

# The Beginning . . .

November 8, 2016, began like any other big night in Obama World: with chicken fingers and waffle fries. The tradition went back to the earliest days of Senator Obama’s campaign for president, passed down from Chicago to Washington, DC, from Houlihan’s to the White House Navy Mess. Throughout two terms, before Oval Office addresses to the nation, on debate nights, and before the president’s State of the Union addresses, we called down to place an order, or four.

The West Wing had been buzzing all day. Staffers popped in and out of their regular meetings, their jackets and sweaters adorned with “I Voted!” stickers. Like everybody else, my attention was elsewhere, on anything but the matters of my regularly scheduled meetings. The polls, the swing states, the footage of long lines and allegations of voter intimidation—the stuff of Election Day overtook the usual rhythms of the daily working West Wing.

## PROLOGUE

Everybody asked everybody else the same question: “What are you hearing?” Of course, nobody was hearing anything. There was nothing to know yet. I wanted to find David Simas, the White House political director, but figured it was too early to ask.

The night would be historic, but for now, our energy needed to be bottled. It was a waiting game.

My mom admits that there was a certain energizing kick in her interest in the 2016 election cycle, too. And it had nothing to do with her own reelection campaign to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Instead, it had everything to do with the pride she felt in the eight years of the Obama administration and all that Barack Obama stood for and accomplished. “Don’t bother me with what this president did not accomplish; that list is far shorter,” she would say.

It also had a lot to do with motherly pride and her very real melancholy: a sadness to see it end. She and my dad were pleased that I had taken their advice—freely and given often—to remain at the White House until the end. “Stay, and turn the lights out.”

But most of all, her energy had to do with the powerful book-ends of Hillary Clinton, a public servant, way ahead of my mom, at the top of her baby boomer generation, running for—and going to become—president! And it had been fun campaigning for Hillary with her own five-year-old granddaughter, Aubrey, my niece, who was predictably adorable, surprisingly quick-witted, and very, very outgoing. She was a natural-born politician.

Aubrey had been to five White House Easter Egg Rolls on the South Lawn. “I can’t wait to see the bunny and Barack-Obama,”

she would always say, all one word. When I would gently warn her that she might not see him one year—that it was a crowded event—she would reply matter-of-factly, “Of course I’ll see him. It’s his backyard!”

She would tell him to his face, “I love you, Barack-Obama!” And she did. But it wasn’t just President Obama whom she loved. Hillary Clinton held a special place in Aubrey’s heart as well. She once piped up with an important question for Hillary at an intimate town hall meeting, asking what Hillary would do about trash on the playground. Hillary responded with kindness, calling Aubrey by name. “Trash on the playground? Well, I worry about that, too!” That sealed it. Aubrey threw her considerable clout behind Hillary.

My mom was sure to meet up with Aubrey on Election Day, to bring her into the polling booth to vote—not just for her grandmother but also for her “friend” and the first “girl president,” Hillary Clinton.

My mom wasn’t on the ballot in DC, where I met up with my wife, Stephanie, outside the White House to find our local polling place, but I was filled with pride just the same—voting for Hillary and watching what it meant to Stephanie to wear her arrowed Hillary shirt around town and to work. No shirt for me, though. In the White House, we had been warned by the lawyers: no political paraphernalia. Not even an “I’m with Her” button was allowed on premises.

Stephanie and I cast our votes. I called my mom on the way back to work. Things looked good, she said. Like Hillary’s, her victory was all but assured.

## PROLOGUE

As I waited for my two phones, one for work and one personal, to clear the X-ray machine, I smiled at one of the regular Secret Service agents. “Thank God, it’s finally over!”

“Nothing’s over yet.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right,” I said. “Nothing more we can do but wait.”

Around seven thirty in the evening, staffers started to crowd into Press Secretary Josh Earnest’s office, festooned with Kansas City Royals gear and photos of his young son. The chicken fingers were good. The waffle fries were perfectly salted. There was nothing to worry about.

Picking up some alcohol from my desk, I bumped into a few friends, who mocked my clothing. I hate suits and had been pushing for Casual Fridays since the 2014 midterms. This Tuesday had a decidedly Friday vibe, so I’d changed into jeans and a sweater—“victory casual”—for the watch party. The only problem was that the buttons near the neck were out of whack, and I had to make a choice: Do I risk choking myself, or do I show, according to some friends and all of my bosses, “too much chest”? I chose the latter. “What’s it matter?” I said to a colleague. “It’s all over anyway. We’re done here. Time to pass the baton to PIW.”

For more than two years, I’d referred to Hillary as “president-in-waiting.” I’m a worrier by nature, but it was always clear to me that she would succeed President Obama. The week before, the White House had begun making plans for the visit of the president-elect. I’d scribbled in my calendar: “Thursday, POTUS will meet with HRC.”

The returns started rolling in shortly after the first of the chicken

fingers had vanished. Donald Trump was up in the electoral college 19 to 3. I turned to the group and joked, “Oh no, we’re losing!” Of course, we were fine. But it was a little disturbing to see the actual check mark of victory next to his smirking, copper-colored face.

The beer and bourbon flowed. Some of the early returns from the bigger states started appearing on the screen. Too close to call. Trump up. No problem: the Democratic-leaning counties hadn’t reported yet. Ohio. Florida. North Carolina. We did what any sports fan does when he needs to regain the mojo. We switched positions. Around nine o’clock, a group of us went into the Rose Garden and did breathing exercises.

Back in Josh’s office, texts, calls, and conversations blurred into a jumble. Pennsylvania. Michigan. Wisconsin. Still, nothing had been called. A few staffers—including some of the First Lady’s aides—and I walked through the basement of the White House and into the East Wing. The Map Room, where a year before I had debated Jerry Seinfeld about the funniest way to end his interview with the president (he won), was dark. The Diplomatic Reception Room, so often filled with dignitaries, Olympians, and entertainers: empty.

We passed the Family Theater by way of the East Colonnade, hurried down an East Wing hallway, and entered the First Lady’s office. It smelled beautiful, floral. I must have shown signs of distress, because Lauren, the First Lady’s deputy press secretary, told me to sit in the First Lady’s chair. After all, Mrs. Obama had been the standout surrogate of the cycle. Lauren and I, after working together for years, had realized only recently that we’d lived to-

gether on the same ship—circling the globe as part of a study-abroad program called Semester at Sea during the first four months of Obama’s presidency. That seemed so long ago now.

Surely, the First Lady’s chair was where things would turn around. I tried to take my mind off the moment. My mom’s results had come in, and I remember telling the group she’d won her reelection big. We celebrated. We needed something to cheer. I called my mom on the walk back from the First Lady’s office toward the West Wing. She spoke in a hushed tone, like she didn’t want anybody at our house in Pennsylvania to hear. “I just want everyone to leave,” she said of the partygoers filling her election-night bash at our home, each guest in varying stages of shock.

At 10:21 p.m., somebody got a notification that Ohio had been called for Trump. The remaining viewers in Josh’s office were pacing nervously. One of the longtime White House press aides, Peter Velz, left to comfort a despondent speechwriter. Behind closed doors, away from the news, they began reading aloud a history of the White House.

At 11:07 p.m., North Carolina was called. I left to finally find David Simas, who was analyzing the results as a number of other staffers huddled around his conference table staring at a torrent of tweets. Hoping for reassurances, I found only disbelief and grim predictions. I tried to imagine what the president might say if the night wore on like this, but I couldn’t hear his voice.

At 11:23 p.m., the Republican governor of New Jersey, Chris Christie, then responsible for leading the potential Trump transition, phoned the woman seated next to me. There was a deep si-

lence following the call. At 11:30 p.m., Simas said Hillary had a 33 percent chance of winning but that “everything has to go right on a night where nothing has gone right.”

A small blue fish swam in circles on a nearby desk.

Slightly dazed, I wandered away, not knowing where to go next.

The Rose Garden is dark at midnight, and quiet. As November 8 turned to November 9, it was also empty. I was alone, drinking bourbon from a cracked plastic cup. I walked off the Colonnade, crumbled absurdly to the ground, and realized that I was in the very spot where I had taken a knee four years before to propose to my wife, Stephanie, my grade school sweetheart.

*This is ironic*, I thought, seated on the grass, head tilted toward the glowing west wall of the White House. Or, maybe, by definition, it wasn't actually ironic. Much like Alanis Morissette, I was never totally clear on what was and was not ironic. The bourbon wasn't clearing it up. I didn't care. I got a text from my hometown neighbor Sean, but my phone died before I could respond with false confidence. I pulled out my work phone—one of America's last BlackBerrys—but it had an error message unlike anything I'd seen before.

On the way out of the West Wing lobby, I bumped into a staffer who had been in Simas's office.

“What's Simas saying?” I asked.

“She's not going to get there.”