

PREFACE

WE WERE SEATED at a round table in a banquet hall in Charlottesville, at the University of Virginia's Colonnade Club. It was a beautiful room—high arched windows, buttercream walls, crisp white linens—and a lovely evening, sometime in summer 2010. Fireflies flickered in the warm air outside.

The dinner that night was hosted by a conservative educational organization devoted to American history and the founding. It was the opening *soirée* for a summer program in which a couple dozen young scholars would hear lectures from prominent intellectuals, meet with book editors, and otherwise schmooze. These events are lavish. They offer a level of luxury that many graduate students have never experienced in their young lives: open bars, nice wines, beautiful grounds and rooms.

At the time, I was in my fifth year of graduate school in political theory and public law at the University of Texas at Austin and about to enter a cutthroat academic job market. I was excited and nervous. My doctoral supervisor was one of the guest speakers that year, and the banquet room was full of others who might have a hand in shaping my career.

At dinner, I was seated to the right of one of the high-level staff members of the organization running the program. Let's call him Todd. I had heard about Todd from friends who had attended the program in the past and imagined him to be an engaging and friendly sort of person. To my left was an old friend of mine, someone who had also gone to graduate school in political theory. I'll call him Ronnie.

We were barely into the first course, during the first event of that first day, when Todd mentioned that he had recently been at an event with

First Lady Michelle Obama. He described his impressions succinctly: “She was truly statuesque. Very tall, very impressive. I’d really like to fuck her.”

An awkward grimace and head shake from Ronnie. I didn’t know what to say, so I set down my napkin and excused myself to the restroom.

I’m not an especially buttoned-up person. At the time I was writing a dissertation about Rousseau and Nietzsche. Rousseau abandoned all his (four or five) newborn children to an orphanage in Paris, and Nietzsche has often been called the intellectual godfather of fascism. I am pretty inured to offensive behavior and ideas, and I try to carry this into everyday life. And that summer wasn’t my first time at the conservative rodeo—I had been in these circles for nearly a decade. But Todd’s remark got under my skin. Maybe he was showing off for Ronnie, but it felt like a provocation aimed my way—a little jab meant to test my prudishness, or inversely my philosophic coolness. It was also clear that it had to do with more than sex, and with more than me. It had to do with women, and it had to do with Michelle Obama, a Black woman, and the first Black president’s wife.

In the ladies’ room at the Colonnade Club, I remember looking in the mirror—the moment felt surreal and cinematic even at the time—and shaking my head and thinking: “What a total asshole.” And then I asked myself: “What on earth am I doing here?” It was the beginning of the long, slow process of extricating myself from the world of conservative intellectualism.

My timing was good.