

FEATURING A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

BECOMING



MICHELLE
OBAMA



Extraordinary praise for
BECOMING

“Becoming is refined and forthright, gracefully written and at times laugh-out-loud funny. . . . In finally telling her story, Obama is doing several things with this book. She is taking the country by the hand on an intimate tour of everyday African-American life and ambition, while recounting her rise from modest origins to the closest this country has to nobility. She’s meditating on the tensions women face in a world that speaks of gender equality but in which women still bear the greater burdens of balancing career and family, even with a forward-thinking husband like Barack Obama. And she is reminding readers that African-Americans, like any other group, experience the heartbreak of infertility, as she describes the challenges she and her husband confronted in order to become parents. . . . One of the great gifts of Obama’s book is her loving and frank bearing-witness to the lived experiences of the black working class, the invisible people who don’t make the evening news and whom not enough of us choose to see.”

—Isabel Wilkerson, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Becoming is inspirational without trying to be. From the first words, the very warmth that permeates its author emanates from the pages. . . . *Becoming* manages to be a coming-of-age tale, a love story and a family saga all in one.”

—Angie Thomas, *Time*

“More like a novel than a political memoir, the First Lady’s book reveals its author as utterly, viscerally human. . . . Beautiful and extraordinary . . . so surprisingly candid, richly emotional, and granularly detailed that it allows readers to feel exactly what Michelle herself felt at various moments in her life.”

—Curtis Sittenfeld, *Vanity Fair*

“An inspirational memoir that also rings true.”

—Gaby Wood, *Daily Telegraph*, Five Stars

“This is a rich, entertaining and candid memoir. And overall she’s a fun person to sit alongside as she tells you the story of her life, warts and all . . . it is as beautifully written as any piece of fiction, with a similar warm languid tone to Ann Patchett’s novel *Commonwealth*.”

—Viv Groskop, *i*, Five Stars

“This brilliantly written and emotionally authentic memoir fills in some important gaps . . . not just a fascinating read but a genuinely moving one too.”

—Kathryn Hughes, *Mail on Sunday*, Five Stars

“Intimate, inspiring and set to become hugely influential.”

—Helen Davies, *Sunday Times*, Books of the Year

“This revealing memoir offers new insights into her upbringing on the South Side of Chicago and the highs and lows of life with Barack Obama . . . *Becoming* is a 400-page expansion of this essential doctrine [‘when they go low, we go high’], without compromising a refreshing level of honesty about what politics really did to her. I have read Barack Obama’s two books so far, and this is like inserting a missing piece of reality into the narrative of his dizzying journey.”

—Afua Hirsch, *Guardian*

“I found myself lifting my jaw from my chest at the end of every other chapter, not because of any seedy insight into stories I’d always wondered about, but because, armed as I was with knowledge about her career, her mannerisms, and even her elbow-heavy dancing, this was not the Obama I thought I knew. She was more.”

—Kuba Shand-Baptiste, *Independent*

“Inspiring. . . After 421 pages of *Becoming*, I closed the book hoping that one day she would use her formidable intelligence, humanity—and humour—to offer a more tangible vision for how America might fight the rising tides of polarization and hate.”

—Gillian Tett, *Financial Times*

“Beautifully written . . . Twenty-five years ago she fell in love with a driven idealist, a man determined not to accept the world as it was. She feared his forceful intellect and ambition might swallow hers; instead, she found her voice.”

—Jenni Russell, *Sunday Times*

“*Becoming* serenely balances gravity and grace, uplift and anecdote . . . *Becoming* is frequently funny, sometimes indignant or enraged, and when Michelle describes her father’s early death from multiple sclerosis it turns rawly emotional.”

—Peter Conrad, *Observer*

“Obama’s memoir is a genuine page-turner, full of intimacies and reflections . . . Allied to this candour is a steeliness of purpose. It is no exaggeration to say that every page of this book is, explicitly or otherwise, a reproach to Donald Trump, and a call-to-arms to those who would defeat the 45th President and all that he stands for.”

—Matt d’Ancona, *Evening Standard*

“Deeply moving . . . *Becoming* is fundamentally about how to be a person in the world, how to live a purposeful life, and how to use the chances you have been given.”

—Helen Lewis, *New Statesman*

“What a memoir. What a woman.”

—Hermione Eyre, *Spectator*

“Candid, engaging . . . Mrs. Obama pulls back the curtains around their lives in a way she could not while Mr. Obama was in office. Besides her lovely turn of phrase, she is a gifted and empathetic observer.”

—*The Economist*

“A literary phenomenon.”

—*Guardian*

BECOMING

MICHELLE
OBAMA



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*To all the people who have helped me become:
the folks who raised me—Fraser, Marian, Craig,
and my vast extended family,
my circle of strong women, who always lift me up,
my loyal and dedicated staff, who continue to make me proud.*

*To the loves of my life:
Malia and Sasha, my two most precious peas,
who are my reasons for being,
and finally, Barack, who always promised me an interesting journey.*

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Introduction to the Paperback Edition

I'M PROUD OF THIS BOOK, TRULY, BECAUSE OF WHAT IT means to me. And hopefully, what it will mean to you.

I knew from the outset that if I was going to write a memoir, it had to include more than the shade of blue I chose for a china pattern or who was or wasn't invited to a State Dinner. Those are parts of my story, yes, but to be honest, they aren't very important parts. And I had no interest in using a memoir to settle scores or win a few news cycles, because I don't care about any of that, either.

What I do care about, what I've always cared about, is going deeper to unearth the fullness of our stories, blemishes and all. I know that I am who I am not because of the titles I've held or the celebrities I've met, but because of the snaking paths and winding roads, the frustrations and contradictions, the constant growth that is painful and joyful and full of confusion. So I knew that if this book was going to make any difference at all, it would need to be raw, vulnerable, and unabashedly honest.

And, as a Black woman, all of that was even more important. For the better part of our history, Black women's stories have either gone untold or been told by others—by those who haven't walked in our shoes and sometimes by those who haven't even cared to imagine what it might feel

like to do so. That's why it was crucial for me to tell, in my own words and on my own terms, not just the story of the first Black First Lady, but also the story of a little Black girl who studied hard, became a lawyer, and fell in love; the story of a Black woman raising children, building a career, and staying afloat amid a tumultuous world. There is great beauty within every Black woman's story, whether or not we ever become First Lady.

For me, embracing that beauty meant reflecting on my entire history, not just the major events and milestones, but the broader historical and societal context swirling along the way. And I found great joy in rediscovering the tiniest details that I'd long brushed aside: the fresh smell of cleaning products on a spring day, the natural ease with which my grandfather kept the record player humming on a Saturday afternoon, the sound of ice scraped off a windshield on a frozen Chicago morning. While sometimes I think about the stories in this book and wonder if they're too small or trivial, what I've learned and re-learned throughout this process is that these moments may in fact be the most important parts of our stories. These years-old sensory recollections, these dusty emotional bursts can split time in two, overlaying who we are atop who we were. It's that experience—seeing at once the present and the past, the outlines still visible beneath the parchment—that for me was profoundly meaningful, opening up a radiance within my own story I hadn't noticed before.

This isn't to say any of this was easy, particularly the experience of baring this truest version of myself for the entire world to accept or leave behind. In fact, the night before this book first went on sale—after all the chapters had been written, all the copies printed and bound and placed on shelves—I woke up in a panic. The following evening, I was scheduled to discuss my memoir with Oprah Winfrey in front of 14,000 people in a professional basketball arena, an event that would kick off a worldwide tour. I laid awake anxious in my bed, worried that these little stories couldn't bear the enormous load.

What if the book just isn't any good? What if people hate it? Or what if they just don't care at all?

My husband stays up much later than me, and thankfully, he was still awake when my fears came to visit and wouldn't leave. I crawled out of

bed, put my slippers on, and went down to talk with him. Maybe the tour wasn't a very smart idea, I told him. Maybe the book will flop. Barack put his arms around me and placed his forehead on mine. "It's good, Miche," he told me. "It really is."

At this point I'd spent eight years as First Lady of the United States. I'd done more interviews than I could count and given more speeches than I can remember. Oprah Winfrey wasn't some high-powered moderator, she was my friend.

But the doubts never leave us for good. We all have our tender spots, and our instinct is to keep them protected.

This book affirmed within me the value in bucking against that instinct, in stepping into our fears. It's where the greatest truths come from—the understanding of what matters and what doesn't, the ability to let go of the things that too often hold us down, the acceptance of ourselves and a belief in our own promise.

I hope that as you read my story, you'll reflect on your own—every one of your bumps and bruises, each of your successes and bursts of laughter. And then I hope you'll share that story, all of it, especially the most tender spots. Because that's how we all can keep becoming.

Michelle Obama
December 2020

Preface

March 2017

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

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 pudgy-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 deadily 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.

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.

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 pigtailed, 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.

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. Whiiiiite.* 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

that Mrs. Burroughs had given to Teddy and Chiaka that day to wear on their chests as an emblem of their accomplishment, or maybe a sign that they were marked for greatness when the rest of us weren't. The two of them, after all, had read every last color card without a hitch.

The next morning in class, I asked for a do-over.

When Mrs. Burroughs said no, cheerily adding that we kindergartners had other things to get to, I demanded it.

Pity the kids who then had to watch me face the color cards a second time, going slower now, pausing deliberately to breathe after I'd pronounced each word, refusing to let my nerves short-circuit my brain. And it worked, through "black," "orange," "purple," and especially "white." I was practically shouting the word "white" before I'd even seen the letters on the card. I like to imagine now that Mrs. Burroughs was impressed with this little Black girl who'd found the courage to advocate for herself. I didn't know whether Teddy and Chiaka had even noticed. I was quick to claim my trophy, though, heading home that afternoon with my head up and one of those gold-foil stars stuck on my shirt.

AT HOME, I lived in a world of high drama and intrigue, immersing myself in an ever-evolving soap opera of dolls. There were births, feuds, and betrayals. There was hope, hatred, and sometimes sex. My preferred way to pass the time between school and dinner was to park myself in the common area outside my room and Craig's and spread my Barbies across the floor, spinning out scenarios that felt as real to me as life itself, sometimes inserting Craig's G.I. Joe action figures into the plotlines. I kept my dolls' outfits in a child-sized vinyl suitcase covered in a floral print. I assigned every Barbie and every G.I. Joe a personality. I also recruited into service the worn-out alphabet blocks my mother had used years earlier to teach us our letters. They, too, were given names and inner lives.

I rarely chose to join the neighborhood kids who played outside after school, nor did I invite school friends home with me, in part because I was a fastidious kid and didn't want anyone meddling with my dolls. I'd

been to other girls' houses and seen the horror-show scenarios—Barbies whose hair had been hacked off or whose faces had been crosshatched with Magic Marker. And one thing I was learning at school was that kid dynamics could be messy. Whatever sweet scenes you might witness on a playground, beneath them lay a tyranny of shifting hierarchies and alliances. There were queen bees, bullies, and followers. I wasn't shy, but I also wasn't sure I needed any of that messiness in my life outside school. Instead, I sank my energy into being the sole animating force in my little common-area universe. If Craig showed up and had the audacity to move a single block, I'd start shrieking. I was also not above hitting him when necessary—usually a direct fist blow to the middle of his back. The point was that the dolls and blocks needed me to give them life, and I dutifully gave it to them, imposing one personal crisis after another. Like any good deity, I was there to see them suffer and grow.

Meanwhile, from my bedroom window, I could observe most of the real-world happenings on our block of Euclid Avenue. In the late afternoons, I'd see Mr. Thompson, the tall African American man who owned the three-unit building across the street, loading his big bass guitar into the back of his Cadillac, setting off for a gig in one jazz club or another. I'd watch the Mendozas, the Mexican family next door, arriving home in their pickup loaded with ladders after a long day of painting houses, greeted at the fence by their yapping dogs.

Our neighborhood was middle-class and racially mixed. Kids found one another based not on the color of their skin but on who was outside and ready to play. My friends included a girl named Rachel, whose mother was white and had a British accent; Susie, a curly-haired redhead; and the Mendozas' granddaughter whenever she was visiting. We were a motley mix of last names—Kansopant, Abuasef, Yacker, Robinson—and were too young to register that things around us were changing fast. In 1950, fifteen years before my parents moved to South Shore, the neighborhood had been 96 percent white. By the time I'd leave for college in 1981, it would be about 96 percent Black.

Craig and I were raised squarely in the crosscurrents of that flux. The blocks surrounding us were home to Jewish families, immigrant

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