



FICTION

The Guest

TOHON

The total number of guests adds up to forty-odd. It is too many, yet Nishat and I are not prepared to drop any. I have just finished my PhD and we are leaving America to take up my new job in Saudi Arabia. It is time for celebration, it is time to say goodbye.

We now have to solve a couple of problems. First, we cannot accommodate so many guests in our university apartment. So, we decide to split it in to two events—about twenty invitees on each occasion. Second, Nishat needs a few large pots and pans for her cooking. She suggests that we borrow them from our Indian friends Topon and Deepa Mollik, who live a couple of miles down the road.

We fix the dates a week apart and make two guest lists with their phone numbers. We even decide who will call whom and what not. I cover the outdoor and some indoor preparation, like helping in the kitchen and with the cleaning. Nishat covers the bulk of the indoor work—the cooking and serving.

It is almost noon when I get off the university shuttle bus. On the hot summer's day I begin to perspire, even after this shortest of a walk. Deepa opens the door and invites me in.

"Are you all moving?" I ask, seeing the entrance hall is full of boxes and pots

and pans.

She laughs. "No. The exterminator came this morning, so we have this mess."

I do not know about the rest of Texas, but cockroaches are a nuisance in Austin, particularly during the summer when it is hot and humid. And they are never just a few; there are probably dozens, invisible during the day. It is at night they come out, looking for food all over the place—in the kitchen stove, sinks, shelves, tables, garbage bins, floors and even the bathroom. We keep the kitchen and bathroom spotless, shiny clean, yet it does not help.

Despite their unpleasant looks, the cockroaches are interesting creatures with quite a few unique traits. They multiply exponentially, for the females will have up to forty babies at one time; they can live with little water and can go without food for a month; they may become thin but do not die of starvation for, like termites, their close cousins, they have a unique digestive system that allows them to eat almost anything, including paper, clothes and book binders; they can walk, jump and fly; their lightning reactions, armour-plated bodies and ability to hide themselves in all sorts of places make extermination virtually impossible. They prefer to live in warm, moist places and

are more abundant in tropical areas. However, they can live in almost any environment. They have even been sighted at the Poles!

Cockroaches are one of the oldest surviving creatures (some 350 million years) and the only creature that can withstand radiation—they would not become extinct even in a nuclear catastrophe. To put things

in perspective, they predate the very first known dinosaurs million

by 150

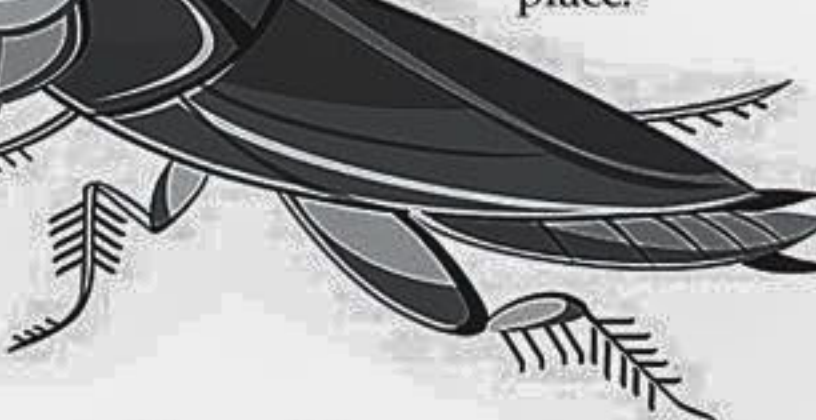
years and were around not only to watch their demise but also remain in our world to day in a nearly unchanged form. In fact, they've needed to evolve so little in all this time that fossils of the species are nearly identical to living specimens found today. None of the cockroach species is known to be listed as endangered. They are the most perfect of all creations and yet, ironically, sodespised.

Deepa asks me to take a seat and offers me a drink. I explain to her that I have got to run to catch the returning bus. She hands me two large paper

bags containing the requested pots and pans.

I feel relieved to find that the bus has not yet arrived. There are a few students waiting at the bus stop. There is not much room left to take shelter from the hot sun. There isn't much shade underneath the only barren tree, either. I put the bags down and stand near the tree trunk, hoping that the bus will arrive soon.

Something catches my eyes. I find a thin, malnourished cockroach, that has probably not had food for weeks, shuffling out of one of the bags. He obviously saved himself by hiding while the exterminators were rampaging all over the place.



With a sudden jolt, I throw him off the bag.

He instantly jumps back on it, sensing burning sands and pebbles under his feet. This time I give a sharper jolt to throw him further away.

He is lost in a desert, with burn-

ing sands underneath and a glaring sun straight above his head, without any shade or water in sight, unless he sees a mirage miles away. He is weak, vulnerable and hapless. He may be the most perfect of all creations, but is still no match for this hostile environment. If his physiology is similar to that of humans, he will soon suffer from hallucinations and then run mad. At some point, he might collapse unconscious and eventually his respiratory system would fail.

Now here I am playing a game. Firstly, I throw this innocent creature into hell-fire and then watch his fate unfold right before my eyes. Why? What right do I have to play with his fate? Does he not suffer? Does he not feel pain?

I push the bag in front of the cockroach. He jumps on it and instantly disappears into the safe haven through its wide-open top.

The bus comes in time and I pick up the bags. I do not think it will matter. What difference does it make if there is one more guest in the house among the dozens who have already made our kitchen their permanent den?

Tohon is an emerging short-story writer. He has published in the Star Weekend Magazine and Star Literature & Reviews pages.

REVIEWS

On Becoming

Michelle Obama. ISBN: 978-1524763138. Crown Publishing Group, 2018

REVIEWED BY RAANA HAIDER

Do not judge a book by its cover; notwithstanding the glamorous becoming photo profile that graces this book. Do judge a book by its title. A more appropriate book title is hard to conceive of. *Becoming* in a single word summarises the passage of the extra-ordinary life of a fifty-four year old American woman who goes by the name of Michelle Obama. Her story is that "I'm an ordinary person who found herself on an extraordinary journey." Many a reader of this endearing

ence resonates with the reader. Its highs and lows remain relatable. Therein lies the strength of her narrative. The gist of *Becoming* is about the process; the tests, trials and tribulations that are part and parcel of existence - of living. In a balanced life, there is no finality but constant change and growth. All of which the author expresses and brings forth with allure, charm, dignity, empathy, enthusiasm and remarkable frankness.

Becoming is simply and aptly structured into three chapters. Chapter One: *Becoming Me*. Chapter Two: *Becoming Us* and the final chapter: *Becoming More*. That is it. "Less is More." In a single word, the author conveys a partial lifetime of being. Methodical in structure, a reflection of the individual herself; the contents remain infinitely absorbing and detailed. "Becoming Me" traces her childhood growing up in the Southside neighbourhood of Chicago. Her tight-knit family composed of her attentive and supportive parents and loving elder brother Craig. Michelle's childhood recollection of racism as a ten year old black girl is succinctly expressed when, a cousin asks: "How come you talk like a white girl?" Michelle credits her parents for "Any time we had a question about a word, or a concept, or some piece of history, they directed us towards those books (a full Encyclopedia Britannica set, which lived on a shelf in the stairwell to our apartment, its titles etched in gold [...]) The idea was we were to transcend, to get ourselves further. They'd planned for it. They encouraged it. We were expected not just to be smart but to own our smartness - to inhabit it with pride - and this filtered down to how we spoke." This outspoken stand obliterates the notion of negativity and promises positivity and hope.

A seminal moment in her young life. How can one forget the following lines spoken by a high school college counsellor who dismissed Michelle's aspirations? "I'm not sure," she said, giving me a perfunctory, patronizing smile, "that you're Princeton material." Michelle with immense insight and truth writes: "[...] failure is a feeling long before it's an actual result. [...] a suggestion of failure long before I'd even tried to succeed." The high school student went on to reach the steps of Princeton and beyond. This is why *Becoming* is a definitive inspirational autobiography. In her words, "You Matter."

Her debut memoir is a runaway success, an instant classic. According to the CEO of the company that owns

Penguin Random House, "We believe this could become the most successful memoir ever." A glib marketing spiel it maybe, successfully spurring further purchases; yet sale figures and feedback by readers could very well justify the boast. The best-selling autobiography of the former FLOTUS has broken sale records globally. Her book presentations have sold out everywhere. The book launchings becoming one of the most successful national and international book tours ever. Released in November 2018, *Becoming* sold 725,000 copies on the first day, a major sales milestone. The literary voyage has gone on to become the best-selling book of the year. Since then some 10 million copies sold worldwide and sales continue to sky-rocket.

Punctuated by innocuous humorous incidents, the reader connects with the author, the professional, the woman, the wife, the mother. As a first year lawyer at Sidley & Austin, a "high-end law firm" in Chicago, she takes on the role of a

with a proper purse, good posture, and sensible shoes who was maybe sitting somewhere nearby...But I was Ma'am. Ma'am was me. It was part of this larger shift, this crazy transition we were in." What was it like to live in the White House? "I sometimes say that it's a bit like what I imagine living in a fancy hotel might be like, only the fancy hotel has no other guests in it - just you and your family." And Michelle Obama has once again taken us through a process, a becoming - with humour and humility.

This woman of substance defines her role of being "Ma'am" incisively. "A First Lady's power is a curious thing - as soft and undefined as the role itself. And yet I was learning to harness it. [...] If reporters and television cameras wanted to follow me, then I was going to take them places." And that she did; to homes and hospitals for war veterans, promoting education for girls, engaging their aspirations, homestead gardening, healthy living; via contacts with mega

trusive social media world remains relentless. The author truthfully is able to remark: "And we'd managed two terms in office without a major scandal. We had held ourselves and the people who worked with us to the highest standards of ethics and decency, and we'd made it all the way through." The Epilogue meaningfully brings the final days at the White House and the coming days together. In short, "Barack and I were determined to make the transition with grace and dignity, to finish our eight years with both our ideals and our composure intact. We were down to the final hour." And that they did then and continue to do today.

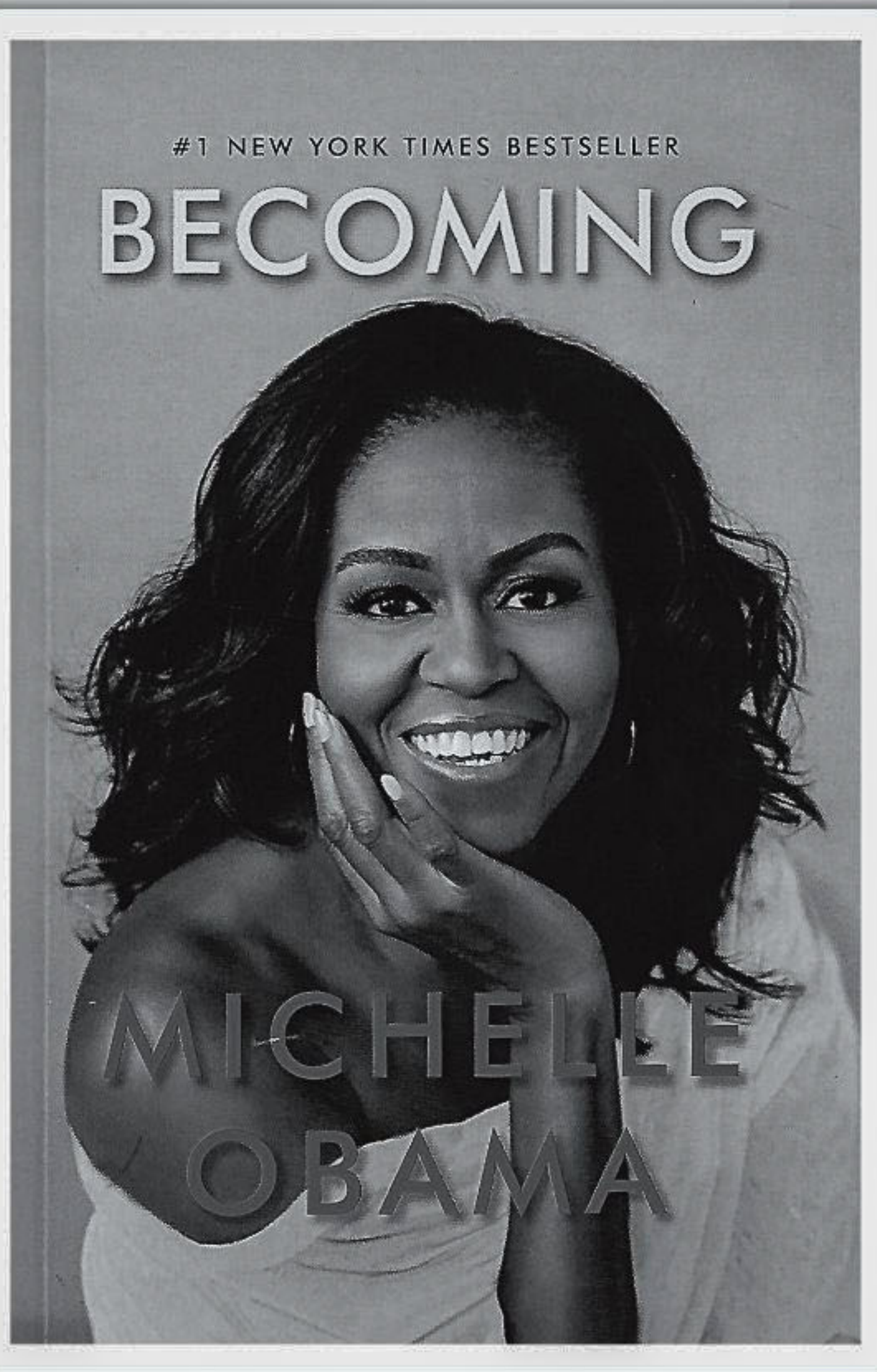
Tumultuous times follow. Barely out of the White House doors in January 2017, a rigorous policy of reversal by the next POTUS goes into effect. Embracing unity and diversity flies out the window. Openness turns inwards. Critical issues of climate change, gun-control, health care, immigration top the Twitter screen one morning and disappear into the distant horizon by the close of the day. Most diplomatically, in her own understated manner, Michelle Obama writes: "I sometimes wonder where the bottom might be." So do we.

Timothy Egan, a New York Times Contributing Opinion Writer in his defining piece "The Comeback of the Century: Why the Book Endures in an Era of Disposable Digital Culture" brings together in an insightful homage - the very format of the written word between two covers and the beauty and strength of the English language in his address to the topical author. Egan masterfully captures a mood, a time, a place. He writes: "So even with a president who is ahistoric, borderline literate and would fail a sixth-grade reading comprehensive test, something wonderful and unexpected is happening in the language of arts. When the dominant culture goes low, the saviours of our senses go high... Which brings us to Michelle Obama..." Incorporating contextually two key words launched by the FLOTUS, Egan plaudits his review.

As for Michelle Obama; we look forward to her becoming more and more. Here is a book to chew on. Shelf it; like her parents did with other books. Her tribute to her husband? "Barack who always promised me an interesting journey." The man kept his word.

Raana Haider now looks forward to Barack Obama's autobiography scheduled for publication in 2020.

and enduring expression of a woman's life's journey would assess Michelle's being and becoming, as that of an extra-ordinary woman who reaches an extra-ordinary destination - First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS). This is not an account of a life that begins and ends with a residency of eight years at the White House, one of the most known addresses in the world. Buckingham Palace being the other. Her life experi-



#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

BECOMING

MICHELLE OBAMA