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## Waiting for Michelle

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Maybe Michelle Obama did tell France's First Lady Carla Bruni-Sarkozy that life in the White House is "hell", and she "can't stand" her job. But then maybe the rapid-response denials from both sides of the Atlantic are true, and she said no such thing.

The more I see her -- or don't see her -- on the national stage I have to wonder. Almost two years into the job, "hell" and "can't stand it" might be a perfectly reasonable way to describe life as an immensely talented woman whose highest contribution is to keep her talents on simmer, and her contributions well within the safe precincts of kids and families.

Recalling the catch phrase of a long-ago game show: Will the real Michelle Obama please stand up? More to the point: can the real Michelle Obama please stand up? Maybe the answer is no. Maybe it's not yet.

The first paragraph of her page on the White House web site repeats her stump line that "first and foremost, she is Malia and Sasha's mom."

It's not until the fourth paragraph do we get to the part about Princeton, Harvard Law, and a spot in one of Chicago's most prestigious law firms, where -- let's take it back to the home front -- she "met the man who would become the love of her life." (Unmentioned: he was a summer intern and she was assigned as his mentor.)

There is certainly nothing wrong with being a mother first. I would describe myself the same way. The difference is that I could take my kids outside without large men with guns escorting us to a bullet-proof car.

I have to assume that being a mother guiding two young women through the cynosure of a White House adolescence can't be the same as it is for the rest of us.

The presumed trade off would be a seat next to the seat of the most powerful man on earth. Except that for public consumption, her seat appears to be unoccupied. With her husband's public approval chained at the neck to an intractable economy, she can't afford to do anything that would create a point of attack.

Raising healthy children, supporting military families, and helping young people to achieve life balance through diet and exercise will hardly throw off the kind of heat that melts approval ratings.

Those who expected a First Lady with clout to match her personality and pedigree quickly noted her -- to borrow a headline from Salon -- "momification".

Writing in *More* magazine, Geraldine Brooks captured the schizophrenic essence of her position; noting a stirring modern woman's success story on one hand, but on the other a "depressingly retrograde narrative of stifling gender roles and frustrating trade-offs."

History is cautionary on first ladies who step too boldly to the spotlight. New First Lady Hillary Clinton never fully recovered from famously promising she wasn't going to stay home and bake cookies. Opening that door brought a back draft of recrimination from those who believed she should stay home -- or at least be demure enough not to throw the cookies in America's face.

How far have we come in the expectations for a woman who -- no matter how much she contributed to the campaign -- is perceived as getting her job by marriage? To be factored in, of course, are Sarah Palin and her "mama grizzlies" prowling the camp perimeter, waiting to charge at any hint of values out of step with their own.

We're two years past the initial reaction to "momification" by the Obama handlers. If it is indeed an assigned role, she has hit her marks and delivered her lines flawlessly -- not once stepping out of character. Her only stumble was taking an expensive (but personally paid) Mediterranean vacation with her daughter Sasha in a down economy.

A dip in the polls aside, she was and is a political asset. But like all political assets, value is sensitive to timing. For now, for her, Washington may feel like Stepford on the Potomac. But economies heal, presidential approval ratings rise, elections pass, and second-term first ladies have a lot more room to be all they can be.

I believe that the real Michelle Obama will stand up. And I believe she will be different from the one we've seen so far.