

**THIS
WILL
BE
MY
UNDOING**

**LIVING AT THE INTERSECTION OF
BLACK, FEMALE, AND FEMINIST
IN (WHITE) AMERICA**

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HARPER PERENNIAL

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the mothers in progress, the daughters, and the daughters who have yet to be born.

But I have not given up hope yet. I am learning to love myself. I took a solo vacation, satiated by my own presence. I came back to Harlem feeling refreshed, ready to transform my energy so that I could take the risk of falling in love. But that deep-seated fear still lingers in the pit of my chest, even if it does not pulsate as it did before. I am trying to shed the fear that maybe I am diseased as a black woman, chalking up these experiences to growing pains on the road to true love. I just wish that these pains didn't hurt so badly.

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A LOTUS FOR MICHELLE

Dear Michelle,

In July 2008, approximately six months before your husband assumed office, *The New Yorker* published a cartoon by Barry Blitt that featured the both of you as terrorists. The theme was "The Politics of Fear," and it was the front cover image. Barack is in Muslim clothing and you are in military garb and have an AK-47 strapped to your back. You are fist-bumping in what seems to be the Oval Office while the American flag burns in the fireplace. Many called the image offensive and disgusting, but nevertheless the magazine's editor, David Remnick, deemed it satirical, for it held up a mirror to the stereotypes swirling around about Barack's faith. But for me, the more problematic issue was how you were portrayed. Unlike Barack Obama, whose

seemingly smooth hair was underneath a ragiyah, your hair was transformed from your usual permed shoulder-length hair to a large afro—the cartoonist accentuated the countless coils. They resembled barbed wire. Your lips are pursed, almost identical to the kind of gesture that many black women make when they are perturbed or in the midst of saying something witty. Your eyebrows are raised and your head is cocked to the side. Your lips, unlike Barack's, are colored red, perhaps to accentuate their fullness. Your eyes, unlike Barack's, are open and spilling over with intent. The AK-47 strapped to your back is the least terroristic element of this image. Contrary to popular belief, you, not Barack, are its true focal point. You are the one whose body is most exaggerated. You do not incite terrorism with bone-straight hair and good posture. No, your body is forced to reflect what America must imagine in order to strip away your exceptionalism: a large afro, gestures normally ascribed to the sassy black woman stereotype, and a gun for good measure. If this image was supposed to satirize "Politics of Fear" surrounding you and your family, then it succeeded because that image was exactly how many in white America could only see you, Michelle: through double vision. They rejected what their actual eyes perceived: an extremely accomplished woman whose career many of them would have been lucky to emulate. Instead they replaced you with an aggressive and violent woman. As long as their imagination is entertained, their belief in their inherent superiority as white people could be sustained.

I was too young to really engage with this image. I was only sixteen years old and I wasn't raised in a particularly

political home. I did know, however, that we were Democrats and that in my community, the Easter bunny was more believable than a black Republican. I had heard of the possibility of a potential black president but only within the realms of comedy, such as Eddie Murphy's *Delirious*, Dave Chappelle's "Black Bush" skit on his Comedy Central show, and Richard Pryor's "Black President" skit on his show back in 1977. It seemed like only through black comedy could I, and many others, consume the idea of a black president. Perhaps this was the only space where we could delight ourselves with the idea, through laughter, because if we seriously considered it, we would have worried that he would be assassinated as soon as he was sworn into office. But when you, Barack, and your daughters, Malia and Sasha, walked across the stage after it became official that he would become president, I went into my mother's bedroom where my stepfather, Z, was peacefully lying on his side of the bed. He smiled at me, but we did not say a word to each other because something in our cores was shifting and we needed time to ourselves in the midst of being close to each other. I will be honest and say that I do not remember President Obama's full speech, but what I can vividly recount is the single tear that fell down my left cheek. It was the first time I had cried from someone's oration, but it was more than that. I had an actual image of black ascendancy. It was not a two-dimensional portrait, a subject of a comedy skit, or an idea casually thrown around among ourselves, but a physical reality. But I did not dream of becoming president like Barack. You were the one who enraptured me. Barack's voice was merely the

background noise to the relationship that I, and millions of black women around the world, would have with you.

Your story reads almost like a myth. Your great-great-grandfather Jim Robinson, the first documented member of your family tree, was born on Friendfield Plantation in Georgetown, South Carolina, which is over 450 miles away from the White House. Slaves lived in tiny white-washed slacks that lined the dirt road en route to this rice plantation, and it was there that Jim, after emancipation, worked as a sharecropper, toiling in the rice fields along the Sampit River, and lived with his wife, Louiser, and their children. We don't know how Jim died, but local historians believe that his body is located in an unmarked grave that commands a view of old rice fields on the outer limits of White Creek.⁶ Robinson, his wife, and his children comprised the last illiterate branch; each descending branch of the family was more educated than its predecessor.

Born on the South Side of Chicago, you showed your intellect quite early on, skipping second grade before entering a gifted program in sixth grade. After graduating as salutatorian from your magnet high school, you went on to Princeton University, a place where your teachers told you that you would never be accepted. I know what that's like, too. My white female guidance counselor suggested that I go to community college when I was in the top 5 percent of my class and assumed that my parents weren't wealthy enough to afford a place like Princeton. When you read your acceptance letter, did you grip the edges of the paper out of fear that it would disappear? Did you cry?

When you were making your way to campus, were you

afraid? Back in 1981, Princeton was considered the most conservative of the Ivies; it still is. But I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that your experiences with racism were more overt. Your classmates asked to touch your hair like you were an object that could be crushed down to the small size they needed you to be in order to make themselves feel great. When the mother of your freshman roommate, Catherine Donnelly, discovered that you were black, she called her alumni friends to object, even going so far as to visit the student housing office to get Catherine's room changed. Her grandmother begged Catherine's mother to take her out of school entirely. Catherine Donnelly's grandmother wanted Catherine out of the school immediately and to be brought home. How did you feel then? Did you ever walk down Prospect Avenue—"The Street," as we call it—and marvel at the eating clubs, some of them eerily similar to plantation houses? If you dared to walk down The Street, were you afraid that some drunk white jock or the son of some finance tycoon or a scion of some political dynasty would yell "nigger" as you passed or throw things at you? Where did you find your place of refuge during your four years there, and how can many other black women, who are still fighting for recognition and respect, find theirs?

You do not know the impact that you had on the black female student body during my time at Princeton, even while we waited with bated breath for you to return to campus, to no avail. It felt cruel that you would not at least stop by and talk to us. But our complaints tapered off when we more deeply considered just how much unnecessary affliction you endured as an undergraduate. This story of

your suffering at Princeton is yours and yours alone, but if we could have known more of it, perhaps we would have felt less alone. Still, we forgot that you aren't just our First Lady, but the whole country's, and that perhaps you simply didn't have the time. We wanted a piece of you to ourselves because whether or not we could articulate it then, we know now that some of the ways in which we see are only possible because of our shared identity as black women. We wanted to hold on to that preciousness for dear life.

I entered Princeton in 2010, exactly twenty-five years after you graduated, and your ascendance sparked an almost cult-like following among black female students; you provided hope as we obsessed over black male desire. We outnumbered the black men three to one; it was a sort of bloodbath. Statistics told us that our professional success would imperil our chances of ever getting married, and we were quite aware how much the odds were against us at Princeton. There were very few black women who were successful in finding relationships. The perpetually single ones like me overanalyzed this incessantly rather than chalking it up to luck, God's favor, or anything in between.

Tell me, did you have these same anxieties while you were at Princeton? Did you date anyone and worry that your dreams alongside the simple fact of you being a black woman made you an unsuitable partner for anyone, black or not? Did you question your worth?

At least, during my time there, my classmates and I were fortunate to have you, an example of a black woman who excelled and fell in love with someone who did nothing to diminish her. Your story was referenced so many times

that your importance became biblical, deserving of a book or chapter of its own somewhere after the book of Ruth and before Proverbs 31. You were never "easy." At Harvard Law, you dated Stanley Stocker-Edwards, the son of Patti LaBelle, and you later said, "My family swore I would never find a man that would put up with me," as though you were a nuisance rather than a blessing standing beside a lover. What was it about your personality that anyone would have to put with? What does it say about your family that they thought that the life you sought to live would be met with a scoff from a man? In those moments, did those comments bounce off you like Teflon or stick like molasses?

In the introduction of your senior thesis, "Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community," you wrote, "My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my 'Blackness' than ever before. I have found that at Princeton no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my White professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don't belong. . . . These experiences have made it apparent to me that the path I have chosen to follow by attending Princeton will likely lead to my further integration and/or assimilation into a White cultural and social structure that will only allow me to remain on the periphery of society; never becoming a full participant." This might have been the case when you were at Princeton and later at Sidley & Austin, but what about as our nation's First Lady? What happens to white people's eyes when you eschew the periphery, when you become the most visible woman in the world? When they turn on the television,

they see you meeting with heads of state from all over the world. When they flip through magazines, there you are smiling and wearing the finest of fabrics created by designers who seek to put the best of their wares on your statuesque black figure. When they close their eyes and think about this country's direction, blackness is carved and curved into two figures: you and Barack. That is incapable. It is the kind of upheaval that black people have patiently waited for white people to experience, even if your eight years in front of us are not enough to overturn centuries of oppression. But I pray that they at least briefly knew what it meant to feel like the "other" whenever they saw your smile and the elegance of your stride and that it scared them. Damn, those eight years felt good.

Do not think that they have not tried to grapple with their inner turmoil, a kind that was collective across the world. Before writing you this letter, I researched images of racist photos of you, and I swore not to look at them the night before I began writing out of fear that I would not sleep. Once I woke up the following morning, I realized that I had made the right decision. There is an image of you dressed in a red gown with your back exposed, your face beautifully made up, your wrists bound and tied together with a thick rope presumably hanging from a tree. The Ku Klux Klan is in the backdrop. Another image is from a Spanish magazine called *Fuera de Serie*. It's your face superimposed on an African Guadeloupean slave painted by the French artist Marie-Guillemine Benoist in 1800 and one of her breasts is exposed. This is what they need: to create images of you as an object en route to a

cruel, racist death. But hey, at least you look beautiful. At least you have on a red gown or a beautiful headscarf while you're on your way to being cast out of this world.

You were the only First Lady to have two Ivy League degrees, you tied with Eleanor Roosevelt for tallest, and, of course, you were black. You were not the kind of blackness that could make white people feel at ease. You are not light-skinned with gray or green eyes, and your hair is not curly. Unlike Barack, you cannot claim a white parent and in turn white people cannot claim any stake in your success. You did not get pregnant out of wedlock. There are no images of you smoking weed or any other substance. You do not have a criminal record. It is a shame that you had to be this spotless, that you had to be, in every sense of the word, perfect.

Because no one could find any flaw in you, they made you feel worthless just by being in your body. Photographers shot and dispersed images of you with your mouth open while in the midst of a conversation to "show" that you were animalistic. Cartoonists exaggerated your five-foot-eleven frame by adding extra muscle in your arms and bones in and around your cheekbones to make you appear more masculine and Neanderthal. Snapshots of you with your lips pursed were circulated to make you seem like the typical sassy black woman with an attitude. Fuck the Ivy League degrees, the high-powered attorney position, the many accolades to your name. You were still black. And even worse, you were a black woman, and they would never allow you to forget that. What did you do to take care of yourself during all

this humiliation? Did you pour love into your family, and did they reciprocate? Did you read the works of Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, and Toni Cade Bambara to realize that you were never alone? Did you listen to Nina Simone as you applied a pomade to your skin and hair before going to bed? What did you do to remind yourself that you are brilliant and accomplished despite the efforts they made to belittle and squish you into a narrow prism so that they could live peacefully? What did you do?

On the night of the 2016 Republican National Convention, when Melania Trump plagiarized your speech word for word, were you flattered, disappointed, or fully expecting something like that to happen? A white woman snatching the words from a black woman's lips and defended by some on top of that. That's not newsworthy; that's history, how it's always been. I was reminded of a time in high school when I wrote a speech from which a white female classmate read because she was a part of student council and I was not. I stood next to her on the podium during graduation, silent as she read. When Melania recited your speech, where were you? After living in the public eye for over eight years, perhaps you have created a mental armor with a thickness that this offense could not penetrate.

Then again, I'm very certain that you have grown even stronger, for during Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, you spoke with the kind of confidence and vigor that drew tears from the eyes of millions of Americans. Ninety-four percent of black women who voted in the 2016 election voted for Hillary Clinton. Ninety-four percent—many of whom probably had family members who were affected

by the 1994 crime bill that triggered massive incarceration rates, particularly among African-Americans. This bill expanded the death penalty, obliterated federal funding for inmate education, and motivated states to lengthen prison sentences. While speaking in support of this bill, Clinton called African-American teenagers "superpredators," and while she apologized for this statement, she still said it. And yet black women rolled up their sleeves and voted for her while white women—53 percent to be exact—decided that a racist, xenophobic, misogynistic man with neither government nor military experience deserved to be president. Now, ain't that some shit? Hillary Clinton, the patron saint of white feminism, couldn't depend on them on Election Day, despite all the celebrity support and pantsuit flash mobs. Of course, the immediate response to the rise of Donald Trump is that everyone was to blame for his victory, but the numbers say differently. When white people attempt to generalize blame, it is a tactic that further enables white supremacy, for the rhetoric obscures those who should really be held accountable: white people themselves.

On Tuesday, November 8, 2016, white people chose white supremacy. They chose to ignore how Trump incited white nationalists and called for surveillance programs directed towards Muslims that were reminiscent of those from Nazi Germany. They chose to ignore the many women who accused Trump of sexual assault. They chose to ignore Trump gloating over doing so. Why? For one, most of his terrifying plans do not affect them. They can turn down their lips and bow their heads in pity, but they will never be targets. They wanted to make Amer-

ica great again by turning the hands on the clock backwards; they wanted everyone to know their place; they rendered the racial and social hierarchies of our country even more calcified. In essence, on Election Day, they chose themselves because historically they always have.

And as for the white women who voted for Trump, I suppose that they left their vaginas at home before they went to the booths. Again, these white women believed that their proximity to white men would allow them to partake in white male privilege. These white women chose their race without taking into account the implications of gender. In fact, there were some white women who showed up to Trump rallies with shirts that stated that they would love for Trump to grab them by the pussy. Somehow, under this man, under his fascism, they felt protected—even honored. This is a true feat of mental calisthenics. But then again, I've never had the privilege of believing that my racial identity can smooth over or compensate for the oppression associated with being a woman. That's the thing about whiteness: it's blinding.

Immediately after Trump became president-elect, there was a push for you to run in 2020, but I'm not sure that America deserves you. I cannot imagine the number of psychological and political battles you fought while in the White House as First Lady, but you mustn't forget how much we black women loved you. You were not afraid to dance on live television, shoot hoops with LeBron James, rap, and appear at black-women-centered events to remind us that you were still an active participant in our world no matter how injected you were in theirs.

Michelle, when you said that you live in a house that was built by slaves, something must have crystallized for millions of Americans—the proof is in how many white people tried to discredit your statement. You might have been destined to work in the White House but not to sleep, eat, and host there. The White House was never meant to be your home.

Everything does in fact come around full circle. The great-great-granddaughter of an illiterate South Carolinian slave whose body rests in an unmarked grave near rice fields was the First Lady of the United States of America. You are not Eleanor Roosevelt or Jackie Kennedy. You are Michelle Obama, the embodiment of a new dream that is characterized by both role reversal and intergenerational revenge. We do not need to be subjected to the lie that is the American Dream. You are the beacon that reminds black women that they can be anything they want to be in this country. You are the beacon that reminds white people that 99 percent of them will never reach where you are; their whiteness cannot carry them there; your achievements lie far beyond their grasp. You are the beacon that reminds us that the ascendance of a black woman like yourself is possible, and what a blessing it was to see you shine. You are not an animal or a man. You may be a terror. But their terror is our delight.

For you, Michelle.