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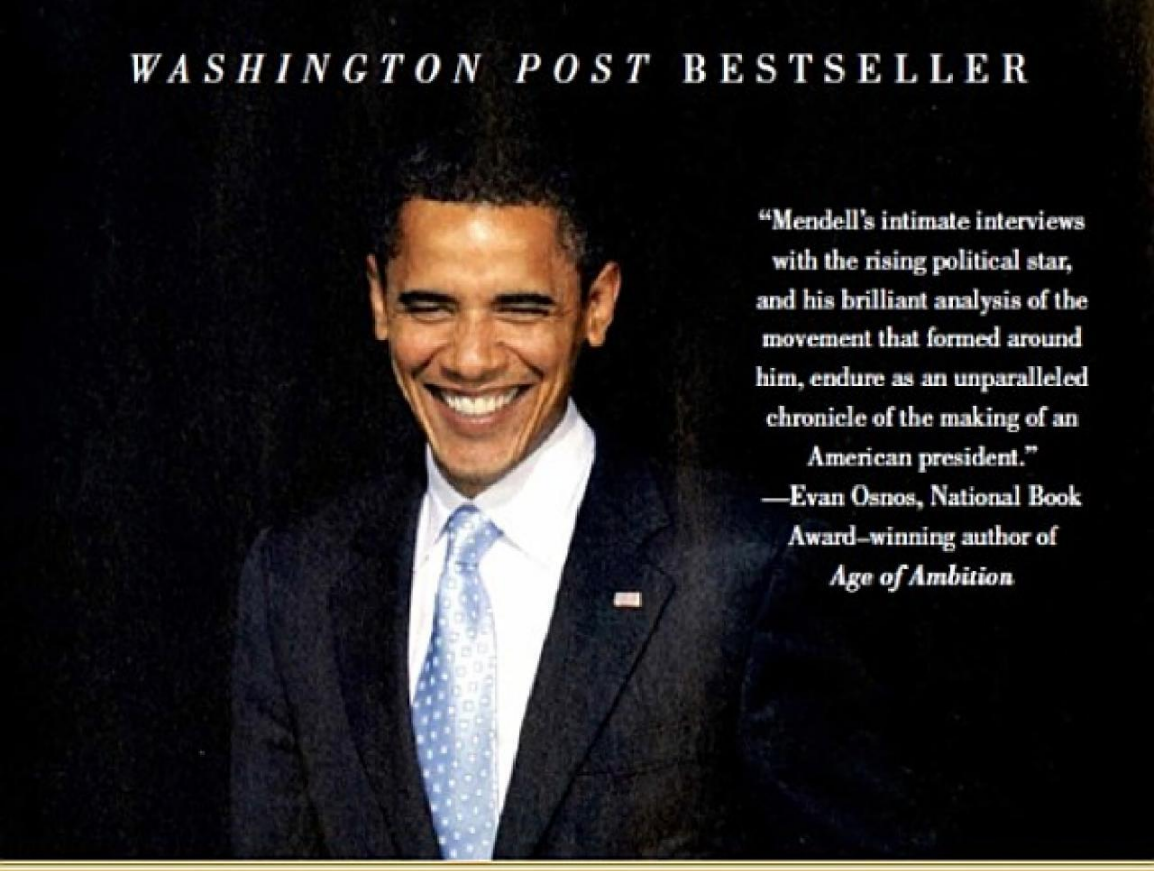

"Mendell's intimate interviews with the rising political star, and his brilliant analysis of the movement that formed around him, endure as an unparalleled chronicle of the making of an American president."
—Evan Osnos, National Book Award–winning author of *Age of Ambition*

OBAMA

From Promise to Power

DAVID MENDELL

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

1

The Ascent

I'm LeBron, baby.
—BARACK OBAMA

For those who know Barack Obama well, this might sound close to impossible, but the swagger in his step appeared even cockier than usual on the afternoon of July 27, 2004.

As summertime bathed downtown Boston in warm sunshine, Obama led a gaggle of reporters, aides and a couple of friends—a group occasionally two dozen deep—around a maze of chain-link security fences guarding the large-scale FleetCenter indoor arena. A former high school basketball player who, at forty-two, still relished a pickup game, the rail-thin Obama was carrying his upper body as if he were heading to the free throw line for the game-winning shot, a shot he believed was destined to sink. His shoulders were pitched backward. His head was held erect. His blue-suited torso swayed in a side-by-side motion with every pace forward. His enormous confidence appeared at an all-time peak. And for good reason: hours later, the Illinois state lawmaker and law school lecturer would take his first steps onto the national stage to deliver his now famous 2004 keynote address to the Democratic National Convention.

Indeed, Obama's time in the bright sunshine had arrived. And though this moment had come upon him rather quickly, unexpectedly and somewhat weirdly, with only weeks of notice, his opportunity to prove to the world that he could play in this most elite league was at hand. Finally.

Having covered Obama for the *Chicago Tribune* since the early days of his U.S. Senate candidacy more than nine months before, I had already established a rapport with the state senator, and I was mostly trying to stay out of the way and watch the day unfold, watch the story of Barack Obama unfurl. Still, as a skeptical newspaper reporter, I was not completely convinced that, by day's end, all would come out well. I was still trying to gauge if this strut was something of an act, whether his winning free throw would clang on the rim and bounce away or whether he was on the verge of hitting nothing but net and making a national name for himself.

After Obama and I slipped through a security checkpoint and he momentarily broke free from the entourage, I sidled up to him and told him that he seemed to be impressing many people of influence in this rarefied atmosphere.

Obama, his gaze fixed directly ahead, never broke his stride.

"I'm LeBron, baby," he replied, referring to LeBron James, the phenomenally talented teenager who at the time was shooting the lights out in the National Basketball Association. "I can play on this level. I got some game."

I wasn't so sure. I fell back amid the marching gaggle of the Obama entourage and chatted with one of his closest friends, Marty Nesbitt, who had flown in from Chicago to accompany Obama during the convention week. I asked Nesbitt how he thought his friend would perform that night, given all the media attention and political pressure. "He sat down with Ted Koppel earlier this week and he hit the cover off the ball, didn't he?" Nesbitt asked. "Barack reminds me of a player on my high school basketball team back in Ohio. He could elevate his game to almost any situation. And when we needed a shot, he always hit it. Always."

That evening, Obama introduced himself to America. He delivered a keynote

address of historic proportions, so inspiring that even some conservative commentators would concede they were moved by it. His rich baritone voice resolute and clear, he hearkened back to his beloved mother's philosophy of a common humanity, a philosophy that had been ingrained in him throughout his childhood. He declared that America is a land of good-hearted people, a nation of citizens who have more unifying traits than dividing traits, a country of individuals bound by the common purpose of freedom and opportunity for all. "There's not a liberal America and a conservative America—there's the *United States* of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the *United States* of America. . . . We are one people. . . ."

Across the arena, many Democrats from various states, various walks of life, various races, had tears in their eyes. And as the woman seated next to me in an upper level of the FleetCenter joyously shrieked—"Oh my god! Oh my god! This is history! This is history!"—I looked around at the energized and emotional crowd and heard myself speak aloud to no one in particular.

"Yes, indeed. Tonight, Barack, you are LeBron, baby."

THROUGHOUT 2004, THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL MOOD IN Obama's home state of Illinois—and much of the country—was sharply polarized. A bevy of Democratic presidential aspirants had vied to challenge President George W. Bush, who had led the country into war in Afghanistan, and then Iraq, in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington. Chagrined from being in the minority in both chambers of the Congress, Democrats desperately craved a strong candidate who could defeat Bush in the November election. Among those Democrats, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts had won the party's nomination, but despairing Democrats were having difficulty warming up to him. They hungered for something more than Kerry could offer—a political savior, an inspirational figure who could lead them out of one of the darkest periods in their party's history. Kerry surely seemed electable, but his reserved nature and plodding public style made him far from a savior who could stir the souls of the masses.

At this point the nation was evenly divided on the Iraq war, but the Democrats were not. In the eyes of many moderate Democrats who had initially supported the war, the nationalistic fever that had washed over America in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist strike was beginning to wear off. For most left-leaning party members, the war had been nothing short of a colossal mistake from the very beginning. Thousands gathered for anti-war rallies in Chicago, San Francisco and other urban centers. In some cities, pro-war demonstrations attracted partisans on the other end of the spectrum. In Chicago, several anti-war events were largely well-behaved. They were arranged and attended not solely by young radicals but also by established members of the city's lakefront liberal crowd. A rally in the city's Federal Plaza seventeen months earlier, in October 2002, was assembled by an aide to former U.S. senator Paul Simon and a mainstream liberal public relations expert. The rally featured a pointed anti-war speech from Obama, then a fairly anonymous state lawmaker, who deemed the impending Iraq engagement "a dumb war." The event drew old and young alike, as 1960s protest veterans mixed with suburbanites and college students and journalists. Another war protest was more demonstrative, spilling out of the city's downtown Loop area one evening and choking off the main transportation artery of Lake Shore Drive. Protestors marched aimlessly to a destination unknown, before being cornered on the drive and arrested en masse by Chicago police attired in riot gear.

In spring 2003, the *Washington Post*, the daily bulletin board of the D.C. elite, published a story illuminating the nation's growing political and cultural divide. The article explored a burgeoning theory that political scientists informally labeled as the red state–blue state phenomenon. The theory was gaining prominence in both political and intellectual circles. Red states were core Republican Party strongholds, populated primarily by culturally conservative Christian whites. The entire South and most of the Midwest fell into the red category. Blue states were Democratic Party territories, home

to larger percentages of gays, minorities and college-educated intellectuals than the nation as a whole. West Coast and Northeastern states generally voted blue. The red-blue notion resonated with so many Americans that it soon took hold as something of a truism.

This tug-of-war was reflected in the nation's capital by a bitterly partisan battle between minority Democrats and majority Republicans. After the fall elections of 2003, the Pew Research Center released a study summarizing eighty thousand interviews over the previous three years that found an evenly split and polarized nation, with sharp differences along political, cultural and religious lines. The country's most religious states were in the South, and their residents tended to be the most socially traditional and the most hawkish on national security issues. People living in New England and on the Pacific Coast, meanwhile, were less religious, more dovish and less socially traditional.

On the night of that Democratic National Convention in Boston, a handsome, caramel-skinned man who seemed to embody all of these disparate parts appeared on television screens throughout the country and called for unity. Barack Obama's mother was a white, middle-class Kansan with a naive, wandering spirit that she would pass along to her son. His father was a poor, black Kenyan whose pioneering trek to the United States for Western schooling represented the immigrant experience. Obama had been raised mostly among whites but also among Polynesians and Asians. He was a devout Christian who had married into a black family from Chicago's South Side. He had been a community organizer in the poorest African-American neighborhoods of Chicago. He had gone to the country's finest law school and excelled. He was then serving in the state legislature in Middle America. And he seemed to be offering himself as the very vision of what America should be—a place where race, class and cultural differences mix together to make a republic whole, not to divide it.

Later that year, his maternal grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, would tell me, "When he was a young man, I asked him what he wanted to do with his life. He said, 'I want to leave the world a better place than when I came in.' And I believe that has been his guiding light."

Obama, without argument, is imbued with an abiding sense of social and economic justice. He is an earnest, thoughtful, occasionally naive man who has a strong sense of moral purpose, a trait driven into him by his ardently progressive mother. But Obama is far more complex than just a crusading dreamer aiming to "give voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless," in his own oft-spoken words. He is an exceptionally gifted politician who, throughout his life, has been able to make people of wildly divergent vantage points see in him exactly what they want to see. "He definitely has this yin and yang quality to him," said Robert Gibbs, one of Obama's top political aides. He is not of the same specific ancestry as most blacks in the United States, nor has he lived the typical black experience in America. Yet he is accepted by most as a brother, in large part because his physical appearance is decidedly African and his wife and children are African American. He was raised by a white family and educated in elite white institutions, giving him nonthreatening appeal and instant credibility with the white cognoscenti. His parents and grandparents were of modest means, and for most of his life he has not had excessive material wealth, making him aware of the daily concerns of the middle class mostly because they have been his concerns.

But it is his easygoing public temperament and ingenious lack of specificity that perhaps have most abetted his career in politics. Whatever setting Obama steps into—a black church, the Senate floor, a rural farmhouse—he blends comfortably into the atmosphere, as if he has spent a lifetime there. With his relentlessly reasonable tone and a studied thoughtfulness, he can turn even the most jaded journalist into a mild fan. He emanates supreme confidence at almost every moment. But he also has a self-deprecating sense of humor and can express humility to an almost unnecessary degree, at least in public. While talking or writing about a deeply controversial subject, he considers all points of view before cautiously giving his often risk-averse assessment,

an opinion that often appears so universal that people of various viewpoints would consider it their own. In settings with everyday voters, he dons his college lecturer hat and explains arcane policy matters in easy-to-understand terms that invite unanimity, not argument.

What the public has yet to see clearly is his hidden side: his imperious, mercurial, self-righteous and sometimes prickly nature, each quality exacerbated by the enormous career pressures that he has inflicted upon himself. He can be cold and short with reporters who he believes have given him unfair coverage. He is an extraordinarily ambitious, competitive man with persuasive charm and a career reach that seems to have no bounds. He is, in fact, a man of raw ambition so powerful that even he is still coming to terms with its full force. This drive is rooted in an effort to atone for his absent father's tragic failures, both as a Kenyan politician and as a family man. "He's always wanted to be president," Valerie Jarrett, a close friend of Obama's, would confide shortly after his Boston speech. "And I'm not sure that he's even still fully admitted it to himself that he does, but I know he does. I know he does."

The journey toward that admission, finally arriving while he vacationed in his native Hawaii in December 2006, would be unlike any other journey by an American politician. Indeed, for all of Obama's intellectual heft, for all of his genuine sense of mission, for all of his aching desire for personal success, no man could be fully prepared for what lay ahead of him after that heady star turn in Boston. And no man could be left unaffected by it. In just a couple of years, he would rise from obscure state lawmaker to national celebrity pursued by paparazzi on his family vacation. He would struggle through a self-described "painful year" of just three or four hours of sleep per night in order to write a best-selling book that would assure his family's financial security for his lifetime and nurture his burgeoning political career. He would spend many weekends and even more weeknights away from his devoted wife and two young daughters in helping the national Democratic Party raise millions of dollars to retake control of Congress. He would be discussed endlessly in the mainstream and alternative media as potentially the first African American to hold the Oval Office.

From Chicago's South Side, an entirely new and unique politician had emerged on the American scene. Obama and his mother's hopeful message of inclusion and brotherly compassion would land squarely in the middle of a massive political void. In a nation that perpetually seeks to anoint the next New Thing, Obama would bask for months in a remarkably intense media spotlight.

Over those two years, this new brand of politician would do the unthinkable: he would transcend race as he embodied it; he would throw an outstretched hand to conservatives as he enchanted progressives; he would beguile hard-bitten national political reporters (at least some of them, at least for a while) with his newness, intellect and affability; he would become a prideful and iconic symbol for millions of black Americans; and he would secure his role as a major national voice for Democrats. Obama would take the optimistic vision instilled in him by his mother—that, at our essence, all humans are connected by compassion and generosity of spirit—and mold it into a compelling political theme. He would offer this theme of reconciliation to a politically and culturally splintered republic as a form of national salvation.

Galloping onto the national stage, Obama would become a source of hope and optimism for disillusioned Democrats from California to New Hampshire. Obama's come-from-nowhere ascent would make it starkly evident just how passionately many Americans yearned for an inspirational leader who could mend the various divisions within the country—racial, political, cultural, spiritual. "Hours before he gave the speech, Democrats were excited," *Chicago Tribune* columnist Clarence Page said. "You know why? Because they finally got a black face for the party who's not Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton. Let's be frank. That's how this thing got launched. It went beyond party, because the whole country right now is looking for that kind of a come-together kind of feeling." Movements to draft him to run for the presidency in 2008 would take hold on the Internet, among Hollywood celebrities and on college

campuses across the country. As a faraway war claimed thousands of American lives and descended into bloody chaos, as an inordinate number of power and finance scandals engulfed Congress, as Americans grew more disenchanted with the policies and leadership of Republican president George W. Bush, America seemed ready for a shepherd to lead the country in an entirely new direction.

Not since the days of Jack and Bobby Kennedy, and their luminous political Camelot, had a politician captured so quickly the imagination of such a broad array of Americans, especially the significant voting bloc of black Americans. And even the Kennedy comparison would not characterize Obama's fame properly. Not since Ronald Reagan had a politician been so adept at sharing his own unwavering optimism with a disheartened electorate. Cunningly using the broad power of the modern media as his launching pad, Obama and his small team of skilled advisers would plot a course that catapulted him from little-known state lawmaker to best-selling author to U.S. senator to national celebrity. A mixture of idealist and pragmatist, Obama would move almost overnight from a critic of the established political system inside the Beltway to a player within that system. He would represent both outsider and insider.

Wherever he went, Obama would draw impassioned crowds in the thousands. Throughout 2006, Obama would grace the covers of national magazines and the front pages of national newspapers. Like Obama's mother, who reinforced his self-esteem constantly, nearly all these journalists saw something special in him. "It's like nothing I've ever seen before," said Julian Green, a former aide. "We actually have fans among the media. I've never run across that for any other politician." "Dreaming of Obama" and "Great Expectations" and "Why Barack Obama Could Be the Next President"—these headlines would feed his growing legend. Among politicians, Obama would be in the highest demand for television's endless talk circuit, exchanging serious discourse with Charlie Rose, cracking wise with Jay Leno and opening his heart (relatively) to Oprah Winfrey. He received both an NAACP Image Award and a Grammy, the latter for a voice recording of his first memoir. In a society that worships celebrity, no political figure in the country could come close to projecting such megastar wattage. "We originally scheduled the Rolling Stones for this party," the New Hampshire governor, John Lynch, told fifteen hundred Democrats who had shelled out twenty-five dollars apiece to see Obama in December 2006. "But we canceled them when we realized Senator Obama would sell more tickets."

Internally and certainly politically, Obama would embrace this adulation. But he would also struggle mightily with its deleterious effects. As his fame spread worldwide and his public life roared ahead at a ferocious pace, his familiar world collapsed on him and he became more confined to a low-oxygen celebrity bubble. "I can't, for example, walk down the street by myself and watch people go by anymore, and that's a very difficult thing to accept," he lamented. He became more cautious of his public comments and his public image. He carefully restricted access to reporters. A highly active legislator in Illinois who sponsored and passed an assortment of bills, he now steered clear of any single controversial issue. He grew ever more reliant on key aides, family and others close to him—and these people would grow more protective of him. "For us, his family, he hasn't changed," his Kenyan-born half sister, Auma Obama, said. "But the people around him have changed. I feel the vulnerability in him and I see him being more guarded than he ever used to be." His small cadre of dedicated advisers, who had attached their own careers to Obama's soaring rocket ship, would feel this intense pressure as well. Said David Axelrod, his chief media strategist: "It's like you are carrying this priceless porcelain vase through a crowd of people and you don't want to be the guy who drops it and breaks it."

Intimate aides like Axelrod would question privately whether Obama's warp-speed ascension had gone too fast, whether the earnest, occasionally thin-skinned Obama was prepared for the unyielding rigors of a presidential contest, even as that contest already seemed to begin with urgency inside the media and among activists. "David always worries about a meltdown," a confidante of Axelrod's told me. And yet every time that private worry had been raised previously, Obama would confidently step onto the court

and hit that key shot. He did that again in early February 2007, when his final conclusion about running for the presidency was rendered with rich political pageantry and yet another speech that electrified supporters and earned praise from analysts.

After months of agonizing indecision, on a bone-chilling winter's morning in Springfield, Illinois, Obama spoke directly to America's yearning for new leadership and offered himself for that role. Before a crowd of nearly seventeen thousand shivering people gathered in the shadow of Illinois's Old State Capitol, Obama announced his candidacy for president. He drew on the powerful historic symbolism of where he stood—outside the building where Abraham Lincoln served as an Illinois lawmaker, the place where Lincoln delivered his famous "House Divided" antislavery speech in 1858. He reasserted that America was ready for a new generation of leadership, ready to withdraw from the war in Iraq, ready to be united. He merged the themes of Lincoln's long-ago call for a unified citizenry and his own mother's most endearing characteristic—seeing the best in people, rather than the worst. "Let us transform this nation," he said through a confident voice and a clenched jaw. "It was here we learned to disagree without being disagreeable—that it's possible to compromise so long as you know those principles that can never be compromised; and that so long as we're willing to listen to each other, we can assume the best in people instead of the worst. . . . The life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible. He tells us that there is power in words. He tells us that there is power in conviction, that beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people. He tells us that there is power in hope."

For Obama's growing legion of followers, this was the moment they had been waiting to experience. For them, it didn't seem to matter that since the aggressively liberal state lawmaker had gone to Washington he had taken a dramatic turn toward calculation and caution, or that he had yet to propose anything philosophically new, or that Obama was, in his own words, "a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views," or that the higher he soared, the more this politician spoke in well-worn platitudes and the more he offered warm, feel-good sentiments lacking a precise framework. It also didn't seem to matter that in his two years in the minority party in the U.S. Senate, he had the clout to pass only one substantial piece of legislation or that he avoided conflict at all costs, spending none of his heavily amassed political capital on even a single controversial issue he believed in. Indeed, through his first year in the Senate, he had to argue with his cautious political advisers to speak out, however carefully, on a topic dear to him—the impact of Hurricane Katrina and its racial and economic ramifications.

And yet his irreducible confidence, his undeniable intellect and, not least, his compelling biracial life story had transformed Obama into America's most alluring new political face. To voters of various political persuasions, perhaps, just perhaps, here was the antidote to what ailed their fractured national leadership. Here was a pragmatic politician who also possessed a capacity to dream, who spoke convincingly of a better tomorrow at a time when Americans were profoundly worried about that tomorrow. Here, at last, seemed to be the magnetic leader who conveyed the perfect blend of confidence, character and, in his own words, hope. "People don't come to Obama for what he's done," said Bruce Reed, president of the Democratic Leadership Council, a group devoted to centrist policies. "They come because of what they hope he can be."

Whether by design or destiny, ambition or purpose, Barack Obama had climbed aboard the ride of his life. And he seemed determined to take America with him.

BUT AS OBAMA STRUCK OUT FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S 2008 nomination for the U.S. presidency, large questions lingered in the public domain: Exactly how had Obama moved this far, this fast—and was it too fast? Was he a man of substance or of media hyperbole? Did he have the experience and toughness to inhabit the White House? Was his mixed racial ancestry a political hindrance, a political asset, or, in a country still confused about race, was it both? Our media can invest people with power

in the blink of an eye, but was this particular investment wise? Could this young senator with an idealistic message of inclusiveness survive the boiling cauldron of presidential politics, or would Obama fall victim to his own burning ambition? Would the mercurial media turn on the mercurial Obama?

And most of all, even though a solid section of the voting public was enthralled with Obama, would the rest of America embrace his message and entrust this newcomer with the world's most important leadership role?

CHAPTER

2

Dreams from His Mother

I know that she was the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known, and that what is best in me I owe to her.

—BARACK OBAMA ABOUT HIS MOTHER, ANN DUNHAM

Barack Obama prepared for elective office by moving to Chicago to work as a community organizer in his mid-twenties, obtaining a Harvard Law School degree in his late twenties and authoring an exhaustive personal memoir in his early thirties. His book, originally published in 1995 by a division of Random House, was called *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. As the title suggests, the book chronicled Obama's life in relation to his East African father, emphasizing Obama's search to find his own racial and spiritual identity amid America's divisive racial spectrum. He finally reached a comfortable place after undertaking a thorough review of his mother's and her parents' journey from the midwestern United States to Hawaii, and then deeply exploring the life and ancestry of his father, who left Obama and his mother when he was two years old.

This wasn't the book Obama originally sold to his literary agent and publisher. He had pitched them a work about his experiences as the first African-American president of the prestigious *Harvard Law Review*. After all, at the time, Obama was a modest thirty-three years old, and his *Law Review* presidency was his only claim to any modicum of fame. Besides, it might have seemed a bit presumptuous to try to sell a life's memoir at the age of thirty-three. Nevertheless, when Obama began writing, an autobiographical memoir poured forth.

Upon its release in 1995, the book sold a few thousand copies, generated mostly positive reviews—although there were a few mixed ones (one critic considered it overwrought and self-indulgent)—and then it faded into obscurity. For years after its publication, the book was difficult to find for those few who tried, with copies hidden in corners of small independent or Afrocentric bookstores. By the early 2000s, with the advent of Internet websites that sold used merchandise in a worldwide flea market, a used paperback copy could be picked up for as little as four or five dollars, but it still was not a hot seller by any measure. That changed dramatically when Obama shot to national fame in 2004 after his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention. Random House quickly ran off several new printings, promoted it vigorously, and the book landed on best-seller lists, where it remained for dozens of weeks, giving Obama the first shot of financial wealth in his life.

Obama, who began reading voraciously in college, had harbored some thoughts of writing fiction as an avocation, although it's an open question whether he seriously considered fiction writing as a full-time profession. Obama himself said he never dabbled in fiction, but others dispute that. When I asked him during the course of his U.S. Senate primary campaign to name his favorite author, he cited E. L. Doctorow, the critically acclaimed novelist and outspoken political liberal. The next day, during a phone conversation on a different matter, he made it a point to say that he wanted to change his answer—to William Shakespeare. (It's probably safe to say that Mr. Doctorow would not feel slighted.) Some politicians are infamous among reporters for casually mentioning a high-minded work that is currently on their nightstand in order

to give the impression of being a deep thinker. Even so, it is difficult to imagine most politicians digesting the heavy works of Shakespeare before extinguishing the bedroom light. Yet Obama's erudite nature and his own ambitious writings made that answer seem quite plausible. Jerry Kellman, the community organizer who brought Obama to Chicago to help poor blacks on the Far South Side retrain for jobs, said Obama possessed a fertile, introspective mind that wandered from scene to scene and place to place—a rare trait that often lends itself to good fiction writing. In short, Obama was a dreamer. Of Obama's fiction writing, Kellman said, "He wasn't really talking about it as a career, for that is a whole different animal. He was talking about it as a muse kind of thing—the arts and exploring emotions and that kind of stuff." Beginning in his college years in New York City, Obama began to chronicle the day-to-day events of his life on a pad of lined white paper that he toted around. The notebook would be filled with word sketches of everyday occurrences, conflicting emotions and personal observations of the various people who passed through his world. Later, he would upgrade that notebook, wrapping it in a more professional-looking leather-bound folder. It was from those early handwritten pages that he harvested *Dreams from My Father*.

To a great extent, the narrative is the story of self-discovery, of a young man in the American middle class ambiguously tethered to an unknown family tree on a faraway continent. On his quest to meet and learn about these blood relatives, Obama also seeks a sense of belonging in his home society, a country still riven by racial, cultural and economic divisions. This might be an interesting but not extraordinary tale for the many people who fit neatly into a human demographic. But Obama's mixed racial ancestry of black and white placed him in a different category, straddling two cultures and two races that, in the United States especially, often collide. The fact that he grew up mostly in Hawaii, where there were few blacks and many people of Asian ancestry, added to Obama's feelings of racial isolation. Indeed, in the book's introduction, Obama conceded that he could not deliver the story of the typical African-American experience, which is often marked by deprivation of financial, educational or other resources. This was to the chagrin of his project's promoters. Obama, again in the introduction, explained that one Manhattan publisher, who presumably rejected his book proposal, once told him, "After all, you don't come from an underprivileged background." Although his childhood was unique to his circumstances, Obama did claim a long-standing genetic link with African Americans. He followed that quote with this: "That I can embrace my black brothers and sisters, whether in this country or in Africa, and affirm a common ancestry without pretending to speak to, or for, all our various struggles—is part of what this book is all about."

The book's chief message is consistent with Obama's overriding political theme of optimism and multiculturalism—hope in the face of despair, hope in the face of centuries of struggle, harmony among people of all races and cultures and kinds of families. The first paperback cover for *Dreams* captured this optimism with a bright color photograph of a broadly smiling Obama on a visit to Kenya. The photo was taken by his half sister Auma, with whom he would ultimately form a close association. He is at his father's small farming compound and seated beside his paternal grandmother, Sarah Onyango Obama, who is attired in white head scarf and traditional Kenyan dress. She is smiling just as broadly as she lovingly caresses Obama's neatly trimmed Afro with the back of her hand.

The remarkably candid memoir is much rawer than the typical book from a politician, no doubt because Obama wrote it before firmly deciding to run for public office. It purposefully tracks the thoughts and movements of a young black American male with more frankness than a political consultant would probably advise—the teenage parties, the pursuit of young women, alcohol and drug use, anger at the white establishment, questioning of organized religion. The book opens with an anecdote describing an abrupt telephone call Obama had received from a relative in Kenya who informed him that his father, a notoriously poor driver, has been killed in an automobile accident. At the time, Obama is twenty-one and living in a spare

Manhattan apartment while he attends Columbia University. He is shocked by the call, and is utterly clueless about how to respond emotionally to this news, chiefly because his father had left Obama's family to attend Harvard University when Obama was a toddler. Obama then launches into a rich, chronological narrative of his life, beginning with his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia and concluding shortly before he goes into politics by running for the Illinois State Senate. Obama states in the introduction that he has melded real people from his life into fictional characters and inserted imprecise dialogue in order to move along the narrative and protect the identities of certain individuals. These literary devices are not uncommon in personal memoirs, but over his political career they would become a source of scrutiny for journalists scouring Obama's past for possible exaggerations or outright mendacity.

Dreams from My Father would prove an invaluable resource for political reporters, as well as a selling point for Obama when he ran for public office. In covering his Senate campaign for the *Chicago Tribune*, I would consistently ask Obama questions about his life. When he would grow weary of these personal inquiries, which was often, he would brush them aside by referring me to his book for answers. "I wrote four hundred pages about myself," he would say. "What more could you want from me?" When I explained that my job was to obtain fresh anecdotes and quotes, as well as to make sure that the story in his book checked out, he would wave me off and say he understood. But his perpetually furrowed brow, together with his imperious manner, gave the appearance of being personally offended that I would dare question his authorial and personal integrity. Still, he would concede what some critics asserted: that the book was too long. "I probably should have trimmed it by fifty or a hundred pages," he confided.

Obama's portrayal of his childhood (when he was known as "Barry," like his father, to better fit into American culture) was rife with vivid stories of his life in Honolulu, where he was born, and poverty-ridden Jakarta, where he lived for several years, leading up to adolescence, by which time he had returned to Hawaii. He also offered rather brief but descriptive portraits of the primary caregivers who molded his character—his mother and her parents. And he recounted his struggles adapting to the African-American community of the United States, as well as his frustrations as a community organizer in an impoverished neighborhood on Chicago's Far South Side. But the book's essence is Obama's search for a heritage that was a mystery to him as a child and adolescent—the story of his once estranged and now deceased father, a gifted African politician whose personal demons prohibited him from fulfilling his great early promise. Partially because one of his parents virtually abandoned him to the other, and then that primary parent led a searching, peripatetic existence, Obama often told close friends that he grew up feeling "like an orphan." His wife, Michelle, and close friends would later speculate that his isolated childhood and parental loss had played a significant role in feeding his desire for public attention.

So it comes as no real surprise that Obama wanted to investigate his paternal heritage and gain an understanding of why his father disappeared. The book reaches its apogee when a sobbing Obama falls to the ground between the graves of his paternal grandfather and his father in rural Kenya, his yearning questions about his absent father answered, their ghosts, which had haunted Obama, finally laid to rest. "When my tears were finally spent, I felt a calmness wash over me," Obama wrote. "I felt the circle finally close. I realized that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America—the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago—all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin."

WITH OBAMA'S ILLUSTRATIVE EXPLORATION INTO HIS FATHER'S heritage an open book—literally—I had a wealth of information about this aspect of his life. But his wife, Michelle, advised me that to truly understand her husband, it was necessary to

visit Hawaii. No matter how much Obama had philosophized in print about his Kenyan father, she told me, that Pacific island held even more answers to Obama's complex persona. "There's still a great deal of Hawaii in Barack," she said. "You can't really understand Barack until you understand Hawaii." In fact, the Obamas still make an annual sojourn to Honolulu every Christmas season, sometimes inviting close friends to join them. The trip is cemented into Obama's schedule, and nothing has ever dislodged it, not even his hectic political campaigns. Hearing this, I convinced my *Tribune* editors that a trip to Honolulu was essential in order to write a newspaper profile of Obama in the weeks leading up to the fall 2004 Senate election in Illinois.

At the time of my visit, Hawaii's population and tourist industry had grown considerably since Obama's youth, but the essence of the islands' mix of various Asian, Polynesian and Western cultures had persevered, as had their tropical serenity. Obama and his campaign staff decided to make his family available to me, most likely because Obama was a candidate for the highest legislative body in the land and the *Tribune* was the largest and most influential newspaper in Illinois. Turning down the *Tribune*'s request for family interviews would not seem a wise political decision at this point in his Senate campaign. However, Obama's top aides must have been wary about what I would turn up. After many discussions among those aides, they elected to send a deputy press aide, Nora Moreno Cargie, to track my reporting and monitor the content of my interviews. No reporter would be thrilled by this idea, and I certainly wasn't. I balked mildly but realized that if I wanted access to Obama's family, I had no choice but to acquiesce to Moreno Cargie's presence.

As it turned out, she was far from obstructive, and she even became helpful in drawing out some sources. She had worked as a researcher for National Public Radio and had a habit of asking questions herself. She also brought a woman's perspective to my discoveries. And like much of Obama's campaign staff, she also had a great curiosity about her employer. So with Moreno Cargie in tow, Obama's other half sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, a high school history teacher in her mid-thirties, provided a tour of Obama's favorite spots on the island, as well as places where seminal moments of her brother's childhood transpired. Obama's grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, then ailing with various maladies, reluctantly agreed to a forty-five-minute interview. I also toured the Punahou School, the private academy where Obama studied, and interviewed teachers, coaches and childhood friends and their parents.

Meeting his grandmother, in particular, opened my eyes to Obama's formative years in a way that I hadn't foreseen. I initially had thought that Obama gained his practical and pragmatic side from studying his father's life. But the interviews revealed that it surely came from Madelyn, who was his primary caregiver while his mother traveled the globe studying other cultures.

Madelyn Dunham was known in the family as "Toot," which is short for "Tutu," meaning "grandparent" in Hawaiian. She still lived in the same modest apartment where Obama was raised, across an inland waterway from the teeming tourist area of Waikiki Beach. Maya had moved back to Hawaii from New York City just a couple of years before, in part to look after her grandmother. She lived in an apartment a few floors below Madelyn's unit, which was on the tenth floor of the twelve-story building in an urban section of Honolulu. The structure was rather prosaic in its beachfrontlike design. It was made of white concrete and shaped like a rectangle plopped on a short side. Triangular arches, the only real decorative treatment, rose slightly above the entrance on the first floor, and balconies just large enough for a few chairs adorned every apartment, their railings the overriding architectural feature of the building. Glass sliding doors opened to each of the balconies. The interiors of the apartments were as modest as the exterior suggested, with each unit resembling a beachfront condominium. Some families visiting Hawaii undoubtedly stay in bigger oceanfront condos than this apartment where Obama grew up.

Madelyn clearly was not one for frills. The walls of her unit were bleach-white with only a couple of pieces of artwork. A short hallway to the right led to two small bedrooms, one of which was Obama's as a child. To the left, the apartment opened into

a kitchen area and then to a medium-sized living room, with the glass doors leading to the adjoining small balcony at the far end. The most prominent ornament in the room sat on a bookshelf beside the television—a handsome family portrait of Obama, Michelle and their two young daughters, Sasha and Malia.

Moreno Cargie and I assumed seats at opposite ends of the living room couch as Madelyn, a small woman shrunken even more by a perpetual stoop, dropped into a chair. At nearly eighty-two, her age was surely getting the best of her physically, but her mind seemed taut and clear. Her black hair now was thinning and graying, and a yellowish streak ran through the middle of it, the result of years of cigarette smoking. She confessed that she still smoked too much. Her family said she was also still a consistent drinker.

Throughout our interview, Madelyn left no question that she was every bit as pragmatic and self-assured as she had been described. This was a woman who had no college education and began her professional life as a bank secretary, yet retired as the bank's vice president. She said she retired, in part, because her colleagues and superiors were pushing her to learn how to work with computers. "New-fangled gadgets that are running the world," she said disdainfully. I tried my best to put her at ease, but her somewhat brusque demeanor indicated that she was dubious of my intentions. She eyed my small digital voice recorder with deep suspicion. "It's one of those new-fangled gadgets," I explained to her with a smile, an expression she did not return.

While Maya was gracious and warm, Madelyn was cautious and protective. This interview was clearly a chore, and she had obviously agreed to it only at her grandson's urging. Even though Obama was now a rising star in the national Democratic Party, she told me that she wished her grandson had entered a more esteemed profession than politics after obtaining his Harvard Law School degree. "International law or something like that," she said. When I suggested that his Harvard credentials would allow him to move back easily into the legal profession if his political career grew unsatisfying or went awry—he perhaps would even be offered a federal judgeship—she replied: "The Supreme Court would be all right." Her matter-of-fact manner about suggesting the Supreme Court for her grandson made me chuckle. After all, on this day, Obama surely looked as if he was headed to the U.S. Senate, but he was still just an Illinois state lawmaker. I wasn't sure if this was an example of naïveté or moxie, and I eventually settled on a mixture of the two. After a half hour's worth of questions, Madelyn announced that she was tired, and effectively ended the interview. As we stepped toward the door, she grabbed my arm gently and gave me a motherly instruction: "Be kind to my grandson." To which I answered: "It's not really my job to show him kindness, but to be as impartial and accurate as I can." She responded with typical pragmatism and brevity. "Oh, I know," she said.

DURING THIS TRIP, AND ESPECIALLY DURING MY INTERVIEW WITH Madelyn, it grew clearer that, even if the spine of Obama's written narrative involved his absent father, it was Obama's mother who played the most vital role in shaping the crux of his character. (His mother's full given name was Stanley Ann Dunham because her father wanted a boy, but she understandably led her life as "Ann." The name Stanley was "one of Gramps's less judicious ideas," Obama wrote in *Dreams*.) Indeed, the extreme importance of his mother's part in forming Obama's character perhaps didn't even strike Obama himself until after she passed away in the mid-1990s from ovarian cancer at the age of fifty-three.

"His mother was an Adlai Stevenson liberal," said Madelyn, who is nonideological herself, although prone to voting Republican. "And he got a heavy dose of her thinking, you know, as a youngster." Obama told me that his mother's influence was ever-present in his life. And it is apparent from private and public conversations with him that he set his moral compass not only from his readings of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Bible but from his mother's guidance. Said Obama: "It's always hard to talk about your mother in any kind of an objective way. I mean,

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A hardcover edition of this book was published in 2007 by Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

First Amistad paperback edition published 2008, revised 2017.

ISBN 978-0-06-268439-4 (pbk.)

EPub Edition February 2017 ISBN 9780062692627