BECOMING

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MICHELLE OBAMA

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Preface

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

So far in my life, I've been a lawyer. I've been a vice president at a hospital and the director of a nonprofit that helps young people build meaningful careers. I've been a working-class black student at a fancy mostly white college. I've been the only woman, the only African American, in

all sorts of rooms. I've been a bride, a stressed-out new mother, a daughter torn up by grief. And until recently, I was the First Lady of the United States of America—a job that's not officially a job, but that nonetheless has given me a platform like nothing I could have imagined. It challenged me and humbled me, lifted me up and shrank me down, sometimes all at once. I'm just beginning to process what took place over these last years—from the moment in 2006 when my husband first started talking about running for president to the cold morning this winter when I climbed into a limo with Melania Trump, accompanying her to her husband's inauguration. It's been quite a ride.

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

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

There's a lot I still don't know about America, about life, about what the future might bring. But I do know myself. My father, Fraser, taught me to work hard, laugh often, and keep my word. My mother, Marian,

showed me how to think for myself and to use my voice. Together, in our cramped apartment on the South Side of Chicago, they helped me see the value in our story, in my story, in the larger story of our country. Even when it's not pretty or perfect. Even when it's more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.

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

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

Then it was over. Even if you see it coming, even as your final weeks are filled with emotional good-byes, the day itself is still a blur. A hand goes on a Bible; an oath gets repeated. One president's furniture gets carried out while another's comes in. Closets are emptied and refilled in the span of a few hours. Just like that, there are new heads on new

pillows—new temperaments, new dreams. And when it ends, when you walk out the door that last time from the world's most famous address, you're left in many ways to find yourself again.

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

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

In the end, I didn't just make toast; I made cheese toast, moving my slices of bread to the microwave and melting a fat mess of gooey cheddar between them. I then carried my plate outside to the backyard. I didn't have to tell anyone I was going. I just went. I was in bare feet, wearing a pair of shorts. The chill of winter had finally lifted. The crocuses were just starting to push up through the beds along our back wall. The air smelled like spring. I sat on the steps of our veranda, feeling the warmth of the day's sun still caught in the slate beneath my feet. A dog started barking somewhere in the distance, and my own dogs paused to listen, seeming momentarily confused. It occurred to me that it was a jarring sound for them, given that we didn't have neighbors, let alone neighbor dogs, at the White House. For them, all this was new. As the dogs loped off to explore

the perimeter of the yard, I ate my toast in the dark, feeling alone in the best possible way. My mind wasn't on the group of guards with guns sitting less than a hundred yards away at the custom-built command post inside our garage, or the fact that I still can't walk down a street without a security detail. I wasn't thinking about the new president or for that matter the old president, either.

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

BECOMING

Becoming Me

1

I SPENT MUCH OF MY CHILDHOOD LISTENING TO THE sound of striving. It came in the form of bad music, or at least amateur music, coming up through the floorboards of my bedroom—the *plink plink plink* of students sitting downstairs at my great-aunt Robbie's piano, slowly and imperfectly learning their scales. My family lived in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, in a tidy brick bungalow that belonged to Robbie and her husband, Terry. My parents rented an apartment on the second floor, while Robbie and Terry lived on the first. Robbie was my mother's aunt and had been generous to her over many years, but to me she was kind of a terror. Prim and serious, she directed the choir at a local church and was also our community's resident piano teacher. She wore sensible heels and kept a pair of reading glasses on a chain around her neck. She had a sly smile but didn't appreciate sarcasm the way my mother did. I'd sometimes hear her chewing out her students for not having practiced enough or chewing out their parents for delivering them late to lessons.

"Good night!" she'd exclaim in the middle of the day, with the same blast of exasperation someone else might say, "Oh, for God's sake!" Few, it seemed, could live up to Robbie's standards.

The sound of people trying, however, became the soundtrack to our life. There was plinking in the afternoons, plinking in the evenings. Ladies from church sometimes came over to practice hymns, belting their piety through our walls. Under Robbie's rules, kids who took piano lessons were allowed to work on only one song at a time. From my room, I'd listen to them attempting, note by uncertain note, to win her approval, graduating from "Hot Cross Buns" to "Brahms's Lullaby," but only after many tries. The music was never annoying; it was just persistent. It crept up the stairwell that separated our space from Robbie's. It drifted through open windows in summertime, accompanying my thoughts as I played with my Barbies or built little kingdoms made out of blocks. The only respite came when my father got home from an early shift at the city's water treatment plant and put the Cubs game on TV, boosting the volume just enough to blot it all out.

This was the tail end of the 1960s on the South Side of Chicago. The Cubs weren't bad, but they weren't great, either. I'd sit on my dad's lap in his recliner and listen to him narrate how the Cubs were in the middle of a late-season swoon or why Billy Williams, who lived just around the corner from us on Constance Avenue, had such a sweet swing from the left side of the plate. Outside the ballparks, America was in the midst of a massive and uncertain shift. The Kennedys were dead. Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed standing on a balcony in Memphis, setting off riots across the country, including in Chicago. The 1968 Democratic National Convention turned bloody as police went after Vietnam War protesters with batons and tear gas in Grant Park, about nine miles north of where we lived. White families, meanwhile, were moving out of the city in droves, lured by the suburbs—the promise of better schools, more space, and probably more whiteness, too.

None of this really registered with me. I was just a kid, a girl with Barbies and blocks, with two parents and an older brother who slept each night with his head about three feet from mine. My family was my world, the center of everything. My mother taught me how to read early, walking me to the public library, sitting with me as I sounded out words on a page. My father went to work every day dressed in the blue uniform of a city laborer, but at night he showed us what it meant to love jazz and art.

As a boy, he'd taken classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, and in high school he'd painted and sculpted. He'd been a competitive swimmer and boxer in school, too, and as an adult was a fan of every televised sport, from professional golf to the NHL. He appreciated seeing strong people excel. When my brother, Craig, got interested in basketball, my father propped coins above the doorframe in our kitchen, encouraging him to leap for them.

Everything that mattered was within a five-block radius—my grandparents and cousins, the church on the corner where we were not quite regulars at Sunday school, the gas station where my mother sometimes sent me to pick up a pack of Newports, and the liquor store, which also sold Wonder bread, penny candy, and gallons of milk. On hot summer nights, Craig and I dozed off to the sound of cheers from the adult-league softball games going on at the nearby public park, where by day we climbed on the playground jungle gym and played tag with other kids.

Craig and I are not quite two years apart in age. He's got my father's soft eyes and optimistic spirit, my mother's implacability. The two of us have always been tight, in part thanks to an unwavering and somewhat inexplicable allegiance he seemed to feel for his baby sister right from the start. There's an early family photograph, a black and white of the four of us sitting on a couch, my mother smiling as she holds me on her lap, my father appearing serious and proud with Craig perched on his. We're dressed for church or maybe a wedding. I'm about eight months old, a pudge-faced, no-nonsense bruiser in diapers and an ironed white dress, looking ready to slide out of my mother's clutches, staring down the camera as if I might eat it. Next to me is Craig, gentlemanly in a little bow tie and suit jacket, bearing an earnest expression. He's two years old and already the portrait of brotherly vigilance and responsibility—his arm extended toward mine, his fingers wrapped protectively around my fat wrist.

At the time the photo was taken, we were living across the hall from my father's parents in Parkway Gardens, an affordable housing project on the South Side made up of modernist apartment buildings. It had been built in the 1950s and was designed as a co-op, meant to ease a post–World War II housing shortage for black working-class families. Later,

it would deteriorate under the grind of poverty and gang violence, becoming one of the city's more dangerous places to live. Long before this, though, when I was still a toddler, my parents—who had met as teenagers and married in their mid-twenties—accepted an offer to move a few miles south to Robbie and Terry's place in a nicer neighborhood.

On Euclid Avenue, we were two households living under one not very big roof. Judging from the layout, the second-floor space had probably been designed as an in-law apartment meant for one or two people, but four of us found a way to fit inside. My parents slept in the lone bedroom, while Craig and I shared a bigger area that I assume was intended to be the living room. Later, as we grew, my grandfather—Purnell Shields, my mother's father, who was an enthusiastic if not deeply skilled carpenter—brought over some cheap wooden paneling and built a makeshift partition to divide the room into two semiprivate spaces. He added a plastic accordion door to each space and created a little common play area in front where we could keep our toys and books.

I loved my room. It was just big enough for a twin bed and a narrow desk. I kept all my stuffed animals on the bed, painstakingly tucking them around my head each night as a form of ritual comfort. On his side of the wall, Craig lived a sort of mirror existence with his own bed pushed up against the paneling, parallel to mine. The partition between us was so flimsy that we could talk as we lay in bed at night, often tossing a balled sock back and forth through the ten-inch gap between the partition and the ceiling as we did.

Aunt Robbie, meanwhile, kept her part of the house like a mausoleum, the furniture swathed in protective plastic that felt cold and sticky on my bare legs when I dared sit on it. Her shelves were loaded with porcelain figurines we weren't allowed to touch. I'd let my hand hover over a set of sweet-faced glass poodles—a delicate-looking mother and three tiny puppies—and then pull it back, fearing Robbie's wrath. When lessons weren't happening, the first floor was deadly silent. The television was never on, the radio never played. I'm not even sure the two of them talked much down there. Robbie's husband's full name was William Victor Terry, but for some reason we called him only by his last name. Terry

was like a shadow, a distinguished-looking man who wore three-piece suits every day of the week and pretty much never said a word.

I came to think of upstairs and downstairs as two different universes, ruled over by competing sensibilities. Upstairs, we were noisy and unapologetically so. Craig and I threw balls and chased each other around the apartment. We sprayed Pledge furniture polish on the wood floor of the hallway so we could slide farther and faster in our socks, often crashing into the walls. We held brother-sister boxing matches in the kitchen, using the two sets of gloves my dad had given us for Christmas, along with personalized instructions on how to land a proper jab. At night, as a family, we played board games, told stories and jokes, and cranked Jackson 5 records on the stereo. When it got to be too much for Robbie down below, she'd emphatically flick the light switch in our shared stairwell, which also controlled the lightbulb in our upstairs hallway, off and on, again and again—her polite-ish way of telling us to pipe down.

Robbie and Terry were older. They grew up in a different era, with different concerns. They'd seen things our parents hadn't—things that Craig and I, in our raucous childishness, couldn't begin to guess. This was some version of what my mother would say if we got too wound up about the grouchiness downstairs. Even if we didn't know the context, we were instructed to remember that context existed. Everyone on earth, they'd tell us, was carrying around an unseen history, and that alone deserved some tolerance. Robbie, I'd learn many years later, had sued Northwestern University for discrimination, having registered for a choral music workshop there in 1943 and been denied a room in the women's dorm. She was instructed to stay instead in a rooming house in town—a place "for coloreds," she was told. Terry, meanwhile, had once been a Pullman porter on one of the overnight passenger rail lines running in and out of Chicago. It was a respectable if not well-paying profession, made up entirely of black men who kept their uniforms immaculate while also hauling luggage, serving meals, and generally tending to the needs of train passengers, including shining their shoes.

Years after his retirement, Terry still lived in a state of numbed formality—impeccably dressed, remotely servile, never asserting himself

in any way, at least that I would see. It was as if he'd surrendered a part of himself as a way of coping. I'd watch him mow our lawn in the high heat of summer in a pair of wing tips, suspenders, and a thin-brimmed fedora, the sleeves of his dress shirt carefully rolled up. He'd indulge himself by having exactly one cigarette a day and exactly one cocktail a month, and even then he wouldn't loosen up the way my father and mother would after having a highball or a Schlitz, which they did a few times a month. Some part of me wanted Terry to talk, to spill whatever secrets he carried. I imagined that he had all sorts of interesting stories about cities he'd visited and how rich people on trains behaved or maybe didn't. But we wouldn't hear any of it. For some reason, he'd never tell.

I WAS ABOUT FOUR when I decided I wanted to learn piano. Craig, who was in the first grade, was already making trips downstairs for weekly lessons on Robbie's upright and returning relatively unscathed. I figured I was ready. I was pretty convinced I already *had* learned piano, in fact, through straight-up osmosis—all those hours spent listening to other kids fumbling through their songs. The music was already in my head. I just wanted to go downstairs and demonstrate to my exacting great-aunt what a gifted girl I was, how it would take no effort at all for me to become her star student.

Robbie's piano sat in a small square room at the rear of the house, close to a window that overlooked the backyard. She kept a potted plant in one corner and a folding table where students could fill out music work sheets in the other. During lessons, she sat straight spined in an upholstered high-back armchair, tapping out the beat with one finger, her head cocked as she listened keenly for each mistake. Was I afraid of Robbie? Not exactly, but there was a scariness to her; she represented a rigid kind of authority I hadn't yet encountered elsewhere. She demanded excellence from every kid who sat on her piano bench. I saw her as someone to win over, or maybe to somehow conquer. With her, it always felt like there was something to prove.

At my first lesson, my legs dangled from the piano bench, too short to reach the floor. Robbie gave me my own elementary music workbook,

which I was thrilled about, and showed me how to position my hands properly over the keys.

"All right, pay attention," she said, scolding me before we'd even begun. "Find middle C."

When you're little, a piano can look like it has a thousand keys. You're staring at an expanse of black and white that stretches farther than two small arms can reach. Middle C, I soon learned, was the anchoring point. It was the territorial line between where the right hand and the left hand traveled, between the treble and the bass clefs. If you could lay your thumb on middle C, everything else automatically fell into place. The keys on Robbie's piano had a subtle unevenness of color and shape, places where bits of the ivory had broken off over time, leaving them looking like a set of bad teeth. Helpfully, the middle C key had a full corner missing, a wedge about the size of my fingernail, which got me centered every time.

It turned out I liked the piano. Sitting at it felt natural, like something I was meant to do. My family was loaded with musicians and music lovers, especially on my mother's side. I had an uncle who played in a professional band. Several of my aunts sang in church choirs. I had Robbie, who in addition to her choir and lessons directed something called the Operetta Workshop, a shoestring musical theater program for kids, which Craig and I attended every Saturday morning in the basement of her church. The musical center of my family, though, was my grandfather Shields, the carpenter, who was also Robbie's younger brother. He was a carefree, round-bellied man with an infectious laugh and a scraggly salt-and-pepper beard. When I was younger, he'd lived on the West Side of the city and Craig and I had referred to him as Westside. But he moved into our neighborhood the same year I started taking piano lessons, and we'd duly rechristened him Southside.

Southside had separated from my grandmother decades earlier, when my mother was in her teens. He lived with my aunt Carolyn, my mom's oldest sister, and my uncle Steve, her youngest brother, just two blocks from us in a cozy one-story house that he'd wired top to bottom for music, putting speakers in every room, including the bathroom. In the dining room, he built an elaborate cabinet system to hold his stereo

equipment, much of it scavenged at yard sales. He had two mismatched turntables plus a rickety old reel-to-reel tape player and shelves packed with records he'd collected over many years.

There was a lot about the world that Southside didn't trust. He was kind of a classic old-guy conspiracy theorist. He didn't trust dentists, which led to his having virtually no teeth. He didn't trust the police, and he didn't always trust white people, either, being the grandson of a Georgia slave and having spent his early childhood in Alabama during the time of Jim Crow before coming north to Chicago in the 1920s. When he had kids of his own, Southside had taken pains to keep them safe—scaring them with real and imagined stories about what might happen to black kids who crossed into the wrong neighborhood, lecturing them about avoiding the police.

Music seemed to be an antidote to his worries, a way to relax and crowd them out. When Southside had a payday for his carpentry work, he'd sometimes splurge and buy himself a new album. He threw regular parties for the family, forcing everyone to talk loudly over whatever he put on the stereo, because the music always dominated. We celebrated most major life events at Southside's house, which meant that over the years we unwrapped Christmas presents to Ella Fitzgerald and blew out birthday candles to Coltrane. According to my mother, as a younger man Southside had made a point of pumping jazz into his seven children, often waking everyone at sunrise by playing one of his records at full blast.

His love for music was infectious. Once Southside moved to our neighborhood, I'd pass whole afternoons at his house, pulling albums from the shelf at random and putting them on his stereo, each one its own immersing adventure. Even though I was small, he put no restrictions on what I could touch. He'd later buy me my first album, Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book*, which I'd keep at his house on a special shelf he designated for my favorite records. If I was hungry, he'd make me a milk shake or fry us a whole chicken while we listened to Aretha or Miles or Billie. To me, Southside was as big as heaven. And heaven, as I envisioned it, had to be a place full of jazz.

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AT HOME, I continued to work on my own progress as a musician. Sitting at Robbie's upright piano, I was quick to pick up the scales—that osmosis thing was real—and I threw myself into filling out the sight-reading work sheets she gave me. Because we didn't have a piano of our own, I had to do my practicing downstairs on hers, waiting until nobody else was having a lesson, often dragging my mom with me to sit in the upholstered chair and listen to me play. I learned one song in the piano book and then another. I was probably no better than her other students, no less fumbling, but I was driven. To me, there was magic in the learning. I got a buzzy sort of satisfaction from it. For one thing, I'd picked up on the simple, encouraging correlation between how long I practiced and how much I achieved. And I sensed something in Robbie as well—too deeply buried to be outright pleasure, but still, a pulse of something lighter and happier coming from her when I made it through a song without messing up, when my right hand picked out a melody while my left touched down on a chord. I'd notice it out of the corner of my eye: Robbie's lips would unpurse themselves just slightly; her tapping finger would pick up a little bounce.

This, it turns out, was our honeymoon phase. It's possible that we might have continued this way, Robbie and I, had I been less curious and more reverent when it came to her piano method. But the lesson book was thick enough and my progress on the opening few songs slow enough that I got impatient and started peeking ahead—and not just a few pages ahead but deep into the book, checking out the titles of the more advanced songs and beginning, during my practice sessions, to fiddle around with playing them. When I proudly debuted one of my late-in-the-book songs for Robbie, she exploded, slapping down my achievement with a vicious "Good *night*!" I got chewed out the way I'd heard her chewing out plenty of students before me. All I'd done was try to learn more and faster, but Robbie viewed it as a crime approaching treason. She wasn't impressed, not even a little bit.

Nor was I chastened. I was the kind of kid who liked concrete answers

to my questions, who liked to reason things out to some logical if exhausting end. I was lawyerly and also veered toward dictatorial, as my brother, who often got ordered out of our shared play area, would attest. When I thought I had a good idea about something, I didn't like being told no. Which is how my great-aunt and I ended up in each other's faces, both of us hot and unyielding.

"How could you be mad at me for wanting to learn a new song?"

"You're not ready for it. That's not how you learn piano."

"But I *am* ready. I just played it."

"That's not how it's done."

"But *why*?"

Piano lessons became epic and trying, largely due to my refusal to follow the prescribed method and Robbie's refusal to see anything good in my freewheeling approach to her songbook. We went back and forth, week after week, as I remember it. I was stubborn and so was she. I had a point of view and she did, too. In between disputes, I continued to play the piano and she continued to listen, offering a stream of corrections. I gave her little credit for my improvement as a player. She gave me little credit for improving. But still, the lessons went on.

Upstairs, my parents and Craig found it all so very funny. They cracked up at the dinner table as I recounted my battles with Robbie, still seething as I ate my spaghetti and meatballs. Craig, for his part, had no issues with Robbie, being a cheerful kid and a by-the-book, marginally invested piano student. My parents expressed no sympathy for my woes and none for Robbie's, either. In general, they weren't ones to intervene in matters outside schooling, expecting early on that my brother and I should handle our own business. They seemed to view their job as mostly to listen and bolster us as needed inside the four walls of our home. And where another parent might have scolded a kid for being sassy with an elder as I had been, they also let that be. My mother had lived with Robbie on and off since she was about sixteen, following every arcane rule the woman laid down, and it's possible she was secretly happy to see Robbie's authority challenged. Looking back on it now, I think my parents appreciated my feistiness and I'm glad for it. It was a flame inside me they wanted to keep lit.

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ONCE A YEAR, Robbie held a fancy recital so that her students could perform for a live audience. To this day, I'm not sure how she managed it, but she somehow got access to a practice hall at Roosevelt University in downtown Chicago, holding her recitals in a grand stone building on Michigan Avenue, right near where the Chicago Symphony Orchestra played. Just thinking about going there made me nervous. Our apartment on Euclid Avenue was about nine miles south of the Chicago Loop, which with its glittering skyscrapers and crowded sidewalks felt otherworldly to me. My family made trips into the heart of the city only a handful of times a year, to visit the Art Institute or see a play, the four of us traveling like astronauts in the capsule of my dad's Buick.

My father loved any excuse to drive. He was devoted to his car, a bronze-colored two-door Buick Electra 225, which he referred to with pride as "the Deuce and a Quarter." He kept it buffed and waxed and was religious about the maintenance schedule, taking it to Sears for tire rotations and oil changes the same way my mom carted us kids to the pediatrician for checkups. We loved the Deuce and a Quarter, too. It had smooth lines and narrow taillights that made it look cool and futuristic. It was roomy enough to feel like a house. I could practically stand up inside it, running my hands over the cloth-covered ceiling. This was back when wearing a seat belt was optional, so most of the time Craig and I just flopped around in the rear, draping our bodies over the front seat when we wanted to talk to our parents. Half the time I'd pull myself up on the headrest and jut my chin forward so that my face could be next to my dad's and we'd have the exact same view.

The car provided another form of closeness for my family, a chance to talk and travel at once. In the evenings after dinner, Craig and I would sometimes beg my dad to take us out for an aimless drive. As a treat on summer nights, we'd head to a drive-in theater southwest of our neighborhood to watch Planet of the Apes movies, parking the Buick at dusk and settling in for the show, my mother handing out a dinner of fried chicken and potato chips she'd brought from home, Craig and I eating

it on our laps in the backseat, careful to wipe our hands on our napkins and not the seat.

It would be years before I fully understood what driving the car meant to my father. As a kid, I could only sense it—the liberation he felt behind the wheel, the pleasure he took in having a smooth-running engine and perfectly balanced tires humming beneath him. He'd been in his thirties when a doctor informed him that the odd weakness he'd started to feel in one leg was just the beginning of a long and probably painful slide toward immobility, that odds were that someday, due to a mysterious unsheathing of neurons in his brain and spinal cord, he'd find himself unable to walk at all. I don't have the precise dates, but it seems that the Buick came into my father's life at roughly the same time that multiple sclerosis did. And though he never said it, the car had to provide some sort of sideways relief.

The diagnosis was not something he or my mother dwelled upon. We were decades, still, from a time when a simple Google search would bring up a head-spinning array of charts, statistics, and medical explainers that either gave or took away hope. I doubt he would have wanted to see them anyway. Although my father was raised in the church, he wouldn't have prayed for God to spare him. He wouldn't have looked for alternative treatments or a guru or some faulty gene to blame. In my family, we have a long-standing habit of blocking out bad news, of trying to forget about it almost the moment it arrives. Nobody knew how long my father had been feeling poorly before he first took himself to the doctor, but my guess is it had already been months if not years. He didn't like medical appointments. He wasn't interested in complaining. He was the sort of person who accepted what came and just kept moving forward.

I do know that on the day of my big piano recital, he was already walking with a slight limp, his left foot unable to catch up to his right. All my memories of my father include some manifestation of his disability, even if none of us were quite willing to call it that yet. What I knew at the time was that my dad moved a bit more slowly than other dads. I sometimes saw him pausing before walking up a flight of stairs, as if needing to think through the maneuver before actually attempting it. When we went shopping at the mall, he'd park himself on a bench, content to

watch the bags or sneak in a nap while the rest of the family roamed freely.

Riding downtown for the piano recital, I sat in the backseat of the Buick wearing a nice dress and patent leather shoes, my hair in pigtails, experiencing the first cold sweat of my life. I was anxious about performing, even though back at home in Robbie's apartment I'd practiced my song practically to death. Craig, too, was in a suit and prepared to play his own song. But the prospect of it wasn't bothering him. He was sound asleep, in fact, knocked out cold in the backseat, his mouth agape, his expression blissful and unworried. This was Craig. I'd spend a lifetime admiring him for his ease. He was playing by then in a Biddy Basketball league that had games every weekend and apparently had already tamed his nerves around performing.

My father would often pick a lot as close to our destination as possible, shelling out more money for parking to minimize how far he'd have to walk on his unsteady legs. That day, we found Roosevelt University with no trouble and made our way up to what seemed like an enormous, echoing hall where the recital would take place. I felt tiny inside it. The room had elegant floor-to-ceiling windows through which you could see the wide lawns of Grant Park and, beyond that, the white-capped swells of Lake Michigan. There were steel-gray chairs arranged in orderly rows, slowly filling with nervous kids and expectant parents. And at the front, on a raised stage, were the first two baby grand pianos I'd ever laid eyes on, their giant hardwood tops propped open like black bird wings. Robbie was there, too, bustling about in a floral-print dress like the belle of the ball—albeit a matronly belle—making sure all her students had arrived with sheet music in hand. She shushed the room to silence when it was time for the show to begin.

I don't recall who played in what order that day. I only know that when it was my turn, I got up from my seat and walked with my very best posture to the front of the room, mounting the stairs and finding my seat at one of the gleaming baby grands. The truth is I was ready. As much as I found Robbie to be snippy and inflexible, I'd also internalized her devotion to rigor. I knew my song so well I hardly had to think about it. I just had to start moving my hands.

And yet there was a problem, one I discovered in the split second it took to lift my little fingers to the keys. I was sitting at a perfect piano, it turned out, with its surfaces carefully dusted, its internal wires precisely tuned, its eighty-eight keys laid out in a flawless ribbon of black and white. The issue was that I wasn't used to flawless. In fact, I'd never once in my life encountered it. My experience of the piano came entirely from Robbie's squat little music room with its scraggly potted plant and view of our modest backyard. The only instrument I'd ever played was her less-than-perfect upright, with its honky-tonk patchwork of yellowed keys and its conveniently chipped middle C. To me, that's what a piano was—the same way my neighborhood was my neighborhood, my dad was my dad, my life was my life. It was all I knew.

Now, suddenly, I was aware of people watching me from their chairs as I stared hard at the high gloss of the piano keys, finding nothing there but sameness. I had no clue where to place my hands. With a tight throat and chugging heart, I looked out to the audience, trying not to telegraph my panic, searching for the safe harbor of my mother's face. Instead, I spotted a figure rising from the front row and slowly levitating in my direction. It was Robbie. We had brawled plenty by then, to the point where I viewed her a little bit like an enemy. But here in my moment of comeuppance, she arrived at my shoulder almost like an angel. Maybe she understood my shock. Maybe she knew that the disparities of the world had just quietly shown themselves to me for the first time. It's possible she needed simply to hurry things up. Either way, without a word, Robbie gently laid one finger on middle C so that I would know where to start. Then, turning back with the smallest smile of encouragement, she left me to play my song.

2

I STARTED KINDERGARTEN AT BRYN MAWR ELEMENtary School in the fall of 1969, showing up with the twin advantages of knowing in advance how to read basic words and having a well-liked second-grade brother ahead of me. The school, a four-story brick building with a yard in front, sat just a couple of blocks from our house on Euclid. Getting there involved a two-minute walk or, if you did it like Craig, a one-minute run.

I liked school right away. I liked my teacher, a diminutive white lady named Mrs. Burroughs, who seemed ancient to me but was probably in her fifties. Her classroom had big sunny windows, a collection of baby dolls to play with, and a giant cardboard playhouse in the back. I made friends in my class, drawn to the kids who, like me, seemed eager to be there. I was confident in my ability to read. At home, I'd plowed through the Dick and Jane books, courtesy of my mom's library card, and thus was thrilled to hear that our first job as kindergartners would be learning to read new sets of words by sight. We were assigned a list of colors to study, not the hues, but the words themselves—"red," "blue," "green," "black," "orange," "purple," "white." In class, Mrs. Burroughs quizzed us one student at a time, holding up a series of large manila cards and

asking us to read whatever word was printed in black letters on the front. I watched one day as the girls and boys I was just getting to know stood up and worked through the color cards, succeeding and failing in varying degrees, and were told to sit back down at whatever point they got stumped. It was meant to be something of a game, I think, the way a spelling bee is a game, but you could see a subtle sorting going on and a knowing slump of humiliation in the kids who didn't make it past "red." This, of course, was 1969, in a public school on the South Side of Chicago. Nobody was talking about self-esteem or growth mind-sets. If you'd had a head start at home, you were rewarded for it at school, deemed "bright" or "gifted," which in turn only compounded your confidence. The advantages aggregated quickly. The two smartest kids in my kindergarten class were Teddy, a Korean American boy, and Chiaka, an African American girl, who both would remain at the top of the class for years to come.

I was driven to keep up with them. When it came my turn to read the words off the teacher's manila cards, I stood up and gave it everything I had, rattling off "red," "green," and "blue" without effort. "Purple" took a second, though, and "orange" was hard. But it wasn't until the letters *W-H-I-T-E* came up that I froze altogether, my throat instantly dry, my mouth awkward and unable to shape the sound as my brain glitched madly, trying to dig up a color that resembled "wuh-haaa." It was a straight-up choke. I felt a weird airiness in my knees, as if they might buckle. But before they did, Mrs. Burroughs instructed me to sit back down. And that's exactly when the word hit me in its full and easy perfection. *White. Whiiiite.* The word was "white."

Lying in bed that night with my stuffed animals packed around my head, I thought only of "white." I spelled it in my head, forward and backward, chastising myself for my own stupidity. The embarrassment felt like a weight, like something I'd never shake off, even though I knew my parents wouldn't care whether I'd read every card correctly. I just wanted to achieve. Or maybe I didn't want to be dismissed as incapable of achieving. I was sure my teacher had now pegged me as someone who couldn't read or, worse, didn't try. I obsessed over the dime-sized gold-foil stars

families, white and black families, folks who were thriving and some who were not. In general, people tended to their lawns and kept track of their children. They wrote checks to Robbie so their kids could learn piano. My family, in fact, was probably on the poor side of the neighborhood spectrum. We were among the few people we knew who didn't own their own home, stuffed as we were into Robbie and Terry's second floor. South Shore hadn't yet tilted the way other neighborhoods had—with the better-off people long departed for the suburbs, the neighborhood businesses closing one by one, the blight setting in—but the tilt was clearly beginning.

We were starting to feel the effects of this transition, especially at school. My second-grade classroom turned out to be a mayhem of unruly kids and flying erasers, which had not been the norm in either my experience or Craig's. All this seemed due to a teacher who couldn't figure out how to assert control—who didn't seem to like children, even. Beyond that, it wasn't clear that anyone was particularly bothered by the fact that the teacher was incompetent. The students used it as an excuse to act out, and she seemed to think only the worst of us. In her eyes, we were a class of "bad kids," though we had no guidance and no structure and had been sentenced to a grim, underlit room in the basement of the school. Every hour there felt hellish and long. I sat miserably at my desk, in my puke-green chair—puke green being the official color of the 1970s—learning nothing and waiting for the midday lunch break, when I could go home and have a sandwich and complain to my mom.

When I got angry as a kid, I almost always funneled it through my mother. As I fumed about my new teacher, she listened placidly, saying things like "Oh, dear" and "Oh, really?" She never indulged my outrage, but she took my frustration seriously. If my mother were somebody different, she might have done the polite thing and said, "Just go and do your best." But she knew the difference. She knew the difference between whining and actual distress. Without telling me, she went over to the school and began a weeks-long process of behind-the-scenes lobbying, which led to me and a couple of other high-performing kids getting quietly pulled out of class, given a battery of tests, and about a week later

reinstalled permanently into a bright and orderly third-grade class upstairs, governed by a smiling, no-nonsense teacher who knew her stuff.

It was a small but life-changing move. I didn't stop to ask myself then what would happen to all the kids who'd been left in the basement with the teacher who couldn't teach. Now that I'm an adult, I realize that kids know at a very young age when they're being devalued, when adults aren't invested enough to help them learn. Their anger over it can manifest itself as unruliness. It's hardly their fault. They aren't "bad kids." They're just trying to survive bad circumstances. At the time, though, I was just happy to have escaped. But I'd learn many years later that my mother, who is by nature wry and quiet but generally also the most forthright person in any room, made a point of seeking out the second-grade teacher and telling her, as kindly as possible, that she had no business teaching and should be working as a drugstore cashier instead.

AS TIME WENT BY, my mother started nudging me to go outside and engage with kids in the neighborhood. She was hoping that I'd learn to glide socially the way my brother had. Craig, as I've mentioned, had a way of making hard things look easy. He was by then a growing sensation on the basketball court, high-spirited and agile and quickly growing tall. My father pushed him to seek out the toughest competition he could find, which meant that he would later send Craig across town on his own to play with the best kids in the city. But for now, he left him to wrangle the neighborhood talent. Craig would take his ball and carry it across the street to Rosenblum Park, passing the monkey bars and swing set where I liked to play, and then cross an invisible line, disappearing through a veil of trees to the far side of the park, where the basketball courts were. I thought of it as an abyss over there, a mythic dark forest of drunks and thugs and criminal goings-on, but Craig, once he started visiting that side of the park, would set me straight, saying that really nobody over there was all that bad.

Basketball, for my brother, seemed to unlock every frontier. It taught him how to approach strangers when he wanted to snag a spot in a pickup

game. He learned how to talk a friendly form of smack, trash-talking his bigger, faster opponents on the court. It helped, too, to debunk various myths about who was who and what was what around the neighborhood, reinforcing the possibility—something that had long been a credo of my dad's—that most people were good people if you just treated them well. Even the sketchy guys who hung out in front of the corner liquor store lit up when they spotted Craig, calling his name and high-fiving him as we passed by.

"How do you even know them?" I'd ask, incredulous.

"I don't know. They just know me," he'd say with a shrug.

I was ten when I finally mellowed enough to start venturing out myself, a decision driven in large part by boredom. It was summer and school was out. Craig and I rode a bus to Lake Michigan every day to go to a rec camp run by the city at a beachfront park, but we'd be back home by four, with many daylight hours still to fill. My dolls were becoming less interesting, and without air-conditioning our apartment got unbearably hot in the late afternoons. And so I started tailing Craig around the neighborhood, meeting the kids I didn't already know from school. Across the alley behind our house, there was a mini housing community called Euclid Parkway, where about fifteen homes had been built around a common green space. It was a kind of paradise, free from cars and full of kids playing softball and jumping double Dutch or sitting on stoops, just hanging out. But before I could find my way into the fold of girls my age who hung out at the Parkway, I faced a test. It came in the form of DeeDee, a girl who went to a nearby Catholic school. DeeDee was athletic and pretty, but she wore her face in a pout and was always ready with an eye roll. She often sat on her family's stoop next to another, more popular girl named Deneen.

Deneen was always friendly, but DeeDee didn't seem to like me. I don't know why. Every time I went over to Euclid Parkway, she'd make quiet, cutting remarks, as if just by showing up I'd managed to ruin everyone's day. As the summer went on, DeeDee's comments only grew louder. My morale began to sink. I understood that I had choices. I could continue on as the picked-on new girl, I could give up on the Parkway

and just go back to my toys at home, or I could attempt to earn DeeDee's respect. And inside that last choice lay another one: I could try to reason with DeeDee, to win her over with words or some other form of kid diplomacy, or I could just shut her up.

The next time DeeDee made one of her remarks, I lunged for her, summoning everything my dad had taught me about how to throw a punch. The two of us fell to the ground, fists flailing and legs thrashing, every kid in Euclid Parkway instantly clustered in a tight knot around us, their hollers fueled by excitement and grade school bloodlust. I can't remember who finally pulled us apart, whether it was Deneen or my brother or maybe a parent who'd been called to the scene, but when it was done, some sort of silent baptism had taken place. I was officially an accepted member of the neighborhood tribe. DeeDee and I were unharmed, dirt stained and panting and destined never to be close friends, but at least I'd earned her respect.

MY DAD'S BUICK continued to be our shelter, our window to the world. We took it out on Sundays and summer evenings, cruising for no reason but the fact that we could. Sometimes we'd end up in a neighborhood to the south, an area known as Pill Hill due to an apparently large number of African American doctors living there. It was one of the prettier, more affluent parts of the South Side, where people kept two cars in the driveway and had abundant beds of flowers blooming along their walkways.

My father viewed rich people with a shade of suspicion. He didn't like people who were uppity and had mixed feelings about home ownership in general. There was a short period when he and my mom considered buying a home for sale not far from Robbie's house, driving over one day to inspect the place with a real estate agent, but ultimately deciding against it. At the time, I'd been all for it. In my mind, I thought it would mean something if my family could live in a place with more than one floor. But my father was innately cautious, aware of the trade-offs, understanding the need to maintain some savings for a rainy day. "You never want to end up house poor," he'd tell us, explaining how some people

handed over their savings and borrowed too much, ending up with a nice home but no freedom at all.

My parents talked to us like we were adults. They didn't lecture, but rather indulged every question we asked, no matter how juvenile. They never hurried a discussion for the sake of convenience. Our talks could go on for hours, often because Craig and I took every opportunity to grill my parents about things we didn't understand. When we were little, we'd ask, "Why do people go to the bathroom?" or "Why do you need a job?" and then blitz them with follow-ups. One of my early Socratic victories came from a question driven by self-interest: "Why do we have to eat eggs for breakfast?" Which led to a discussion about the necessity of protein, which led me to ask why peanut butter couldn't count as protein, which eventually, after more debate, led to my mother revising her stance on eggs, which I had never liked to eat in the first place. For the next nine years, knowing that I'd earned it, I made myself a fat peanut butter and jelly sandwich for breakfast each morning and consumed not a single egg.

As we grew, we spoke more about drugs and sex and life choices, about race and inequality and politics. My parents didn't expect us to be saints. My father, I remember, made a point of saying that sex was and should be fun. They also never sugarcoated what they took to be the harder truths about life. Craig, for example, got a new bike one summer and rode it east to Lake Michigan, to the paved pathway along Rainbow Beach, where you could feel the breeze off the water. He'd been promptly picked up by a police officer who accused him of stealing it, unwilling to accept that a young black boy would have come across a new bike in an honest way. (The officer, an African American man himself, ultimately got a brutal tongue-lashing from my mother, who made him apologize to Craig.) What had happened, my parents told us, was unjust but also unfortunately common. The color of our skin made us vulnerable. It was a thing we'd always have to navigate.

My father's habit of driving us through Pill Hill was a bit of an aspirational exercise, I would guess, a chance to show us what a good education could yield. My parents had spent almost their entire lives living within a couple of square miles in Chicago, but they had no illusions that

daughter, Pamela, was a teenager already and not so interested in me, though I found all teenagers intriguing. I don't remember much about Mr. Stewart, except that he drove a delivery truck for one of the big bakery companies in the city and that he and his wife and their kids were the lightest-skinned black people I'd ever met.

How they afforded a place in the suburbs, I couldn't guess. Park Forest, it turns out, was one of America's first fully planned communities—not just a housing subdivision, but a full village designed for about thirty thousand people, with shopping malls, churches, schools, and parks. Founded in 1948, it was, in many ways, meant to be the paragon of suburban life, with mass-produced houses and cookie-cutter yards. There were also quotas for how many black families could live on a given block, though by the time the Stewarts got there, the quotas had apparently been abolished.

Not long after they moved, the Stewarts invited us to come visit them on one of my dad's days off. We were excited. For us, it would be a new kind of outing, a chance to glimpse the fabled suburbs. The four of us took the Buick south on the expressway, following the road out of Chicago, exiting about forty minutes later near a sterile-looking shopping plaza. We were soon winding through a network of quiet streets, following Mrs. Stewart's directions, turning from one nearly identical block to the next. Park Forest was like a miniature city of tract homes—modest ranch-style places with soft gray shingles and newly planted saplings and bushes out front.

"Now why would anyone want to live all the way out here?" my father asked, staring over the dashboard. I agreed that it made no sense. As far as I could see, there were no big trees like the giant oak that sat outside my bedroom window at home. Everything in Park Forest was new and wide and uncrowded. There was no corner liquor store with ratty guys hanging out in front of it. There were no cars honking or sirens. There was no music floating from anybody's kitchen. The windows in the houses all looked to be shut.

Craig would remember our visit there as heavenly, namely because he played ball all day long in the wide-open lots under a blue sky with Donny Stewart and his new pack of suburban brethren. My parents had

a pleasant enough catch-up with Mr. and Mrs. Stewart, and I followed Pamela around, gaping at her hair, her fair skin and teenager jewelry. At some point, we all had lunch.

It was evening when we finally said good-bye. Leaving the Stewarts, we walked in the dusk to the curb where my dad had parked the car. Craig was sweaty, dead on his feet after all the running he'd done. I, too, was fatigued and ready to go home. Something about the place had put me on edge. I wasn't a fan of the suburbs, though I couldn't articulate exactly why.

My mother would later make an observation about the Stewarts and their new community, based on the fact that almost all of their neighbors on the street seemed to be white.

"I wonder," she said, "if nobody knew that they're a black family until we came to visit."

She thought that maybe we'd unwittingly outed them, arriving from the South Side with a housewarming gift and our conspicuous dark skin. Even if the Stewarts weren't deliberately trying to hide their race, they probably didn't speak of it one way or another with their new neighbors. Whatever vibe existed on their block, they hadn't overtly disrupted it. At least not until we came to visit.

Was somebody watching through a window as my father approached our car that night? Was there a shadow behind some curtain, waiting to see how things would go? I'll never know. I just remember the way my dad's body stiffened slightly when he reached the driver's side door and saw what was there. Someone had scratched a line across the side of his beloved Buick, a thin ugly gulch that ran across the door and toward the tail of the car. It had been done with a key or a rock and was in no way accidental.

I've said before that my father was a withstander, a man who never complained about small things or big, who cheerily ate liver when it was served to him, who had a doctor give him what amounted to a death sentence and then just carried on. This thing with the car was no different. If there was some way to fight it, if there was some door to pound in response, my dad wouldn't have done it anyway.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, before unlocking the car.

We rode back to the city that night without much discussion about what had happened. It was too exhausting, maybe, to parse. In any event, we were done with the suburbs. My father must have had to drive the car to work the next day looking the way it did, and I'm sure that didn't sit well with him. But the gash in his chrome didn't stay for long. As soon as there was time, he took the car over to the body shop at Sears and had it erased.

3

SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY, MY NORMALLY LAID-back brother started to sprout worries. I can't say exactly when or why this began, but Craig—the boy who could high-five and what-up his way around the neighborhood, who blithely catnapped anytime he had ten free minutes, regardless of his surroundings—grew more fretful and vigilant at home, convinced that catastrophe was creeping our way. In the evenings at our apartment, he rehearsed for every outcome, immersing himself in hypotheticals the rest of us found bizarre. Worried he'd lose his sight, he took to wearing a blindfold around the house, learning to navigate our living room and kitchen by feel. Worried he might go deaf, he began teaching himself sign language. There was also apparently the threat of amputation, prompting Craig to fumble his way through various meals and homework sessions with his right arm tied behind his back. Because you never did know.

Craig's biggest fear, however, was also probably the most realistic, and that was fire. House fires were a regular occurrence in Chicago, in part due to slumlords who let their buildings slide into disrepair and were all too happy to reap the insurance benefits when a fire tore through, and in part because home smoke detectors were a relatively new development

and still expensive for working-class people to afford. Either way, inside our tight city grid, fire was almost a fact of life, a random but persistent snatcher of homes and hearts. My grandfather Southside had moved to our neighborhood after a fire destroyed his old house on the West Side, though luckily nobody'd been hurt. (According to my mother, Southside stood on the curb outside the burning house, shouting for the firefighters to direct their hoses away from his precious jazz albums.) More recently, in a tragedy almost too giant for my young mind to take in, one of my fifth-grade classmates—a boy with a sweet face and a tall Afro named Lester McCullom, who lived around the corner from us in a town house on Seventy-Fourth Street—had died in a fire that also killed his brother and sister, the three of them trapped by flames in bedrooms upstairs.

Theirs was the first wake I ever attended: every kid in the neighborhood sobbing at the funeral parlor as a Jackson 5 album played softly in the background; the adults stunned into silence, no prayer or platitude capable of filling the void. There were three closed caskets at the front of the room, each one with a framed photograph of a smiling child on its lid. Mrs. McCullom, who with her husband had managed to survive the fire by jumping out a window, sat before them, so slumped and broken that it hurt to look in her direction.

For days afterward, the skeleton of the McCulloms' burned-out town house continued to hiss and cave in on itself, dying far more slowly than its young occupants had. The smell of smoke lingered heavily in the neighborhood.

As time passed, Craig's anxieties only grew. At school, we'd been put through the paces of teacher-led evacuation drills, dutifully enduring lectures on how to stop, drop, and roll. And as a result, Craig decided that we needed to step it up on safety at home, electing himself the family fire marshal, with me as his lieutenant, ready to clear exit pathways during drills or boss around our parents as needed. We weren't so much convinced we'd have a fire as we were fixated on being ready for one. Preparation mattered. Our family was not just punctual; we arrived early to everything, knowing that it made my dad less vulnerable, sparing him from having to worry about finding a parking spot that didn't require him to walk a long way or an accessible seat in the bleachers at one of

and a good deal of awkwardness, my brother managed to drag 170 or so pounds of paternal deadweight backward through the imaginary inferno that raged in his preadolescent mind, hauling my father across the floor, rounding the couch, and finally making it to the stairwell.

From here, Craig figured he could probably slide my dad's body down the stairs and out the side door to safety. My father always refused to let him practice this part, saying gently, "That's enough now," and insisting on getting back to his feet before Craig could try to lug him down the stairs. But between the small man and the grown man, the point had been made. None of this would be easy or comfortable if it came to it, and there were, of course, no guarantees that any of us would survive. But if the very worst happened, we at least had a plan.

SLOWLY, I WAS becoming more outward and social, more willing to open myself up to the messes of the wider world. My natural resistance to chaos and spontaneity had been worn down somewhat through all the hours I'd spent trailing my father through his precinct visits, plus all the other weekend outings we made, dropping in on our dozens of aunts, uncles, and cousins, sitting in thick clouds of barbecue smoke in someone's backyard or running around with neighborhood kids in a neighborhood that wasn't ours.

My mother was one of seven children in her family. My father was the oldest of five. My mom's relatives tended to gather at Southside's house around the corner—drawn by my grandfather's cooking, the ongoing games of bid whist, and the exuberant blasting of jazz. Southside acted as a magnet for all of us. He was forever mistrustful of the world beyond his own yard—worried primarily about everyone's safety and well-being—and as a result poured his energy into creating an environment where we were always well fed and entertained, likely with the hope we'd never want to move away from it. He even got me a dog, an affable, cinnamon-colored shepherd mutt we called Rex. Per my mother's orders, Rex wasn't allowed to live at our house, but I'd visit him all the time at Southside's, lying on the floor with my face buried in his soft fur, listening to his tail *thwap* appreciatively anytime Southside walked past. Southside spoiled

the dog the same way he spoiled me, with food and love and tolerance, all of it a silent, earnest plea never to leave him.

My father's family, meanwhile, sprawled across Chicago's broader South Side and included an array of great-aunts and third cousins, plus a few stray outliers whose blood connection remained cloudy. We orbited between all of them. I quietly assessed where we were going by the number of trees I'd see on the street outside. The poorer neighborhoods often had no trees at all. But to my dad, everyone was kin. He lit up when he saw his uncle Calio, a skinny, wavy-haired little man who looked like Sammy Davis Jr. and was almost always drunk. He adored his aunt Verdelle, who lived with her eight children in a neglected apartment building next to the Dan Ryan Expressway, in a neighborhood where Craig and I understood that the rules of survival were very different.

On Sunday afternoons, all four of us normally took the ten-minute drive north to Parkway Gardens to eat dinner with my dad's parents, whom we called Dandy and Grandma, and his three youngest siblings, Andrew, Carleton, and Francesca, who'd been born more than a decade after my father and thus seemed more like sister and brothers to us than aunt and uncles. My father, I thought, seemed more like a father and less like a brother with the three of them, offering them advice and slipping them cash when they needed it. Francesca was smart and beautiful and sometimes let me brush her long hair. Andrew and Carleton were in their early twenties and dazzlingly hip. They wore bell-bottoms and turtlenecks. They owned leather jackets, had girlfriends, and talked about things like Malcolm X and "soul power." Craig and I passed hours in their bedroom at the back of the apartment, just trying to sponge up their cool.

My grandfather, also named Fraser Robinson, was decidedly less fun to be around, a cigar-puffing patriarch who'd sit in his recliner with a newspaper open on his lap and the evening news blaring on the television nearby. His demeanor was nothing like my father's. For Dandy, everything was an irritant. He was galled by the day's headlines, by the state of the world as shown on TV, by the young black men—"boo-boos," he called them—whom he perceived to be hanging uselessly around the neighborhood, giving black people everywhere a bad name. He shouted

at the television. He shouted at my grandmother, a sweet, soft-spoken woman and devout Christian named LaVaughn. (My parents had named me Michelle LaVaughn Robinson, in honor of her.) By day, my grandmother expertly managed a thriving Bible bookstore on the Far South Side, but in her off-hours with Dandy she was reduced to a meekness I found perplexing, even as a young girl. She cooked his meals and absorbed his barrage of complaints and said nothing in her own defense. Even at a young age, there was something about my grandmother's silence and passivity in her relationship with Dandy that got under my skin.

According to my mother, I was the only person in the family to talk back to Dandy when he yelled. I did it regularly, from the time I was very young and over many years, in part because it drove me crazy that my grandmother wouldn't speak up for herself, in part because everyone else fell silent around him, and lastly because I loved Dandy as much as he confounded me. His stubbornness was something I recognized, something I'd inherited myself, though I hoped in a less abrasive form. There was also a softness in Dandy, which I caught only in glimmers. He tenderly rubbed my neck sometimes when I sat at the foot of his reclining chair. He smiled when my dad said something funny or one of us kids managed to slip a sophisticated word into a conversation. But then something would set him off and he'd start snarling again.

"Quit shouting at everyone, Dandy," I'd say. Or, "Don't be mean to Grandma." Often, I'd add, "What's got you so mad anyway?"

The answer to that question was both complicated and simple. Dandy himself would leave it unanswered, shrugging crankily in response to my interference and returning to his newspaper. Back at home, though, my parents would try to explain.

Dandy was from the South Carolina Low Country, having grown up in the humid seaport of Georgetown, where thousands of slaves once labored on vast plantations, harvesting crops of rice and indigo and making their owners rich. My grandfather, born in 1912, was the grandson of slaves, the son of a millworker, and the oldest of what would be ten children in his family. A quick-witted and intelligent kid, he'd been nicknamed "the Professor" and set his sights early on the idea of someday

going to college. But not only was he black and from a poor family, he also came of age during the Great Depression. After finishing high school, Dandy went to work at a lumber mill, knowing that if he stayed in Georgetown, his options would never widen. When the mill eventually closed, like many African Americans of his generation he took a chance and moved north to Chicago, joining what became known as the Great Migration, in which six million southern blacks relocated to big northern cities over the course of five decades, fleeing racial oppression and chasing industrial jobs.

If this were an American Dream story, Dandy, who arrived in Chicago in the early 1930s, would have found a good job and a pathway to college. But the reality was far different. Jobs were hard to come by, limited at least somewhat by the fact that managers at some of the big factories in Chicago regularly hired European immigrants over African American workers. Dandy took what work he could find, setting pins in a bowling alley and freelancing as a handyman. Gradually, he downgraded his hopes, letting go of the idea of college, thinking he'd train to become an electrician instead. But this, too, was quickly thwarted. If you wanted to work as an electrician (or as a steelworker, carpenter, or plumber, for that matter) on any of the big job sites in Chicago, you needed a union card. And if you were black, the overwhelming odds were that you weren't going to get one.

This particular form of discrimination altered the destinies of generations of African Americans, including many of the men in my family, limiting their income, their opportunity, and, eventually, their aspirations. As a carpenter, Southside wasn't allowed to work for the larger construction firms that offered steady pay on long-term projects, given that he couldn't join a labor union. My great-uncle Terry, Robbie's husband, had abandoned a career as a plumber for the same reason, instead becoming a Pullman porter. There was also Uncle Pete, on my mother's side, who'd been unable to join the taxi drivers' union and instead turned to driving an unlicensed jitney, picking up customers who lived in the less safe parts of the West Side, where normal cabs didn't like to go. These were highly intelligent, able-bodied men who were denied access to stable

high-paying jobs, which in turn kept them from being able to buy homes, send their kids to college, or save for retirement. It pained them, I know, to be cast aside, to be stuck in jobs that they were overqualified for, to watch white people leapfrog past them at work, sometimes training new employees they knew might one day become their bosses. And it bred within each of them at least a basic level of resentment and mistrust: You never quite knew what other folks saw you to be.

As for Dandy, life wasn't all bad. He met my grandmother while attending church on the South Side and ultimately found work through the federal government's Works Progress Administration, the relief program that hired unskilled laborers for public construction projects during the Depression. He then went on to log thirty years as a postal worker before retiring with a pension that helped allow him all that time to yell at the boo-boos on TV from the comfort of his recliner.

In the end, he had five kids who were as smart and disciplined as he was. Nomenee, his second child, would end up with a degree from Harvard Business School. Andrew and Carleton would go on to become a train conductor and an engineer, respectively. Francesca worked as a creative director in advertising for a time and eventually became a grade school teacher. But still, Dandy would remain unable to see his children's accomplishments as any sort of extension of his. As we saw every Sunday arriving at Parkway Gardens for dinner, my grandfather lived with the bitter residue of his own dashed dreams.

IF MY QUESTIONS for Dandy were hard and unanswerable, I soon learned that many questions are just that way. In my own life, I was starting to encounter questions I couldn't readily answer. One came from a girl whose name I can't remember—one of the distant cousins who played with us in the backyard of one of my great-aunts' bungalows farther west of us, part of the loosely related crowd that often turned up when my parents drove over for a visit. As the adults drank coffee and laughed in the kitchen, a parallel scene would unfold outside as Craig and I joined whatever pack of kids came with those adults. Sometimes

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AT SCHOOL, WE WERE GIVEN AN HOUR-LONG BREAK for lunch each day. Because my mother didn't work and our apartment was so close by, I usually marched home with four or five other girls in tow, all of us talking nonstop, ready to sprawl on the kitchen floor to play jacks and watch *All My Children* while my mom handed out sandwiches. This, for me, began a habit that has sustained me for life, keeping a close and high-spirited council of girlfriends—a safe harbor of female wisdom. In my lunch group, we dissected whatever had gone on that morning at school, any beefs we had with teachers, any assignments that struck us as useless. Our opinions were largely formed by committee. We idolized the Jackson 5 and weren't sure how we felt about the Osmonds. Watergate had happened, but none of us understood it. It seemed like a lot of old guys talking into microphones in Washington, D.C., which to us was just a faraway city filled with a lot of white buildings and white men.

My mom, meanwhile, was plenty happy to serve us. It gave her an easy window into our world. As my friends and I ate and gossiped, she often stood by quietly, engaged in some household chore, not hiding the fact that she was taking in every word. In my family, with four of us

packed into less than nine hundred square feet of living space, we'd never had any privacy anyway. It mattered only sometimes. Craig, who was suddenly interested in girls, had started taking his phone calls behind closed doors in the bathroom, the phone's curlicue cord stretched taut across the hallway from its wall-mounted base in the kitchen.

As Chicago schools went, Bryn Mawr fell somewhere between a bad school and a good school. Racial and economic sorting in the South Shore neighborhood continued through the 1970s, meaning that the student population only grew blacker and poorer with each year. There was, for a time, a citywide integration movement to bus kids to new schools, but Bryn Mawr parents had successfully fought it off, arguing that the money was better spent improving the school itself. As a kid, I had no perspective on whether the facilities were run-down or whether it mattered that there were hardly any white kids left. The school ran from kindergarten all the way through eighth grade, which meant that by the time I'd reached the upper grades, I knew every light switch, every chalkboard and cracked patch of hallway. I knew nearly every teacher and most of the kids. For me, Bryn Mawr was practically an extension of home.

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

Dr. Lavizzo was a round, cheery man who had an Afro that puffed out on either side of his bald spot and who spent most of his time in an office near the building's front door. It's clear from his letter that he understood precisely what he was up against. Failure is a feeling long before it becomes an actual result. It's vulnerability that breeds with self-doubt and then is escalated, often deliberately, by fear. Those "feelings of failure" he mentioned were everywhere already in my neighborhood, in the form of parents who couldn't get ahead financially, of kids who

were starting to suspect that their lives would be no different, of families who watched their better-off neighbors leave for the suburbs or transfer their children to Catholic schools. There were predatory real estate agents roaming South Shore all the while, whispering to home owners that they should sell before it was too late, that they'd help them *get out while you still can*. The inference being that failure was coming, that it was inevitable, that it had already half arrived. You could get caught up in the ruin or you could escape it. They used the word everyone was most afraid of—"ghetto"—dropping it like a lit match.

My mother bought into none of this. She'd lived in South Shore for ten years already and would end up staying another forty. She didn't buy into fearmongering and at the same time seemed equally inoculated against any sort of pie-in-the-sky idealism. She was a straight-down-the-line realist, controlling what she could.

At Bryn Mawr, she became one of the most active members of the PTA, helping raise funds for new classroom equipment, throwing appreciation dinners for the teachers, and lobbying for the creation of a special multigrade classroom that catered to higher-performing students. This last effort was the brainchild of Dr. Lavizzo, who'd gone to night school to get his PhD in education and had studied a new trend in grouping students by ability rather than by age—in essence, putting the brighter kids together so they could learn at a faster pace.

The idea was controversial, criticized as being undemocratic, as all "gifted and talented" programs inherently are. But it was also gaining steam as a movement around the country, and for my last three years at Bryn Mawr I was a beneficiary. I joined a group of about twenty students from different grades, set off in a self-contained classroom apart from the rest of the school with our own recess, lunch, music, and gym schedules. We were given special opportunities, including weekly trips to a community college to attend an advanced writing workshop or dissect a rat in the biology lab. Back in the classroom, we did a lot of independent work, setting our own goals and moving at whatever speed best suited us.

We were given dedicated teachers, first Mr. Martinez and then Mr. Bennett, both gentle and good-humored African American men,