

# CHAPTER 3

## High school in Hawaii

*'When you come from Hawaii, you start to understand that people, black or white, ... are all just Americans.'*

'It's time for you to go to back to America,' Ann said to Barack one day. 'I'm sending you back to live with Gramps and Toot. Maya and I will come to visit at Christmas. Then, after about a year, we'll come back and live there with you.'

Barack remembered Hawaii well. Each summer while they lived in Indonesia, he visited his grandparents, Gramps and Toot, back in Hawaii. He loved the food, the comics and the days at the beach. Now he could enjoy Hawaii all year round. And there were no more early morning lessons!

Barack had a place at a top Honolulu high school called Punahou Academy. You could see the Pacific Ocean from the windows. But his first day did not go well. There was only one other black pupil in the class. Later, in his book, *Dreams From My Father*, Barack remembers this day.

The teacher read everyone's name out. When she read Barack's name, the other pupils laughed. Barack wanted to run out of the classroom, but then it got worse. The teacher told the class that his name came from Kenya. And she asked Barack about his family tribe. He didn't answer for a while.

Then finally, he spoke. 'Luo,' he said. Some boys behind him started to make monkey sounds.

'Can I touch your hair?' asked one girl at breaktime. 'Does your father eat people?' asked a boy. Questions like this were not unusual in the 1960s in America. White and

black people did not usually live or work together in those days.

But Hawaii was different from the rest of America. The pupils came from many different races – from Polynesia, Asia and Europe, as well as America. After a few weeks, everyone lost interest in Barack's colour. He made friends and he says that he learnt to keep quiet in class. In the evenings, he read comics and listened to pop music on his radio. His new life was safe, but it was a very quiet life.



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And then one day, a letter arrived from Barack's father. He was coming to visit. He was coming from Kenya for Christmas. And Barack's mother and sister were coming from Indonesia.

Barack's father knew all about his son. Ann wrote to him often and told him the family news. He knew that she was married again, with a daughter. He had another wife, too, and Barack now had five brothers and one sister living in Kenya.

The big day arrived. Barack remembers seeing his father for the first time in his grandparents' little house.

He was tall and dark, but he didn't look very strong. He wore thick glasses and had a loud laugh. He was very pleased to see Barack and he was happy because Barack was doing well in school.

Barack's father stayed for a month. It was Christmas and there were presents. Barack's father gave Barack a basketball. There was a lot of fun in the house at first but then there were arguments. Barack's father didn't want him to watch TV. He wanted him to study.

Barack's class teacher invited Barack's father to speak to her class. Teenagers often feel uncomfortable when their parents meet their friends, and Barack was the same. That day in class, Barack remembers that he felt very unhappy. He waited for the other boys to start laughing.

His father talked about the first people in the world, who lived in Kenya. He talked about different tribes and their ways of life. In some tribes a young boy still had to kill a lion before he became a man. He talked about the Luo. The older Luo men still made laws for the tribe under great old trees, he said. He told them about Kenya's fight to be free.

Barack didn't need to worry. Everyone loved his father's talk. They thought he was cool.

Barack's father was a quiet man, until someone put some Kenyan music on. When there was music, he danced. In their one month together, Barack learnt many important lessons from his father. One of those lessons was how to dance.

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Over the next five years, life was good for Barack. He did well at school, he went to parties and he went out with girls. He had a part-time job at a burger bar. He joined in

school activities, like singing and the school magazine, and he read a lot.

'He was very clever,' remembers one of his teachers, Eric Kusunoki.

Barack was living with his mother, Ann, and his sister, Maya. Ann and Lolo weren't married anymore, and Ann and Maya were back in Hawaii. Ann was studying at the University of Hawaii, and they had a small flat near Barack's school. Barack helped his mother with the shopping and washing, and sometimes looked after Maya. After three years, his mother's studies took her back to Indonesia. Barack didn't want to go so he moved back with Gramps and Toot. And then he discovered basketball.



'He always had a basketball in his hands,' remembers one friend. 'He was always looking for a game.'

Barack was famous for his quick moves. The school team were good. In his last year, they won the Hawaii Schools Championship. His teammates remember that he was a good leader.

It wasn't so bad being black in Hawaii, Barack wrote later. White people didn't hate black people in Hawaii. Life in Honolulu wasn't like life on a housing project\* in Harlem. They could say what they wanted. They could eat where they wanted. But he still worried about his colour and his race. His father was black, but his mother and grandparents were white. Where did he fit in a white man's world?

His friends remember him as a happy teenager. He liked to go surfing in Hawaii's famous waves and he liked to go fishing with Gramps. He loved jazz, when everyone else was listening to rock'n'roll.

His last years at high school were not easy. There were different roads he could take. He started going to lots of parties, and stopped working hard at school. He saw that luck played a big part in his friends' lives. He still couldn't answer his own question: 'Who am I?'

\* 'Housing projects' are areas of houses that the government builds for poor families.