

CHAPTER 1

reading in my bare-bones apartment—felt like luxury compared to the grind of organizing. While others were easily distracted by pickup basketball games or pub crawls, I had gotten the carousing out of my system, and could afford the discipline of spurning social engagements for an evening spent poring over case law. And after three years of confronting bosses and bureaucrats and irate citizens who cared little for nuance or complexity, the Socratic method held no fears for me; stand in a classroom and explain why a seminal case should have been decided differently? No problem. I found myself gravitating toward constitutional law, relishing the debates over judicial philosophy, federalism, civil liberties. It was a way to engage with the foundational issues of the Republic without getting my hands dirty or compromising my ideals. It suited the part of me that was a thinker rather than a doer. But I also had an ulterior motive. I noticed that wherever I went—restaurants, classrooms, parties—whenever somebody learned that I'd been an organizer in Chicago, I got a respectful nod. And whenever they learned that I had decided to go to law school, I got an approving nod. That's smart, they'd say, as if to suggest that whatever role I ultimately chose for myself, I would be equipped to handle it. That I would be a force to be reckoned with.

Not that going to law school made me any less restless. Beyond my formal studies, I spent a lot of time thinking about how the law interfaces with real life—how legal outcomes, even when technically correct, could nonetheless leave people feeling the system was rigged; how what seemed fair in abstract principles could be experienced as oppressive by those it affected. I joined a law firm one summer to help with a voting rights case, and although the work we did was valuable, the rhythms and rewards of corporate life felt stifling. My second summer, I worked at a small civil rights firm, but even there the male partners all wore braces and Ferragamo shoes, seeming to mirror the habits of their corporate counterparts.

Toward the end of law school, misgivings about choosing public life over organizing kept worming their way into my head. They buzzed loudest the spring of my first year, when I attended a series of symposiums on public interest law. Panel after panel, seasoned practitioners spoke about their efforts to improve the legal system, protect the environment, advance social justice. It should have been inspiring; instead it depressed me. Despite their determination, most were able to point to few lasting victories. It seemed like they were always playing defense, preserving the gains of the past rather than charting bold new courses. And when I looked around the auditorium, I realized that I was one of the few Black people there.

Which raised the question of whether I was further distancing myself from the community I cared most about.

It was about that time that I received a small inheritance from an aunt who had passed away in Kenya, someone I'd never met. Seizing the opportunity to clear my head, I took the money and traveled to Europe for the summer, landing on impulse in Spain, where I knew no one and could pretend to be just another tourist. For weeks, I wandered through Barcelona, then along the Costa Brava and into the Pyrenees, carrying a backpack and a dog-eared copy of Don Quixote, soaking in the beauty and the history and the late-night meals, letting everything wash over me like the end of a fever dream.

I took roadside buses to small villages, watching the old men gather in the town square each evening, as if in a ritual dating back to the Middle Ages. I stood in

courtyards outside of cathedrals, listening to the laughter of children playing as their parents spoke in animated tones, a reminder of a time before America, before the frontier or the telegraph or the automobile, when life was lived in one place, a community's rhythms dictated by the seasons and the sense of belonging conferred by ancient walls.

I wondered whether such depth of history brought comfort, or whether it wore on the citizens like a weight. I was too shy to ask; instead I watched, and read, and lost myself in the sweep of someone else's narrative, marveling at a world that had existed long before I was born and would go on long after I was gone.

But despite my efforts to blend into the scenery, sooner or later someone invariably recognized that I was foreign, and upon learning I was American, would express opinions: about NATO or the death penalty or, invariably, race. "It is true—

Colonel Gaddafi is popular among your Blacks?" "I have heard that the KKK is very powerful in America, yes?" Often there was genuine curiosity behind the questions, but I sensed a gulf between us, a skepticism of my responses or perhaps of America's place in the world. It was less judgmental than it was a tad patronizing, and I found myself getting irritated, then defensive. I couldn't bring myself to deny the truth of the critiques, but I also found myself wanting to explain the other side of the story, the possibility and dynamism and real freedom I had experienced back home.

I realized that despite my best efforts, no real distance existed between me and my country. I had finally come to understand what it meant to be patriot, to love a place not because it was perfect but because it was yours.

I came back from Europe more determined than ever to do something meaningful, to apply the lessons I'd learned as an organizer but on a broader stage. What form that would take—the law, politics, some combination thereof—I still didn't know. And to my surprise, a public performance of sorts would end up lending a hand.

Sometime during my second year at law school, on a lark, I had applied to be president of the Harvard Law Review. The position was considered prestigious, the top student job, although to be honest it struck me as a bit of an anachronism, a nod to the cachet of yesterday's elite. More than a century old and said to be the most cited law journal in the world, the Harvard Law Review had always been edited by a student president and an elected board of editors, all chosen through a process that emphasized grades and the production of a publishable "note"—a piece of legal scholarship.

The election of the president was an especially elaborate affair, the candidates subjected to a full day of interviews, culminating in a big meeting where each living editor (a few hundred in all) got to vote. It was, quite literally, white shoe: evidence of a time when most of the candidates—indeed most lawyers of any note—would have come from the same narrow class background. Caucus rooms would be filled with smoke as rival factions hashed out their support. Deals would be cut, and loyalties would be tested.

The process had evolved somewhat by the late 1980s—the smoke was gone, and the girls were allowed to run—but it remained a deeply politicized, secretive, bare-knuckled business. Nobody expected a Black guy named Barack Obama to end up in the mix.

But over the course of my first two years, I had earned good grades, and my intellectual curiosity, along with a certain diplomatic bent, had allowed me to build bridges between the various cliques that made up the social landscape at Harvard: the Alpha Dogs who'd gone to the best prep schools and expected to run the world; the Grind Crew, the students who felt out of their element, less affluent than their peers and who therefore refused to play the glad-handing game, choosing instead to bust

their hump; the Wonky Woke, the public interest types who envisioned themselves defending indigent clients or saving the northern spotted owl; and the Mean Reds, mostly women, some of color, determined to call out any vestige of patriarchy or racism or general stupidity—and to make the faculty and administration just a little bit miserable for the fact of their being mostly white, male, and presumed to be complacent.

The fact that I had friends in each camp continued to surprise me. And when I was nominated for president, what began as a lark turned serious. For two weeks, I went through the ringer—interviews that lasted hours, candidate forums that verged on attack ads, days when I didn't bother going to class or even eating much because I was so consumed by the process.

The long day of voting came and went. I got back to my apartment late, cooked some spaghetti, and waited as a couple of my closest supporters tested the joint I had bought for the occasion. They had been holed up in the caucus room and now lay exhausted on my bed while I paced the floor; we expected results to be called in to my landline any minute. The phone rang.

“Barack?” a voice said. “Congratulations, man. It's over...You're the new president of the Harvard Law Review.”

Over the course of the subsequent year, I'd learn more about politics—the art of managing egos, the almost-endless meetings, the delicate ballet of courting contributors—than from any classroom or textbook. I became a public figure, at least in the world of legal education, interviewed by national papers and news programs, recognized by strangers on the street. I received multiple job offers from prestigious law firms as well as letters from across the country, some of them looking for legal advice, others asking me to run for public office—the presidency included—as if I were already a full-fledged political commodity.

I had arrived. A star was born.

Except...when I look back at it all now, at the excitement and the attention and the fact that I had put my name forward in the first place, I see clearly that I was motivated by something more than just the chance to guide a student publication. I liked the idea of being on stage, of being seen. Deep down, I suppose I found the idea alluring—being a somebody. For a Black kid who never felt like he quite belonged, the opportunity felt intoxicating, a validation of all my outsider hopes, a counter to all my inherited fears.

Steve Jobs would reportedly ask job candidates whether they wanted to be a sidekick or if they wanted to make their own distinctive dent in the universe. If he'd asked me back when I was running for the law review presidency, I would have pretended I didn't care that much. But the truth? I wanted to make a dent.

Maybe that's true for anyone with ambition, anyone who senses the sweep of history and wonders if they might have a place in it. Maybe a certain megalomania is a prerequisite, just as it takes a certain delusion to sit down and start writing a book, or to stand under blinding lights and ask for people's votes, or to think that despite our smallness in the universe, God has a plan for us, individually.

Of course, most of the time we disguise these grand ambitions, if not from others then from ourselves. We clothe them in gauzy

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