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The Sum of All Parts

by Kelley A. Fournier

I met my childhood best friend Kate for lunch over winter break our senior year in college. A conversation about fashion thus commenced. I have learned that fashion is the least awkward subject for two friends who only text sporadically to be sure that the other has not died.

“I love Michelle Obama. She is adorable,” said Kate.

I brought the straw of my Diet Pepsi up to my lips to stop my knee-jerk Republican reaction from coming out. I remembered Michelle Obama attending one of the many Inaugural Balls in a strapless, form-fitting black gown covered from top to bottom in sequin, her hair tied back into a soft French-twist, her long neck adorned with multiple strands of chunky pearls. I remembered my Republican-turned-Democrat friend Ken telling me a few weeks earlier that Barack met Michelle when he worked for her at Sidley, Austin, Brown and Wood LLP, a Chicago law firm.

“Michelle Obama is a very smart woman and all anyone seems to care about it what she wears, which a stylist picks out for her.” Although she is not my favorite, I have developed general annoyance when people short change her of being the intelligent woman she is.

“I don’t know. I just love what she wears.” Kate has always been one to back down from an argument.

When I was about nine I was at an outlet book store with my parents when I spotted an anthology for children entitled *The Most Important Women of the 20th Century*. The front cover was yellow and red and blue and showed Amelia Earhart and Rosa Parks. My mother bought it for me, more or less to stop me from complaining later that she hadn’t bought it for me.

I got a highlighter out of my mother’s roll top desk and flipped through each page looking for someone interesting. Madeline Albright. Clare Luce Booth. However, the page I highlighted most and spent hours staring at the glamorous pictures of, was Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis.

From that one page I began a self-assigned research project on Jackie, checking the three of so books out of the Charter Oak Elementary School library with her in them. Every article I read reminded me that Jackie was a beautiful and stylish woman. She had millions of dollars worth of clothes. Her jewelry. The pill box hats. Her flipped out black hair. The oversized black sunglasses.

When you’re a girl of about nine you look for a woman to idolize, someone to put your name on, to claim as what you want to see yourself as when you are old enough to wear make-up. Much like looking for a good pair of shoes – and eventually your spouse – you try them on and evaluate which one complements

and enhances you best. Mothers are only good to buy training bras with, grandmothers smell musty. You are left with a plethora of women in the past and present – movie stars and singers if you are one of those girls with a bright pink feather boa who desires to be famous, an Olympic athlete if you play Little League soccer, a heroine in a book if you're a bookworm, your babysitter, your teacher, your aunt from Boston, or if you're a tomboy like my younger sister, Batman. For me it was the women of American history.

In February 2009 I got on the 12:31am Amtrak from New Haven, Connecticut to Washington, D.C. Ken, who was living in Arlington, VA, at the time, gave me a tour of the capital city, pointing out the spelling error in the etching at the Lincoln Memorial, the dimensions of the Washington Monument, the Metro Route he took to work, which road he saw Barack's motorcade drive down one night.

When he was at work, I went to the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian. Tucked in the left corner of the first floor is the First Ladies Exhibit. The royal blue walls and skimpy accent lighting create an overall sense that the room is too dark to house something like Louisa Adams' harp. The walls meet the ceiling about a foot above a border of photographs of all the First Ladies where Michelle's is inching closer and closer to Martha Washington's.

Helen Taft's Inaugural gown over a cloth mannequin encased in glass is just within the doorway. A video plays on a television set into the far wall, and it creates a base soundtrack for the room which is muffled by the sounds of tourists. Laura Bush's bright red sequined Inaugural gown is in a second encasement. Along another wall is a large encasement housing a piece from every First Lady.

I stood for a long time before the bust where Jackie's three-strand pearls lay. They were her most beloved piece of jewelry, that I read in a photo caption in a style book about Jackie I took out of the library. More beloved than the pink Kunzite ring Jack Kennedy had purchased for her for Christmas 1963 and hid in his Oval Office desk days before he was assassinated. They are an unrelenting symbol of her class.

I took a picture of the necklace on my BlackBerry and allowed myself to be carried away by the crowd of others.

When I got home I assigned myself another research project on Jackie. I went to the West Hartford Public Library and checked out biographies and picture books on Jackie. Yes, she was beautiful and stylish. But she loved art and literature, history. She believed that religion and family should be honored. She was well-read, well-traveled. Independent. She spoke multiple languages. She was a writer, an editor at Viking Press and later Doubleday. She was diplomatic. Funny, clever, bold, generous. Adventurous. Had an affinity for the beach. She was a Republican.

When you're a little girl, you look for a woman to idolize, someone to put your name on, to claim as what you want to see yourself as when you are old enough to wear make-up. I put her away for the better part of a decade and more. She hadn't gone away – entirely. She hasn't been able to, whether or not I am conscious of it, shape what I have loved, what I have come to accept as myself.

She has set that standard.

My grandmother gave me a replica of Jackie's pearls for my 22nd birthday last month. She told me it was supposed to be my graduation gift, but it could not wait. My grandmother had loved the Kennedy's, being a Democrat and all. Throughout my life she would read the style section of the newspaper, study the circulars sent to her from various stores and tell me about the latest fashion trends *Purple is the color this fall, or long skirts are making a comeback* – I didn't have the heart to tell her that long skirts will never make a comeback. When I went over her house one night with a book on Jackie she began to tell me all about the beautiful clothes Jackie had and how they were a bribe from her father-in-law, Joe Kennedy. Still, she knew what those pearls meant to me and didn't want to wait the two months between when they arrived at her house in a cardboard box and when I would graduate to bestow them upon me.

This summer my friends and I are planning on going back to D.C. just for a weekend. I want to take them to the Smithsonian to see the First Ladies Exhibit, it is not a surprise to me that none of them have been there. I especially want to go to see Michelle's inaugural dress that was just added to the collection in March.

I hope that my children will find an affinity for American history. I have already bought home a children's book, an anthology of Caroline Kennedy's favorite poetry for my unborn daughter, who my friends have come to call Mary-Grace.

While I would have to hide an initial bout of disappointment if she came to love, to idolize Michelle Obama, even simply as a child who like me saw nothing more than photographs of glamorous dresses and power, I would still tell her that I understand. I understand because there is something more to her. She loves basketball. She is a scholar, a dynamic lawyer, an associate dean at the University of Chicago. She has dedicated a great deal of her life to community service and activism. She is connected to her roots. She enjoys being a mother, a wife, a daughter.

I hope that above all the sum of her parts is more inspiring than her pieces, that her inspiration for a child meets that of an adult, like Jackie Kennedy has for me.

After an hour and a half I got up and pulled on the sleeves of my black and white tweed winter jacket, pulled the purple scarf I adorned it with over my neck. I unhooked from the back of my chair my Chanel bag, which I jokingly call my Sha-Na-Na bag due to its origins in a backroom of a shop of Canal Street in Chinatown NYC. I hugged Kate. I wished her a Happy New Year. I told her to say hi to her family for me. I told her not to wait so long between the next call.

Then I placed my oversized black sunglasses over my blue eyes to shield the sunlight reflecting off the white snow.

Kelley Fournier is a recent graduate of Central Connecticut State University where she studied political science and English in the honors program. She is employed on a United States Senate campaign in Connecticut as a member of the field staff. In her free time she continues her other passions, writing and reading. This is her first published work.

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