The TRUTHS WE HOLD

AN AMERICAN JOURNEY

KAMALA HARRIS

Adapted for young readers
by Ruby Shamir

VINTAGE

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FOR THE PEOPLE

I still remember the awe I felt the first time I walked into the Alameda County Superior Courthouse, in Oakland, California, as an employee.

It was 1988, and I was an intern during my last summer of law school. I had a sense that I wanted to work in the district attorney's office after I got my degree, but having never seen the job up close, I hadn't made up my mind.

The sun shone brightly on the courthouse. The building stood apart on Lake Merritt, taller and more regal than other buildings nearby. Though from certain angles, it looked like a wedding cake. In its own way it was grand, and I felt my heart race as I climbed up the stairs to the main entrance.

I was the first to arrive at the orientation session. Within a few minutes, the rest of my fellow clerks showed up. There was only one woman among them, Amy Resner. As soon as the session was over, I asked her for her phone number. In that

male-dominated environment, it was refreshing to have at least one female colleague. She remains one of my closest friends today, and I'm godmother to her children.

As summer interns, we had very little power or influence. Our job was to watch and learn, and help out where we could. It was a chance to get a taste of how the criminal justice system worked from the inside, what it looked like when justice was served—and when it wasn't. We were placed with attorneys, seasoned prosecutors, who were bringing all kinds of cases to trial, and we had the chance to be in the room—and part of the process—of putting together a case.

I'll never forget the time my supervisor was working on a case involving a drug bust. The police had arrested a number of people who had illegal drugs, but also an innocent woman; she had been at the wrong place at the wrong time and had been swept up, too. I hadn't seen her. I didn't know who she was or what she looked like. I didn't have any connection to her, except for the report I was reviewing. But there was something about her that caught my attention.

It was late on a Friday afternoon, and most people had gone home for the weekend. In all likelihood, a judge wouldn't see her until Monday. That meant she'd have to spend the weekend in jail.

Then I started thinking: *Does she work weekends? Is she going to have to explain to her boss where she was? Is she going to get fired?*

Even more important, I knew she had young children at home, so my thoughts turned to: *Do they know she's in jail? They must think she did something wrong. Who's taking care of them right now? Is there even someone who can? What if the Child Protective Services agency gets called because no one is watching her kids. My God, her children could get taken away from her!*

Everything was on the line for this woman: her family, her job, her standing in her community, her dignity, her freedom. And yet she'd done nothing wrong.

I rushed to the clerk of the court and begged to have the judge return for just five minutes, so we could get her released. All I could think about was her family and her frightened children. Finally, as the minutes in the day wound down, the judge returned. I watched and listened as he reviewed her case, waiting for him to give the order. Then, with the pound of a gavel, just like that, she was free. She'd get to go home to her children in time for dinner. I never did get the chance to meet her, but I'll never forget her.

It was a defining moment in my life. It became crystal clear to me how, even on the edges of the criminal justice system,

the stakes were so high and intensely human. Even with the limited power of an intern, people who cared could do justice. It proved to me how much it mattered to have compassionate people working in the district attorney's office. Years before I would be elected to run a major prosecutor's office, this was one of the victories that mattered the most. I knew she was going home.

And I knew the kind of work I wanted to do, and who I wanted to serve.

The courthouse wasn't far from where I grew up. I was born in Oakland, California, in 1964 and spent the early years of my childhood living on the boundary between Oakland and Berkeley.

My father, Donald Harris, was born in Jamaica in 1938. He was a brilliant student who immigrated to the United States after being admitted to the University of California at Berkeley. He went there to study economics and would go on to teach economics at Stanford University, where he still works.

My mother, Shyamala Gopalan, began her life thousands of miles to the east, in southern India. She was the oldest of four children—three girls and a boy. Like my father, she was a gifted student, and when she showed a passion for science, her parents encouraged and supported her.

She graduated from the University of Delhi at nineteen. And she didn't stop there. She applied to a graduate program at Berkeley, a university she'd never seen, in a country she'd never visited. It's hard for me to imagine how difficult it must have been for her parents to let her go. Commercial jet travel was only just starting to spread globally. It wouldn't be a simple matter to stay in touch—there were no personal computers, no cell phones, no email. Yet, when my mother asked permission to move to California, my grandparents didn't stand in the way. She was a teenager when she left home for Berkeley in 1958 to pursue a doctorate degree and was on her way to becoming a breast cancer researcher.

My mother was expected to return to India after she completed her degree. Her parents had an arranged marriage—they hadn't chosen to marry each other; their parents had made the decision for them. It was assumed my mother would follow a similar path. But fate had other plans. She and my father met and fell in love at Berkeley while participating in the civil rights movement, the decades-long struggle for justice and equal rights no matter the color of one's skin. Her marriage—and her decision to stay in the United States—was the ultimate act of her independence and of love. My parents had two daughters together. My mother received her PhD at age twenty-five, the

same year I was born. My beloved sister, Maya, came two years later. Family lore has it that, in both pregnancies, my mother kept working right up to the moment of delivery—one time, she went into labor while she was at the lab, and the other while she was making apple strudel. (In both cases, knowing my mom, she would have insisted on finishing up before she went to the hospital.)

Those early days were happy and carefree. I loved the outdoors, and I remember that when I was a little girl, my father wanted me to run free. He would turn to my mother and say, "Just let her run, Shyamala." And then he'd turn to me and say, "Run, Kamala. As fast as you can. Run!" I would take off, the wind in my face, with the feeling that I could do anything. (It's no wonder I also have many memories of my mother putting Band-Aids on my scraped knees.)

Music filled our home, and every night, I would fall asleep to the sounds of jazz recordings that my dad spun on our record player or my mom singing along to the gospel music she loved. But the harmony between my parents didn't last. In time, things got harder. They stopped being kind to each other. I knew they loved each other very much, but they just couldn't get along. By the time I was five years old, the bond between them had given way. They separated shortly after my dad took

a job at the University of Wisconsin, and they divorced a few years later. They didn't fight about money. The only thing they fought about was who got the books.

It was hard on both of them. I think, for my mother, the divorce represented a kind of failure she had never considered. Her marriage was as much an act of rebellion as an act of love. After all, she had challenged the tradition of arranged marriages, which had been hard enough to explain to her parents. Explaining the divorce, I imagine, was even harder. I doubt they ever said to her, "I told you so," but I think those words echoed in her mind regardless.

Maya was still a toddler at the time of their separation, a little too young to understand what was going on, to feel the hardness of it all. I have often felt a pang of guilt because of something Maya never got to experience: I knew our parents when they were happy together. Maya never really did.

My father remained a part of our lives. We would see him on weekends and spend summers with him. But it was really my mother who took charge of our upbringing. She was the one most responsible for shaping us into the women we would become.

And she was extraordinary. My mother was barely five foot one, but I felt like she was a giant. She was smart and tough

and fierce and protective. She was generous, loyal, and funny. She had only two goals in life: to raise her two daughters and to end breast cancer. She pushed us hard and with high expectations as she nurtured us. And all the while, she made Maya and me feel special, like we could do anything we wanted to if we put in the work.

My mother had been raised in a household where political activism and civic leadership came naturally. Her mother, my grandmother, Rajam Gopalan, had never attended high school, but she was a skilled community organizer. She would take in women who were being abused by their husbands, and then she'd call the husbands and tell them they'd better shape up or she would take care of them. She used to gather village women together, teaching them about their health and how they could prevent unplanned pregnancies. My grandfather P. V. Gopalan had been part of the movement to win India's independence. From them, my mother learned that it was service to others that gave life purpose and meaning. And from my mother, Maya and I learned the same.

My mother inherited my grandmother's strength and courage. People who knew them knew not to mess with either. And from both of my grandparents, my mother developed a strong political awareness. She was conscious of history,

conscious of struggle, conscious of inequities. She was born with a sense of justice imprinted on her soul. My parents often brought me in a stroller with them to civil rights marches. I have young memories of a sea of legs moving about, of the energy and shouts and chants. Social justice was a central part of family discussions. My mother would laugh telling a story she loved about the time when I was fussing as a toddler. "What do you want?" she asked, trying to soothe me. "Fweedom!" I yelled back, echoing a call-and-response I'd heard at a protest.

My mother surrounded herself with close friends who were really more like sisters. My godmother, "Aunt Mary," a fellow Berkeley student, was one of them. My mother and Aunt Mary met through the civil rights movement that was taking shape in the early 1960s. As black students spoke out against injustice, a group of passionate, keenly intelligent, politically engaged young men and women found one another—my mother and Aunt Mary among them.

They went to peaceful protests where they were attacked by police with hoses. They marched against the Vietnam War and for civil rights and voting rights. They went together to see Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak at Berkeley, and my mother had a chance to meet him. She told me that at one anti-war protest, the marchers were confronted by the Hell's Angels

motorcycle gang. She told me that at another, she and her friends were forced to run for safety with me in a stroller, after violence broke out against the protesters.

But my parents and their friends were more than just protesters. They were big thinkers, pushing big ideas, organizing their community. Aunt Mary, her brother (my "Uncle Freddy"), my mother and father, and about a dozen other students organized a study group to read the black writers that the university was ignoring. They received prominent guests, too, including civil rights and intellectual leaders like LeRoi Jones and Fannie Lou Hamer. My uncle Aubrey taught San Francisco State University's first-ever class in black studies.

These were my mother's people. In a country where she had no family, they were her family—and she was theirs. From almost the moment she arrived from India, she chose and was welcomed to and enveloped in the black community. It was the foundation of her new American life.

We were also close with my mother's mentor, Howard, a brilliant endocrinologist who took her under his wing. When I was a girl, he gave me a pearl necklace that he'd brought back from a trip to Japan. (Pearls have been one of my favorite forms of jewelry ever since!) Aunt Lenore was one of my mother's closest confidantes and she showed me the beauty of

the outdoors as we chased fireflies in the fading light of the day together. On the nights we'd go to Aunt Mary's house, Uncle Sherman and I played chess together. He loved to explain the bigger implications of the game: the idea of being strategic, of having a plan, of thinking things through multiple steps ahead, of predicting your opponent's actions and adjusting yours to outmaneuver them. Every once in a while, he would let me win.

I was also very close to my mother's brother, Balu, and her two sisters, Sarala and Chinni (whom I called Chitti, which means "younger mother"). They lived many thousands of miles away, but through long-distance phone calls, letters we wrote back and forth, and periodic visits to India, we were always there for one another.

My mother, grandparents, aunts, and uncle instilled in Maya and me pride in our South Asian roots. Our classical Indian names harked back to our heritage, and we were raised with a strong awareness of and appreciation for Indian culture.

But my mother also understood that she was raising two black daughters. She knew that her adopted homeland would see Maya and me as black girls, and she was determined

to make sure we would grow into confident, proud black women.

About a year after my parents separated, we moved into the top floor of a two-story home on Bancroft Way, in a part of Berkeley known as the flatlands. It was a close-knit neighborhood of working families who were focused on doing a good job, paying the bills, and supporting each other. It was a community that was invested in its children, a place where people believed in the most basic promise of the American Dream: that if you work hard and do right by the world, your kids will be better off than you were. We weren't rich in money, but our values provided a different kind of wealth.

My mom would get Maya and me ready every morning before heading to work at her research lab. She would kiss me goodbye and I would walk to the corner and get on the bus to Thousand Oaks Elementary School. I only learned later that we were part of a national experiment in desegregation—mixing black and white students in the classroom even if they came from neighborhoods that weren't mixed. My elementary school class was only the second class in my city to be desegregated through busing, with working-class black children from the flatlands being bused in one direction and wealthier white children from the Berkeley hills bused in the other. At the time,

all I knew was that the big yellow bus was the way I got to school.

It was wonderful to grow up in such a diverse environment. I remember celebrating different cultural holidays at school and learning to count to ten in several languages. I remember parents, including my mom, volunteering in the classroom to lead science and art projects with the kids. Mrs. Frances Wilson, my first-grade teacher, loved her students. In fact, when I graduated from the University of California Hastings College of the Law, there was Mrs. Wilson sitting in the audience, cheering me on.

When Maya and I finished school for the day, our mother would often still be at work, so we would head two houses down to the Sheltons', with whom we shared a long-standing relationship of love, care, and connection.

Regina Shelton, originally from Louisiana, and her husband, Arthur, an Arkansas transplant, owned and ran a nursery school. The Sheltons were devoted to getting the children in our neighborhood off to the best possible start in life. Their day care center was small but welcoming, with posters of strong African American leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman on the wall. The Sheltons also ran an after-school program in their home, and that's where Maya and I would spend our afternoons. We simply called it going to

"the house." There were always children running around at the house; lots of laughter and joyful play.

Mrs. Shelton quickly became a second mother to Maya and me. Elegant and warm, she brought traditional southern style to her grace and hospitality—not to mention to her pound cake and flaky biscuits, which I adored. She was also deeply thoughtful in both senses of the term—exceptionally smart and uncommonly generous.

I'll never forget the time I made lemon bars to share. I had spent one afternoon making a lemon bar recipe that I'd found in one of my mother's cookbooks. They had turned out beautifully, and I was excited to show them off. I put them on a plate, covered them with plastic wrap, and walked over to Mrs. Shelton's house, where she was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping tea and laughing with her sister, Aunt Bea, and my mother. I proudly showed off my creation, and Mrs. Shelton took a big bite. It turned out I had used salt instead of sugar, but, not having tasted them myself, I didn't know.

"Mmmm, honey," Mrs. Shelton responded in her graceful southern accent, her lips slightly puckered from the taste. "That's delicious . . . maybe a little too much salt . . . but really delicious." I didn't walk away thinking I was a failure. I walked away thinking I had done a great job, and just made

one small mistake. It was little moments like this that helped me build a natural sense of confidence. I believed I was capable of anything.

Mrs. Shelton taught me so much. She was always reaching out to mothers who needed counseling or support or even just a hug, because that's what you do. She took in children who couldn't live with their parents and adopted a girl named Sandy who would become my best friend. She always saw the goodness in people. I loved that about her, too. She invested in neighborhood kids who had fallen on hard times, and she did it with the expectation that these struggling boys and girls could be great. And yet she never talked about it or dwelled on it. To her, these deeds were not extraordinary; they were simply an extension of her values.

When I would come home from the Sheltons', I'd usually find my mother reading or working on her notes or preparing to make us dinner. She loved to cook, and I loved to sit with her in the kitchen and watch and smell and eat as she chopped and seasoned, mining a cupboard full of spices. We'd sing along to the music she'd play in the background.

My mother cooked like a scientist. She was always experimenting—I learned that okra could be soul food or Indian food, depending on what spices you chose; she would

add dried shrimp and sausage to make it like gumbo, or fry it up with turmeric and mustard seeds. Even my lunch became a lab for her creations: On the bus, my friends, with their bologna sandwiches and PB&Js, would ask excitedly, "Kamala, what you got?" I'd open the brown paper bag, which my mother always decorated with a smiley face or a doodle: "Cream cheese and olives on dark rye!" I'll admit, not every experiment was successful—at least not for my grade school tastes. But no matter what, it was different, and that made it special, just like my mother. She even made leftovers enticing, giving them the name "smorgasbord" and setting them out with fancy toothpicks and bread cut into silly shapes. My mother had a way of making even the ordinary seem exciting.

There was a lot of laughter, too, though my mother could be tough. My sister and I rarely earned praise for behavior or achievements that were expected. "Why would I applaud you for something you were supposed to do?" she would say if I tried to fish for compliments. And if I came home to report the latest drama in search of sympathy, my mother would have none of it. Her first reaction would be: "Well, what did you do?" I guess she was trying to teach me that I had power and could make a difference. Fair enough, but it still drove me crazy.

But that toughness was always accompanied by unwavering love and loyalty and support. If Maya or I was having a bad day, or if the weather had been gray and rainy for too long, she would throw what she liked to call an "unbirthday party," with unbirthday cake and unbirthday presents. Other times, she'd make some of our favorite things—chocolate chip pancakes or her "Special K" cereal cookies ("K" for Kamala). And often, she would get out the sewing machine and make clothes for us or for our Barbie dolls. She even let Maya and me pick out the color of the family car, a Dodge Dart that she drove everywhere. We chose yellow—our favorite color at the time—and if she regretted letting us make the decision, she never let on. (On the plus side, it was always easy to find our car in a parking lot.)

On Sundays, our mother would send us off to the 23rd Avenue Church of God, piled with the other kids in the back of Mrs. Shelton's car. My earliest memories of the teachings of the Bible were of a loving God, a God who asked us to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves" and to "defend the rights of the poor and needy." That's why to this day I believe we must live our faith and show faith in action.

My favorite night of the week was Thursday. On Thursdays, you could always find us in a plain beige building that was bursting with life on the inside, home to a pioneering black cultural center: Rainbow Sign.

Rainbow Sign was a performance space, movie house, art gallery, dance studio, and more. It had a restaurant with a big kitchen, and somebody was always cooking up something delicious—smothered chicken, meatballs in gravy, candied yams, corn bread, peach cobbler. By day, you could take classes in dance and foreign languages, or workshops in theater and art. At night, there were movies, lectures, and performances from some of the most prominent black thinkers and leaders of the day—musicians, painters, poets, writers, filmmakers, scholars, dancers, and politicians.

My mother, Maya, and I went to Rainbow Sign often. Everyone in the neighborhood knew us as "Shyamala and the girls." We were a unit. A team. And when we'd show up at Rainbow Sign, we were always greeted with big smiles and warm hugs. Families with children were especially welcome at Rainbow Sign—an approach that reflected both the values and the vision of the women in charge of it.

This meant that kids like me who spent time at Rainbow Sign were exposed to dozens of extraordinary men and women

who showed us what we could become. In 1971, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm paid a visit while she was exploring a run for president. Talk about strength! "Unbought and Unbossed," just as her campaign slogan promised. Alice Walker, the writer who went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for *The Color Purple*, did a reading at Rainbow Sign. So did Maya Angelou, the first black female bestselling author, thanks to her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The singer-songwriter Nina Simone performed at Rainbow Sign when I was seven years old.

Rainbow Sign had an electric atmosphere. It was where I learned that artistic expression, ambition, and intelligence were cool. It was also where I could begin to imagine what my future might hold for me. My mother was raising us to believe that "It's too hard!" was never an acceptable excuse; that being a good person meant standing for something larger than yourself; that success is measured in part by what you help others achieve and accomplish. She would tell us, "Fight systems in a way that causes them to be fairer, and don't be limited by what has always been." It was a citizen's upbringing, the only kind I knew, and one I assumed everyone else was experiencing, too.

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I was happy just where I was. But when I was in middle school, we had to leave. My mother was offered a unique opportunity in Montreal, Canada, teaching at McGill University and conducting research at the Jewish General Hospital. It was an exciting step in advancing her career.

It was not, however, an exciting opportunity for me. I was twelve years old, and the thought of moving away from sunny California in February, in the middle of the school year, to a French-speaking foreign city covered in twelve feet of snow was upsetting, to say the least. My mother tried to make it sound like an adventure, taking us to buy our first down jackets and mittens, as though we were going to be explorers of the great northern winter. But it was hard for me to see it that way. It was made worse when my mother told us that she wanted us to learn the language, so she was enrolling us in a neighborhood school for native French speakers, Notre-Dame-des-Neiges—Our Lady of the Snows.

It was a difficult transition, since the only French I knew was from my ballet classes. I used to joke that I felt like a duck, because all day long at our new school I'd be saying, "*Quoi? Quoi? Quoi?*" ("What? What? What?")

I was sure to take my upbringing with me to Montreal. One day, Maya and I held a demonstration in front of our building,

protesting the fact that kids weren't allowed to play soccer on the lawn. I'm happy to report that our demands were met.

Eventually I convinced my mother to let me switch to a fine arts school, where I tried out violin, French horn, and kettle drum alongside my studies in history and math.

By the time I got to high school, I had adjusted to our new surroundings. I still missed home, my friends and family, and was always so happy to return during the summer and holidays, when we'd stay with my father or Mrs. Shelton. But I'd gotten used to most of it. What I hadn't gotten used to was the feeling of being homesick for my country. I felt this constant sense of yearning to be back home. There was no question in my mind I'd return to America for college.

During high school, I started thinking more concretely about my future—college and beyond. I'd always assumed I would have a career; I'd seen the satisfaction my parents got from their work. I'd also seen a series of extraordinary women—Aunt Mary, Mrs. Wilson, Mrs. Shelton, and my mother most of all—who were leaders making a difference in others' lives.

Though the seed was planted very early on, I'm not sure when, exactly, I decided I wanted to be a lawyer. Some of my greatest heroes were lawyers: Thurgood Marshall, Charles

Hamilton Houston, Constance Baker Motley—giants of the civil rights movement. They fought in court to make sure that people were actually treated equal in the eyes of the law, as they should be.

I cared a lot about fairness, and I saw the law as a tool that can help make things fair. But I think what most drew me to the profession was the way people around me trusted and relied on lawyers. Uncle Sherman and our close friend Henry were lawyers, and anytime someone had a problem, within the family or the neighborhood, the first thing you'd hear was "Call Henry. Call Sherman. They'll know what to do. They'll know how to make sense of this." I wanted to be able to do that. I wanted to be the one people called. I wanted to be the one who could help.

So when it came to college, I wanted to get off on the right foot. And what better place to do that, I thought, than at the university Thurgood Marshall had attended?

I had always heard stories about what a wonderful place Howard University was, especially from my mom's friend Aunt Chris, who had gone there. Howard has an extraordinary legacy, one that has lasted and grown since its founding, two

years after the Civil War. It lasted when the doors of higher education were largely closed to black students. It lasted when segregation and discrimination were the law of the land. It lasted when few recognized the potential and capacity of young black men and women to be leaders. Generations of students had been nurtured and taught at Howard, equipped with the confidence to aim high and the tools to make the climb. I wanted to be one of them—and in the fall of 1982, I moved into Eton Towers, my first college dorm.

I'll always remember walking into the auditorium for my freshman orientation. The room was packed. I stood in the back, looked around, and thought, "This is heaven!" There were hundreds of people, and everyone looked like me. Some were children of Howard graduates; others were the first in their families to go to college. Some had been in predominantly black schools their whole lives; others had long been one of only a few people of color in their classroom or their neighborhood. Some came from cities, some from rural communities, and some from African countries or from the Caribbean.

As was the case for most Howard students, my favorite place to hang out was an area we called the Yard, a grass-covered space the size of a city block, right smack in the heart of the

campus. On any given day, you could stand in the middle of the Yard and see, on your right, young dancers practicing their steps or musicians playing instruments. Look to your left and there were briefcase-toting students strolling out of the business school, and medical students in their white coats, heading back to the lab. Groups of students might be in a circle of laughter, or locked in deep discussion. A columnist for *The Hilltop*, the school newspaper, with the star of the football team. A gospel choir singer with the president of the math club.

That was the beauty of Howard. Every signal told students that we could be anything—that we were young, gifted, and black, as the famous Nina Simone song my mother used to play at home said, and we shouldn't let anything get in the way of our success. The campus was a place where you didn't have to be confined to the box of another person's choosing. At Howard, you could come as you were and leave as the person you hoped to be. There were no false choices.

We weren't just told we could be great; we were challenged to live up to that potential. There was an expectation that we would develop and use our talents to take on roles of leadership and have an impact on other people, on our country, and maybe even on the world.

I dove in with gusto. Freshman year, I ran for my first

elected office: freshman class representative of the Liberal Arts Student Council. It was my very first campaign.

I chaired the economics society and competed on the debate team. I pledged a sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, which was founded by nine women at Howard more than a century ago. And I got involved in political protests.

While at Howard, in addition to being a student, I had many jobs. Since the school was located in Washington, DC, I interned at the government agency the Federal Trade Commission. I also did research in the National Archives and was a tour guide at the U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Once, I emerged from my shift to find the legendary actors and civil rights activists Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis in the main area, waiting for a special after-hours tour. They made a point of talking to me and telling me that it made them proud to see me as a young black woman working in public service. I've never forgotten how it made me feel as a young person to have these two icons, both larger than life, take the time to show an interest in me.

In the summer of my sophomore year, I got an internship with Senator Alan Cranston of California. Who could have known that some thirty years later, I would be elected to the same Senate seat? (I still have, framed, the thank-you letter

from his office manager, which hangs in my Senate office near where my own interns sit, and I often tell them, "You're looking at your future!") I loved going to the Capitol Building every day that summer for work. It felt like the epicenter of change—and even as an intern sorting mail, I was thrilled to be a part of it. But I was even more mesmerized by the Supreme Court Building, across the street. I would walk across the street in the hot, humid summer, when you could cut the air with a butter knife, just so I could stand in awe of its magnificence and read the words engraved in marble above its entrance: EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW. I imagined a world where that might be.

After Howard, I returned home to Oakland and enrolled at UC Hastings College of the Law.

When I realized that I wanted to work in the district attorney's office as a prosecutor—that I had found my calling—I was excited to share the decision with my friends and family. And I wasn't surprised to find them doubtful. I had to defend my choice as if I were already in court.

Prosecutors are lawyers who work for the government and bring cases against people who commit crimes. I was interested in working as a prosecutor in the district attorney's office in Oakland—which was located in that wedding cake–like building in Alameda County in California.

America has a deep and dark history of people using the power of the prosecutor unfairly and unjustly. I knew this history well—of innocent men framed, of charges brought against people of color without enough evidence, of prosecutors hiding information that would show that defendants, those charged with a crime, were innocent. I grew up with these stories—so I understood my community's suspicions. But history told another story, too.

I knew the history of brave prosecutors who went after the racist and violent Ku Klux Klan in the South. I knew the stories of prosecutors who went after corrupt politicians and corporations that spewed pollution. I knew the legacy of Robert Kennedy, who, as U.S. attorney general, sent Department of Justice officials to protect the civil rights activists called the Freedom Riders in 1961, and sent the U.S. Marshals to protect James Meredith, the first African American student at the University of Mississippi, the next year.

I knew quite well that equal justice was a goal we hadn't met. I knew that the law was applied unevenly, sometimes on purpose. But I also knew that what was wrong with the system didn't need to be a permanent fact. And I wanted to be part of changing that.

One of my mother's favorite sayings was "Don't let

anybody tell you who you are. You tell them who you are." And so I did. I knew part of making change was what I'd seen all my life, surrounded by adults shouting and marching and demanding justice from the outside. But I also knew there was an important role on the inside, sitting at the table where the decisions were being made. When activists came marching and banging on the doors, I wanted to be on the other side to let them in.

I was going to be a prosecutor in my own image. I was going to do the job from the viewpoint of my own experiences and perspectives, from wisdom gained at my mother's knee, in Rainbow Sign's hall, and on the Howard Yard.

An important part of what that wisdom told me was that when it came to criminal justice, we were being asked to accept false choices. For too long, we'd been told there were only two options: to be either tough on crime or soft on crime. But that was oversimplified and it ignored the realities of public safety. You can want the police to stop crime in your neighborhood and also want them not to use more force than necessary. You can want them to hunt down a killer on your streets and also want them to stop using racial profiling, assuming people are more likely to commit a crime because of their race, because of how they look on the outside. You can believe that criminals should

go to prison but also stand up against jailing people unjustly.

At the end of my summer internship, I was thrilled to accept a position as deputy district attorney. All I had to do was complete my final year of law school and take the bar exam, which would certify me as an attorney who could practice law, and then I'd be able to start my career in the courtroom.

I finished law school in the spring of 1989 and took the bar exam in July. In the last weeks of summer, my future seemed so bright and so clear. The countdown to the life I imagined had begun.

And then, with a jolt, I was stopped in my tracks. In November, the state bar sent letters out to those who had taken the exam, and, to my utter devastation, I had failed. I couldn't get my head around it. It was almost too much to bear. My mother had always told me, "Don't do anything halfway," and I had always taken that to heart. I was a hard worker. A perfectionist. Someone who didn't take things for granted. But there I was, letter in hand, realizing that in studying for the bar, I had put forward the least determined performance of my life.

Fortunately, I still had a job in the district attorney's office. They were going to keep me on, with clerk duties, and give me

space to study to retake the exam in February. I was grateful for that, but it was hard to go into the office, feeling like a failure. Just about everyone else who had been hired along with me had passed, and they were going to move on with their training without me. I remember walking by someone's office and hearing them say to someone else, "But she's so smart. How could she have not passed?" I felt miserable and embarrassed. I wondered if people thought I was a phony. But I held my head up and kept going to work every day—and I passed the bar exam on my second attempt. I was so proud and so honored the day I was sworn in as an officer of the court, and I showed up at the courthouse ready to start the work. But as it turns out, neither law school nor the bar exam really teach you what to do in court, and in those early days, it can feel like you've landed on another planet, where everyone speaks the language but you. And now, for the first time, I had to bring a case to trial, on my own.

I had prepared, going over the facts of the case a dozen times. I'd practiced the questions I wanted to ask over and over until I knew them by heart. I'd researched and rehearsed every procedure and custom. I'd done everything I could. Still, the stakes were so high, it never felt like enough.

I walked into the courtroom, down the main aisle, and

past the rows to the bar that separates defendants, families, witnesses, and other viewers from the officials of the court. Chairs were set up in front of the bar for lawyers waiting for their cases to be called, and I took my seat among them. I was nervous and excited. But most of all, I was honored by and very aware of the huge responsibility I held—the duty to protect those who were among the most vulnerable and voiceless members of our society. When my turn came, I rose from my chair at the prosecutor's desk and stepped up to the podium, saying the words every prosecutor speaks:

"Kamala Harris, for the people."

The reason we have public offices of prosecution in America is that, in our country, a crime against any of us is considered a crime against all of us. Almost by definition, our criminal justice system involves matters in which the powerful have harmed the less powerful, and we do not expect the weaker party to secure justice alone; we make it a group effort. That's why prosecutors don't represent the victim; they represent "the people"—all of us, society at large.

I kept that principle front and center as I worked with victims of crimes, whose dignity and safety were always the most important to me. It takes enormous courage for someone to come forward and share their story. They not only

have to tell and retell about a crime that was painful or humiliating, they also have to endure cross-examination from the other side, knowing they will be questioned and that their most personal details may be on display. But when they take the stand, they are doing so for the benefit of all of us—so that there will be consequences and accountability for those who break the law.

"For the people" was my guide—and there was nothing I took more seriously than the power I now possessed. I was just starting out as a prosecutor and yet I had the ultimate say about whether to charge a defendant with a crime and, if so, what and how many charges to bring. I could make deals with the defendant's lawyer or make recommendations to a judge that could deprive a person of their freedom with the swipe of my pen.

Despite this power, our judicial system is made up of more than just the prosecutor, the defendant, and the judge. We also have a jury. Juries are twelve people who are selected from the surrounding neighborhood to listen to the cases made by lawyers on both sides and decide if the defendant is guilty or not.

When it came time for closing arguments, I approached the jury box. I decided to do it without notes so I wouldn't be

looking down at a piece of paper, reading off my best arguments for why they should convict the defendant. I wanted to look the jurors in the eye. I felt that I should know my case well enough that I could close my eyes and see the entire incident in 360 degrees.

As I finished my closing and headed back to the prosecutor's table, I caught a glimpse of the audience. Amy Resner, my friend from the first day of orientation, was sitting there with a big smile on her face, cheering me on. Now we were both on our way.

The daily work was intense. At any given time, an individual prosecutor might be juggling more than one hundred cases. Eventually I was assigned to work on violent felonies—serious crimes like murder. I'd be on call for the week and have to race to the scene of a homicide when someone had been killed. Usually, that meant leaping out of bed between midnight and 6 a.m. There are rules in the U.S. Constitution for how evidence is collected and how it can be used in court. My role was to make sure it was done in the proper way. I often had to explain to victims and their families that there was a difference between what we knew happened and what we could prove happened. Just because someone is arrested for a crime doesn't mean he or she will be convicted and go to prison. The case

prosecutors make depends on carefully collecting the evidence from the scene of a crime in a legal manner.

I was at home in the courtroom. I understood its rhythm. I was comfortable with its quirks. Eventually, I moved into a unit that focused on prosecuting sex crimes—putting rapists and child molesters behind bars. These are people who commit hideous crimes of sexual assault, forcing others—even kids—to perform sex acts. It was difficult, upsetting, and deeply important work. I met so many girls, and sometimes boys, who had been abused, assaulted, neglected, all too often by people they trusted.

It was hard not to feel the weight of all the big problems we were up against. Putting abusers in prison meant they wouldn't be able to hurt other children. But what about the kids they had already gotten their hands on? How had our system helped those children? That reality, and what to do about it, bounced back and forth in my head—sometimes in the back of my mind, sometimes at the front of my skull. But it would be a few years before I could tackle it head-on.

In 1998, after eight years in the Alameda County District Attorney's Office, I was recruited across the bay to the San Francisco District Attorney's Office to run the career criminal unit, which focused on violent criminals and criminals

who kept committing crimes over and over again. From the moment I got there, I saw that the office was dysfunctional and had a backlog of cases.

It was rumored that when attorneys were finished with a case, some would toss the files in the trash. This was the late 1990s, and the office still didn't have email. It was an unprofessional environment and yet so powerful. It was a disgrace.

After eighteen months, I got a lifeline. The San Francisco city attorney, Louise Renne, called me with a job offer to lead the division in her office that handled child and family services. Unlike the district attorney's office, the city attorney doesn't bring criminal cases; it's basically like the law office of the city government. I told her I would take the job but that I didn't just want to be a lawyer dealing with individual cases; I wanted to work on policy that could improve the system as a whole, help kids in trouble before they ended up in the criminal justice system.

Louise was all for it.

I spent two years at the city attorney's office. I started a task force to study the issues of children who had been taken advantage of by criminals. My partner in this project was Norma Hotaling, who had a very difficult childhood but gathered the strength to turn her life around and wanted to

help other kids who were facing the same kinds of challenges she had.

One of our priorities was creating a safe place for these young people to get love and support and treatment. I knew from years of experience that the survivors we were trying to help usually had nowhere to go. In most cases, their parents weren't in the picture. Many of them had run away from foster care, the temporary housing arrangements for kids who can't live with their parents. People often wondered why it was that exploited kids picked up by the police would go right back to the criminals who "took care of them." It didn't seem so strange to me—where else were these kids able to turn?

To our delight, the city government adopted and funded our recommendation to open a safe house for these kids.

The work was meaningful, empowering, and proof that I could do serious policy work. It also boosted my confidence that when I saw problems, I could be the one to help create the solutions. All those times my mother had pressed me—"Well, what did *you* do?"—suddenly made a lot more sense. I realized I didn't have to wait for someone else to take the lead; I could start making things happen on my own.

I think it was that realization that turned my sights to elected office. Of all the problems I saw in front of me, few

were in more urgent need of fixing than the district attorney's office, which I had left two years prior. Suddenly it wasn't just an important problem to be solved. It was an important problem *I* could solve.

I wanted to honor, support, and empower the DA's office as a whole. But in order to run the office and make changes, I would have to run *for* elected office, because while lawyers in the DA's office aren't elected, the DA is. A political campaign would be a huge undertaking. My friends, my family, my colleagues, and my mentors were generally supportive of the idea, but they were worried, too. My would-be opponent had a reputation as a fighter; in fact, his nickname was Kayo (as in K.O., or "knockout")—a tribute to the many knockouts he scored in his boxing youth. A campaign would be not only bruising but also expensive, and I had no experience as a fund-raiser.

Was this really the time for me to run? I had no way of knowing. But more and more, I was coming to feel that "wait and see" wasn't an option. I thought of the writer James Baldwin, whose words had defined so much of the civil rights struggle. "There is never a time in the future in which we will work out our salvation," he'd written. "The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now."