters agreed with me.

Having such substantive arguments felt liberating, a reminder of why I was running. They helped me regain my voice as a candidate. That confidence showed a few debates later, at an early-morning affair at Drake University in Iowa. The moderator, George Stephanopoulos of ABC, quickly gave Joe Biden the chance to explain why exactly I was not ready to be president. By the time I got an opportunity to respond, five minutes later, I'd had to listen to practically every other candidate onstage knock me around.

"Well, you know, to prepare for this debate, I rode in the bumper cars at the state fair," I said, using a line Axe had come up with, referencing my well-publicized excursion with Malia and Sasha to the state fair earlier that week. The audience laughed, and for the next hour I happily jousted with my opponents, suggesting that any

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Democratic voter who was trying to figure out who represented a real change from the failed policies of George Bush need look no further than the respective positions of those of us onstage. For the first time since the debates had begun, I enjoyed myself, and the consensus among the pundits that morning was that I had won.

It was a gratifying result, if for no other reason than not having to endure any dour looks from the team.

"You killed it!" Axe said, clapping me on the back.

"I guess we'll be pushing to have all the debates at eight in the morning!" Plouffe joked.

"That's not funny," I said. (I was not, and am not, a morning person.)

We piled into the car and started driving to our next stop. Along the route, our supporters, several rows deep, could be heard shouting long after they had disappeared from sight.

"Fired up!"

"Ready to go!"

—

PART OF THE reason I'd received so much attention from the moderators during the Drake University debate was the release of an ABC poll showing me leading in Iowa for the first time, albeit by just 1 percent, over both Clinton and Edwards. The race was close, clearly (later polls would put me right back in third place), but there was no denying that our Iowa organization was having an impact, especially among younger voters. You could feel it in the crowds—in their size, their energy, and, most important, the number of supporter cards and volunteer sign-ups we were collecting at every stop. With less than six months to go before the caucus, our strength was only building.

Unfortunately none of our progress showed up in national polling. Our focus on Iowa and to a lesser extent New Hampshire meant we'd made minimal TV buys and appearances elsewhere, and by September we remained around twenty points behind Hillary. Plouffe did his best to educate the press as to why national polls were meaningless at this early stage, but to no avail. Increasingly I found myself fielding anxious phone calls from supporters around the country, many offering policy

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advice, advertising suggestions, complaints that we'd neglected this or that interest group, and general questions about our competence.

Two things finally flipped the narrative, the first one not of our making. At a late-October debate in Philadelphia, Hillary—whose performances until then had been nearly flawless—got tangled up, unwilling to provide a straight answer on the issue of whether undocumented workers should be allowed driver's licenses. Undoubtedly she'd been coached to hedge her response, since it was an issue that divided the Democratic base. Her efforts to straddle the fence only fed the already prevalent impression that she was a garden-variety Washington politician—sharpening the contrast we'd been hoping to make.

And then there was what happened at the Iowa Jefferson-Jackson Dinner on November 10, which *was* of our making. Traditionally the JJ Dinner signaled the final sprint to caucus day and offered a kind of barometric reading of where the race stood, with each candidate delivering a ten-minute speech without notes before an arena of eight thousand potential caucus-goers as well as the national media. As such, it was a key test of both our message's appeal and our organizational prowess going into the final few weeks.

We put everything we had into a successful showing, lining up buses to bring in supporters from all ninety-nine counties across the state and dwarfing turnout from the other campaigns. John Legend gave a short predinner concert on our behalf for more than a thousand people, and when it was done, Michelle and I led the entire procession down the street to the arena where the dinner was being held, a pumped-up local high school drum and drill corps called the Isiserettes performing beside us, their happy racket giving us the air of a conquering army.

The speech itself won the day for us. To that point in my political career, I had always insisted on writing the bulk of any important speech myself, but campaigning nonstop as I was, there was no way I'd have time to write the JJ Dinner remarks on my own. I had to trust Favs, with guidance from Axe and Plouffe, to produce a draft that effectively summarized my case for the nomination.

And Favs delivered. In that critical moment of our campaign, with only modest input from me, this guy just a few years out of college

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