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# Dreams from My Father



*A Story of Race and Inheritance*

# Barack Obama



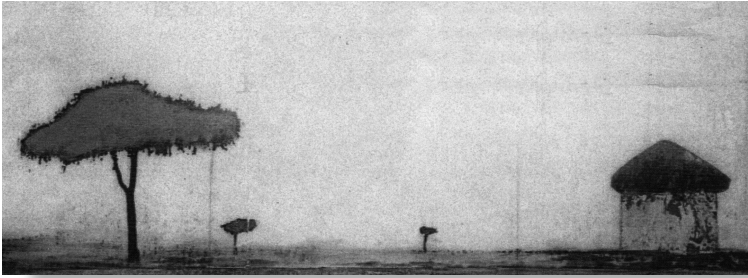
# Dreams from My Father

**Also by Barack Obama**

*The Audacity of Hope*

# Dreams from My Father

*A Story of Race and Inheritance*



Barack Obama



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Pictured in left-hand photograph on cover: Habiba Akumu Hussein and Barack Obama Sr. (President Obama's paternal grandmother and his father as a young boy). Pictured in right-hand photograph on cover: Stanley Dunham and Ann Dunham (President Obama's maternal grandfather and his mother as a young girl).

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*For we are strangers before thee,  
and sojourners, as were all our fathers.*

I CHRONICLES 29:15



PREFACE TO THE 2004 EDITION

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**A**LMOST A DECADE HAS passed since this book was first published. As I mention in the original introduction, the opportunity to write the book came while I was in law school, the result of my election as the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review*. In the wake of some modest publicity, I received an advance from a publisher and went to work with the belief that the story of my family, and my efforts to understand that story, might speak in some way to the fissures of race that have characterized the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity—the leaps through time, the collision of cultures—that mark our modern life.

Like most first-time authors, I was filled with hope and despair upon the book's publication—hope that the book might succeed beyond my youthful dreams, despair that I had failed to say anything worth saying. The reality fell somewhere in between. The reviews were mildly favorable. People actually showed up at the readings my publisher arranged. The sales were underwhelming. And, after a few months, I went on with the business of my life, certain that my career as an author would be short-lived, but glad to have survived the process with my dignity more or less intact.





I had little time for reflection over the next ten years. I ran a voter registration project in the 1992 election cycle, began a civil rights practice, and started teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago. My wife and I bought a house, were blessed with two gorgeous, healthy, and mischievous daughters, and struggled to pay the bills. When a seat in the state legislature opened up in 1996, some friends persuaded me to run for the office, and I won. I had been warned, before taking office, that state politics lacks the glamour of its Washington counterpart; one labors largely in obscurity, mostly on topics that mean a great deal to some but that the average man or woman on the street can safely ignore (the regulation of mobile homes, say, or the tax consequences of farm equipment depreciation). Nonetheless, I found the work satisfying, mostly because the scale of state politics allows for concrete results—an expansion of health insurance for poor children, or a reform of laws that send innocent men to death row—within a meaningful time frame. And too, because within the capitol building of a big, industrial state, one sees every day the face of a nation in constant conversation: inner-city mothers and corn and bean farmers, immigrant day laborers alongside suburban investment bankers—all jostling to be heard, all ready to tell their stories.

A few months ago, I won the Democratic nomination for a seat as the U.S. senator from Illinois. It was a difficult race, in a crowded field of well-funded, skilled, and prominent candidates; without organizational backing or personal wealth, a black man with a funny name, I was considered a long shot. And so, when I won a majority of the votes in the Democratic primary, winning in white areas as well as black, in the suburbs as well as Chicago, the reaction that followed echoed the response to my election to the *Law Review*. Mainstream commentators expressed surprise and genuine hope that my victory signaled a broader change in our racial politics. Within the black community, there was a sense of pride regarding my accom-



plishment, a pride mingled with frustration that fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* and forty years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, we should still be celebrating the possibility (and only the possibility, for I have a tough general election coming up) that I might be the sole African American—and only the third since Reconstruction—to serve in the Senate. My family, friends, and I were mildly bewildered by the attention, and constantly aware of the gulf between the hard sheen of media reports and the messy, mundane realities of life as it is truly lived.

Just as that spate of publicity prompted my publisher's interest a decade ago, so has this fresh round of news clippings encouraged the book's re-publication. For the first time in many years, I've pulled out a copy and read a few chapters to see how much my voice may have changed over time. I confess to wincing every so often at a poorly chosen word, a mangled sentence, an expression of emotion that seems indulgent or overly practiced. I have the urge to cut the book by fifty pages or so, possessed as I am with a keener appreciation for brevity. I cannot honestly say, however, that the voice in this book is not mine—that I would tell the story much differently today than I did ten years ago, even if certain passages have proven to be inconvenient politically, the grist for pundit commentary and opposition research.

What has changed, of course, dramatically, decisively, is the context in which the book might now be read. I began writing against a backdrop of Silicon Valley and a booming stock market; the collapse of the Berlin Wall; Mandela—in slow, sturdy steps—emerging from prison to lead a country; the signing of peace accords in Oslo. Domestically, our cultural debates—around guns and abortion and rap lyrics—seemed so fierce precisely because Bill Clinton's Third Way, a scaled-back welfare state without grand ambition but without sharp edges, seemed to describe a broad, underlying consensus on bread-and-butter issues, a consensus to which even George W. Bush's first campaign, with its "compassionate conservatism," would



have to give a nod. Internationally, writers announced the end of history, the ascendance of free markets and liberal democracy, the replacement of old hatreds and wars between nations with virtual communities and battles for market share.

And then, on September 11, 2001, the world fractured.

It's beyond my skill as a writer to capture that day, and the days that would follow—the planes, like specters, vanishing into steel and glass; the slow-motion cascade of the towers crumbling into themselves; the ash-covered figures wandering the streets; the anguish and the fear. Nor do I pretend to understand the stark nihilism that drove the terrorists that day and that drives their brethren still. My powers of empathy, my ability to reach into another's heart, cannot penetrate the blank stares of those who would murder innocents with abstract, serene satisfaction.

What I do know is that history returned that day with a vengeance; that, in fact, as Faulkner reminds us, the past is never dead and buried—it isn't even past. This collective history, this past, directly touches my own. Not merely because the bombs of Al Qaeda have marked, with an eerie precision, some of the landscapes of my life—the buildings and roads and faces of Nairobi, Bali, Manhattan; not merely because, as a consequence of 9/11, my name is an irresistible target of mocking websites from overzealous Republican operatives. But also because the underlying struggle—between worlds of plenty and worlds of want; between the modern and the ancient; between those who embrace our teeming, colliding, irksome diversity, while still insisting on a set of values that binds us together, and those who would seek, under whatever flag or slogan or sacred text, a certainty and simplification that justifies cruelty toward those not like us—is the struggle set forth, on a miniature scale, in this book.

I know, I have seen, the desperation and disorder of the powerless: how it twists the lives of children on the streets of Jakarta or Nairobi in much the same way as it does the lives of children on Chicago's



South Side, how narrow the path is for them between humiliation and untrammelled fury, how easily they slip into violence and despair. I know that the response of the powerful to this disorder—alternating as it does between a dull complacency and, when the disorder spills out of its proscribed confines, a steady, unthinking application of force, of longer prison sentences and more sophisticated military hardware—is inadequate to the task. I know that the hardening of lines, the embrace of fundamentalism and tribe, dooms us all.

And so what was a more interior, intimate effort on my part, to understand this struggle and to find my place in it, has converged with a broader public debate, a debate in which I am professionally engaged, one that will shape our lives and the lives of our children for many years to come.

The policy implications of all this are a topic for another book. Let me end instead on a more personal note. Most of the characters in this book remain a part of my life, albeit in varying degrees—a function of work, children, geography, and turns of fate.

The exception is my mother, whom we lost, with a brutal swiftness, to cancer a few months after this book was published.

She had spent the previous ten years doing what she loved. She traveled the world, working in the distant villages of Asia and Africa, helping women buy a sewing machine or a milk cow or an education that might give them a foothold in the world's economy. She gathered friends from high and low, took long walks, stared at the moon, and foraged through the local markets of Delhi or Marrakesh for some trifle, a scarf or stone carving that would make her laugh or please the eye. She wrote reports, read novels, pestered her children, and dreamed of grandchildren.

We saw each other frequently, our bond unbroken. During the writing of this book, she would read the drafts, correcting stories that I had misunderstood, careful not to comment on my characterizations of her but quick to explain or defend the less flattering aspects



of my father's character. She managed her illness with grace and good humor, and she helped my sister and me push on with our lives, despite our dread, our denials, our sudden constrictions of the heart.

I think sometimes that had I known she would not survive her illness, I might have written a different book—less a meditation on the absent parent, more a celebration of the one who was the single constant in my life. In my daughters I see her every day, her joy, her capacity for wonder. I won't try to describe how deeply I mourn her passing still. I know that she was the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known, and that what is best in me I owe to her.



## INTRODUCTION

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I ORIGINALLY INTENDED A VERY different book. The opportunity to write it first arose while I was still in law school, after my election as the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*, a legal periodical largely unknown outside the profession. A burst of publicity followed that election, including several newspaper articles that testified less to my modest accomplishments than to Harvard Law School's peculiar place in the American mythology, as well as America's hunger for any optimistic sign from the racial front—a morsel of proof that, after all, some progress has been made. A few publishers called, and I, imagining myself to have something original to say about the current state of race relations, agreed to take off a year after graduation and put my thoughts to paper.

In that last year of law school, I began to organize in my mind, with a frightening confidence, just how the book would proceed. There would be an essay on the limits of civil rights litigation in bringing about racial equality, thoughts on the meaning of community and the restoration of public life through grassroots organizing, musings on affirmative action and Afrocentrism—the list of topics filled an entire page. I'd include personal anecdotes, to be sure, and analyze the sources of certain recurring emotions. But all in all it was



an intellectual journey that I imagined for myself, complete with maps and restpoints and a strict itinerary: the first section completed by March, the second submitted for revision in August. . . .

When I actually sat down and began to write, though, I found my mind pulled toward rockier shores. First longings leapt up to brush my heart. Distant voices appeared, and ebbed, and then appeared again. I remembered the stories that my mother and her parents told me as a child, the stories of a family trying to explain itself. I recalled my first year as a community organizer in Chicago and my awkward steps toward manhood. I listened to my grandmother, sitting under a mango tree as she braided my sister's hair, describing the father I had never truly known.

Compared to this flood of memories, all my well-ordered theories seemed insubstantial and premature. Still, I strongly resisted the idea of offering up my past in a book, a past that left me feeling exposed, even slightly ashamed. Not because that past is particularly painful or perverse but because it speaks to those aspects of myself that resist conscious choice and that—on the surface, at least—contradict the world I now occupy. After all, I'm thirty-three now; I work as a lawyer active in the social and political life of Chicago, a town that's accustomed to its racial wounds and prides itself on a certain lack of sentiment. If I've been able to fight off cynicism, I nevertheless like to think of myself as wise to the world, careful not to expect too much.

And yet what strikes me most when I think about the story of my family is a running strain of innocence, an innocence that seems unimaginable, even by the measures of childhood. My wife's cousin, only six years old, has already lost such innocence: A few weeks ago he reported to his parents that some of his first grade classmates had refused to play with him because of his dark, unblemished skin. Obviously his parents, born and raised in Chicago and Gary, lost their own innocence long ago, and although they aren't bitter—the two of



them being as strong and proud and resourceful as any parents I know—one hears the pain in their voices as they begin to have second thoughts about having moved out of the city into a mostly white suburb, a move they made to protect their son from the possibility of being caught in a gang shooting and the certainty of attending an underfunded school.

They know too much, we have all seen too much, to take my parents' brief union—a black man and white woman, an African and an American—at face value. As a result, some people have a hard time taking me at face value. When people who don't know me well, black or white, discover my background (and it is usually a discovery, for I ceased to advertise my mother's race at the age of twelve or thirteen, when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites), I see the split-second adjustments they have to make, the searching of my eyes for some telltale sign. They no longer know who I am. Privately, they guess at my troubled heart, I suppose—the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds. And if I were to explain that no, the tragedy is not mine, or at least not mine alone, it is yours, sons and daughters of Plymouth Rock and Ellis Island, it is yours, children of Africa, it is the tragedy of both my wife's six-year-old cousin and his white first grade classmates, so that you need not guess at what troubles me, it's on the nightly news for all to see, and that if we could acknowledge at least that much then the tragic cycle begins to break down . . . well, I suspect that I sound incurably naive, wedded to lost hopes, like those Communists who peddle their newspapers on the fringes of various college towns. Or worse, I sound like I'm trying to hide from myself.

I don't fault people their suspicions. I learned long ago to distrust my childhood and the stories that shaped it. It was only many years later, after I had sat at my father's grave and spoken to him through Africa's red soil, that I could circle back and evaluate these early stories





for myself. Or, more accurately, it was only then that I understood that I had spent much of my life trying to rewrite these stories, plugging up holes in the narrative, accommodating unwelcome details, projecting individual choices against the blind sweep of history, all in the hope of extracting some granite slab of truth upon which my unborn children can firmly stand.

At some point, then, in spite of a stubborn desire to protect myself from scrutiny, in spite of the periodic impulse to abandon the entire project, what has found its way onto these pages is a record of a personal, interior journey—a boy’s search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American. The result is autobiographical, although whenever someone’s asked me over the course of these last three years just what the book is about, I’ve usually avoided such a description. An autobiography promises feats worthy of record, conversations with famous people, a central role in important events. There is none of that here. At the very least, an autobiography implies a summing up, a certain closure, that hardly suits someone of my years, still busy charting his way through the world. I can’t even hold up my experience as being somehow representative of the black American experience (“After all, you don’t come from an underprivileged background,” a Manhattan publisher helpfully points out to me); indeed, learning to accept that particular truth—that I can embrace my black brothers and sisters, whether in this country or in Africa, and affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for, all our various struggles—is part of what this book’s about.

Finally, there are the dangers inherent in any autobiographical work: the temptation to color events in ways favorable to the writer, the tendency to overestimate the interest one’s experiences hold for others, selective lapses of memory. Such hazards are only magnified when the writer lacks the wisdom of age; the distance that can cure one of certain vanities. I can’t say that I’ve avoided all, or any, of these



hazards successfully. Although much of this book is based on contemporaneous journals or the oral histories of my family, the dialogue is necessarily an approximation of what was actually said or relayed to me. For the sake of compression, some of the characters that appear are composites of people I've known, and some events appear out of precise chronology. With the exception of my family and a handful of public figures, the names of most characters have been changed for the sake of their privacy.

Whatever the label that attaches to this book—autobiography, memoir, family history, or something else—what I've tried to do is write an honest account of a particular province of my life. When I've strayed, I've been able to look to my agent, Jane Dystel, for her faith and tenacity; to my editor, Henry Ferris, for his gentle but firm correctives; to Ruth Fecych and the staff at Times Books, for their enthusiasm and attention in shepherding the manuscript through its various stages; to my friends, especially Robert Fisher, for their generous readings; and to my wonderful wife, Michelle, for her wit, grace, candor, and unerring ability to encourage my best impulses.

It is to my family, though—my mother, my grandparents, my siblings, stretched across oceans and continents—that I owe the deepest gratitude and to whom I dedicate this book. Without their constant love and support, without their willingness to let me sing their song and their toleration of the occasional wrong note, I could never have hoped to finish. If nothing else, I hope that the love and respect I feel for them shines through on every page.



PART ONE

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*Origins*



## CHAPTER ONE

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A FEW MONTHS AFTER MY twenty-first birthday, a stranger called to give me the news. I was living in New York at the time, on Ninety-fourth between Second and First, part of that unnamed, shifting border between East Harlem and the rest of Manhattan. It was an uninviting block, treeless and barren, lined with soot-colored walk-ups that cast heavy shadows for most of the day. The apartment was small, with slanting floors and irregular heat and a buzzer downstairs that didn't work, so that visitors had to call ahead from a pay phone at the corner gas station, where a black Doberman the size of a wolf paced through the night in vigilant patrol, its jaws clamped around an empty beer bottle.

None of this concerned me much, for I didn't get many visitors. I was impatient in those days, busy with work and unrealized plans, and prone to see other people as unnecessary distractions. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate company exactly. I enjoyed exchanging Spanish pleasantries with my mostly Puerto Rican neighbors, and on my way back from classes I'd usually stop to talk to the boys who hung out on the stoop all summer long about the Knicks or the gunshots they'd heard the night before. When the weather was good, my roommate and I might sit out on the fire escape to smoke cigarettes



and study the dusk washing blue over the city, or watch white people from the better neighborhoods nearby walk their dogs down our block to let the animals shit on our curbs—“Scoop the poop, you bastards!” my roommate would shout with impressive rage, and we’d laugh at the faces of both master and beast, grim and unapologetic as they hunkered down to do the deed.

I enjoyed such moments—but only in brief. If the talk began to wander, or cross the border into familiarity, I would soon find reason to excuse myself. I had grown too comfortable in my solitude, the safest place I knew.

I remember there was an old man living next door who seemed to share my disposition. He lived alone, a gaunt, stooped figure who wore a heavy black overcoat and a misshapen fedora on those rare occasions when he left his apartment. Once in a while I’d run into him on his way back from the store, and I would offer to carry his groceries up the long flight of stairs. He would look at me and shrug, and we would begin our ascent, stopping at each landing so that he could catch his breath. When we finally arrived at his apartment, I’d carefully set the bags down on the floor and he would offer a courtly nod of acknowledgment before shuffling inside and closing the latch. Not a single word would pass between us, and not once did he ever thank me for my efforts.

The old man’s silence impressed me; I thought him a kindred spirit. Later, my roommate would find him crumpled up on the third-floor landing, his eyes wide open, his limbs stiff and curled up like a baby’s. A crowd gathered; a few of the women crossed themselves, and the smaller children whispered with excitement. Eventually the paramedics arrived to take away the body and the police let themselves into the old man’s apartment. It was neat, almost empty—a chair, a desk, the faded portrait of a woman with heavy eyebrows and a gentle smile set atop the mantelpiece. Somebody opened the refrigerator and found close to a thousand dollars in small bills rolled



up inside wads of old newspaper and carefully arranged behind mayonnaise and pickle jars.

The loneliness of the scene affected me, and for the briefest moment I wished that I had learned the old man's name. Then, almost immediately, I regretted my desire, along with its companion grief. I felt as if an understanding had been broken between us—as if, in that barren room, the old man was whispering an untold history, telling me things I preferred not to hear.

It must have been a month or so later, on a cold, dreary November morning, the sun faint behind a gauze of clouds, that the other call came. I was in the middle of making myself breakfast, with coffee on the stove and two eggs in the skillet, when my roommate handed me the phone. The line was thick with static.

“Barry? Barry, is this you?”

“Yes. . . . Who's this?”

“Yes, Barry . . . this is your Aunt Jane. In Nairobi. Can you hear me?”

“I'm sorry—who did you say you were?”

“Aunt Jane. Listen, Barry, your father is dead. He is killed in a car accident. Hello? Can you hear me? I say, your father is dead. Barry, please call your uncle in Boston and tell him. I can't talk now, okay, Barry. I will try to call you again. . . .”

That was all. The line cut off, and I sat down on the couch, smelling eggs burn in the kitchen, staring at cracks in the plaster, trying to measure my loss.

At the time of his death, my father remained a myth to me, both more and less than a man. He had left Hawaii back in 1963, when I was only two years old, so that as a child I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told. They all had their favorites, each one seamless, burnished smooth from repeated use. I can still picture Gramps leaning back in his old stuffed chair after dinner, sipping whiskey and cleaning his teeth with the cellophane



from his cigarette pack, recounting the time that my father almost threw a man off the Pali Lookout because of a pipe. . . .

“See, your mom and dad decided to take this friend of his sight-seeing around the island. So they drove up to the Lookout, and Barack was probably on the wrong side of the road the whole way over there—”

“Your father was a terrible driver,” my mother explains to me. “He’d end up on the left-hand side, the way the British drive, and if you said something he’d just huff about silly American rules—”

“Well, this particular time they arrived in one piece, and they got out and stood at the railing to admire the view. And Barack, he was puffing away on this pipe that I’d given him for his birthday, pointing out all the sights with the stem, like a sea captain—”

“Your father was really proud of this pipe,” my mother interrupts again. “He’d smoke it all night while he studied, and sometimes—”

“Look, Ann, do you want to tell the story or are you going to let me finish?”

“Sorry, Dad. Go ahead.”

“Anyway, this poor fella—he was another African student, wasn’t he? Fresh off the boat. This poor kid must’ve been impressed with the way Barack was holding forth with this pipe, ’cause he asked if he could give it a try. Your dad thought about it for a minute, and finally agreed, and as soon as the fella took his first puff, he started coughing up a fit. Coughed so hard that the pipe slipped out of his hand and dropped over the railing, a hundred feet down the face of the cliff.”

Gramps stops to take another nip from his flask before continuing. “Well, now, your dad was gracious enough to wait until his friend stopped coughing before he told him to climb over the railing and bring the pipe back. The man took one peek down this ninety-degree incline and told Barack that he’d buy him a replacement—”

“Quite sensibly,” Toot says from the kitchen. (We call my grand-



mother Tutu, Toot for short; it means “grandparent” in Hawaiian, for she decided on the day I was born that she was still too young to be called Granny.) Gramps scowls but decides to ignore her.

“—but Barack was adamant about getting *his* pipe back, because it was a gift and couldn’t be replaced. So the fella took another look, and shook his head again, and that’s when your dad picked him clear off the ground and started dangling him over the railing!”

Gramps lets out a hoot and gives his knee a jovial slap. As he laughs, I imagine myself looking up at my father, dark against the brilliant sun, the transgressor’s arms flailing about as he’s held aloft. A fearsome vision of justice.

“He wasn’t really holding him over the railing, Dad,” my mother says, looking to me with concern, but Gramps takes another sip of whiskey and plows forward.

“At this point, other people were starting to stare, and your mother was begging Barack to stop. I guess Barack’s friend was just holding his breath and saying his prayers. Anyway, after a couple of minutes, your dad set the man back down on his feet, patted him on the back, and suggested, calm as you please, that they all go find themselves a beer. And don’t you know, that’s how your dad acted for the rest of the tour—like nothing happened. Of course, your mother was still pretty upset when they got home. In fact, she was barely talking to your dad. Barack wasn’t helping matters any, either, ’cause when your mother tried to tell us what had happened he just shook his head and started to laugh. ‘Relax, Anna,’ he said to her—your dad had this deep baritone, see, and this British accent.” My grandfather tucks his chin into his neck at this point, to capture the full effect. “ ‘Relax, Anna,’ he said. ‘I only wanted to teach the chap a lesson about the proper care of other people’s property!’ ”

Gramps would start to laugh again until he started to cough, and Toot would mutter under her breath that she supposed it was a good thing





that my father had realized that dropping the pipe had just been an accident because who knows what might have happened otherwise, and my mother would roll her eyes at me and say they were exaggerating.

“Your father can be a bit domineering,” my mother would admit with a hint of a smile. “But it’s just that he is basically a very honest person. That makes him uncompromising sometimes.”

She preferred a gentler portrait of my father. She would tell the story of when he arrived to accept his Phi Beta Kappa key in his favorite outfit—jeans and an old knit shirt with a leopard-print pattern. “Nobody told him it was this big honor, so he walked in and found everyone standing around this elegant room dressed in tuxedos. The only time I ever saw him embarrassed.”

And Gramps, suddenly thoughtful, would start nodding to himself “It’s a fact, Bar,” he would say. “Your dad could handle just about any situation, and that made everybody like him. Remember the time he had to sing at the International Music Festival? He’d agreed to sing some African songs, but when he arrived it turned out to be this big to-do, and the woman who performed just before him was a semi-professional singer, a Hawaiian gal with a full band to back her up. Anyone else would have stopped right there, you know, and explained that there had been a mistake. But not Barack. He got up and started singing in front of this big crowd—which is no easy feat, let me tell you—and he wasn’t great, but he was so sure of himself that before you knew it he was getting as much applause as anybody.”

My grandfather would shake his head and get out of his chair to flip on the TV set. “Now there’s something you can learn from your dad,” he would tell me. “*Confidence*. The secret to a man’s success.”

That’s how all the stories went—compact, apocryphal, told in rapid succession in the course of one evening, then packed away for months, sometimes years, in my family’s memory. Like the few photographs of my father that remained in the house, old black-and-white studio



prints that I might run across while rummaging through the closets in search of Christmas ornaments or an old snorkle set. At the point where my own memories begin, my mother had already begun a courtship with the man who would become her second husband, and I sensed without explanation why the photographs had to be stored away. But once in a while, sitting on the floor with my mother, the smell of dust and mothballs rising from the crumbling album, I would stare at my father's likeness—the dark laughing face, the prominent forehead and thick glasses that made him appear older than his years—and listen as the events of his life tumbled into a single narrative.

He was an African, I would learn, a Kenyan of the Luo tribe, born on the shores of Lake Victoria in a place called Alego. The village was poor, but his father—my other grandfather, Hussein Onyango Obama—had been a prominent farmer, an elder of the tribe, a medicine man with healing powers. My father grew up herding his father's goats and attending the local school, set up by the British colonial administration, where he had shown great promise. He eventually won a scholarship to study in Nairobi; and then, on the eve of Kenyan independence, he had been selected by Kenyan leaders and American sponsors to attend a university in the United States, joining the first large wave of Africans to be sent forth to master Western technology and bring it back to forge a new, modern Africa.

In 1959, at the age of twenty-three, he arrived at the University of Hawaii as that institution's first African student. He studied econometrics, worked with unsurpassed concentration, and graduated in three years at the top of his class. His friends were legion, and he helped organize the International Students Association, of which he became the first president. In a Russian language course, he met an awkward, shy American girl, only eighteen, and they fell in love. The girl's parents, wary at first, were won over by his charm and intellect; the young couple married, and she bore them a son, to whom he



bequeathed his name. He won another scholarship—this time to pursue his Ph.D. at Harvard—but not the money to take his new family with him. A separation occurred, and he returned to Africa to fulfill his promise to the continent. The mother and child stayed behind, but the bond of love survived the distances. . . .

There the album would close, and I would wander off content, swaddled in a tale that placed me in the center of a vast and orderly universe. Even in the abridged version that my mother and grandparents offered, there were many things I didn't understand. But I rarely asked for the details that might resolve the meaning of "Ph.D." or "colonialism," or locate Alego on a map. Instead, the path of my father's life occupied the same terrain as a book my mother once bought for me, a book called *Origins*, a collection of creation tales from around the world, stories of Genesis and the tree where man was born, Prometheus and the gift of fire, the tortoise of Hindu legend that floated in space, supporting the weight of the world on its back. Later, when I became more familiar with the narrower path to happiness to be found in television and the movies, I'd become troubled by questions. What supported the tortoise? Why did an omnipotent God let a snake cause such grief? Why didn't my father return? But at the age of five or six I was satisfied to leave these distant mysteries intact, each story self-contained and as true as the next, to be carried off into peaceful dreams.

That my father looked nothing like the people around me—that he was black as pitch, my mother white as milk—barely registered in my mind.

In fact, I can recall only one story that dealt explicitly with the subject of race; as I got older, it would be repeated more often, as if it captured the essence of the morality tale that my father's life had become. According to the story, after long hours of study, my father had joined my grandfather and several other friends at a local Waikiki bar. Everyone was in a festive mood, eating and drinking to the



sounds of a slack-key guitar, when a white man abruptly announced to the bartender, loudly enough for everyone to hear, that he shouldn't have to drink good liquor "next to a nigger." The room fell quiet and people turned to my father, expecting a fight. Instead, my father stood up, walked over to the man, smiled, and proceeded to lecture him about the folly of bigotry, the promise of the American dream, and the universal rights of man. "This fella felt so bad when Barack was finished," Gramps would say, "that he reached into his pocket and gave Barack a hundred dollars on the spot. Paid for all our drinks and puu-puus for the rest of the night—and your dad's rent for the rest of the month."

By the time I was a teenager, I'd grown skeptical of this story's veracity and had set it aside with the rest. Until I received a phone call, many years later, from a Japanese-American man who said he had been my father's classmate in Hawaii and now taught at a mid-western university. He was very gracious, a bit embarrassed by his own impulsiveness; he explained that he had seen an interview of me in his local paper and that the sight of my father's name had brought back a rush of memories. Then, during the course of our conversation, he repeated the same story that my grandfather had told, about the white man who had tried to purchase my father's forgiveness. "I'll never forget that," the man said to me over the phone; and in his voice I heard the same note that I'd heard from Gramps so many years before, that note of disbelief—and hope.

*Miscegenation.* The word is humpbacked, ugly, portending a monstrous outcome: like *antebellum* or *octoroon*, it evokes images of another era, a distant world of horsewhips and flames, dead magnolias and crumbling porticos. And yet it wasn't until 1967—the year I celebrated my sixth birthday and Jimi Hendrix performed at Monterey, three years after Dr. King received the Nobel Peace Prize, a time when America had already begun to weary of black demands for equality, the problem of



discrimination presumably solved—that the Supreme Court of the United States would get around to telling the state of Virginia that its ban on interracial marriages violated the Constitution. In 1960, the year that my parents were married, *miscegenation* still described a felony in over half the states in the Union. In many parts of the South, my father could have been strung up from a tree for merely looking at my mother the wrong way; in the most sophisticated of northern cities, the hostile stares, the whispers, might have driven a woman in my mother's predicament into a back-alley abortion—or at the very least to a distant convent that could arrange for adoption. Their very image together would have been considered lurid and perverse, a handy retort to the handful of softheaded liberals who supported a civil rights agenda.

Sure—but would you let your daughter marry one?

The fact that my grandparents had answered yes to this question, no matter how grudgingly, remains an enduring puzzle to me. There was nothing in their background to predict such a response, no New England transcendentalists or wild-eyed socialists in their family tree. True, Kansas had fought on the Union side of the Civil War; Gramps liked to remind me that various strands of the family contained ardent abolitionists. If asked, Toot would turn her head in profile to show off her beaked nose, which, along with a pair of jet-black eyes, was offered as proof of Cherokee blood.

But an old, sepia-toned photograph on the bookshelf spoke most eloquently of their roots. It showed Toot's grandparents, of Scottish and English stock, standing in front of a ramshackle homestead, unsmiling and dressed in coarse wool, their eyes squinting at the sun-baked, flinty life that stretched out before them. Theirs were the faces of American Gothic, the WASP bloodline's poorer cousins, and in their eyes one could see truths that I would have to learn later as facts: that Kansas had entered the Union free only after a violent precursor to the Civil War, the battle in which John Brown's sword tasted first



blood; that while one of my great-great-grandfathers, Christopher Columbus Clark, had been a decorated Union soldier, his wife's mother was rumored to have been a second cousin of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy; that although another distant ancestor had indeed been a full-blooded Cherokee, such lineage was a source of considerable shame to Toot's mother, who blanched whenever someone mentioned the subject and hoped to carry the secret to her grave.

That was the world in which my grandparents had been raised, the dab-smack, landlocked center of the country, a place where decency and endurance and the pioneer spirit were joined at the hip with conformity and suspicion and the potential for unblinking cruelty. They had grown up less than twenty miles away from each other—my grandmother in Augusta, my grandfather in El Dorado, towns too small to warrant boldface on a road map—and the childhoods they liked to recall for my benefit portrayed small-town, Depression-era America in all its innocent glory: Fourth of July parades and the picture shows on the side of a barn; fireflies in a jar and the taste of vine-ripe tomatoes, sweet as apples; dust storms and hailstorms and classrooms filled with farm boys who got sewn into their woolen underwear at the beginning of winter and stank like pigs as the months wore on.

Even the trauma of bank failures and farm foreclosures seemed romantic when spun through the loom of my grandparents' memories, a time when hardship, the great leveler that had brought people closer together, was shared by all. So you had to listen carefully to recognize the subtle hierarchies and unspoken codes that had policed their early lives, the distinctions of people who don't have a lot and live in the middle of nowhere. It had to do with something called respectability—there were respectable people and not-so-respectable people—and although you didn't have to be rich to be respectable, you sure had to work harder at it if you weren't.

Toot's family was respectable. Her father held a steady job all



through the Depression, managing an oil lease for Standard Oil. Her mother had taught normal school before the children were born. The family kept their house spotless and ordered Great Books through the mail; they read the Bible but generally shunned the tent revival circuit, preferring a straight-backed form of Methodism that valued reason over passion and temperance over both.

My grandfather's station was more troublesome. Nobody was sure why—the grandparents who had raised him and his older brother weren't very well off, but they were decent, God-fearing Baptists, supporting themselves with work in the oil rigs around Wichita. Somehow, though, Gramps had turned out a bit wild. Some of the neighbors pointed to his mother's suicide: it was Stanley, after all, then only eight years old, who had found her body. Other, less charitable, souls would simply shake their heads: The boy takes after his philandering father, they would opine, the undoubtable cause of the mother's unfortunate demise.

Whatever the reason, Gramps's reputation was apparently well deserved. By the age of fifteen he'd been thrown out of high school for punching the principal in the nose. For the next three years he lived off odd jobs, hopping rail cars to Chicago, then California, then back again, dabbling in moonshine, cards, and women. As he liked to tell it, he knew his way around Wichita, where both his and Toot's families had moved by that time, and Toot doesn't contradict him; certainly, Toot's parents believed the stories that they'd heard about the young man and strongly disapproved of the budding courtship. The first time Toot brought Gramps over to her house to meet the family, her father took one look at my grandfather's black, slicked-back hair and his perpetual wise-guy grin and offered his unvarnished assessment.

“He looks like a wop.”

My grandmother didn't care. To her, a home economics major fresh out of high school and tired of respectability, my grandfather



must have cut a dashing figure. I sometimes imagine them in every American town in those years before the war, him in baggy pants and a starched undershirt, brim hat cocked back on his head, offering a cigarette to this smart-talking girl with too much red lipstick and hair dyed blond and legs nice enough to model hosiery for the local department store. He's telling her about the big cities, the endless highway, his imminent escape from the empty, dust-ridden plains, where big plans mean a job as a bank manager and entertainment means an ice-cream soda and a Sunday matinee, where fear and lack of imagination choke your dreams so that you already know on the day that you're born just where you'll die and who it is that'll bury you. He won't end up like that, my grandfather insists; he has dreams, he has plans; he will infect my grandmother with the great peripatetic itch that had brought both their forebears across the Atlantic and half of a continent so many years before.

They eloped just in time for the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and my grandfather enlisted. And at this point the story quickens in my mind like one of those old movies that show a wall calendar's pages peeled back faster and faster by invisible hands, the headlines of Hitler and Churchill and Roosevelt and Normandy spinning wildly to the drone of bombing attacks, the voice of Edward R. Murrow and the BBC. I watch as my mother is born at the army base where Gramps is stationed; my grandmother is Rosie the Riveter, working on a bomber assembly line; my grandfather sloshes around in the mud of France, part of Patton's army.

Gramps returned from the war never having seen real combat, and the family headed to California, where he enrolled at Berkeley under the GI bill. But the classroom couldn't contain his ambitions, his restlessness, and so the family moved again, first back to Kansas, then through a series of small Texas towns, then finally to Seattle, where they stayed long enough for my mother to finish high school. Gramps worked as a furniture salesman; they bought a house and found them-





selves bridge partners. They were pleased that my mother proved bright in school, although when she was offered early admission into the University of Chicago, my grandfather forbade her to go, deciding that she was still too young to be living on her own.

And that's where the story might have stopped: a home, a family, a respectable life. Except something must have still been gnawing at my grandfather's heart. I can imagine him standing at the edge of the Pacific, his hair prematurely gray, his tall, lanky frame bulkier now, looking out at the horizon until he could see it curve and still smelling, deep in his nostrils, the oil rigs and corn husks and hard-bitten lives that he thought he had left far behind. So that when the manager of the furniture company where he worked happened to mention that a new store was about to open in Honolulu, that business prospects seemed limitless there, what with statehood right around the corner, he would rush home that same day and talk my grandmother into selling their house and packing up yet again, to embark on the final leg of their journey, west, toward the setting sun. . . .

He would always be like that, my grandfather, always searching for that new start, always running away from the familiar. By the time the family arrived in Hawaii, his character would have been fully formed, I think—the generosity and eagerness to please, the awkward mix of sophistication and provincialism, the rawness of emotion that could make him at once tactless and easily bruised. His was an American character, one typical of men of his generation, men who embraced the notion of freedom and individualism and the open road without always knowing its price, and whose enthusiasms could as easily lead to the cowardice of McCarthyism as to the heroics of World War II. Men who were both dangerous and promising precisely because of their fundamental innocence; men prone, in the end, to disappointment.

In 1960, though, my grandfather had not yet been tested; the disappointments would come later, and even then they would come



slowly, without the violence that might have changed him, for better or worse. In the back of his mind he had come to consider himself as something of a freethinker—bohemian, even. He wrote poetry on occasion, listened to jazz, counted a number of Jews he'd met in the furniture business as his closest friends. In his only skirmish into organized religion, he would enroll the family in the local Unitarian Universalist congregation; he liked the idea that Unitarians drew on the scriptures of all the great religions (“It’s like you get five religions in one,” he would say). Toot would eventually dissuade him of his views on the church (“For Christ’s sake, Stanley, religion’s not supposed to be like buying breakfast cereal!”), but if my grandmother was more skeptical by nature, and disagreed with Gramps on some of his more outlandish notions, her own stubborn independence, her own insistence on thinking something through for herself, generally brought them into rough alignment.

All this marked them as vaguely liberal, although their ideas would never congeal into anything like a firm ideology; in this, too, they were American. And so, when my mother came home one day and mentioned a friend she had met at the University of Hawaii, an African student named Barack, their first impulse was to invite him over for dinner. The poor kid’s probably lonely, Gramps would have thought, so far away from home. Better take a look at him, Toot would have said to herself. When my father arrived at the door, Gramps might have been immediately struck by the African’s resemblance to Nat King Cole, one of his favorite singers; I imagine him asking my father if he can sing, not understanding the mortified look on my mother’s face. Gramps is probably too busy telling one of his jokes or arguing with Toot over how to cook the steaks to notice my mother reach out and squeeze the smooth, sinewy hand beside hers. Toot notices, but she’s polite enough to bite her lip and offer dessert; her instincts warn her against making a scene. When the evening is over, they’ll both remark on how intelligent the young man seems, so



dignified, with the measured gestures, the graceful draping of one leg over another—and how about that accent!

But would they let their daughter *marry* one?

We don't know yet; the story to this point doesn't explain enough. The truth is that, like most white Americans at the time, they had never really given black people much thought. Jim Crow had made its way north into Kansas well before my grandparents were born, but at least around Wichita it appeared in its more informal, genteel form, without much of the violence that pervaded the Deep South. The same unspoken codes that governed life among whites kept contact between the races to a minimum; when black people appear at all in the Kansas of my grandparents' memories, the images are fleeting—black men who come around the oil fields once in a while, searching for work as hired hands; black women taking in the white folks' laundry or helping clean white homes. Blacks are there but not there, like Sam the piano player or Beulah the maid or Amos and Andy on the radio—shadowy, silent presences that elicit neither passion nor fear.

It wasn't until my family moved to Texas, after the war, that questions of race began to intrude on their lives. During his first week on the job there, Gramps received some friendly advice from his fellow furniture salesman about serving black and Mexican customers: "If the coloreds want to look at the merchandise, they need to come after hours and arrange for their own delivery." Later, at the bank where she worked, Toot made the acquaintance of the janitor, a tall and dignified black World War II vet she remembers only as Mr. Reed. While the two of them chatted in the hallway one day, a secretary in the office stormed up and hissed that Toot should never, ever, "call no nigger 'Mister.'" Not long afterward, Toot would find Mr. Reed in a corner of the building weeping quietly to himself. When she asked him what was wrong, he straightened his back, dried his eyes, and responded with a question of his own.

"What have we ever done to be treated so mean?"



My grandmother didn't have an answer that day, but the question lingered in her mind, one that she and Gramps would sometimes discuss once my mother had gone to bed. They decided that Toot would keep calling Mr. Reed "Mister," although she understood, with a mixture of relief and sadness, the careful distance that the janitor now maintained whenever they passed each other in the halls. Gramps began to decline invitations from his coworkers to go out for a beer, telling them he had to get home to keep the wife happy. They grew inward, skittish, filled with vague apprehension, as if they were permanent strangers in town.

This bad new air hit my mother the hardest. She was eleven or twelve by this time, an only child just growing out of a bad case of asthma. The illness, along with the numerous moves, had made her something of a loner—cheerful and easy-tempered but prone to bury her head in a book or wander off on solitary walks—and Toot began to worry that this latest move had only made her daughter's eccentricities more pronounced. My mother made few friends at her new school. She was teased mercilessly for her name, Stanley Ann (one of Gramps's less judicious ideas—he had wanted a son). Stanley Steamer, they called her. Stan the Man. When Toot got home from work, she would usually find my mother alone in the front yard, swinging her legs off the porch or lying in the grass, pulled into some solitary world of her own.

Except for one day. There was that one hot, windless day when Toot came home to find a crowd of children gathered outside the picket fence that surrounded their house. As Toot drew closer, she could make out the sounds of mirthless laughter, the contortions of rage and disgust on the children's faces. The children were chanting, in a high-pitched, alternating rhythm:

"Nigger lover!"

"Dirty Yankee!"

"Nigger lover!"



The children scattered when they saw Toot, but not before one of the boys had sent the stone in his hand sailing over the fence. Toot's eyes followed the stone's trajectory as it came to rest at the foot of a tree. And there she saw the cause for all the excitement: my mother and a black girl of about the same age lying side by side on their stomachs in the grass, their skirts gathered up above their knees, their toes dug into the ground, their heads propped up on their hands in front of one of my mother's books. From a distance the two girls seemed perfectly serene beneath the leafy shade. It was only when Toot opened the gate that she realized the black girl was shaking and my mother's eyes shone with tears. The girls remained motionless, paralyzed in their fear, until Toot finally leaned down and put her hands on both their heads.

"If you two are going to play," she said, "then for goodness sake, go on inside. Come on. Both of you." She picked up my mother and reached for the other girl's hand, but before she could say anything more, the girl was in a full sprint, her long legs like a whippet's as she vanished down the street.

Gramps was beside himself when he heard what had happened. He interrogated my mother, wrote down names. The next day he took the morning off from work to visit the school principal. He personally called the parents of some of the offending children to give them a piece of his mind. And from every adult that he spoke to, he received the same response:

"You best talk to your daughter, Mr. Dunham. White girls don't play with coloreds in this town."

It's hard to know how much weight to give to these episodes, what permanent allegiances were made or broken, or whether they stand out only in the light of subsequent events. Whenever he spoke to me about it, Gramps would insist that the family left Texas in part because of their discomfort with such racism. Toot would be more



circumspect; once, when we were alone, she told me that they had moved from Texas only because Gramps wasn't doing particularly well on his job, and because a friend in Seattle had promised him something better. According to her, the word *racism* wasn't even in their vocabulary back then. "Your grandfather and I just figured we should treat people decently, Bar. That's all."

She's wise that way, my grandmother, suspicious of overwrought sentiments or overblown claims, content with common sense. Which is why I tend to trust her account of events; it corresponds to what I know about my grandfather, his tendency to rewrite his history to conform with the image he wished for himself.

And yet I don't entirely dismiss Gramps's recollection of events as a convenient bit of puffery, another act of white revisionism. I can't, precisely because I know how strongly Gramps believed in his fictions, how badly he wanted them to be true, even if he didn't always know how to make them so. After Texas I suspect that black people became a part of these fictions of his, the narrative that worked its way through his dreams. The condition of the black race, their pain, their wounds, would in his mind become merged with his own: the absent father and the hint of scandal, a mother who had gone away, the cruelty of other children, the realization that he was no fair-haired boy—that he looked like a "wop." Racism was part of that past, his instincts told him, part of convention and respectability and status, the smirks and whispers and gossip that had kept him on the outside looking in.

Those instincts count for something, I think; for many white people of my grandparents' generation and background, the instincts ran in an opposite direction, the direction of the mob. And although Gramps's relationship with my mother was already strained by the time they reached Hawaii—she would never quite forgive his instability and often-violent temper and would grow ashamed of his crude, ham-fisted manners—it was this desire of his to obliterate the



past, this confidence in the possibility of remaking the world from whole cloth, that proved to be his most lasting patrimony. Whether Gramps realized it or not, the sight of his daughter with a black man offered at some deep unexplored level a window into his own heart.

Not that such self-knowledge, even if accessible, would have made my mother's engagement any easier for him to swallow. In fact, how and when the marriage occurred remains a bit murky, a bill of particulars that I've never quite had the courage to explore. There's no record of a real wedding, a cake, a ring, a giving away of the bride. No families were in attendance; it's not even clear that people back in Kansas were fully informed. Just a small civil ceremony, a justice of the peace. The whole thing seems so fragile in retrospect, so haphazard. And perhaps that's how my grandparents intended it to be, a trial that would pass, just a matter of time, so long as they maintained a stiff upper lip and didn't do anything drastic.

If so, they miscalculated not only my mother's quiet determination but also the sway of their own emotions. First the baby arrived, eight pounds, two ounces, with ten toes and ten fingers and hungry for food. What in the heck were they supposed to do?

Then time and place began to conspire, transforming potential misfortune into something tolerable, even a source of pride. Sharing a few beers with my father, Gramps might listen to his new son-in-law sound off about politics or the economy, about far-off places like Whitehall or the Kremlin, and imagine himself seeing into the future. He would begin to read the newspapers more carefully, finding early reports of America's newfound integrationist creed, and decide in his mind that the world was shrinking, sympathies changing; that the family from Wichita had in fact moved to the forefront of Kennedy's New Frontier and Dr. King's magnificent dream. How could America send men into space and still keep its black citizens in bondage? One of my earliest memories is of sitting on my grandfather's shoulders as the astronauts from one of the Apollo missions



arrived at Hickam Air Force Base after a successful splashdown. I remember the astronauts, in aviator glasses, as being far away, barely visible through the portal of an isolation chamber. But Gramps would always swear that one of the astronauts waved just at me and that I waved back. It was part of the story he told himself. With his black son-in-law and his brown grandson, Gramps had entered the space age.

And what better port for setting off on this new adventure than Hawaii, the Union's newest member? Even now, with the state's population quadrupled, with Waikiki jammed wall to wall with fast-food emporiums and pornographic video stores and subdivisions marching relentlessly into every fold of green hill, I can retrace the first steps I took as a child and be stunned by the beauty of the islands. The trembling blue plane of the Pacific. The moss-covered cliffs and the cool rush of Manoa Falls, with its ginger blossoms and high canopies filled with the sound of invisible birds. The North Shore's thunderous waves, crumbling as if in a slow-motion reel. The shadows off Pali's peaks; the sultry, scented air.

Hawaii! To my family, newly arrived in 1959, it must have seemed as if the earth itself, weary of stampeding armies and bitter civilization, had forced up this chain of emerald rock where pioneers from across the globe could populate the land with children bronzed by the sun. The ugly conquest of the native Hawaiians through aborted treaties and crippling disease brought by the missionaries; the carving up of rich volcanic soil by American companies for sugarcane and pineapple plantations; the indenturing system that kept Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino immigrants stooped sunup to sunset in these same fields; the internment of Japanese-Americans during the war—all this was recent history. And yet, by the time my family arrived, it had somehow vanished from collective memory, like morning mist that the sun burned away. There were too many races, with power among them too diffuse, to impose the mainland's rigid caste system;





and so few blacks that the most ardent segregationist could enjoy a vacation secure in the knowledge that race mixing in Hawaii had little to do with the established order back home.

Thus the legend was made of Hawaii as the one true melting pot, an experiment in racial harmony. My grandparents—especially Gramps, who came into contact with a range of people through his furniture business—threw themselves into the cause of mutual understanding. An old copy of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* still sits on his bookshelf. And growing up, I would hear in him the breezy, chatty style that he must have decided would help him with his customers. He would whip out pictures of the family and offer his life story to the nearest stranger; he would pump the hand of the mailman or make off-color jokes to our waitresses at restaurants.

Such antics used to make me cringe, but people more forgiving than a grandson appreciated his curiosity, so that while he never gained much influence, he made himself a wide circle of friends. A Japanese-American man who called himself Freddy and ran a small market near our house would save us the choicest cuts of aku for sashimi and give me rice candy with edible wrappers. Every so often, the Hawaiians who worked at my grandfather's store as deliverymen would invite us over for poi and roast pig, which Gramps gobbled down heartily (Toot would smoke cigarettes until she could get home and fix herself some scrambled eggs). Sometimes I would accompany Gramps to Ali'i Park, where he liked to play checkers with the old Filipino men who smoked cheap cigars and spat up betel-nut juice as if it were blood. And I still remember how, one early morning, hours before the sun rose, a Portuguese man to whom my grandfather had given a good deal on a sofa set took us out to spear fish off Kailua Bay. A gas lantern hung from the cabin on the small fishing boat as I watched the men dive into inky-black waters, the beams of their flashlights glowing beneath the surface until they emerged with a



large fish, iridescent and flopping at the end of one pole. Gramps told me its Hawaiian name, humu-humu-nuku-nuku-apuaa, which we repeated to each other the entire way home.

In such surroundings, my racial stock caused my grandparents few problems, and they quickly adopted the scornful attitude local residents took toward visitors who expressed such hang-ups. Sometimes when Gramps saw tourists watching me play in the sand, he would come up beside them and whisper, with appropriate reverence, that I was the great-grandson of King Kamehameha, Hawaii's first monarch. "I'm sure that your picture's in a thousand scrapbooks, Bar," he liked to tell me with a grin, "from Idaho to Maine." That particular story is ambiguous, I think; I see in it a strategy to avoid hard issues. And yet Gramps would just as readily tell another story, the one about the tourist who saw me swimming one day and, not knowing who she was talking to, commented that "swimming must just come naturally to these Hawaiians." To which he responded that that would be hard to figure, since "that boy happens to be my grandson, his mother is from Kansas, his father is from the interior of Kenya, and there isn't an ocean for miles in either damn place." For my grandfather, race wasn't something you really needed to worry about anymore; if ignorance still held fast in certain locales, it was safe to assume that the rest of the world would be catching up soon.

In the end I suppose that's what all the stories of my father were really about. They said less about the man himself than about the changes that had taken place in the people around him, the halting process by which my grandparents' racial attitudes had changed. The stories gave voice to a spirit that would grip the nation for that fleeting period between Kennedy's election and the passage of the Voting Rights Act: the seeming triumph of universalism over parochialism and narrow-mindedness, a bright new world where differences of race or culture would instruct and amuse and perhaps even ennoble. A useful fiction,



one that haunts me no less than it haunted my family, evoking as it does some lost Eden that extends beyond mere childhood.

There was only one problem: my father was missing. He had left paradise, and nothing that my mother or grandparents told me could obviate that single, unassailable fact. Their stories didn't tell me why he had left. They couldn't describe what it might have been like had he stayed. Like the janitor, Mr. Reed, or the black girl who churned up dust as she raced down a Texas road, my father became a prop in someone else's narrative. An attractive prop—the alien figure with the heart of gold, the mysterious stranger who saves the town and wins the girl—but a prop nonetheless.

I don't really blame my mother or grandparents for this. My father may have preferred the image they created for him—indeed, he may have been complicit in its creation. In an article published in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* upon his graduation, he appears guarded and responsible, the model student, ambassador for his continent. He mildly scolds the university for herding visiting students into dormitories and forcing them to attend programs designed to promote cultural understanding—a distraction, he says, from the practical training he seeks. Although he hasn't experienced any problems himself, he detects self-segregation and overt discrimination taking place between the various ethnic groups and expresses wry amusement at the fact that "Caucasians" in Hawaii are occasionally at the receiving end of prejudice. But if his assessment is relatively clear-eyed, he is careful to end on a happy note: One thing other nations can learn from Hawaii, he says, is the willingness of races to work together toward common development, something he has found whites elsewhere too often unwilling to do.

I discovered this article, folded away among my birth certificate and old vaccination forms, when I was in high school. It's a short piece, with a photograph of him. No mention is made of my mother or me, and I'm left to wonder whether the omission was intentional



on my father's part, in anticipation of his long departure. Perhaps the reporter failed to ask personal questions, intimidated by my father's imperious manner; or perhaps it was an editorial decision, not part of the simple story that they were looking for. I wonder, too, whether the omission caused a fight between my parents.

I would not have known at the time, for I was too young to realize that I was supposed to have a live-in father, just as I was too young to know that I needed a race. For an improbably short span it seems that my father fell under the same spell as my mother and her parents; and for the first six years of my life, even as that spell was broken and the worlds that they thought they'd left behind reclaimed each of them, I occupied the place where their dreams had been.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BARACK OBAMA began his career as a community organizer in some of Chicago's poorest communities and then attended Harvard Law School, where he was elected the first African American president of the *Harvard Law Review*. From 1997 to 2004, he served as a state senator from Chicago's South Side. In addition to his legislative duties, he was a senior lecturer in constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School, practiced civil rights law, and served on the boards of directors of various charitable organizations. From 2005 to 2008, Barack Obama served as a U.S. senator from Illinois, before being elected President of the United States on November 4, 2008.



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