Bedtime Biography: The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt

Introduction

Bedtime Biographies are best when listened to. Check out the audio version to get the full experience! Eleanor Roosevelt dedicated herself to making life better for ordinary men, women, and children. But her own life was anything but ordinary. The wife, and later widow, of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, she broke the mold and challenged people's ideas about how first ladies should behave. Today, Eleanor is remembered as one of the twentieth century's most admired people, and as a tireless campaigner for world peace and civil rights. In this bedtime biography, we'll journey through the life, times, and personal struggles of this thoroughly modern icon. So find yourself a comfortable place to sit, we're about to discover how Eleanor Roosevelt became the First Lady – of the world.

Chapter 1

Eleanor Roosevelt was born in New York in 1884, when the clatter of horses' hooves and beautiful carriages filled the streets, and gas lamps, rather than electricity, lit people's homes. She was born into a life of extraordinary privilege. The Roosevelts were a wealthy and influential family who knew all the right people. Her parents, Anna and Elliott, weren't just part of New York's high society, they were part of the highest society. By the time she was 16 years old, Eleanor's uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, had been elected president of the United States. The young Eleanor may have belonged to America's elite, but she often felt like an outsider. She was a quiet and solemn child, and her mother's embarrassing nickname for her was 'Granny' because she said she was so old-fashioned and sensible. All the women in Eleanor's family were blessed with good looks, but she was the ugly duckling; tall and awkward, she was painfully aware that her mother was disappointed that she wasn't conventionally beautiful. But what Eleanor lacked in perceived looks, she made up for with her intense intellectual curiosity. When she was told she wasn't allowed to read in bed, the determined Eleanor hid books underneath her mattress and awoke at 5:00 a.m. every day to read them. Her parents were indeed wealthy and powerful, but they also believed that the rich should help the poor. When she was five years old, Eleanor's father took her to see the homeless little boys who slept rough in the city. These boys, her father said, had to make their own money, and had no one to rely on except themselves. From that day on, Eleanor never forgot that, while she had plenty, other people did not. Of course, even money and status couldn't protect her from all of life's hardships, and tragedy visited Eleanor's childhood more than once. At eight years old, she lost her mother to diphtheria. Her beloved father, who was already struggling with alcoholism, sent her and her three brothers to live with her grandmother while he went to a sanatorium to try to get well. But just two years later, he died too. Eleanor was an orphan at the age of just ten. She stayed with her grandmother Mary until, in 1899, she was sent to a school in England to complete her education. There she met Marie Souvestre, the school's French headmistress. Madame Souvestre took Eleanor under her wing, and spent long hours talking with her about politics and world affairs in the school library. Eleanor would later say that Madame, with her quiet encouragement and instruction, was one of the most important influences in her young life. Eleanor finished her education at 18. She'd have loved to spend more time at school, or even college, but her grandmother believed that, at 18 years old, it was high time that she entered the marriage market. For the next year, Eleanor's life was a whirl of parties and formal balls that were

designed to introduce young debutantes to eligible gentlemen. It might sound like a fairytale to some, but for Eleanor, it was an unpleasant time as she reflected, once again, that she couldn't live up to the beauty of the other woman in her family. But Eleanor's focus wasn't only on finding a husband. She soon began following the philanthropic values that her parents had passed down to her, teaching calisthenics and dancing to New York's poorest children. Thankfully, she didn't spend long on the city's upper-class marriage circuit. When she was 19, her distant cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, proposed to her, and she accepted. Their wedding was the highlight of New York's social calendar, although Eleanor felt that many guests only attended to catch a glimpse of her uncle, President Theodore Roosevelt, who gave her away. Eleanor spent the next decade setting up house and bearing six children. It wasn't an easy ride. Tragedy struck in 1909 when her third child, Franklin Junior, died at eight months old. The grief-stricken Eleanor blamed herself. Like most upper-class women of her time, she'd given over the care of her children to an army of nurses and nannies. As a result, she felt she'd barely known the baby she'd lost. In 1910, Franklin was elected to the New York Senate. But although her husband was now a politician, it didn't occur to Eleanor that she had a political role to play, too. Instead, she believed her job was to keep the home fires burning. She did occasionally go to Washington's capitol galleries to hear the issues of the day being debated. But she went only because she felt it was her wifely duty to be interested in whatever interested her husband – and that was politics. Although she later became famous for her outspoken support of women's rights, in the early 1910s, Eleanor still held antiquated views on gender roles. She was shocked when her husband announced his support for women's suffrage, as she'd always believed that men were naturally superior and more politically-minded than women. Eleanor was content that her contribution to politics should be throwing dinner parties for her husband's political allies and their wives. She couldn't imagine that she'd have anything else to offer.

Chapter 2

Eleanor's ideas about her role in life began to change in 1914 when the dark shadow of the First World War fell across the world. Franklin had been appointed as assistant secretary of the navy, and the family went to live in Washington, DC. The city was a hive of activity as people from every walk of life valiantly contributed to the war effort. Eleanor quickly realized that it was her duty to get involved. Although she'd been raised in incredible privilege, surrounded by maids and servants, she now began to work in the local Red Cross canteen, doing hard manual work from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. the following night. She also visited psychiatric hospitals and met injured soldiers. As her confidence in her own abilities grew, she started raising money to improve conditions in America's psychiatric facilities. By the time the war ended, Eleanor had proved to herself that she could organize and manage effectively outside of the home. Even more important, she'd seen the opportunities for someone in her position to create positive change, and she'd felt the joy of doing something good for ordinary people. The shadow of war was finally lifted in 1918, but the darkest period of Eleanor's life was just around the corner. Three years later, in the summer of 1921, Franklin had taken a step back from politics after an unsuccessful election campaign to become vice-president. During an idyllic family holiday on Campobello Island, he began to feel ill. The doctor was called, who assured him that it was just a cold, and Franklin went to bed to recover. It wasn't a cold. Within a few days, Franklin couldn't move his legs; he was diagnosed with polio. During the fall and winter of that year, Eleanor acted as her husband's dutiful nurse, learning how to move him around and care for him. Franklin, for his part,

never once complained or expressed bitterness about his situation, and neither did Eleanor. Only once did she shut herself away in a room and cry. With Franklin's illness and Eleanor's new duties as a carer, the couple found themselves slipping out of the high-society social circle they'd always been part of. Luckily, Eleanor couldn't have cared less. Instead, she discovered a newfound desire to work and began to build a career of her own. In the 1920s, she was elected chairperson of the Women's Division of the Democratic State Committee, and she also started raising funds for the Women's Trade Union League. Through her work, Eleanor began to find her political feet. She made useful contacts, drove voters to the polls on election day, and gained insights into how politics really worked. She didn't like everything she saw. In some small towns, corruption was still rampant; people were paid by politicians to vote for them, and political parties worked hand-in-glove with crooked local businesses. But Eleanor wasn't deterred. She concluded that there was good and bad in most politicians and that most people could act in a noble manner – just maybe not all the time. She also began making the occasional political speech, although she had an unfortunate habit of laughing while she was talking. Overarching all of her new political activities was an increasing interest in the welfare of America's workers. In 1927, with the help of friends, she set up a handmade furniture company and factory. The idea was that the company could employ young people who found themselves out of work. To get the project off the ground, Eleanor didn't hesitate to put in her own money. Although the company wasn't the long-term success that she'd hoped it would be, it did provide valuable work to people throughout the Great Depression. Thanks to the initiative, those who'd lost all hope during this terrible time could regain a sense of dignity and security through work. The furniture company wasn't Eleanor's only community outreach program in the late 1920s. In partnership with her friends, she bought a school for girls in New York and started giving courses in American history and English literature. Unlike what was offered at many girls' schools at that time, Eleanor strove to give the girls a rigorous, useful education, even taking her students to see city courts in progress.

Chapter 3

As Eleanor followed her own interests, Franklin followed his, and in 1928 he was elected governor of New York. Like his wife, Franklin genuinely wanted to improve the lives of ordinary people, especially the most vulnerable. To this end, he made it his mission to carry out inspections of New York's state institutions, such as children's hospitals and state prisons. Because he wasn't able to walk around these places himself, Eleanor went in for him and made detailed reports on food, overcrowding, and medical care. On her visits, she looked into the kitchen's cooking pots to see if what was on the menu was actually being served, and carefully observed the relationships between the people in the institutions and the staff who ran them. But even as governor of New York, Franklin still felt he had more to give. In 1932, he was elected president of the United States, the highest office in the land. Although Eleanor had encouraged her husband to run for the presidency, privately, she was troubled when he won. She feared that, as his presidency began, her own personal life would end. But once in the White House, she decided to make the best of it, and it wasn't long before she was challenging people's ideas about how a first lady should behave. Eleanor broke with convention in ways both big and small. She shocked people by operating her own elevator and moving her own furniture around – something a President's wife had never done before. True to form, she also helped the women around her. Thanks to the sexist attitudes of the day, many of the women who held senior jobs in the government had never been invited to the White House. Once she realized what was happening, Eleanor invited them herself,

holding garden parties and teas to honor their work. She didn't stop there, either. When she learned that female reporters in Washington were always at risk of being fired unless they could find something new to write about, she began holding regular press conferences for them. During these sessions, she reported on her own activities as the First Lady. But perhaps Eleanor's most daring break with convention was her refusal to have a Secret Service agent with her whenever she went out alone. It was unnecessary, she argued. Instead, she learned how to shoot, and carried a revolver with her at all times. Thankfully, she never needed to use it. During her time in the White House, Eleanor also became known for her progressive views on racial equality, an area where she sometimes found herself at odds with her husband. She was a passionate supporter of anti-lynching legislation and was disappointed when Franklin failed to back this legislation himself. Against the recommendations of her political advisors, Eleanor also held garden parties for African American girls from local reform schools. Those around her were terrified of what Southern Conservatives would say about these parties, but she'd long decided that she would always do what she thought was right, and not concern herself with what others might think. Her concern for workers grew when she made trips to the rest of the country and reported back to Franklin on the conditions she found there. One visit that shook her to her core took place in a coal-mining area of West Virginia, where the community had been hit hard by the Great Depression. There, she found whole families living on a dollar a week, and children subsisting on little more than table scraps. Throughout the time that Franklin was president, Eleanor fought to retain her independence, including her financial one. In 1936, for instance, she began writing a magazine column entitled My Day, sharing details of her work and daily routine in the White House. Spurred on by the public's enthusiasm for her writing, she committed herself to writing this column six days a week, for the next five years, only once missing her daily deadline. Franklin and Eleanor were still in office when the Second World War began. As Eleanor's own sons enlisted in the military and went to Europe on active service, Eleanor felt intensely connected to all the other mothers around the world, who were also worried for their children's lives. As the conflict raged, Eleanor bravely traveled to war zones across the world, providing much-needed morale boosts to allied troops. When she met the young soldiers and saw the sacrifices they were making, she made a promise to herself: to dedicate the rest of her life to ensuring there would never be another war. Eleanor would see the end of the Second World War, but sadly, Franklin did not. He died in 1945, after suffering ill-health for some time. Within days, her life was turned upside down, as she hurriedly left the White House to make way for the next president, Harry S. Truman. After Franklin's death, Eleanor downsized, turning the Roosevelt family estate over to the government and instead moved into a cottage on the grounds. But although her home had shrunk, her political life was about to get bigger – much bigger.

Chapter 4

In December 1945, President Truman asked Eleanor to serve as a member of the newly-formed United Nations. Eleanor would be part of the American delegation for the organization's first meeting in London. Eleanor's initial response was that it would be impossible for her to accept the role. After all, she'd had no experience with anything like this before. On the other hand, though, she did think the United Nations was the only way the world could achieve lasting peace, and its existence had meant a great deal to Franklin. She decided to take on the role. Of course, nothing that's worth doing is easy, and her work with the UN brought many challenges. During that first meeting in January 1946, Eleanor was the only woman in the American delegation, and she often

got the feeling that her presence wasn't welcome. She knew if she failed, her failure would reflect badly on all women, and it might be years before another woman was asked to serve. But as always, she rose to the unique challenges of her position. She quickly noticed that there weren't many women on the other delegations, either, and so she invited them to tea in her hotel suite. After a few of these casual meetings, she realized that delegates from different countries could often make more progress, and reach greater understanding, in more informal settings. This led Eleanor to begin a custom of bringing together different nations' representatives for dinners or social events in the evenings. Eleanor might've been fearful that she wouldn't be up to the job, but she soon proved herself a formidable adversary. Her debating skills came to the fore when one of the most important questions of the first meeting arose. That question was about the thousands of war refugees who found themselves in Germany when the war ended, and who were still there. Many of the refugees from Eastern European countries were desperate to stay in Germany rather than return home and live under Communist rule. The UN delegates from the Soviet countries wanted to force these refugees to return home, whereas the Western nations felt strongly that it was for each man or woman to decide for themselves. As the debater representing the United States on this point, it was Eleanor's job to make a speech, and persuade the other countries to vote with the West. But she knew that the Russians had a trick up their sleeve. The Soviet debater, she realized, would try to delay the final vote for as long as possible, in the hope that the West's allies in Southern America would lose interest and go home before the vote. So to keep the Latin Americans in their seats, Eleanor used her speech to compare the refugee situation to the Latin American peoples' fight for independence. As a result, these allies stayed, and the West won the vote. For Eleanor, and for democracy, it was a triumph for the right of the individual to make their own decisions. But her most important work for world peace was still to come. In spring 1946, Eleanor was elected as the first chairperson of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The commission's task was to decide how the international community should approach the subject of human rights. During her work there, she found herself in constant conflict with the Soviet Union's delegates, who always disagreed with the West's proposals. Things were especially strained at the commission as many Eastern European countries, who were under Communist rule, felt they had to agree with Russia, whether they wanted to or not. One day, the head of the Czechoslovakian delegation, Jan Masaryk, leaned forward and whispered in Eleanor's ear that he had no choice but to vote with Russia, given that they were in his backyard. During her years with the United Nations, Eleanor worked at a frenetic pace. She was so busy that some of her meetings had to take place in the back of her car as she was driven from one engagement to the next. The person she was meeting with would then wait in the car while she was at her next appointment, and then resume their meeting when she came out and drove off again! But all of Eleanor's work was building up to an enormous achievement, not just for her, but for all humankind. That achievement was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Completed in 1948, this declaration enshrined the rights and freedoms of all human beings, regardless of gender, race, or religion. Nations that chose to accept this declaration would sign up to a legally-binding treaty, for which there would also be a system for enforcing the inscribed rights. Eleanor's work with the United Nations ended in 1952, but she remained deeply committed to the cause of world peace for the rest of her life. Throughout the 1950s, she met with leaders across the globe, from the president of the Soviet Union to the heads of younger nations, who were just beginning to disentangle themselves from colonialism. She greeted everyone in the spirit of respect and friendship, spreading the post-war American values of democracy and international cooperation to every corner of the earth. Right up until her death in 1963, Eleanor saw clearly the political and

humanitarian problems that threatened our societies; she always believed there was much more work to be done. But as a dear friend once said of her, Eleanor Roosevelt was someone who'd rather light a candle than curse the darkness, and her glow warmed the world.

The End

You've reached the end of this Bedtime Biography. Thank you for listening. Why not pause listening now so you can stay in a relaxed state? And if you're off to bed now, I wish you a good night's sleep.