

like some sort of Stepford wife. release?" the post went on, remarking approvingly on what it termed the "bitch, please look" that Obama had seemed unable to suppress in the wake of a comment by Ann Romney.

It's not that Obama doesn't know the anodyne, wifely things to say (essentially, nothing). She is, after all, a "community and external affairs" professional. But her pride visibly chafes at being asked to subsume her personality, to make herself seem duller and less independent than she is, even in the service of getting her husband elected President of the United States. In Wisconsin, I asked her if she was offended by Bill Clinton's use of the phrase "fairy tale" to describe her husband's characterization of his position on the Iraq War. At first, Obama responded with a curt "No." But, after a few seconds, she affected a funny voice. "I want to rip his eyes out!" she said, clawing at the air with her fingernails. One of her advisers gave her a nervous look. "Kidding!" Obama said. "See, this is what gets me into trouble."

Pundits have portrayed Obama as an oversharer and a taskmaster, demeaning her husband by acknowledging his morning breath and his body odor. But the domestic carping that commentators have taken as some sort of uncontrollable T.M.I. tic serves Obama's husband well, and this may account for her frequent recitation of the mundane details of their housekeeping arrangements. By noting, for example, that Barack is "the 'Harry Potter' parent," and that she encourages him to find time to read to Malia and Sasha, Michelle makes Barack seem like a great dad and a guardian of young womanhood. The contrast between their family life and that of the Clintons is implicit. When Michelle remarks—as she did, now famously, at a fund-raiser hosted in Beverly Hills—that Barack forgets to "secure the bread so that it doesn't get stale," she's playing the martinet as hammy as she played the big hungry bear in South Carolina.

"Occasionally, it gives campaign people heartburn," David Axelrod, the Obama campaign's chief strategist, admits. "She's fundamentally honest—goes out there, speaks her mind, jokes. She doesn't parse her words or select them with an antenna for political correctness."

People forget that Barack himself has

been working the hapless-hubby routine for a long time: he writes about trying to enjoy the bachelor life as a freshman senator in Washington but finding himself too "fully domesticated, soft, and helpless" to remember to buy a shower curtain. The ordinary card, in fact, may be one of the Obamas' best assets. It assuages fears of difference—"We're just like you" is the cumulative message of all the back-and-forth about the bread and the bread—and inoculates against jealousy, a smart bit of self-deprecation on the part of a young, gifted, attractive couple whose fortunes have risen quickly, like movie stars insisting that they were unpopular in high school.

Besides, Obama's tendency toward deflation isn't limited to Barack. Cindy Moelis recalls commissioning a cookie bouquet with icing in the pattern of the Obama campaign's logo and presenting it to Michelle, who replied, "Oh, great. More sugar for the kids." Obama's dismissiveness is not that of the spoiled princess, as her detractors have suggested, but that of the wary striver: why get used to things being good if they could fall apart at any moment?

"Michelle's always been very vocal about anything," her mother, Marian Robinson, told me. "If it's not right, she's going to say so. When she was at Princeton, her brother"—Craig, now the head basketball coach at Brown, was two years ahead of Michelle—"called me and said, 'Mom, Michelle's here telling people they're not teaching French right.' She thought the style was not conversational enough. I told him, 'Just pretend you don't know her.'"

There is more to the Obamas' relationship, however, than the caricature of Michelle as a ballbreaker to Barack's Obambi (Maureen Dowd's term). Consider the moments leading up to Barack's career-making speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. The story that the Obamas like to tell, and that their chroniclers like to repeat, is that Michelle pulled Barack aside just before he took the stage, warning him, "Just don't screw it up, buddy!"

Someone who was involved in the preparation of the speech recalls a more nuanced dynamic, as Michelle calmed an irritable Barack. "We were spending intense sessions tinkering with wording and commas," the person says. "It was

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pretty tense, because everybody was picking at Barack and making suggestions. He was getting a little irate. Michelle was in the room, and she was kind of handling both him as well as some of the speech." The observer went on, "She was listening intently and, without being overly directive, was somebody that he could glance over to, almost a telepathic kind of relationship. He was clearly looking to her for reaction."

Earlier on the day that Obama visited the nursery school, she addressed a congregation at the Pee Dee Union Baptist Church, in Cheraw, a hamlet of about six thousand known as "The Prettiest Town in Dixie." The church's makeshift gravel parking lot, next to the Pee Dee Ice and Fuel Company and bounded by train tracks, was full. After an invocation by the Reverend Jerry Corbett and an introduction by the mayor of Cheraw, Obama came to the pulpit. "You all got up bright and early just for me?" she asked the mostly elderly, almost all-black crowd. "Yes!" they roared. Obama continued, "On behalf of my church home and my pastor, Reverend Wright, I bring greetings."

Obama opened with some reminiscing, "My people are from South Carolina," she said. "I don't know if y'all knew that... In fact, my brother and I came down last week for a mini family reunion at my grandparents' church, because they retired back down here, and before their death they were living here, attending an A.M.E. Baptist church in Georgetown."

Obama was playing to her audience—later she riffed on "those relatives who have plastic on the furniture" and reminded the churchgoers to get "ten other triflin' people in your life" out of bed and down to the polls on Saturday. Her appearances at the church, and many like it, were a key point of strategy in a state that would be the first real test of whether or not Barack could attract significant numbers of black voters. "In South Carolina in particular, because she had family from there, it made a lot of sense for her to speak in the African-American community," David Axelrod said.

After warming up the crowd, Obama launched into her stump speech, a forty-five-minute monologue that she composed herself and delivers without notes. Obama has been open about the value of