

WHAT

OBAMA

... FOR OUR CULTURE, OUR POLITICS, OUR FUTURE

MEANS

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*Not Guilty: Twelve Black Men Speak Out on Law,
Justice, and Life*

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There are no accidents in my philosophy. Every effect must have its cause. The past is the cause of the present, and the present will be the cause of the future. All these are links in the endless chain stretching from the finite to the infinite.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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PROLOGUE

Convergence

WHEN I VISITED my mother last May, much of her living room had been converted into what I half jokingly called a Barack Obama shrine. Since Obama had declared his candidacy for president, my mother had diligently collected everything about the man that she could get her hands on. Magazines, newspaper articles, and T-shirts formed the bulk of her collection, all of it in pristine condition and not to be handled except with utmost care. Almost overnight, all things Obama had become a staple of my mother's conversation. His message of unity and transcendence, his unwillingness to be cowed by "a chorus of cynics," all of this inspired

in my mother a late-life surge of confidence. It had even led to her changing the way she answered her phone. Instead of her usual “Hello,” she took to lifting the receiver and announcing, “This is our moment.”

By the night of Obama’s remarkable triumph, she had digested far more than his trademark phrases. Still, she was more than thrilled when, during his victory speech at Chicago’s Grant Park, he once again proclaimed, “This is our moment.” Obama’s victory seemed “just too good to be true, overwhelmingly good,” she told me. “There are no words to describe how I feel. ‘Elated’ is not good enough.”

Hers is a voice tempered and made scratchy by seventy-seven years of living, almost as many years of smoking, and decades of making herself heard in a house crowded with loud, boisterous youngsters. My mother is special to me, of course, but in many respects she’s a typical black woman of her generation. A child of the Depression, she married young, stayed married, and stayed home to raise six children. She remembers Jim Crow quite well and, like many of her peers, has more than a few chilling firsthand tales of travel in Mississippi (where her father was born), Missouri, and other places known for white residents’ historically open and often violent hostility toward African Americans. She is faithful, fearless, and frank, adept at blessing you with gentle encouragement while demonstrating her unerring skill at telling it exactly like it is. While her experience, her lifetime of dearly purchased knowledge, deeply informs my

own life, there are parts of it to which I have no access. Her memories contain mysteries that I can only guess at. To hear her answer her phone with such an uncautiously optimistic phrase was a startling, wonderful surprise.

Her optimism, while inspired by Obama's meteoric rise, seems to me quite different from the youthful exuberance that often surrounded him. My mother remembers Emmett Till, Medgar, Malcolm, Martin—she's witnessed and endured enough to know that getting all giddy is foolish for colored people, let alone dangerous. But because she is a dedicated and informed voter, her hopefulness cannot be attributed to ignorance or naïveté. Nor does she choose to forget any of those traumas and tragedies. She can remember them while hoping at the same time.

To my knowledge, my mother has never mounted a soapbox and given a speech, never rocked the microphone at a street rally. She's one of those proud black Americans who could be relied on to fill seats when leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. came to town seeking support, applauding attentively and standing ready with the checkbook when a call for offerings was raised. I was with my mother when I saw Angela Davis speak at a rally during the distant seventies. I was sitting next to my mother when an aging Roy Wilkins presided over his last NAACP convention near the end of that decade. She supported them all, primarily because they were "race people," or dedicated champions of black advancement. And she clearly considers Barack