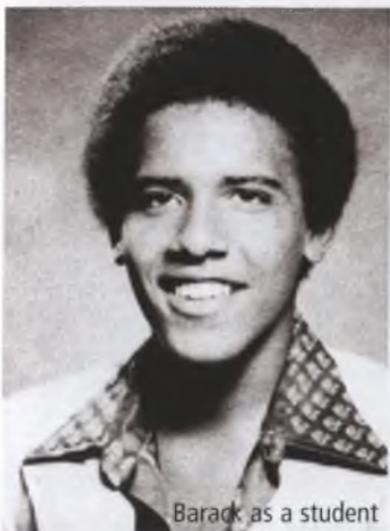


CHAPTER 4

College years

'Can words change anything?'

About a year after Barack's arrival back in Hawaii, Ann returned to Hawaii too. She was studying at Hawaii University. When Barack was at secondary school, she started worrying about him. He wasn't working hard and he wasn't doing anything with his life. 'You've lost your way,' she said to him. Barack tried not to listen to her, but he did quite well in his high school exams and he won a place at college*.



Barack as a student

In the autumn of 1979, Barack moved to Los Angeles, and started life as a student at Occidental College. There were lots of black students there. Barack liked to hang out with them. Sometimes they talked about being black, but mostly they talked about their classes, getting a good job after college and going on dates.

Some black students were more political, and Barack spent time with them. He read a lot, thought a lot and people listened to his ideas. At one meeting in the college gardens, he went up to the microphone. Students were sitting on the grass. Some were playing games. He started to speak. He talked about the lives of black people in South Africa. He talked about

* Students in America go to college at age seventeen, after high school.

the need for change. The students started to listen and it felt good. But afterwards he felt unhappy. Yes, he loved making a speech. He was good at making speeches. But did he have anything to say? Can words change anything? He wasn't sure.

There was a party afterwards. He writes about it in his book, *Dreams From My Father*. He was talking to a friend, Regina. She liked his speech, she said. Another friend came over and put his arm around Barack's shoulder.

'Obama! Great party, man!' he said. 'Hey, Regina, Barack and me – we've had some good parties in our time. One weekend, we stayed up for forty hours. We started on Saturday morning and didn't stop until Monday. When the cleaners came on Monday morning, we were all sitting there. There were bottles everywhere, cigarette ends, newspapers. Those Mexican ladies started to cry,' he laughed.

'You think that's funny?' Regina said quietly to Barack. 'My grandmother was like those Mexican ladies. She had to clean up for people for most of her life. Those people probably laughed too.'

Barack knew Regina was right and he felt bad. He understood that life wasn't just about race and colour. It was about a lot of other things too.

* * *

In 1981, Barack moved to Columbia University in New York. He started to live a simpler life. He ran three miles (nearly five kilometres) a day and he didn't eat on Sundays. For the first time in years, he worked hard at his studies and he wrote a diary. He took long walks around the city. He saw the worst housing projects in black Harlem. He saw the million-dollar homes of the rich and

famous on the East Side. He looked for a future among these very different lives. Where would he fit in?



Barack planned to go to Kenya and visit his father. He wanted to know him better. But then, in November, he received a phone call from a stranger. She was his Aunt Jane, she said, and she was calling from Nairobi. She had bad news. Barack's father was dead.