Dreams from My Father

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BARACK OBAMA

As Obama details in his memoir, he was born in 1961 to a white American mother and a Black Kenyan father. His parents separated when he was a toddler, and he grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia. After graduating from Columbia University, Obama worked in finance for several years before becoming a community organizer in Chicago. Following his first trip to Kenya in the late 1980s, Obama studied law at Harvard, eventually being selected as an editor to the *Harvard Law Review*. Obama met and married his wife, Michelle Obama, while working at a Chicago law firm. A few years later, Obama was offered an advance to write what eventually became 1995's *Dreams from My Father*. Starting in 1997, Obama served in the Illinois legislature for seven years and as a U.S. senator for three. He was then elected as the first Black president of the U.S. in 2008, serving two terms in office. During his presidency, Obama oversaw the creation of the Affordable Care Act, which expanded health insurance coverage to more Americans. He also supported the Supreme Court's 2015 ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (legalizing gay marriage), and some credit him with pulling the country out of the Great Recession. Since the end of his second term as president in 2017, Obama has dedicated his efforts to his organization, the Obama Foundation, which provides scholarships and other opportunities to young Black people. He also oversees plans for his presidential library, which is planned for Chicago.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Born in 1961, Obama's early childhood occurs amid the backdrop of the civil rights movement, which included the passing of the Voting Rights Act in 1964 and the end of Jim Crow laws and segregation in the American South. Especially in describing his grandparents, Obama references the optimistic and progressive spirit of the era. Also pertinent for Obama's family at this time was the first few years of Hawaiian statehood (Hawaii entered the union as a state in 1959). Obama's father (who was Kenyan) lived in Hawaii and got married to Obama's mother in the years before Kenya declared its independence from Britain. He returned to Kenya to serve in its new democratic government as the finance minister. However, throughout the time he was working for the government, the first president, Jomo Kenyatta, instituted one-party rule, and his government was widely considered corrupt and autocratic. Kenyatta died several years before Obama's father died (1978 and 1982, respectively), though questions of corruption continued (and still continue) to plague the country after Kenyatta's death. As a young adult, Obama worked as a community organizer in Chicago at the height of the crack cocaine epidemic, at the same time as Chicago's manufacturing jobs were disappearing. This led to an increase in poverty and gang violence, though the era also saw attempts to reinvigorate Chicago's South Side with urban renewal projects and public housing. The 1983 election of Chicago's first Black mayor, Harold Washington, gave Black residents hope for a better future. Though as Obama details in his memoir, Harold's sudden death in 1987 dashed many of these hopes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the 2004 forward to *Dreams from My Father*, Obama notes that the policy agenda accompanying the topics in his memoir are a subject for another book. In 2006, Obama published *The Audacity of Hope* on that very subject. Formative books and authors that Obama mentions in his memoir include the works of James Baldwin (*If Beale Street Could Talk*; *Go Tell It on the Mountain*), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Obama's Kenyan uncles, meanwhile, prefer the works of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, best known for his novel *Things Fall Apart*. Given Obama's leap into politics after the publication of his memoir, *Dreams from My Father* is considered a political memoir and shares similarities with other memoirs written by political figures, including those by Bill Clinton (*My Life*), Condoleezza Rice (*Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family*), and Elizabeth Warren (*A Fighting Chance*). Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor has also been open about the fact that *Dreams from My Father* directly inspired her own memoir, *My Beloved World*. *Becoming*, Mr. Obama's wife, Michelle Obama's, own memoir, continues the story of the Obamas' life after the events of *Dreams from My Father* ends. It also offers an intimate portrait of the South Side of Chicago, where she grew up and where Mr. Obama spent his years as a community organizer.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Dreams from My Father
- **When Written:** 1990-1994
- **Where Written:** Chicago
- **When Published:** 1995
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Hawaii, California, New York, Chicago, and Kenya
- **Climax:** Barack cries at his father's grave.
- **Antagonist:** Though there's no clear-cut antagonist, Obama

struggles with racism—and, at times, his father—throughout the memoir.

- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Mic Drop. In addition to receiving favorable reviews for the print edition, *Dreams from My Father* has won one award of a different kind. The 2006 audiobook, narrated by Obama himself, won a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album.

Modern Art. The Obamas attracted attention during their time at the White House for requesting modern art to hang, something no other president or first family had done. Later, the National Portrait Gallery commissioned famous contemporary artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald to paint the Obamas' official portraits—the first Black artists to paint official portraits of a president or first lady.

PLOT SUMMARY

At 21, Barack gets a call from his Aunt Jane in Nairobi informing him that his father is dead. Barack barely knew his father, who met Barack's mother Ann when he was studying in Hawaii. They had Barack in 1961, but Barack's father left them two years later to attend Harvard and then he returned to Kenya. Because of this, Barack doesn't have memories of his father—only fantastical stories of the man's exploits.

Despite some initial misgivings, Barack's white grandparents, Toot and Gramps, approved of Ann's decision to marry Barack's father and grew to love their Black son-in-law and biracial grandson. Toot and Gramps are fairly progressive about race and they're generally kind and adventurous people. Barack spent his early years feeling loved—it wasn't until later that he wondered why his father left him.

When Barack is six, Ann marries an Indonesian man, Lolo, and they move to Indonesia. Lolo treats Barack like a son and, and Barack turns to Lolo for advice and information about his new home. As Ann learns more about Indonesia and her husband, however, she becomes concerned about Barack's future. She throws herself into teaching him English and making sure that he grows up to be an American who's proud of his Black heritage. But when Barack discovers a **photograph** in *Life* magazine of a Black man who used skin lightening creams, his world changes forever. He begins to suspect that Ann is keeping things from him and that being Black might not be something to be proud of.

This feeling persists as Barack returns to Hawaii at age nine. He is one of only two black kids at his school and his peers are frequently racist. Late in the fall, his father sends word that he's coming to visit Hawaii over Christmas. Meeting his father is a surreal experience; Barack is at once terrified and intrigued. He finds that he prefers his father from a distance, though, since the man is overbearing and controlling.

As Barack grows, he dedicates himself to basketball and makes more Black friends. His best friend in high school, Ray, introduces him to Black parties and challenges Barack's belief that white people are inherently good. After a disastrous party, Barack realizes that Ray is right; he comes to think that Black people can either fall into line and do what white people want them to do, or they can be angry. Barack chooses anger and apathy, so he turns to drugs and alcohol. At several points, he seeks out one of Gramps's elderly Black friends, Frank, for advice. Frank tells Barack that Gramps doesn't understand what it means to be Black, and that while it's important that Barack go to college, college will simply train him to be a nonthreatening Black person.

In college, Barack meets other Black students and, insecure about his Hawaiian upbringing surrounded by white people, he feels the need to prove that he's sufficiently Black. He's mean to Black classmates who act "too white" and befriends the most radical students. His attitude begins to change when he meets a woman named Regina and gets involved with protests against apartheid in South Africa. Regina insists that he has to think about others and be kind, and he eventually realizes that she's right. He transfers to Columbia University and decides to give up drinking and drugs.

After graduating, Barack hopes to become a community organizer, and eventually a man named Marty Kaufman hires him to organize on Chicago's South Side. He arrives in Chicago a few months after the election of Harold Washington, the city's first Black mayor. Barack meets Marty's community leaders—Angela, Shirley, Mona, and Will—and begins conducting interviews. From the interviews, he learns that many Black Chicagoans are proud of to have ascended to the middle class, but they're worried that their homes are losing value and their neighborhoods are getting more dangerous. When he tries to pull in local religious leaders, he finds it difficult; some leaders take issue with Marty's willingness to work with Catholics, whom many Black Chicagoans find racist. The first community meeting that Barack organizes is a disaster, and he learns that Black Chicagoans don't want to admit that Harold Washington becoming mayor won't fix all their problems.

Next, Barack turns his attentions to the Altgeld Gardens housing projects. In his attempts to find jobs for Altgeld's residents, he finds an issue: there's no employment center that's accessible to Altgeld. As Barack works on the employment center issue, he becomes close friends with his fellow organizers, but he also becomes discouraged by the complex reality of trying to make change; there's no one clear enemy to fight, only a diffuse tangle of petty greed, bureaucracy, entrenched interests, and structural racism.

When Barack's half-sister Auma visits Chicago, he loves her

instantly. Auma tells him about their father, whom she calls the Old Man. The Old Man did well for a long time—but after he returned from the U.S., married a white woman named Ruth, and had four more sons (two with Ruth and two with Kezia, Auma's mother), everything fell apart. The Old Man spoke out against the tribalism and corruption in the government, so the president blacklisted him. He then became homeless and violent, and he alienated everyone—Auma has thrived only because she threw herself into school. The Old Man had just begun to reconnect with his children when he died.

When the employment center near Atgeld finally opens, Harold Washington himself comes to cut the ribbon. Washington wows the crowd, but Barack still isn't satisfied. He begins working with young mothers to advocate for better services and tries to organize tenants to clear asbestos from Atgeld's apartments. While their efforts gain momentum and culminate in a community meeting of several hundred people, the Altgeld director refuses to guarantee basic repairs and the meeting is a failure. Disheartened, Barack applies to law school.

When Barack travels to D.C. to visit his half-brother, Roy, Roy says that their father's actions have made him hate himself. He can't handle the responsibility of being the oldest son. Depressed, Barack goes home early and begins to connect with local religious leaders again. Several point him toward Reverend Wright of Trinity Church. As Barack gets to know the church and Reverend Wright, he realizes that most Black people aren't as judgmental as his father was. Soon after Harold Washington's unexpected death, Barack announces that he's leaving for law school.

In the summer, Barack travels to Europe and then to Nairobi. He's immediately struck that people recognize him as his father's son. While staying with Auma, he meets many family members, including his aunts Jane, Zeituni, and Kezia. Auma introduces Barack to the idea that, in Kenya, family is everything—something their father never understood. Later, Barack tries to coach his teenage brother Bernard on choosing a career path, meets the semi-estranged Aunt Sarah, and begins to understand the tensions that pervade his family, all of which makes him wonder what family really means.

At the family homestead in Alego, Barack meets more family members and Roy shows him the graves of Onyango and the Old Man, whose tomb doesn't even have a marker. Slowly, the family reveals bits and pieces of Onyango and the Old Man's stories. But it's not until Barack returns from an overnight trip to see one of Onyango's brothers that Granny tells the whole tale. Onyango, who was born in 1895, was the first Obama to adopt Western ways of dressing and farming. He worked for white men, served in the First World War, was notoriously strict, and married Helima and then Akumu. Akumu gave birth to Sarah and the Old Man but she was deeply unhappy, so she ran away.

The Old Man was wildly intelligent but consistently brought shame to his father with his independence and his antics. Onyango didn't approve of the Old Man's marriages to either Ann or Ruth because he didn't think that white women would understand Luo customs or accept being one of multiple wives—and the Old Man's two divorces proved his point. Onyango never let his son forget this, so the Old Man consistently tried to hide his struggles. Onyango was closed off and exacting with his son, and the Old Man was the same way with his children. As Barack cries at his father's grave, he realizes that this was their mistake: they shouldn't have hidden their confusion and their struggles. Barack feels that he's finally home.

Barack goes on to attend Harvard and, after graduating, he returns to organizing in Chicago where he marries Michelle. He remains connected to his Kenyan family and many of them attend his wedding. At the wedding, Auma cries and Roy (who converted to Islam and now goes by Abongo) insists that Toot and Ann are his two new mothers.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Barack Obama – Barack Obama is the memoir's protagonist and narrator. He's a biracial man born to a white American mother, Ann, and a Black Kenyan father. Barack grows up without his father and initially thinks nothing of the fact that his mother and maternal grandparents, Gramps and Toot, are white. Indeed, Barack doesn't begin to understand that racism even exists until he's nine and living in Indonesia with Ann and her second husband, Lolo. Seeing a **photograph** in *Life* magazine of a man who used skin lightening creams suggests to Barack that being Black might not be something to be proud of. Over the next several years, as he returns to Hawaii to attend school, Barack struggles to figure out how to be a Black man. He comes to the conclusion that the only thing Black people have that's truly their own is anger and turns to drugs and alcohol. This behavior continues through several years of college, until his friends are able to impress upon him that being disaffected and rude to people doesn't make him Black—it just makes him mean. Transferring to Columbia University and moving to New York helps Barack learn more about what it means to be Black and, during this time, he receives word that his father died. Over the next few years, Barack connects with his half-siblings, Auma and Roy, and begins to learn about who his father really was. Their stories impress upon Barack that their father wasn't someone to idolize; he's a cautionary tale at best. Shaken, Barack takes a job as a community organizer in Chicago, in part so he can try to make up for his father's mistakes. In Chicago, Barack discovers that being part of a community means communicating openly and he throws himself into helping neighborhoods overcome gang violence and drug use. He also begins attending Trinity Church. After

being accepted to Harvard Law School, Barack visits Kenya for the first time. In Kenya, Barack visits his ancestral homestead, speaks with many family members, and learns more about his family history. What he learns helps him feel connected to Kenya, his father, and his family.

Barack's Father/The Old Man –The Old Man is Barack's father, a Kenyan man who married Ann and had Barack during his time studying at the University of Hawaii. Barack's father's name is also Barack, but Auma (Barack's half-sister) refers to their father as "the Old Man." When Barack was a child, his father left him and his mother, so all Barack had of him was stories. Gramps, Toot, and Ann all paint the Old Man as an exacting, god-like figure. When Barack meets his father (for the only time) at age 10, however, he finds the Old Man frightening, overbearing, and difficult—but the Old Man also teaches Barack to dance, which is a particularly joyful memory. Barack and the Old Man lose contact through Barack's teen years, then they briefly reconnect via letters just before the Old Man dies in a car crash. As Barack gets to know the Old Man's other children, he puts together a more complete—and tragic—picture of his father. The Old Man was rebellious, independent, and very intelligent—he seldom attended school except for exams, he tutored his friends, and he always ended up at the top of the class anyway. He clashed often with his father, Onyango, who was ashamed of his son's antics, and he left his wife Kezia and their young children Roy and Auma to attend school in Hawaii. After returning to Kenya, the Old Man married a white woman named Ruth and had two sons with her and two with Kezia. He worked for the government, but he spoke out against the tribalism and corruption he saw—so the president blacklisted him. He alienated most of his family members during his fall from grace and was only beginning to repair his relationships with his family when he died. Barack's family members warn him that the Old Man was too generous, too concerned with fitting in, and that he wrongly believed that his Western education would allow him to bypass the familial relationships that guide life in Kenya. But Barack also comes to understand that his father was confused about how to be a Black man in the world and balance his American education with his Kenyan roots and traditions. This, Barack believes, was a result of not communicating openly, either with Onyango or with his children.

Gramps – Gramps is Barack's maternal grandfather, Ann's father, and Toot's husband. He grew up near Wichita, Kansas, where his father was a known philanderer, and his mother committed suicide. Because of this Toot's parents immediately disliked Gramps when he started dating their daughter, which gave him a sense of the prejudice that some people face. As an idealistic person always looking for new horizons, Gramps took Toot to Texas, Seattle, and then to Hawaii. Throughout their moves, they found themselves particularly disturbed by the racism they witnessed. Gramps was incensed, for instance, when the furniture store where he worked asked him to only serve Mexican or Black customers after hours. While Gramps cultivated friendships with many Black men, he's not thrilled when his daughter Ann marries Barack's father, who is Black. Eventually, he comes around and is proud to have a Black son-in-law and a biracial grandson, but Gramps is still known for making off-color jokes, and he consistently shocks tourists by telling them that Barack is a descendent of Hawaiian royalty or by claiming Barack as his grandson, thereby calling out tourists' racism. In the fifth grade, when Barack returns to his grandparents after he lived for several years in Indonesia, he finds them changed. In the years that Barack was gone, Gramps had become a life insurance agent, a job he finds meaningless and depressing. He also resents Toot for making more money than he does, so they fight regularly. Barack notices that Gramps makes a point to surround himself with Black people, many of whom are worse off than he is, and Barack believes that Gramps feels a kinship with them—though Gramps's friend Frank assures Barack that Gramps may have good intentions, but will never understand what it's like to be Black. Despite this, Barack knows that his grandparents love him and will always support him, even if they are sometimes inadvertently racist and ignorant about some of the racism that Barack faces.

Hussein Onyango Obama – Onyango was Barack's grandfather, a Kenyan man of the Luo people. Most remember him as an exacting, mean, and difficult man—he carried heavy wooden sticks with which to hit any misbehaving people, adults and children alike. He also kept two machetes, each with its own name, sharpened at all times. Born in 1895, Onyango was the first in the family to adopt Western ways of dressing and working. His father, Obama, disowned him for this. Onyango worked for white colonizers in various capacities, served in the first World War, and eventually learned Western farming techniques, which made him a renowned and admired farmer. He had several wives, including Granny, and was considered both a good husband (in that he stayed married to his wife Helima, who couldn't have children) and a difficult one (he had impossibly high standards that many wives weren't able to meet; many returned to their birth families). A man who wanted what he wanted and wouldn't take no for an answer, Onyango took a woman named Akumu as his second wife, despite the fact that she was already promised to another man. Akumu became the Old Man and Sarah's biological mother, although after many attempts, she succeeded in running away from her husband. Throughout the Old Man's childhood, Onyango encouraged his son to be the best in school while ignoring Sarah's desire to receive an education; he didn't believe in educating women. He consistently shamed the Old Man for any mistakes, real or imagined, that the Old Man made. This led the Old Man to be secretive and unwilling to ask his father for help. Onyango kept this up to the end and never got to know his son. Auma suspects that the family's troubles started with Onyango, since Onyango was the only person the Old Man feared.

Auma – Auma is Barack's older half-sister; her mother is Kezia and her father is the Old Man. A beautiful, bright woman, Auma is studying in Germany when she and Barack first meet. Barack feels like he loves Auma immediately, and they share a close relationship. It's Auma who first tells Barack about the darker sides of their father's character, as she and her older brother Roy suffered a lot at their father's hand—the Old Man's third wife, Ruth, excluded them once the Old Man began to verbally abuse her, and things worsened after she left her husband. After the Old Man drove Roy out of the house, teenage Auma was left alone with her father—and she was terrified of him. She found herself at boarding school and left the country to study in Germany without telling him, fearing he'd revoke her visa. As much as Auma loves Kenya and her Kenyan family, she is in many ways a Western woman. She teaches college classes and has plans that often pull her away from family functions, which creates strain between her and the rest of the family. At times, she seems to resent Roy because, despite living in the U.S., Roy doesn't experience these same strains when he's with the family. Auma also takes issue with the way that her family jokes about and excuses the abuse of women. Her dream is to be able to buy land outside of Nairobi to build a home for all her siblings, but she at times resents the Old Man for not building the house himself. She's later a bridesmaid in Barack's wedding and is the only one to cry during the ceremony.

Roy/Abongo – Roy is Barack's half-brother and the Old Man's eldest child. He's close with his sister Auma, but not as close with his brothers Abo and Bernard since they didn't grow up together. Auma insists that Roy is much like the Old Man in that he doesn't show his true feelings—and of all his children, the Old Man clashed most with Roy. When Barack first meets Roy, Roy has been living in Washington, D.C. with his wife, an American woman who served in the Peace Corps—but their marriage is struggling. Roy is a towering, heavy man who resembles the Old Man to an unnerving degree, though his laugh is infectious and bright. As Barack gets to know Roy, he discovers that Roy is a heavy drinker and is haunted by his unhappy memories of their father. As the oldest of the Old Man's children, it's traditionally Roy's responsibility to make sure that all his younger brothers and Auma are cared for, but he chafes under this responsibility. When he returns to Kenya at the same time that Barack goes to Kenya to visit, Barack discovers that Roy is still drinking and has given up entirely on his American wife—in fact, he plans to marry an African woman, Amy. Though Barack fears that Roy is in trouble and isn't doing well, within a few years, Roy turns himself around. He converts to Islam (making him give up alcohol), begins going by his Kenyan name (Abongo), and plans to start a business so he can employ his younger brothers. Barack sees that Roy is finally figuring out how to be at peace with himself as a Black man, and he's proud of his brother.

Toot – Toot is Barack's maternal grandmother, Ann's mother, and Gramps's wife. She insists on being called Toot—short for tutu, or "grandmother" in Hawaiian—because when Barack was born, she felt too young to be a grandparent. She's from Kansas and grew up in a "respectable" family, so it shocked her parents when she fell in love with Gramps, a bad-boy from a disreputable family. She was happy to follow him, first to Texas, then to Seattle and Hawaii. Toot is generally unprejudiced and concerned with treating everyone kindly and compassionately, although Barack suspects that Toot and Gramps weren't particularly excited when Ann announced her intentions to marry Barack's father, a Black man. As time went on, however, they came to love their Black son-in-law and biracial grandson and they remained committed to progressive racial politics. When Barack returned from Indonesia to live with his grandparents and attend the fifth grade, he found them to be changed people. Toot spent most of her time at home reading mystery novels in her room or fighting with Gramps. Many of their conflicts stemmed from the fact that Toot made more money than Gramps after working her way up through various banking jobs. However, while Toot does take pride in her professional success, she also later admits that she regrets not being able to live the life of a happy housewife.

Ann – Ann is Barack's mother and Gramps and Toot's daughter. She is a white woman who is originally from Kansas, although the family moved all over the United States during her childhood. Ann met Barack's father in a language course at the University of Hawaii and they soon married and had Barack. While Barack's father left them soon afterwards, Ann went to great lengths to make sure that Barack knew about his father, his heritage, and what it means to be a Black person—however, Barack suspects as he gets older that Ann offered him a somewhat softened view of racism. When Barack was six, Ann married an Indonesian man named Lolo and moved with him and Barack to Indonesia, where she eventually had her daughter, Maya. There, Ann realized that she wanted Barack to grow up as an American, not an Indonesian; to this end, she threw herself into teaching him English, signed him up for a correspondence course, and ultimately sent him back to Hawaii to attend a private school. Ann always wanted only what was best for her son, and in her mind, that meant that he must receive a good education and make something of himself. Because of this, she was incensed and exasperated when Barack got into drugs and developed a bad attitude about his future, but she effectively guilted him into turning his life around when he was a young adult. After Barack's high school years, Ann plays a relatively small part in Barack's life. He eventually comes to understand that Ann loved Barack's father deeply and genuinely, but that she lacks some understanding of what it means to be Black.

Lolo – Lolo is Ann's second husband whom she married when Barack was about six years old. Lolo is a handsome Indonesian man, and he and Ann met in Hawaii. Then, he spoke about

helping Indonesia by getting his education in the U.S. and returning to serve his country. It's implied that Ann fell for him in large part because of these dreams. However, when Ann and Barack join him in Indonesia after a year of separation, Lolo seems different—he's quieter and no longer so optimistic about life, and he turns to alcohol. Eventually, Ann discovers that this shift occurred because Lolo was forced to return to Indonesia by the authoritarian government, had his passport seized, and was briefly imprisoned. Ann believes that Lolo "made peace with power" and is simply trying to get by in a country he knows he cannot trust. Despite the fact that this leads to fights between Lolo and Ann, Lolo is an important father figure to Barack who takes his role seriously. Barack often turns to Lolo for advice or clarification of what he sees in Indonesia, such as deep poverty, unfamiliar spiritual beliefs, or sudden death. Lolo encourages Barack to be strong and stoic. Ultimately, about the time that Barack returns to the U.S. to live with his grandparents and attend Punahou, Lolo and Ann separate. They have one daughter together, Maya, and remain cordial through their divorce and in the following years. Ann helps Lolo travel to the U.S. a decade after their divorce to receive medical treatment, but he dies of a liver condition.

Frank – Frank is an elderly Black man who plays poker with Gramps. While many of the other men in their poker group are silent, Frank, a former poet of some renown, is vocal and sometimes reads his poetry for the group. He both intrigues and frightens young Barack, as he seems to know things that Barack suspects other adults have kept from him—specifically about race. However, after an incident in which a Black man frightened Toot at the bus stop, Barack goes to Frank for advice. Frank says that Toot has good reason to be afraid, which confuses and horrifies Barack—he says that her fear suggests that she knows that Black people have a lot to be angry about. He also shares information about Gramps's childhood and early years in Kansas that Barack didn't know about, such as Kansas's Jim Crow laws that dictated that Black people like Frank must move off the sidewalk for white people like Gramps. Most importantly, Frank encourages Barack to recognize that Gramps will never understand what it's like to be Black. He'll never understand the need for constant vigilance, and he'll never understand the power dynamic inherent to hiring Black people to perform domestic labor for white families. Barack thinks often of Frank long after he leaves Hawaii.

Reverend Wright – Reverend Wright is the imposing, charismatic reverend of Trinity Church in Chicago. He and his church have a reputation among Chicago's clergy for being too radical, too focused on scholarship, and too upwardly mobile—but Barack discovers that Reverend Wright's practices are nevertheless highly effective. The church has around 4000 members, a variety of clubs, and a diverse congregation, all major achievements in a religious landscape that seems increasingly fractured. And most importantly, Barack recognizes that the socioeconomic diversity of the congregation means that the many Black professionals who attend are forced to learn about and worship with people they might otherwise write off, like former gangsters or Muslims. This, Barack sees, creates a sense of Black unity. And part of Reverend Wright's philosophy serves this purpose: he believes that it's unacceptable to become middle class and then think of oneself as superior to others who have less money. Though many attribute the success of Trinity to Reverend Wright's charisma and warmth, Reverend Wright believes that he's just an accessory to a devout and community-focused congregation. Barack finally attends a service at Trinity right before he leaves Chicago and cries during Reverend Wright's sermon, which is titled "The Audacity of Hope."

Sayid – Sayid is one of Barack's uncles in Kenya. He is Granny's son and the Old Man's youngest half-brother. Sayid is large, clean-shaven, and welcoming. He introduces Barack to the idea that in the last century or so, white colonizers and Black Kenyans who have spent time in the city have introduced the idea of poverty to rural Kenya—and the concept of poverty, he suggests, didn't exist among Black Kenyans before this. Now, he believes that the apathy and listlessness of many rural Kenyans is due to their own unwillingness to try to improve their situations on their own. Though Sayid didn't attend university, he makes a point to dedicate himself to his work on development projects and seems undaunted that his attempts to line up a job for when his current project ends are going poorly. He believes in persistence and hard work. Though Barack thinks that Sayid's beliefs have a bit of truth to them, he also recognizes that the issues of poverty in Kenya are undeniable and seemingly impossible to fix through simple hard work or motivation. However, Sayid does share Barack's belief that tribalism among Africans doesn't help anyone.

Ruth – Ruth is the Old Man's third wife whom he met at Harvard. She followed him to Kenya, where they married and had two sons, Mark and David. A white American woman, Ruth doesn't accept Kezia as a legitimate wife, so she refuses to let her sons visit Alego. However, she does accept Roy and Auma as her own—until her sons are born and the Old Man is blacklisted from the government. She suffers a great deal of verbal abuse from the Old Man until they finally divorce, and she never makes peace with the rest of the family. Indeed, Ruth changes Mark and David's last names when she marries a Tanzanian man and is incensed when David insists that he's still an Obama. Barack meets Ruth when he visits Kenya. During the visit, she consistently speaks poorly about the Old Man while praising Mark for his achievements. Auma tells Barack later that Ruth is the only of the Old Man's wives who can prove her children's paternity without a doubt.

Rafiq – Rafiq is the president of the Roseland Unity Coalition, which endeavors to help Roseland's Black residents take over local businesses. The Coalition was instrumental in electing

Harold Washington. Shirley explains to Barack that Rafiq actually grew up in Altgeld and was a contemporary of Will's. He changed his name from Wally to Rafiq when he became a Muslim and gave up his life as a gang leader. He and Barack work together to try to get a job center in the South Side, but Rafiq proves hard to work with. Rafiq believes that people are bound together by blood first, then by religion, and then by race—and he believes that if people don't share those commonalities, they won't care about each other. In his understanding, all Black people deeply hate white people, but many are unwilling to admit that and therefore end up in trouble when they try to work through their anger. Rafiq makes a point to call out mistreatment of local Black families by their Jewish, Arab, and Korean neighbors, which sometimes seems simply to stoke division.

Deacon Will Milton – Will is a large Black man who works with Marty. Though Will calls himself a deacon and wears a collar, he's not actually ordained. He turned to the church after being laid off from a prestigious banking job; he first became a janitor and then a preacher. He feels that it's his responsibility to remind people to follow Scripture and take care of their neighbors—not just focus on breaking into the middle class. This makes him unpopular with many who see Chicago's Black middle class slipping away. Barack finds Will to be somewhat difficult to work with, in part because of his eccentric ideas (he openly smokes marijuana, leaves meetings he thinks are boring, and argues with people about Scripture instead of listening to their concerns) and in part because of his mixed reputation. However, Will remains committed to helping and he sticks with organizing projects in Chicago after Barack leaves his job.

Marty Kaufman – Marty, a Jewish organizer on the South Side of Chicago, is Barack's boss when he moves to Chicago. Marty looks constantly rumpled, but he's smart and dedicated to his work. He hires Barack because he recognizes the necessity of having a Black person to spread his message—because he's Jewish, many of the Black religious congregations he tries to work with are unwilling to actually commit to a partnership. Despite this knowledge though, Marty still struggles to maintain enthusiasm and ties with the Black people who help him and those he's supposed to serve. Angela recognizes that, as good as Marty's intentions are, he wants to treat the poor Black and white people in Chicago the same—ignoring Chicago's history of segregation and the fact that, despite the Black middle class's recent rise, that middle class's wealth is slipping away.

Harold Washington – Harold Washington is the first Black mayor of Chicago; he was elected in 1983, mere months before Barack moved to Chicago to organize with Marty. Washington only appears in person once in the memoir, but he looms large over the Black community in Chicago. Every Black person Barack speaks to talks about Washington as though he's a close friend or a family member, and every Black household has a picture of him hanging in their home. Though Barack recognizes that Washington, to many, symbolizes Black power and that it's possible to overcome Chicago's history of racism and segregation, he ultimately comes to realize that simply having a Black mayor doesn't mean that Chicago doesn't still have racial issues. And indeed, when Washington dies suddenly in 1987, it takes only a few days before the diverse coalition that elected him fractures, resulting in chaos in Chicago. When Barack meets Washington, his impression is that the mayor is charismatic and charming.

Aunt Sarah – Aunt Sarah is the Old Man's older sister. Although she was traumatized when their mother, Akumu, abandoned them as children, Sarah remained loyal to their mother for the rest of her life. In adulthood, she remains estranged from most of the Old Man's family. Tradition dictates that, since she's unmarried, the Old Man would be responsible for caring for her in adulthood, so she contests the Old Man's will, believing that the rest of his family is trying to keep his money for themselves. In reality, Zeituni explains to Barack, there isn't much money in the Old Man's estate in the first place—and the lawyers' fees to continue litigating will eat up whatever money is left. Barack finds her somewhat disturbing in her single-minded pursuit of her deceased brother's money.

Granny – Granny is one of Barack's grandmothers and one of Onyango's three wives. She's a large woman with eyes that constantly sparkle, and she's very affectionate with her grandchildren. Granny speaks very little English, so almost all of Barack's conversations with her are conducted with the help of Auma or another family member as a translator. As a young and newly married woman, she raised the Old Man and Sarah after their biological mother, Akumu, ran away, but while the Old Man accepted Granny as his real mother, Sarah never did. Granny is beloved by her children and grandchildren; Auma talks about how much fun she had with Granny at Alego when she was a child. Granny is the one who tells Barack the story of Onyango and of the Old Man.

Akumu – Akumu is one of Onyango's wives and the biological mother of the Old Man. From the very beginning, she resented her marriage to Onyango—she'd been promised to another man whom she would have preferred to marry. After having Sarah and the Old Man, Akumu ran away. Though this wasn't the first time she ran away, her parents and Onyango let her go this time. However, her choice to abandon her children affected the Old Man deeply. He adopted Granny (the third wife who was younger than even Akumu) as his mother and only vaguely reconnected with Akumu. Aunt Sarah, meanwhile, remained loyal to her biological mother, which forms the basis for some of the animosity between Aunt Sarah and the rest of the Old Man's family in the years after his death.

Sadie – Sadie is a young mother in the Chicago parents' group with which Barack works. She, like the other parents, lives in Altgeld. However, unlike most of the other parents, Sadie is

married and highly religious. Her husband is training to be a minister, so her family doesn't associate much with the other families. Though Barack is disappointed when Sadie—who's tiny, soft-spoken, and nervous—offers to talk to Mr. Anderson about the possible presence of asbestos in Altgeld's apartments, Sadie proves herself a skilled organizer. She becomes the face of the asbestos conflict, but she withdraws from the parents' organization after a disastrous public event with the director. Sadie tells Barack that she's not hopeful that they can accomplish anything, so she needs to concentrate on saving money to move away instead.

Regina – Regina is a Black student whom Barack meets at Occidental College. She's a few years older and beautiful; she wears homemade dresses and tinted glasses. Regina is the first person Barack meets at college who makes him feel like he doesn't have to hide who he is, and she's the first person who calls him Barack instead of Barry. They become close and Regina tells him a lot about her upbringing in Chicago, which Barack envies—though she envies his idyllic childhood in Hawaii. She's very involved with organizing Black student events and doesn't go out a lot. Despite making Barack feel more comfortable being himself, Regina also calls Barack out on his selfishness and bad behavior.

Dr. Rukia Odero – Rukia is a history professor and former friend of the Old Man's. She enlightens Barack as to why so many Black Americans end up disillusioned with Africa: they expect a precolonial experience and tend to not find it. This, she suggests, is because Africa as it was before Europeans arrived doesn't exist; the continent is now part of the global economy and is abandoning or rethinking many traditional customs. However, she mentions her daughter, whose first language is English but who also speaks Swahili and several other languages. Rukia suggests that she'd rather her daughter be true to herself than be "authentically African" as others might imagine it.

Bernard – Bernard is Barack's younger brother, Kezia and the Old Man's son. Bernard and Abo were born to Kezia after the Old Man had already married Ruth, so even though they're full siblings to Auma and Roy, they didn't grow up with each other at all. Bernard is only 17 and he's a generous, earnest young man who immediately sparks Barack's interest. However, Bernard is not interested in applying himself either to academics or to learning a trade, though Barack tries to take on the role of an older brother and convince him to try harder. Instead, Bernard plays basketball and floats through life with no real direction.

Ray – A Black boy originally from Los Angeles, Ray is Barack's best friend in high school. He's two years older and often talks about his cool former life in L.A. He introduces Barack to the Black party scene in Hawaii and is instrumental in stoking Barack's rage about "white folks." However, Barack also takes issue with Ray's hatred and dismissal of white people, as he thinks that Ray doesn't feel the need to justify this hate. Ray also doesn't have much time for Barack's more measured analysis of the racism they experience and, at times, he reminds Barack that Barack is biracial to discredit his ideas.

Abo – Abo is one of Barack's younger half brothers; he grew up with his mother Kezia and brother Bernard in Alego, but he didn't know his full siblings Auma and Roy until he was older. When Barack meets Abo, Abo is grousing about how boring the family homestead outside of Kendu Bay is. He also reacts with disappointment to Barack's gift of a cassette player, since it's not a Sony. Barack notices that Abo looks like the young men in Chicago in that he seems to know from a young age that life won't be kind to him.

Marcus – Marcus is one of Barack's best friends in college, whom Barack describes as "the most conscious of brothers." He's tall, elegant, and comfortable with his identity as a Black person. All of this makes Barack feel one step behind. Marcus is, in Barack's opinion, undeniably Black—he has friends in prison, family members who were part of the Black Panthers, and others who are single mothers. Barack admires Marcus and wants to impress him, but his efforts tend to fall flat. Eventually, Marcus becomes disillusioned with college and drops out.

Yusuf – Yusuf is one of Barack's uncles and the Old Man's half brother. Granny is his mother. He's slight and wears a moustache. Yusuf insists that the Luo are too stubborn and uneducated, as they won't adopt Western farming techniques that would allow them to better use the fertile land around Alego, but Sayid insists that Yusuf doesn't lead by example. In Sayid's estimation, having been educated in the city and then introduced to the concept of poverty, Yusuf has simply given up and no longer finds meaning in the traditional way of life in Alego.

Sadik – Sadik is a friend who helps Barack find his way in New York City. Though Sadik takes a generally dim view of the idea that people can really make a difference in the city, he supports Barack's attempts. He also, however, encourages Barack to look out for himself as he guides Barack through situations where others might take advantage of him. They eventually move in together. Sadik remains interested in drinking and going out, and he finds Barack's transformation into a straight-laced, conventionally successful person perplexing.

Mark – Mark is one of Barack's half brothers and the first son of the Old Man and Ruth. Mark had no issue with Ruth taking him and David away from Kenya upon her divorce from the Old Man. When Barack meets him, he finds Mark maddeningly superior and uninterested in connecting with his Kenyan heritage. Mark resents their father for the way he treated him and Ruth and though he and Barack promise to write, Barack knows they never will.

Joyce – Joyce is a young Black woman whom Barack meets at Occidental. She's proud of her multiracial heritage and has

ancestors who are Italian, African, French, and Native American. However, she angrily asserts that she's an individual and feels pressured by Black people in particular to choose a race with which to identify. Barack resents her for this, though he also recognizes that, like her, he wants to be seen as an individual, not just a stereotypical Black person.

Reverend Philips – Reverend Philips is an elderly reverend in Chicago's South Side who helps connect Barack with other pastors willing to help out with organizing efforts. Reverend Philips has white hair and a soothing voice. He educates Barack on the history of Black churches in America, and he also encourages Barack to find a church of his own, if only to show the pastors he works with that he has faith.

Billy – Billy is a friend of Roy's. His father was friends with the Old Man and, as children, Billy and Roy often went to the other's father for advice instead of going to their own fathers. Billy is tall and handsome, and though Roy is thrilled to see him, Billy also makes Roy uncomfortable by talking about how wild Roy was as a young person and asking about American women.

Asante – Asante is a guidance counselor in a Chicago high school. His goal is to introduce Black male students to Africa, as he believes that discovering Africa and connecting to their African roots can help Black boys feel like they're a part of something larger. Barack suspects that, for those boys, simply having someone like Asante to talk to will make more of a difference than anything else.

David – David is one of Barack's half brothers, and he's the second son of the Old Man and Ruth. Following her divorce from the Old Man, Ruth took her sons to Europe with her. But David, unwilling to distance himself from the Kenyan side of his family, ran away back to Kenya and lived with family members, including Roy. While living with Roy, David was killed in a motorcycle accident.

Mr. Wilkerson – Mr. Wilkerson is an English doctor who, with his wife, goes on safari with Barack and Auma. He grew up in Kenya on a tea plantation and feels like Kenya is home, though he recognizes that, due to the history of colonialism, he'll never really be able to call Africa home. He and his wife work for the government in Malawi in a medical capacity, training doctors, digging wells, and handing out medical supplies and condoms.

Ruby – Ruby is a Black woman whom Barack meets during his interviews with people in Chicago. Barack takes a special interest in her teenage son, Kyle. Ruby initially gets involved with organizing after Kyle experiences a brush with gang violence, and she stays dedicated to the efforts even after experiencing many failures. She and Barack have a brief falling-out when Ruby wears blue contacts, something that Barack sees as a reflection of Black self-hatred, but they make up and remain friends.

Johnnie – A native of the South Side, Johnnie is the assistant Barack hires after two years in Chicago. Johnnie is enthusiastic and is able to talk at length, bouncing from subject to subject, something Barack finds endearing. He's thrilled and proud when Barack announces he's going to law school. Johnnie doesn't resent Barack for his success, something that surprises Barack.

Mary – Mary is a white woman with an absent Black husband and biracial daughters whom Barack meets in Chicago through organizing. Barack knows little about her, as she's a private and reserved person, but he knows that she teaches kindergarten. She reminds Barack of Ann and is one of the only people to not greet Barack's news of his acceptance to Harvard with enthusiasm.

Linda and Bernadette – Linda and Bernadette are two sisters living in Altgeld; they each have a young child and Linda is pregnant again. They dream of going to college, buying a beautiful home, and having a garden. To Barack, they seem painfully young and innocent, although he knows that they must see him the same way. They're instrumental figures in Barack's attempts to organize Altgeld tenants when they discover that the apartments might contain asbestos.

Dr. Collier – Dr. Collier is the principal of an elementary school in Chicago. She's a stout Black woman who puts Barack in contact with her parents' group, which is made up almost entirely of young mothers who are in their teens or early twenties. Dr. Collier throws herself into doing whatever she can to help these mothers and their children.

Zeituni – Zeituni is one of the Old Man's sisters and Barack's aunt. She's a beloved part of the Old Man's extended family of former wives and sisters living in Nairobi and Alego. As a child, she was Onyango's favorite, but she tells Barack that Onyango was still just as strict with her as he was with everyone else.

Francis – Francis is the driver and guide for Barack and Auma's safari. His wife and children cultivate corn and coffee, and he'd rather farm than work for a travel agency. He's open about how government corruption makes farming an untenable job for him, and he believes that he needs to speak out in the hope that something might change.

Coretta – Coretta is the only other Black student at his school when Barack starts fifth grade in Hawaii. Barack reacts meanly toward her after other students tease them about being boyfriend and girlfriend, and he realizes that he has treated her this way because she is Black. She's awed by the Old Man when he comes to speak at the school.

Reggie – Reggie is Barack's college roommate. He, like Barack, likes to think of himself as a radical. He embarrasses Barack in front of Regina by recounting an all-weekend party he and Barack threw in the dorms. They made a mess and left vomit, garbage, and cigarette butts everywhere—and laughed at the cleaning staff's horrified looks.

Kyle – Kyle is Ruby's teenage son. He reminds Barack of himself, so Barack takes a special interest in him and tries to

encourage him to believe that he can have a bright future. Kyle, however, is disaffected and angry—he insists that he'll never be able to do anything as a Black man.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Helima – Helima is Onyango's first wife. She's the first woman who can keep house to his standards, though they eventually discover that she cannot have children. Onyango, however, stays married to her, despite the fact that not being able to bear children is grounds for divorce.

Mr. Foster – Mr. Foster is the former head of a Chicago neighborhood Chamber of Commerce; he resigned a week before Barack, Angela, Shirley, and Mona went to meet with him. At the meeting, he explained that the Black business owners in the area struggle (or are unwilling) to work together.

Tim – Tim is a classmate and friend of Barack's in college. Barack sees Tim as the polar opposite of Marcus: Tim is Black, but he's suburban, middle-class, and wears argyle sweaters. When Barack makes fun of how "white" Tim acts, Marcus calls Barack out.

Mr. Anderson – Mr. Anderson is the elderly project manager of Altgeld. A Black man who's trying to hold onto the little bit of power he has, he proves an enemy when Altgeld residents discover that there might be asbestos in their apartments and Mr. Anderson avoids helping them.

Aunt Jane – Aunt Jane is one of Barack's paternal aunts. She is the one to call Barack with the news that the Old Man died, though Barack doesn't meet her in person until years later when he visits Kenya for the first time.

George – George is one of Barack's younger half brothers. He is an elementary-age boy when Barack first visits Kenya and meets him.

Obama – Obama is Barack's great-great grandfather and Onyango's father. He was a beloved elder who disowned Onyango when Onyango adopted Western ways of dressing and conducting himself.

Omar – Omar is Barack's uncle. He's been in the United States for about 25 years when Barack travels to Kenya for the first time, and their relatives in Kenya refer to Omar as "lost" since he has left the fold of the family and doesn't intend to return.

Dr. King – Dr. King is the principal at Asante's school. He seems eager and genuinely willing to help with a program that they're organizing—but Johnnie and Barack discover that he really just wants the proposed youth outreach organization to hire his wife and his daughter.

Dorsila – Dorsila is one of Onyango's last surviving siblings. She's in her seventies but seems young and innocent to Barack. Dorsila walks all the way from her village to visit with Barack and offers several insights into their family.

Angela – Angela is one of the Black women who works with Marty. She's thrilled to have Barack on board, but she, like Shirley and Mona, soon become disillusioned with Marty. She continues to work with Barack after Marty leaves Chicago.

Jeff – Jeff is a white friend of Barack and Ray's. He plays on the basketball team at their high school. After Ray invites him and Scott to a Black party, Jeff tells Barack that he now understands how hard it must be to be the only Black kids at school.

Shirley – Shirley is one of the Black women who works with Marty. She continues to work with Barack after Marty leaves Chicago.

Mona – Mona is one of the Black women who works with Marty. She continues to work with Barack after Marty leaves Chicago.

Smitty – Smitty is a Black barber in Chicago. He cuts Barack's hair and gives him a history lesson on Harold Washington's election.

Ms. Alvarez – Ms. Alvarez is the city-wide administrator of the Mayor's Office of Employment and Training.

Reverend Smalls – Reverend Smalls is a Chicago reverend who consistently pushes back on Barack and Marty's attempts to organize the city's churches.

Reverend Reynolds – Reverend Reynolds is a Chicago reverend who is one of the first people to invite Barack to work with his church and the local ministerial alliance.

Miss Omoro – Miss Omoro is a British Airways employee working in Nairobi. She recognizes Barack as the Old Man's son, a thrilling experience for Barack.

Amy – Amy is a Kenyan woman whom Roy announces he's going to marry. Auma and Kezia dislike Amy; they believe that she's irresponsible and brings out Roy's worst qualities.

Elizabeth – Elizabeth is Francis's teenage niece; she accompanies Barack and Auma on their safari.

Maya – Maya is Obama's younger half-sister. She's Ann's daughter with Lolo.

Scott – Scott is a white friend of Barack and Ray's. He plays on the basketball team.

Hasan – Hasan is Barack's college roommate.

Kezia – Kezia is one of Barack's aunts and the Old Man's first wife. She is the mother to Auma, Roy, Bernard, and Abo.

Salina – Salina is Billy's mother, a tall and handsome woman.

Michelle – Michelle is Barack's wife. She's an instant hit with his Hawaiian and Kenyan families.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

In his memoir, Barack Obama recounts his upbringing in Hawaii; his college years; his stint as a community organizer in Chicago; and finally, his first visit to Kenya in the months before he began studying law at Harvard. Born to a white American mother and a Black Kenyan father (who was mostly absent from Barack's life), Barack's story circles back again and again to what it means to be part of a family or a community. Ultimately, he proposes that families and communities don't have to look a certain way to be functional and supportive—people can get the support necessary to grow and thrive if they're part of a family or community that supports its members and takes responsibility for the well-being of the group.

Despite having an absent biological father, Barack finds unwavering love and support from his extended family as he grows up. His father, whom he refers to as the Old Man, leaves Barack's mother, Ann, when Barack is two years old. Ann remarries an Indonesian man, Lolo, when Barack is six years old, and the family moves to Indonesia. There, Lolo makes sure that young Barack is looked after and understands how to navigate childhood and school as an Indonesian, thereby helping Barack fit into their world in Djakarta. Upon Barack's return to Hawaii for school at age nine, his grandparents, Gramps and Toot, take over where Lolo left off. They make sure that Barack attends the local private school, and Gramps in particular insists that Barack will have the tools and social capital—thanks to the relationships he'll make at school—to go anywhere he wants when he's an adult. The care that Ann, Lolo, Gramps, and Toot all show Barack begins to make the case that family doesn't have to look a particular way in order to be supportive and caring. Even though Barack's biological father is absent, his mother, stepfather, and grandparents provide him with more than enough love and support. What matters more than what a family looks like, Barack suggests, is the care they show to others.

As a young adult, Barack applies his understanding of nontraditional families to larger communities while he works as a community organizer in the South Side of Chicago. There, Barack sees that despite his own success, being part of a fractured family can have the opposite effect: that of making young people feel unsupported. The inner-city youths whom Barack works with often turn to gangs, drugs, and violence to find community and meaning in their lives. Barack specifically attributes this to the combination of poverty and a lack of father figures—two things that, broadly speaking, Barack never had to deal with in his own youth. However, he also notices that in the South Side, children nevertheless have their mothers—while most of the religious leaders Barack deals with through his work are male, it's the women in the community who are most committed to coming together and figuring out how to serve and protect their neighborhoods. These women, Barack realizes, are the glue in a community where many fathers are absent from their children's lives—they're involved in the churches, in the schools, and in the community campaigns Barack works on. Recognizing the integral role these women play helps Barack once again realize that families and communities don't have to look a certain way in order to come together to support one another's well-being—particularly the well-being of their children. And indeed, his own involvement as a professional community organizer—a person tasked with advocating alongside the residents and organizing community events—shows him that there are many routes to building a sense of community in an area.

Finally, in Kenya, Barack receives further proof that a comprehensive sense of responsibility to the group is what ties families and communities together. For the first time, Barack finds himself in a place in which it's possible that someone will recognize him as his father's son wherever he goes—and where relatives emerge on a consistent basis, asking for help or gifts. He also notices that, as in the South Side, there's a conspicuous lack of successful men in the family who are able to shepherd the family toward collective success. With this, Barack begins to realize that being part of a family is about more than just providing emotional support. If he's to accept his ties to his Kenyan family, this means stepping up to help financially where and when he can, maintaining his relationships with his family after returning to the U.S., and becoming successful in a way that will make the family proud. And with this, Barack comes to recognize that what binds communities and families together through change and hardship is a sense of duty and responsibility to the collective. Regardless of what a family or community looks like, Barack suggests that a group's members must constantly strive for better for current and future generations—individuals' commitments to others in the group are what enables families and communities to thrive.

FATHERS, SONS, AND MANHOOD

Though Barack Obama is interested in what it means to be part of a family more broadly, the memoir focuses specifically on the relationship between fathers and sons. Barack meets his father—whom he calls the Old Man—only once, when he's 10 years old, and his father dies when Barack is 21. Due to his father's absence from his life and the far-fetched stories of his father that he grows up with, Barack spends his entire life trying to come to terms with his father's legacy. Barack makes the case that although idolizing one's father is a natural tendency for a son, recognizing the flawed humanity of one's father is a crucial step

in a man's maturation. Moreover, having an imperfect or absent father doesn't necessarily mean a child can't have a father at all—any man who's willing to step in can act as a father figure and help lead young people to maturity.

The secondhand stories that others tell about Barack's absent father, along with the letters that Barack receives from the Old Man himself, paint a picture of a man who is simultaneously overbearing and perfect. They cement the Old Man in Barack's mind as an ideal, larger-than-life figure. The Old Man leaves two-year-old Barack in Hawaii with Barack's mother, Ann, so that the Old Man can attend Harvard. As a result, Barack formulates an understanding of his father through stories and the intermittent letters the Old Man sends. To young Barack, the stories about his father are comforting because they center on him, the son, as he relates to the Old Man. They're also funny and lighthearted from Barack's perspective—due to never living with his father, Barack never has to confront what it must have been like to live with a man whom Ann describes as "a bit domineering. Instead, his understanding of the Old Man is of a man who fathered him and then, out of duty to his home country of Kenya, nobly pursued his education at Harvard and returned to Kenya to help bring the still-developing nation into the modern world. The Old Man's letters to Barack encourage him to follow in his footsteps by doing well in school, something that isn't difficult for Barack. As a young child, these stories are enough for Barack—but later, as he gets older and becomes more curious about his family history, he begins to wonder why his father never came back for him. As these questions arise, the Old Man suddenly begins to look more human—and possibly, like more of a cautionary tale than a role model to emulate.

Despite not having his biological father to guide him, Barack nevertheless grows up with his maternal grandfather, Gramps, and Ann's second husband, Lolo, to guide him. Due to their constant presence, Barack is able to see clearly that these men are not perfect—but this doesn't mean they can't also offer constructive lessons about how to be a man and how the world works. Lolo, whom Ann marries when Barack is six years old, moves the family to his home country of Indonesia. And though Lolo never presses his relationship with Barack, he's consistently willing to answer all of Barack's questions about Indonesia and how to make oneself a strong, powerful man. Once Barack returns to Hawaii (were his grandparents still live) at age nine, Gramps takes over as the primary father figure. Gramps makes Barack feel welcomed and cared for as Barack embarks on his private school career—though he provides Barack more than his fair share of embarrassment by unwittingly humiliating his grandson on the first day of school. But Gramps also connects Barack to several of his elderly Black friends, who guide Barack (who's biracial) toward a better understanding of what it means to be a Black man in America. This kind of guidance is something that Gramps, as a white man, cannot provide. From these men, then, Barack learns several important lessons: he begins to understand that no one, not even those men he admires, are perfect. Perhaps even more importantly, he begins to see that any man who's willing to offer advice can step in to help raise boys into men—something that Barack later puts into practice as an adult by mentoring some of his colleagues' fatherless sons.

Through all of this, it's the Old Man's absence and abandonment of his son that begins to impress on Barack that his father isn't the god he grew up believing him to be. His few memories of the Old Man as imposing and unapproachable haunt him, and their intermittent written correspondence does nothing to sooth Barack's worry. Later, in his twenties, Barack connects with his older half siblings, Auma and Roy, and he eventually travels to Kenya to meet the rest of his family. Through these newfound familial relationships, Barack is forced to reckon with the fact that his father was both cruel and generous, and that he lived far beyond his means in the last few years of his life. To preserve his reputation after the Kenyan government blacklisted him, the Old Man gave some people lavish gifts he couldn't afford—while driving teenage Roy out of the house and making Auma feel alone, though she still lived with him. And through these stories and those of his grandfather, Barack begins to see his father as grappling with the same dilemmas that Barack is faced with as a young adult: how to be a man, find success, and interact with the next generation. In short, the Old Man finally becomes undeniably human in Barack's eyes. With this, Barack proposes that his own coming of age is tied deeply to his final recognition of his father's humanity—and indeed, a growing recognition of the humanity of all father figures. No fathers are perfect, the memoir suggests, but they all have something to teach and pass on to the next generation.

RACE AND IDENTITY

During Barack Obama's younger years, life is simple, and his identity is nothing to fret over. His mother, Ann, loves him; his grandparents love him; and his father, though absent, is someone to look up to. However, one fateful day when he's nine years old, Barack opens up a *Life* magazine to a piece about Black people who used skin lightening creams with disastrous effects, complete with **photographs**. This marks the moment in which Barack (who's biracial) begins to suspect that being Black is, possibly, something to be ashamed of—and from then on, Barack constantly struggles to figure out what it means to be a Black man in America. Through his journey of self-discovery, he proposes that fully comprehending and accepting one's identity as a Black person entails learning about one's roots, understanding racist systems of power, and recognizing the varied viewpoints of other Black people.

Seeing the *Life* photograph raises immediate feelings of shame

and suspicion in Barack; it suddenly makes racism real for him. He attributes his earlier innocence to his white mother's habit of buying him books about civil rights and famous Black figures and to the particular melting pot culture of Hawaii, where—in theory at least—there is enough diversity and few enough Black people that it's easy enough to pretend racism doesn't exist there. Upon seeing the photograph, however, Barack begins to wonder if his mother knows about skin lightening. And later, when he returns to Hawaii to live with his white grandparents, Gramps and Toot, he feels that there is a gulf opening up between him and them because of their different skin colors. This eventually transforms into anger: Barack comes to understand that as a Black man in the United States, where minorities still experience discrimination, many white people (intentionally or not) see him as a threat. He can't control whether or not people treat him like a human being, no matter what he does or doesn't do. This sense of alienation from the people who raise him lead to increasing feelings of powerlessness and anger, which culminate in Barack's college days spent escaping from his identity through substance abuse and mocking fellow Black students who act too "white." Especially given his Hawaiian upbringing (in comparison to his classmates' upbringings in Chicago, Compton, or New York City), Barack feels the need to prove his Blackness to his college peers. However, even his Black peers eventually begin to call him out on what they identify as bad behavior. They impress upon Barack that his apathetic, exclusionary attitude doesn't make him Black—it just makes him rude.

Through his friends' advice and his later experiences as a community organizer in the South Side of Chicago, Barack begins to understand that his youthful desire to prove that his Blackness is normal. While he may have settled on a life path focused on serving other Black individuals through community organization, other Black people find different ways to express and connect with their roots. Barack ends up in Chicago in the first place because of an increase in crime, poverty, and drugs in Chicago's South Side, especially among young Black men. In working to overcome these obstacles, Barack must reckon with the fact that for many of the people he seeks to serve, Jim Crow laws (which enforced racial segregation in the U.S.) are only a generation removed. Being Black, to them, means constantly struggling for basic survival and respect. For some—especially young boys—this means turning to violence and drugs. For others, this means embracing the legacy of Malcolm X, a civil rights leader who advocated for Black empowerment through separatism. For others still, this means working within their church communities (which often collaborate with Barack's organization) to create change within Chicago. Being exposed to these many different ways of grappling with being Black helps Barack see that there isn't one correct way to think of his identity. It can (and does) change as he grows and is exposed to new ideologies and ways of thinking—and especially as he begins to connect with his Kenyan family in his mid-twenties.

Barack makes the case that in his experience, Africa isn't just a convenient silver bullet that helps Black Americans discover who they are. Rather, although learning about or traveling to Africa can help illuminate Black Americans' historical roots, it raises as many questions as it answers. In the year before his first trip to Kenya, Barack meets a guidance counselor, Asante, whose mission is to introduce Black male students to Africa. He insists that learning about Africa can give boys the sense that they're part of something much larger even than simply the history of Black Americans' struggle for freedom and respect. In Asante's eyes, learning about Africa offers a window into a world that's centered around the experiences of Black people and that encourages them to be proud of who they are. Barack experiences some of this during his first trip to Kenya—for instance, it's exhilarating to realize that his skin color doesn't matter because everyone there looks like him. But he also discovers that Kenya doesn't offer him the version of his ancestors that he hoped for. His grandfather Onyango, for instance, wasn't a traditional African man who stood up to British colonialism, as Barack assumed. Rather, Onyango was the first in the family to adopt Western styles of dress, work in white homes and establishments, and learn Western farming methods that ultimately made him rich. In short, Barack finds that African history and culture, both at large and on a small scale, don't exist separately from the white, Western world—it exists in opposition to or in tandem with that world. Barack's final coming-of-age moment comes as he realizes this, suggesting that coming to terms with one's Black identity means also coming to terms with the way that white culture and Western imperialism have made this a struggle at all.

STORYTELLING AND TRUTH

Since Barack Obama's father leaves him and his mother Ann when Barack is only two years old, Barack grows up with stories and the occasional letter, not the man himself. And later, as Barack connects with his far-flung half siblings, they bond through telling stories primarily about their late father, whom they refer to as the Old Man. With this, the memoir situates storytelling as one of its central concerns. Ultimately, it suggests that while storytelling is a passable way to learn about someone in that person's absence, the sharing stories and family lore serves a much broader purpose. Telling stories is a way to connect with others in the present, but it can also function as a way to either make sense of how one's past experiences influence one's present—or, as a way of editing the truth of one's history to create a more flattering picture of the past.

For much of the memoir, Barack approaches stories as though they're a simple way to explain, illuminate, and describe facts in a straightforward manner. He spends much of his life grappling with the various stories he hears about his father, in the hope

that he'll be able to make sense of who he is by putting together his father's story. This reflects the idea that by plumbing history and by creating a simple chain of cause and effect, a person can trace the development of themselves and those close to him. However, as Barack gets older and more skeptical, he also has to contend with the fact that many stories about his father seem too wild to be true. Because of this, he abandons some of the more sensational stories—such as the one about his father lecturing a racist white man in a bar so eloquently that the man offered his father $100 in apology. He deems these as nice ideas but ultimately fictitious, sprung from the minds of admiring relatives. But in the case of this story, Barack reveals that years later, he received an unexpected phone call from an old friend of his father's, who confirms the truth of the story totally unprompted. With this, Barack has to face the undeniable proof that reason, logic, and his own expectations of what's possible don't always apply to the stories he hears—at least when they concern the Old Man.

But even in light of having some of the more fantastical accounts of the Old Man's exploits confirmed, Barack still has to contend with questions of truth—in particular, what people omit from their stories and why. Throughout his journey, Barack receives information that either adds more nuance or contradicts a story he once believed was true. In telling the story of his maternal grandparents, Gramps and Toot—part of Barack's project of figuring out who he is and where he came from—he focuses on situating their eventual move to Hawaii in the historical context of the 1950s and 60s. He explains that they were very progressive when it came to their thoughts on race, something that caused issues with their white peers and bosses in Kansas and Texas but, according to Gramps, ceased to be an issue in Hawaii. But through Barack's relationship with Frank, an elderly Black man who's an old friend of Gramps's, Barack learns that Gramps's account of his early life leaves certain things out. For instance, Frank explains, Gramps and Toot employed Black women in their home in Kansas and thought of them as family, which Frank implies demonstrates a misunderstanding of the power dynamics inherent in hiring domestic help. Frank suggests that it's impossible to truly consider those women family, and by omitting that he ever hired those women in the first place, Gramps makes it seem as though he's always understood that. In short, while Gramps was never overtly racist, he still seeks to omit parts of his story that point to his own complicity within racist systems. With this, Barack comes to the understanding that storytelling can serve many purposes—and those purposes don't always include telling the unvarnished truth. Rather, the memoir proposes that storytelling is a highly personal endeavor that reveals as much about the speaker as it does about the subject of the story.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE LIFE PHOTOGRAPH

At nine years old, Barack Obama sees a photograph in *Life* magazine of a Black man who used skin-lightening cream, an image that prompts Barack's realization that racism is lurking everywhere. The photograph and accompanying article introduce Barack (who's biracial) to the racist notion that being Black is something to be ashamed of, a horrible notion that has never occurred to him before this point. In this sense, while the photo explicitly showcases the damage that racism does to Black people by making them feel ashamed of their skin color, it also represents Barack's loss of innocence as he encounters this internalized shame for the first time. Seeing the photo thus symbolically marks the beginning of his struggle to navigate his racial identity as a Black man in America.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Three Rivers Press edition of *Dreams from My Father* published in 1995.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ According to her, *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.

Related Characters: Barack Obama, Toot (speaker), Gramps

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

As Barack shares his grandparents' reasons for moving away from Texas, he contrasts Gramps's righteous narrative

of rejecting racism with Toot's more tempered view of what happened. These differing versions of the same story begin to show how stories don't tell the unadulterated truth. Toot's version of the story, he believes, is likely more correct than Gramps's—while they were certainly put off by the behavior of those around them, they likely couldn't identify it as racism, but instead saw a mere meanness and inequality that they didn't want to be around. But even if Toot's version is more accurate in terms of what happened, Gramps's story is nevertheless also true in that it reveals how he thinks of himself: as a crusader for justice, a man whose views were (for white people, at least) ahead of his time. While Gramps probably did take issue with the racism he saw in Texas, not having known the word "racism" may now make Gramps feel as though he was embarrassingly uninformed. Because of this, he tells a story that reflects the person he wishes he was and the person he's since become—but it doesn't reflect the person he *actually* was quite as accurately. By testing Toot and Gramps's stories against one another and gleaning truth from both, Barack is showing how important it is to listen to stories for both their content and their framing; often the subtext or the inaccuracies tell as much as anything else.

> 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.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Ann, Toot, Gramps, Barack's Father/The Old Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In relating the stories that his mother and grandparents told about the Old Man, Barack realizes that these stories probably tell him more about the storytellers than about the Old Man himself. After all, whenever his white family told stories about his Black father, they would implicitly reveal (or embellish) their own racial attitudes, past and present. Conveying their progressive politics was, perhaps, just as important to his family as informing him about his father was.

Barack also brings up that the stories of his father would have been especially warped because of the time in which his family knew the Old Man; he and Ann met in 1960, the year in which John F. Kennedy was elected—an election that symbolized, in the American psyche, a generational upheaval in which antiracism played a starring role. So for Gramps to admit, for example, that he was initially lukewarm on the idea of having a Black son-in-law would position him as reactionary and out-of-step with the zeitgeist—it would frame Gramps as a relic of Jim Crow rather than a proud progressive who embraced his Black family and fought for justice. For this reason, Gramps tells the stories that reflect his current values, rather than the ones he held in 1961—but this comes at the expense of giving Barack a real portrait of his father and grandfather.

Because of this, Barack doesn't learn much about who his father actually was until much later in life when he talks to his Kenyan family. Barack's Kenyan family is better able to describe the Old Man in part because they knew him better than Ann, Gramps, and Toot did. But it's also plausible to think that they could give a fuller picture of the Old Man—his flaws alongside his strengths—because they are Black themselves and aren't trying to prove their anti-racism to Barack when they tell stories.

Chapter 4 Quotes

> *White folks*. The term itself was uncomfortable in my mouth at first; I felt like a non-native speaker tripping over a difficult phrase. Sometimes I would find myself talking to Ray about *white folks* this or *white folks* that, and I would suddenly remember my mother's smile, and the words that I spoke would seem awkward and false.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Ann, Ray

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80-81

Explanation and Analysis

In high school, Ray introduces Barack to the term "white folks," a term that he means in a derogatory sense, calling attention to what he sees as the racism inherent to all white people. Even though Barack is also Black and concerned about racism, he struggles to use the term the way Ray

does. He attributes this at first to a kind of language barrier—he's not a "native speaker" of Ray's vernacular, presumably because he was raised by "white folks" rather than Black ones and he therefore has a different relationship to white people than Ray does. In this way, Barack feels like he's playacting by using this term, trying to perform a belief that he doesn't actually hold via language that isn't natural to him.

He also specifically invokes his mother in this passage, showing his guilt and confusion over implying that all white people are bad—Barack loves his mother and feels that she has loved and supported him in return, so it doesn't seem quite right to him to suggest that *all* white people are bad. Due to this, when he uses the term "white folks" he feels that he is fundamentally lying; he doesn't believe that white folks are all bad, even as he implies that they are to fit in. At this point, Barack isn't sure whether Ray is right and Barack just doesn't know it yet, or whether Ray is (as Barack intuitively feels) being overly general and imprecise with his condemnation. Barack's careful attention to language and his discomfort with using words or phrases that aren't precisely what he means persists throughout his career, both in his book-writing career (he wrote his books himself, unlike many politicians who use ghostwriters) and in many of his celebrated speeches.

> At best, these things were a refuge; at worst, a trap. Following this maddening logic, the only thing you could choose as your own was withdrawal into a smaller and smaller coil of rage, until being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Jeff, Scott, Ray

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

After a disastrous situation in which Barack brought his white friends Scott and Jeff to an otherwise all Black party, Barack feels his anger reaching a breaking point. After the party, Jeff had suggested that his experience of feeling singled out at the Black party was equivalent to how Barack must feel all the time. While Jeff might have meant this to be empathetic, the comparison is obviously not correct; as a Black person in America, Barack is constantly affected by racism and is never able to see himself as a neutral presence—in both Black and white spaces, Barack is hyper-aware of his race, since his race makes him a target. Jeff, on the other hand, has *never* been aware of his race until this moment, and his discomfort at being a white person at a Black party is not equivalent to the difficulty of being one of the only Black people in a white school. (After all, Jeff's whiteness might make him stand out at the party, but he's not a target for discrimination and he does not experience powerlessness due to his race.)

Jeff's ignorance makes Barack feel an anger and cynicism that is new for him, as he starts to think about how white people always have the power. This power imbalance makes it somewhat irrelevant whether a white person's intentions are good or bad—either way, they can subtly dictate the terms of any situation, which is itself oppression. In this light, Barack begins to feel that the only thing that's truly his own—the only thing that doesn't somehow belong to white people—is his rage at the racism saturating his world.

Notably, Barack recognizes full well, even then, that while this logic might hold some emotional appeal, it's ultimately self-defeating, as it defines being Black not through anything positive, but through powerlessness and rage. While his anger is righteous (it springs from real wounds inflicted by racism), it's not productive—it's a "refuge" or a "trap" that keeps Black people from cultivating the power and pride that would allow them to make change. While Barack realizes this to some extent in this moment, he doesn't immediately embrace it; for a time, his rage leads him into drug abuse, disaffection, and cynicism. But he returns to his critique of this rage in college as he realizes that he wants to make positive change, which requires him to believe that his Blackness can be powerful if he harnesses it to do good.

> "I don't suppose he would have. Stan doesn't like to talk about that part of Kansas much. Makes him uncomfortable. He told me once about a black girl they hired to look after your mother. A preacher's daughter, I think it was. Told me how she became a regular part of the family. That's how he remembers it, you understand—this girl coming in to look after somebody else's children, her mother coming to do somebody else's laundry. A regular part of the family."

Related Characters: Frank (speaker), Ann, Toot, Gramps, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80-81

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Gramps's Black friend Frank suggests that Barack's white grandparents—while perfectly nice and loving—still have some ignorant and even racist attitudes. When Gramps told Frank about hiring a Black babysitter, he framed the woman's presence in their home as familial rather than professional. Gramps likely meant to show Frank that his family home was open to Black people like him, but Frank heard this quite differently; Gramps didn't respect the humanity of Black people enough to acknowledge that being a paid employee is actually *nothing* like being a family member. Gramps is able to have these delusions because he's white and he's so used to having power that he doesn't even recognize when he's using it. To him, in other words, the experience of hiring a babysitter does not register as an exercise of power over another person. Obviously, though, Frank and the babysitter both recognize that Gramps—as a white person paying for a service—is dictating the terms of the interaction. It's absurd to suggest that this is anything like a familial relationship between equals.

This moment is also important because it helps Barack understand that Gramps, while well-meaning, often tells stories that are meant to make himself seem more moral or virtuous than he actually is. Because of these distortions, his stories don't give Barack a true sense of who Gramps is or the world that he came from—they only reveal who Gramps wishes he were. Frank hints here that there are aspects of Gramps's Kansan upbringing that Gramps would never mention to Barack, presumably because it would reveal his own complicity in the pervasive racism where he grew up. It's sad that Gramps is so protective of his own image. Acknowledging his ignorance would be a step towards atoning for his past behavior and changing his future behavior, and knowing the truth about the world in which Gramps and Toot grew up would help Barack understand his family and his own experiences of racism better. However, Gramps prioritizes protecting his own image over helping his grandson understand the racism that he faces, which is selfish and emblematic of his own fragility.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ The minority assimilated into the dominant culture, not the other way around. Only white culture could be neutral and objective. Only white culture could be nonracial, willing to adopt the occasional exotic into its ranks. Only white culture had individuals. And we, the half-breeds and the college-degreed, take a survey of the situation and think to ourselves, Why should we get lumped in with the losers if we don't have to?

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Joyce

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

During college, Barack meets a young woman named Joyce who has family members from all over the world—but she wants to enter the white world and ignore the other parts of her heritage, particularly her Black ancestors. Barack recognizes that this is emblematic of the relationship between the dominant white culture and marginalized Black culture. White culture, because it's so prevalent and because white people have more power, is not even considered to be racialized—white things are neutral and "nonracial," they're merely considered to be the norm. For biracial people like Barack and Joyce, their skin color will always mark them as "exotic" but their proximity to whiteness (via education, being brought up by white people in white culture, etc.) makes them able—if they want to—to affiliate with white people rather than Black people. In fact, this might seem like a natural choice; when white people are successful, respected, wealthy, and educated, while minorities seem like "losers," who wouldn't try to assimilate to white culture and leave Black culture behind?

While Barack understands the appeal of this logic, he also knows that it's nefarious and wrongheaded, and he doesn't admire Joyce for disaffiliating from Black culture in order to succeed. First, this logic essentially blames Black people for the effects of racism. Joyce seems to see race, rather than racism, as the reason that white people succeed while many minorities don't—but actually, it's the effects of individual and structural racism that make markers of success (like wealth and education) less available to people of color. Second, Barack feels discomfort throughout his life with the idea of prioritizing his own success over the success of others. While he could have joined a white corporation and worked his way up the ladder to become personally rich and powerful, he chooses over and over again to prioritize

solidarity and justice over personal success. This is evident when he quits his lucrative consulting job to become a community organizer, when he uses his Harvard Law degree to take on discrimination cases rather than corporate clients, and also in his choice to go into public service by running for office. For Barack, the power that Joyce seeks by disaffiliating from Black people and assimilating into white culture is selfish and illusory. He would rather fight to create an equal world than accept racist terms in order to better his own situation.

❝ Except now I was hearing the same thing from black people I respected, people with more excuses for bitterness than I might ever claim for myself. Who told you that being honest was a white thing? they asked me. Who sold you this bill of goods, that your situation exempted you from being thoughtful or diligent or kind, or that morality had a color?

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Reggie, Regina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

After Regina accuses Barack of being rude and self-centered at a party, Barack realizes that she just wants him to be a good person. In this moment, Barack sees that his apathy and his anger toward white people and white culture have made him feel as though he didn't have to behave kindly or with integrity. He had for a long time seen abandoning kindness and embracing his rage as the way to be authentically Black, but thanks to Regina, he realizes that he's simply being a jerk.

Barack began leaning into anger rather than kindness in high school when he came to believe that the only things that truly belong to Black people are rage and powerlessness—but embracing rage and powerlessness, he now sees, means giving up on being kind, generous, and helping others. Here, because of Regina, Barack begins to realize that kindness and the willingness to work in service of others aren't just virtues peddled by white people who want to get Black people to fall into line. Rather, they're values that everyone should follow, no matter their skin color. As Barack makes this connection and realizes that being rude doesn't make him authentically Black, he begins to come of age and think more critically about who he wants to be as an adult. And most importantly, Barack vows at this point to not define himself in terms of Black rage—no matter how righteous or understandable that might be.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Such images became a form of prayer for me, bolstering my spirits, channeling my emotions in a way that words never could. They told me [...] that I wasn't alone in my particular struggles, and that communities had never been a given in this country, at least not for blacks. Communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens. They expanded or contracted with the dreams of men—and in the civil rights movement those dreams had been large.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Barack describes how pictures of the civil rights movement helped inspire him to become a community organizer. For him, the lesson of the civil rights movement is the importance of cultivating community, as community gives people a place to find others who look, think, and dream like they do. In addition, being in a community makes a person feel whole and supported in a way that Barack implies isn't possible on one's own.

However, Barack also acknowledges that "communities [have] never been a given" for Black people in the United States, a nod to the history of slavery in and the devastation that slavery wrought on Black families and communities. Slavery destroyed Black communities, first in Africa when Africans were abducted from their homes to become slaves and later in the U.S., as slave owners separated families and communities regularly. And in the present, the effects of structural racism (including mass incarceration, underfunded institutions, and wealth inequality) mean that Black communities and families are still difficult to maintain, even generations after the end of slavery. Barack views the civil rights movement as an antidote to these collective traumas in that fighting for equal rights gave Black communities a way to connect with each other and rebuild their sense of shared purpose and camaraderie. Notably, Barack also sees the ideals of the civil rights movement as being in service of the greater good, something that by this point has become very important to him.

When Barack notes that Black dreams were large during the civil rights movement, he implies in turn that those around him aren't dreaming as big as previous generations

did. This is why he wants to organize in the first place: to help people regain a sense that they can make a difference in their lives if they work together.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ One thing I noticed, though. The woman so concerned with the cruder habits of her neighbors had a picture of Harold in her kitchen, right next to the sampler of the Twenty-third Psalm. So did the young man who lived in the crumbling apartment a few blocks away [...]. As it had for the men in Smitty's barbershop, the election had given both these people a new idea of themselves. Or maybe it was an old idea, born of a simpler time. Harold was something they still held in common: Like my idea of organizing, he held out an offer of collective redemption.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Smitty, Harold Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

As Barack traverses Chicago and conducts interviews with people on the South Side, he realizes that despite the many differences between Black Chicagoans—differences of social class, interest, personality, etc.— most Black Chicagoans share a deep love and appreciation for Harold Washington, Chicago's first Black mayor. This helps Barack understand what community might mean to Black people, as Washington becomes a unifying symbol of what Black people might accomplish by focusing on their shared interests rather than their divisions. And as Black people begin to get excited about the future that might be possible now that they've elected a Black mayor, they begin to think of themselves as a community that is powerful and capable of creating change. In other words, the election of Harold Washington helps Black Chicagoans understand that they can unify around their shared interests, despite their many differences.

Even if the woman whom Barack mentions is concerned with distancing herself from her poorer neighbors, the fact remains that she (like those neighbors) believes that Harold Washington's election is good for her—just the same as the other young man in the crumbling apartment believes. And especially as Barack goes on to speak with religious leaders in the community who all suggest that Chicago's Black community is fracturing because of socioeconomic differences, the connecting tie of Harold Washington helps Barack keep in mind that the people he's trying to help do have this one thing in common.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ That's what the leadership was teaching me, day by day: that the self-interest I was supposed to be looking for extended well beyond the immediacy of issues, that beneath the small talk and sketchy biographies and received opinions people carried within them some central explanation of themselves. Stories full of terror and wonder, studded with events that still haunted or inspired them. Sacred stories.

And it was this realization, I think, that finally allowed me to share more of myself with the people I was working with [...]

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Deacon Will Milton, Angela

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Over the course of Barack's interviews with Black Chicagoans, he begins to see that the people with whom he speaks aren't just interested in issues like drugs, gang violence, or property values (the issues he came to Chicago to help solve, in other words). Rather, these people are trying to figure out how to understand their place in the world, telling themselves "sacred stories" of who they are and where they've been. What he's learning here, in essence, is that it's impossible to distill people or their communities down into single political or social issues, like gang violence or educational opportunities—every person is much more complicated than that, and understanding them and their communities means learning the stories that they tell about themselves.

As Barack begins to realize the importance of personal stories, he also starts to understand the importance of telling his own story. Now that he realizes that people's aspirations for the future are intimately tied with their narratives of themselves, he learns that telling his own story can be a powerful motivator, an offering of vulnerability that helps others feel that he is part of their community and shares their dreams. He tells his own "sacred stories" in his memoir; these include stories about the Old Man's visit, or the time he saw the photograph in *Life* magazine that made him understand the complexity of being Black—moments

that changed his life forever, helping to shape his conception of self and his future goals. Most importantly, as he exchanges "sacred stories" with others, he discovers that one can only build a community by listening and communicating honestly with others. As Black Chicagoans are honest with Barack, Barack is honest with them in return, which bonds them—a bond that provides political power, as it unites them in common cause.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ All my life, I had carried a single image of my father, one that I had sometimes rebelled against but had never questioned, one that I had later tried to take as my own. The brilliant scholar, the generous friend, the upstanding leader—my father had been all those things. All those things and more, because except for that one brief visit in Hawaii, he had never been present to foil the image, because I hadn't seen what perhaps most men see at some point in their lives: their father's body shrinking, their father's best hopes dashed, their father's face lined with grief and regret.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Gramps, Auma, Barack's Father/The Old Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

After Auma shares her story of growing up with their father, Barack realizes that he's gone through life believing in an idealized version of the Old Man. Auma's story is, in many ways, tragic. Though she acknowledges that the Old Man was indeed the scholar, friend, and leader that Barack thought he was, she also paints a picture of a man who was verbally abusive to his wife and children, who struggled with alcohol, and who refused to admit that he was wrong, even when he was living on the streets and couldn't care for his family. With this, Barack realizes that he hasn't had to engage with the Old Man as a real person—a person who grew, made mistakes, and experienced disappointment. Since Barack's father was mostly a myth to him, Barack could make him into whoever and whatever he needed at any given time. (This is why Barack, as a child, told his classmates stories about his father being an African prince—he wanted to impress them so that he could fit in, and it didn't matter to him that this was a lie, since Barack's father wasn't real to him anyway.) Auma's story changes Barack's conception of his father by presenting his many flaws and failures. This is understandably shocking for Barack. No longer is the Old Man someone to simply live up to by attending college and helping other people; instead, parts of the Old Man's story become cautionary tales.

As Barack thinks of his idealized image of his father, he also begins to think more critically about how children's relationships with their parents change over time. He understands after hearing Auma's story that, in his mind, the Old Man always remained the same person who visited him when he was ten. He knew his father for a few short weeks and otherwise never had to check his ideas of his father against reality. Because of this, his father was never fully human to him. This stands in stark contrast to how Barack has written about other family members, such as Gramps. Because Barack knew Gramps intimately over many years and because he's had the time to interrogate Gramps's history and his stories, he recognizes that Gramps is an old man who may have been somewhat progressive in his day—but who also couldn't acknowledge his own ethical missteps or his ignorance about race. In other words, Barack has a far more complex understanding of who Gramps is simply by virtue of having a closer relationship with the man. Because of this, he's able to learn more from Gramps about what it means to grow older and establish a sense of self.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ I wondered how much difference those posters would make to the boy we had just left in Asante's office. Probably not as much as Asante himself, I thought. A man willing to listen. A hand placed on a young man's shoulders.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Barack's Father/The Old Man, Johnnie, Asante

Related Themes:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Asante, a school guidance counselor, makes a point to introduce his Black students to Africa's history and cultures because he thinks that it will uplift the students by connecting them to their shared African heritage. But Barack doesn't think that this is so important to the students. Instead, Barack proposes that what young men in particular need most are male role models to take an interest in them and model kindness, caring, and respect. Since many of these students don't have father figures, Barack thinks that it's not Asante's interest in Africa that

makes a difference, but rather Asante's personal interest in their lives.

Barack believes in the importance of male role models in part because of his own experience of growing up without a father and in part because of his knowledge of how fractured the Black community is in Chicago. Barack notes at many points that there are few men and fathers around to help guide young boys toward adulthood—and in their absence, boys turn instead to gangs and violence to find a sense of community. Fathers, in this sense, become the cornerstone of community in Barack's mind. Without them, the community fractures.

As a man of Kenyan descent, Barack is also skeptical of some Black American rhetoric about Africa. This is a complex issue, since most descendants of enslaved Africans were robbed of their heritage through slavery—Black Americans often don't know what country or tribe their ancestors belonged to, and therefore feeling connected to the African continent can stand in for a more specific knowledge of one's history. This can be immensely positive and inspiring, but it can also—as Barack later explores—be overly general and sentimental. As Barack is not the descendant of slaves, he is able to trace his African roots, meet his African family, and get a sense of his specific heritage; because of this, he does not share the feeling that many Black Americans have of being dislocated from their heritage. However, he *does* share the feeling of being an outsider in white-dominated America, and going to Africa to visit his family unfortunately doesn't fix this. Meeting his Kenyan family answers specific questions about his father, but Africa itself isn't a promised land where Black people live in peace away from white oppression—in fact, Africa is a vast continent with a colonial history and a globalized present. It's not a place where Black people are free from racism, and it's certainly not untouched by white culture. For Barack, becoming more connected to Africa doesn't really solve any of his issues in America; what would have been better for him is having a father figure. For this reason, he's skeptical that Asante's attempts to introduce Black students to Africa will make a difference—instead, he thinks that the students are benefiting from Asante's clear interest in their emotional lives and his desire to help shape their future.

❝ "I thought I could start over, you see. But now I know you can never start over. Not really. You think you have control, but you are like a fly in somebody else's web."

Related Characters: Roy/Abongo (speaker), David, Barack's Father/The Old Man, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

When Barack visits his half-brother Roy in Washington, D.C. for the first time, Roy admits that he came to the United States in the aftermath of the Old Man's death death to try to start over and make a new life for himself. However, Roy proposes that it's actually impossible to escape one's history and family ties. At this point, Roy represents the less useful—and more constricting—aspect of what he proposes. For him, the memories of his deceased father and his deceased brother David weigh him down and make him feel hopeless, alone, and haunted.

However, later in the memoir, Barack comes to see the notion that he's caught in his family's "web" as more of a positive thing. He begins to see that his real project is to learn as much as he can about that web and figure out what he needs to do to make the most of his connections. Ultimately, Roy learns this too as he becomes more comfortable with himself and decides to start a business so that he can employ his brothers and uncle. As he accepts that he has responsibility to his familial web, he begins to see it not as a trap but as a support system.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ And I had things to learn in law school, things that would help me bring about real change. [...] I would learn power's currency in all its intricacy and detail, knowledge that would have compromised me before coming to Chicago but that I could now bring back to where it was needed, back to Roseland, back to Altgeld; bring it back like Promethean fire.

That's the story I had been telling myself, the same story I imagined my father telling himself twenty-eight years before [...]

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Barack's Father/The Old Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276-77

Explanation and Analysis

To justify his choice to leave Chicago to attend law school, Barack tells himself that he's going away to learn how power

really works so that he can return and make more of a difference in Chicago—but he also wonders if he's fooling himself.

The idea that Barack wants to learn about "power's currency" so he can return to Chicago and make a difference reflects his notion of himself as somebody who wants to help uplift Black people. He sees himself as a good person who is trying his best to make change, and attending Harvard Law School fits into that narrative to the extent that his law degree will make him better at the organizing work that he currently does. There's certainly some logic to the notion that learning how power works can make a person more powerful, but Barack is also skeptical of this story he's telling about himself—maybe he, like his father before him, is attending Harvard for personal betterment and will then leave the people he loves behind.

Implicitly, this passage acknowledges how power corrupts. Had Barack gone to Harvard Law before spending years organizing in Chicago, it would have "compromised" him. By this, he might mean several things. It's possible that he's acknowledging that having a Harvard Law degree might have irreparably alienated him from the working class Chicagoans whose trust he has spent years earning—perhaps it was important for him to begin as an organizer without having much more education than the people he was serving. It's also possible that Barack is making a more sinister point—that perhaps if he had gone to Harvard Law before seeing the urgent problems that Black Chicagoans faced, he might never have chosen to devote his life to public service. Had he gone straight to law school, the allure of wealth and prestige might have sent him down the corporate route, but he hopes that having seen the suffering and dreaming of Black Chicago will ground him in his future career, keeping him tethered to his mission of seeking justice. In this passage, though, he admits his own uncertainty; he's not sure whether law school will change him for better or worse, whether he'll be able to steal the "Promethian fire" from the powerful and bring it back to the poor, or whether he'll end up more like Icarus than Prometheus, ruined by flying too close to the sun.

Barack's fears about his future are enhanced by his knowledge of his father's history. Despite attending Harvard, the Old Man failed to make much of a positive difference in Kenya; his legacy, to a degree, was to alienate his children and his wives. So Barack understands that getting a prestigious education doesn't necessarily lead a person to care for others or accomplish their goals. Barack understandably doesn't want to make the same mistakes that his father did, but he also doesn't yet fully understand what those mistakes even were—he won't make those connections until he goes to Kenya in a few months. At this point, then, the story that Barack is repeating about his relationship with his father isn't as useful as it might otherwise be. Without fully understanding his father's choices and his failures, Barack cannot really expect to either follow in his footsteps or avoid his mistakes.

> That was one of the lessons I'd learned these past two and a half years, wasn't it?—that most black folks weren't like the father of my dreams, the man in my mother's stories, full of high-blown ideals and quick to pass judgment. They were more like my stepfather, Lolo, practical people who knew life was too hard to judge each other's choices, too messy to live according to abstract ideals.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Ann, Lolo, Barack's Father/The Old Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

As Barack gets closer to leaving for law school, he starts to understand that—even as he feels slightly ashamed of leaving his work in Chicago to pursue a prestigious degree—Black Chicagoans don't resent him for choosing to become a lawyer. They don't reject or punish him for leaving or accuse him of being insufficiently dedicated to the South Side of Chicago; instead, they're mostly proud of him for his achievements. As Barack starts to realize this, he sees the similarities between the outlook of Black Chicagoans and his former stepfather Lolo. For all Lolo's faults, Barack understands that Lolo was pragmatic, non-judgmental, and would certainly have been proud of an objectively amazing achievement like getting into law school. Because of the unfairness of life in Indonesia, Lolo wasn't driven by abstract ideals—he lived a practical life and celebrated people who were able to defy the odds to advance themselves. In this way, many Black Chicagoans remind him of Lolo—they see Barack's choices not in black-and-white moral terms, but as personal decisions that reflect the complexity and inscrutability of an individual life. Furthermore, while Barack's father might have been more idealistic than Lolo, he didn't accomplish much, so his idealistic and judgmental nature might not be a good example to follow. This continues Barack's project of humanizing his father and recognizing where his father may have been flawed.

Even more broadly, though, Barack is discovering that it's

not useful to hold tightly to one's "high-blown ideals" and judge others for not living up to them. It's far kinder, more realistic, and better for one's relationships to support others as they do what works for them. Going forward, this makes him far more accepting and welcoming of his Kenyan family. He accepts them with the understanding that they're doing the best they can in complicated situations, rather than lecturing them for deeds or beliefs that the Old Man may have believed were marks against their character or their loyalty.

❝ By widening its doors to allow all who would enter, a church like Trinity assured its members that their fates remained inseparably bound, that an intelligible "us" still remained.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Reverend Wright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

As Barack becomes more familiar with Trinity Church and its willingness to welcome affluent professionals, poor people, former gangsters, and everyone in between, he sees that there's a lot to be said for that kind of diversity, especially when it comes to mixing people of different incomes. At Trinity, a Black congregation of many different social classes worships together, and instead of dividing themselves into smaller groups by income, they mostly acknowledge that they're all Black and they're all here to worship—and therefore, they have a lot in common even though they live different lives and earn different paychecks. Since Trinity is a place where Black Chicagoans of all classes come together, the church becomes a place where Barack can see a version of Harold Washington's power to unify Black Chicagoans regardless of class. He noted earlier that affluent and poor Black people alike had photos of the first Black mayor in their homes; Harold, Washington like Trinity, gave Black Chicagoans something to rally around, despite their many other differences. Given what Barack sees as the erosion of the Black community in Chicago, this is especially meaningful to him. By not excluding certain Black people from its pews, Trinity is able to create a robust, diverse community and remind its congregants that people often have more in common with others than they think they do.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ I let my eyes wander over the scene—the well-worn furniture, the two-year-old calendar, the fading photographs, the blue ceramic cherubs that sat on linen doilies. It was just like the apartments in Altgeld, I realized. The same chain of mothers and daughters and children. The same noise of gossip and TV. The perpetual motion of cooking and cleaning and nursing hurts large and small. The same absence of men.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Kezia, Bernard, Aunt Jane, Zeituni, Auma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis

On the first night that Barack meets a large group of his family in Kenya, he's struck with the realization that his family isn't all that different from the Black Chicagoans he knows. What Barack picks up on in particular is the sense that there's not a lot of money to go around. He shows this by mentioning the worn furniture and the calendar. However, despite the lack of funds, Barack sees that his family and the families in Altgeld still want to do whatever they can to make their homes feel like home—hence the calendar (which may also be on the wall two years after its expiration because of the pictures, a habit he also noticed amongst Altgeld's residents). And above all else, everyone in the apartment cares about their family members most of all. It may be modest, but home is the place where family members can "nurs[e] hurts large and small" and foster a sense of community and caring.

Like in Altgeld, though, Barack also recognizes that there are few or no adult men around to guide the family toward future success. This work falls to women—and while Barack acknowledges that women make sacrifices and do the best they can, he suggests that they alone cannot lead the family to success. Drawing out these similarities between life in Nairobi and life in Altgeld helps Barack to realize that Africa itself might not answer all of his questions about his family—in important ways, like the ones he lists here, life really isn't that different in America and in Kenya. The important thing for him, then, becomes to connect with the family members in this apartment and pay attention to the stories they have to tell about the family and about Barack's history.

"That's where it all starts," she said. "The Big Man. Then his assistant, or his family, or his friend, or his tribe. It's the same whether you want a phone, or a visa, or a job. Who are your relatives? Who do you know? If you don't know somebody, you can forget it. That's what the Old Man never understood, you see. He came back here thinking that because he was so educated and spoke his proper English and understood his charts and graphs everyone would somehow put him in charge. He forgot what holds everything together here."

Related Characters: Auma (speaker), Barack's Father/The Old Man, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 322

Explanation and Analysis

During an outing to track down Barack's missing luggage, he and Auma stop in front of a portrait of President Kenyatta and Auma explains how loyalty works in Kenya. She lays out a system in which familial or community connections are everything. A person who's all on their own will never get anywhere or achieve anything in this system—and nor will a person who has family and connections but ignores or abuses them. This, Auma suggests, is what happened to the Old Man. He attempted to succeed in Kenya by Western standards; he got an American education and thought that being credentialed and qualified would speak for itself. Instead, he floundered in Kenya because the way that one rises to power there is not through a fancy degree but via family and friends.

Though it's perhaps possible to forgive the Old Man for believing that his education would matter more than his connections, what's not possible to forgive is the way that the Old Man's lapse in judgment seriously damaged his family. When the Old Man tried to live by Western ideals rather than Kenyan reality, his world fell apart entirely. And because of this, Auma essentially encourages Barack to take their father as a cautionary tale. While education or living in the Western world aren't bad things on their own, they can become sinister and cause problems when they cause a person to think that they're above living in reality and showing loyalty to family. Essentially, if Barack plans to remain a part of his Kenyan family, he should absolutely go to Harvard when he gets back to the U.S.—but he can never forget that Harvard won't solve everything and that, no matter what, he owes something to his family.

Chapter 16 Quotes

Without power for the group, a group larger, even, than an extended family, our success always threatened to leave others behind. And perhaps it was that fact that left me so unsettled—the fact that even here, in Africa, the same maddening patterns still held sway; [...] It was as if we—Auma, Roy, Bernard, and I—were all making it up as we went along.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Roy/Abongo, Barack's Father/The Old Man, Bernard, Auma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 330-31

Explanation and Analysis

During his stay in Kenya, Barack notices that the family seems to punish Auma for her Western habits—and she suffers in the same way that academically-minded Black kids in the U.S. suffer. Both Auma and school-focused Black Americans, in other words, are often perceived as "acting white." As Barack pieces this together, he begins to see that no matter where Black people are in the world, they'll always face opposition from their families or their wider racial group for seeming to abandon their family or race in favor of joining the white, dominant culture. In coming to Africa, Barack had hoped not to find this constant judgment of Black behavior based on white norms, so it's a shock for him to find that Kenya is somewhat similar to America in this respect.

This moment impresses on Barack that he and his siblings are actually figuring things out as they grow up and move through the world; previous generations unfortunately didn't figure all of this out and tell their children how to navigate this landscape. This also reminds Barack that his father wasn't quite the man he thought he was—the Old Man, for all his dreams and ideals, couldn't figure out how to navigate the clash between white and Black worlds any better than his children can. But by identifying where the Old Man went wrong, Barack and his siblings do have the opportunity to do better than their father did. Auma, for instance, is in the process of trying to purchase land to build a family home, while Roy has plans to start a business so he can employ other family members. It's important to note that these endeavors are ones that will help the family as a whole. Thus, it's possible to see that Barack's generation is trying to put their education and immersion in the Western world to good use by giving back to the family—something their father, for the most part, failed to do.

Chapter 18 Quotes

Auma shook her head. "Can you imagine, Barack?" She said, looking at me. "I swear, sometimes I think that the problems in this family all started with him. He is the only person whose opinion I think the Old Man really worried about. The only person he feared."

Related Characters: Auma (speaker), Hussein Onyango Obama, Barack's Father/The Old Man, Barack Obama

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 371

Explanation and Analysis

When the family tells Barack about his grandfather Onyango's reputation for scolding and hitting people for any minor infraction, Auma suggests that he's the root of their family's troubles. The major issue that Auma identifies with Onyango's behavior is that it made the Old Man feel inadequate and on edge all the time. In this sense, it's possible to humanize the Old Man and see that he spent his life trying to please his father and he probably feared that he would never succeed.

Barack, meanwhile, sees that even though he didn't grow up with the Old Man around, he nevertheless also grew up wanting to make his father proud, however abstractly. In this way, Barack begins to see that the poor relationship between Onyango and the Old Man has been replicated with the Old Man's children—and this cycle needs to stop if the Old Man's children are going to be able to find their way in the world without being haunted by their father's memory.

More broadly, this suggests that it's a normal thing for children to want to please their parents—and in particular, for sons to want to please their fathers. While this might not always be a bad thing—Barack's choice to get his act together enough to graduate from high school, thereby pleasing his mother, is one iteration of this idea. Issues arise, though, when fathers are too exacting and overbearing. It's possible to propose that the real root of the Obama family's issues isn't necessarily Onyango himself, it's the constant pressure for family members to succeed and live up to unattainable standards.

"Let me tell you, your father, he was a very great man. I was closer to him than to my own father. If I was in trouble, it was my Uncle Barack that I went to first. And, Roy, you would also go to my father, I believe."

"The men in our family were very good to other people's children," Roy said quietly. "With their own, they didn't want to look weak."

Related Characters: Roy/Abongo, Billy (speaker), Barack's Father/The Old Man, Barack Obama

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 385-86

Explanation and Analysis

Billy, a childhood friend of Roy's, tells Barack that when they were children, they used to go to each other's fathers for guidance. Billy's tone suggests that he sees this as a good thing; Roy's quiet response, on the other hand, implies that the situation made him sad. With this, Barack sees that men can simultaneously be bad fathers to their own children and exceptional mentors to the children of others. This makes the case that anyone, whether they're related by blood or not, can help raise and mentor children and guide them toward a fulfilling adulthood. Indeed, even Barack takes on a mentoring role to many young men throughout his memoir, from Ruby's teenage son Kevin to Bernard. Mentoring in this sense is essential to helping young boys grow up into functional, happy adults. This, however, doesn't mean that those male mentors can't also make major mistakes when it comes to their own children.

And importantly, Roy suggests that their fathers messed up by trying too hard to look strong. For them, being vulnerable and helpful with their sons was akin to "looking weak," so they ruled their sons by fear rather than kindness in an attempt to project strength. Their behavior then taught their sons these unhelpful definitions of weakness and strength, which created a cycle in which men weren't able to express their emotions or be particularly loving with their children. This bred generations of resentment (after all, given what both Roy and Billy say, this seriously damaged their relationships with their fathers). While it's important to recognize the good things that the Old Man and Billy's father did for the children of others, it's nevertheless a tragedy that they were never able to form good relationships with their own children.

❝ "But I think also that once you are one thing, you cannot pretend that you are something else. How could he be a *matatu* driver, or stay out all night drinking, and also he is writing Kenya's economic plan? A man does service for his people by doing what is right for him, isn't this so? Not by doing what others think he should do. But my brother, although he prided himself on his independence, I also think that he was afraid of some things. Afraid of what people would say about him if he left the bar too early. That perhaps he would no longer belong with those he'd grown up with."

Related Characters: Sayid (speaker), Bernard, Barack's Father/The Old Man, Barack Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 390

Explanation and Analysis

Barack's uncle Sayid (one of the Old Man's younger half brothers) shares that, in his estimation, the Old Man was too worried about keeping up appearances with everyone to do anything effectively. He was, Sayid observes, trying to simultaneously be a fun-loving, freewheeling man while also wearing a suit and writing economic policy for the entire country. It's possible to read this as an attempt by the Old Man to keep his family and his childhood friends close even as he moved up in government—but as Barack has learned during his time in Kenya, becoming educated and financially successful often means a having difficult relationship with people from one's past. Essentially, Sayid proposes that what drove the Old Man's behavior was a desire to fit in, both with his colleagues in the government and with his old friends at home. With this, Sayid essentially tells Barack that at some point, a person has to choose who they are and act like that person. He believes that had the Old Man stuck to one version of himself, he might have come through his hard times more successfully, or perhaps he wouldn't have fallen on hard times at all. And he implies that the reason that the Old Man didn't stick to one vision of himself was a lack of courage—he couldn't embrace his new identity and sacrifice his old one because he was worried that people would judge him. The irony is that everyone judged him anyway; the whole family saw his failures and weaknesses, so his manic attempts to be all things to all people failed.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ I knew that, as I had been listening to the story of our grandfather's youth, I, too, had felt betrayed. My image of Onyango, faint as it was, had always been of an autocratic man—a cruel man, perhaps. But I had also imagined him an independent man, a man of his people, opposed to white rule. [...] What Granny had told us scrambled that image completely, causing ugly words to flash across my mind. Uncle Tom. Collaborator. House nigger.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Granny, Hussein Onyango Obama

Related Themes:

Page Number: 406

Explanation and Analysis

Upon learning that Onyango had been one of the first Luo to adopt Western customs, Barack feels betrayed. Whether consciously or not, Barack suggests that he's taken pride throughout his life in his belief that his Kenyan family resisted white rule and fought bravely for the rights of Black people in Kenya. But Granny's story paints a more nuanced picture of a man trying to move up in the world through whatever opportunities were available to him. Given Onyango's willingness to serve white men, Barack has to reckon with the fact that Onyango is in some ways complicit in the grief and damage that colonialism brought to the country. In essence, Barack has to accept at this point that Black people worldwide—and in every moment in history—are simply trying to figure out how to survive in a racist world that offers perks to Black people who assimilate into the dominant culture. Barack and his siblings are attempting to do the exact same thing in the present (albeit under different circumstances), which softens Barack's judgment of Onyango to some extent. In a way, this moment evokes something that Barack realized when he was leaving Chicago: that while the Old Man was high-minded and judgmental of the choice to live pragmatically rather than idealistically, it's often better to acknowledge that life is complicated and that judging people's difficult choices doesn't fix anything. Instead of judging individual people for how they live their lives, Barack will spend his career in government trying to make policies that he hopes will spare people these difficult choices in the first place.

I realized that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America—the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago—all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright.

Related Characters: Barack Obama (speaker), Roy/Abongo, Bernard, Barack's Father/The Old Man

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 430

Explanation and Analysis

While Barack cries over the Old Man's grave, he feels like he finally understands himself, where he came from, and what he's inherited from his father and grandfather. It's a major leap for him to be able to connect every part of his life in the U.S. to his family and his roots in Kenya, as this anchors him inside a much larger community of Black people and helps him feel at peace with his identity. Before this moment, his Blackness has seemed somewhat abstract to him—a "construct of words." What he means by this is that he has struggled to feel like he belongs among Black people since he was raised by and among white people. For a long time, he worried that his relationship to Black people was, to some extent, hypothetical—he has sought belonging through "intellect" (by reading Black theorists and learning Black history), and he has sought belonging through "obligation" (by deciding that he must help other Black people). But he realizes that neither path made him at peace with himself. It's not until this moment that he sees himself as a true Black person—here, he realizes that his experiences have not actually been disconnected from his Blackness, since they're all rooted, in part, here in Kenya among his family.

It's noteworthy that a big part of this new sense of belonging and rootedness has to do with realizing that his lifelong struggles—which he thought were unique to him—go back generations. When he says that "their struggle" is "my birthright," he likely means this in a couple different ways. He's definitely talking about his personal struggles: growing up without a father, balancing a desire to belong with his family and a desire to belong among others, worrying that succeeding in white spaces is a betrayal of Black people. It's a great comfort to him to know that his relatives, for generations, have faced the same things. But he's also talking about a larger struggle for dignity and justice for Black people. He has always felt like something of an outsider to this struggle because of his upbringing, and in this moment—when he finally connects fully to himself as a Black person—suddenly that struggle feels like it's truly his. He'll carry that with him for the rest of his life on his journey to becoming America's first Black president.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

At 21, Barack lives in New York on an uninviting block on the border of East Harlem. He's solitary and impatient, and he admires the old man living alone next door. Barack occasionally carries the man's groceries, but otherwise they only nod at each other. However, when Barack's roommate finds the man dead in the stairwell and Barack sees the man's barren apartment, Barack begins to question his own solitude. Shortly after his 21st birthday, he receives a phone call from an Aunt Jane in Nairobi. Aunt Jane tells Barack that his father is dead. At this point, Barack sees his father as a myth, since he left Hawaii when Barack was two. He knows his father from the stories that his mother Ann and his grandparents, Gramps and Toot, tell about him—such as the one about how he almost threw someone over the Pali Lookout because the man dropped Barack's father's pipe.

By beginning his narrative with his father's death and his own isolated life as a young man in New York, Barack does two things. First, he makes it clear that this is a story about his father as much as it is a story about him; then, he also encourages the reader to compare his solitary young adulthood to the picture he paints of his childhood, which seems to be one surrounded by loving family members. Mentioning this particular story about his father, meanwhile, also situates his father as someone truly larger than life who didn't play by normal rules—and possibly not someone whose life Barack can ever live up to.

While Gramps finds the pipe story hilarious, Ann prefers a "gentler portrait" of Barack's father. Every so often, Barack's family members pull out these stories and then don't speak about his father again for months. However, Ann makes sure that Barack sees photos of his father and knows his father's story. Barack's father was Kenyan, from the Luo tribe. He was one of the first Africans to attend college in the United States at the University of Hawaii. There, he met Ann. They had a son—Barack—and two years later, he left to pursue a Ph.D. at Harvard and returned to Kenya. As a child, Barack was content with this story. It's not until later that he wonders why his father never returned for him.

Here, Barack begins to draw out how people's interpretations of stories change over time. As a child, Ann's stories of Barack's father are more than enough because they tell Barack about who he is, and they tell him his father is a noble, intelligent individual. But as Barack gets older and becomes more interested in what makes a family a family, he begins to ask more questions about this story. Essentially, as he gets older, he sees that Ann leaves important information out—like why his father left at all.

It didn't matter to young Barack that his Black father looked nothing like the white people who raised him (his mother and her family are white). He recalls only one story of his father that deals with race. Supposedly, while Barack's father was out at a bar one night, a white man used an offensive slur. Barack's father lectured the man about bigotry, and the man offered Barack's father $100 on the spot. For a long time, Barack suspects that the story is exaggerated, but many years later, when an old friend of his father's calls Barack out of the blue, the caller repeats the story.

It's telling that at this point, race isn't an issue for Barack. He is surrounded by white people who love him, so the color of anyone's skin simply doesn't seem to matter. This story, however, introduces him to the idea that to others, at least, race is an issue—and possibly, Barack will have to tackle issues of race himself as he gets older. This story also forces Barack to realize that his father defies all attempts at rationalization; he was truly an individual.

In 1960, when Barack's parents married, interracial marriage was still a felony in most U.S. states. He still wonders why Toot and Gramps allowed Ann to marry a Black man, since they came from Kansas and did not seem like political radicals. But Barack's grandparents often reminded him that Kansas fought with the Union in the Civil War—and Toots has a distant ancestor who was Cherokee. Toot and Gramps grew up 20 miles away from each other during the Depression. Their stories of their youth romanticize the Depression era, but Barack can intuit the hierarchy that governed their world. Toot's family was "respectable;" Gramps's was not—his mother committed suicide and his father was a known philanderer. When Gramps and Toot fell in love, Gramps was a bad boy with dreams of the big city.

Though Toot and Gramps try to make the case that they're not at all racist simply because they come from Kansas and have Native American ancestors, it's important to keep in mind that they're still subject to the cultural currents guiding life in America at this time. Barack also begins to dive into the way that Toot and Gramps make the Depression era sound more romantic through the language they use to describe it. He paints a picture of his grandparents as star struck lovers falling in love despite all odds—a story that may be compelling, but which ignores the economic difficulties of the era.

Gramps and Toot eloped before Pearl Harbor. Gramps served in the war, and then they headed for California, Kansas, Texas, and Seattle. Despite all their moving, Gramps's desire for new frontiers persisted: when his furniture business opened a new store in Honolulu, he packed up the family and moved to Hawaii. Barack insists that Gramps was, by the time he got to Hawaii, simultaneously generous, provincial, and easily disappointed. Gramps briefly joined the Unitarian Universalist congregation, but Toot eventually got him to drop that. All of this made them "vaguely liberal." Barack imagines the scene when Ann first brought Barack's father home. His grandparents would have been struck by his handsomeness and dignity, but the question remained: would they "let their daughter *marry* one?"

In this part of the story, Barack finally makes it clear that as liberal as his grandparents were, they still lived in a fundamentally racist society—hence the question of whether they'd let their daughter marry a Black man. The fact that this is a question at all points to an undercurrent of racism, even among people who might otherwise be supportive of Black people's rights during the 1960s. Barack also paints Gramps as a person trying very hard to figure out his own identity. Figuring out personal identity is also Barack's project throughout the memoir.

Barack says that at this point, his grandparents hadn't given Black people much thought. Jim Crow laws existed in Kansas, but not like in the South. Race only became real for Toot and Gramps in Texas, where Gramps's boss told him to serve Black and Mexican customers after hours. Meanwhile, at the bank where she worked, Toot was reprimanded for using "Mister" to address the Black janitor. Gramps and Toot withdrew from their coworkers, and Ann grew lonely. One day, Toot came home to find enraged children at the fence, shouting racial slurs into the yard. In the yard, Ann was sitting with a Black girl, reading. When Toot invited the girls inside, the Black girl sprinted away. When Gramps went to the principal, the principal said, "white girls don't play with coloreds."

In these moments, Gramps and Toot do prove themselves to be very progressive, especially in comparison with their racist employers and the principal. In this sense, Gramps and Toot aren't necessarily wrong in their characterizations of themselves later, as they relate these stories to young Barack. It's essential to Barack's development that Gramps and Toot present themselves in this way—they want to make sure Barack feels supported, and as though he never has to question their support because of the color of his skin.

Later, Gramps tells Barack they left Texas because of the racism; Toot, however, insists that "racism" wasn't part of their vocabulary then. Barack trusts Toot and knows that Gramps tends to rewrite history to make himself look better, but he also knows that Gramps felt empathetic toward Black people due to the prejudice he experienced as a kid. But despite all this, Gramps and Toot didn't take easily to Ann and Barack's father's engagement. The couple married quietly and Barack arrived not long after. Barack believes that his birth helped Gramps come around to the relationship. Hawaii also provided the perfect backdrop, as it is diverse enough to seem like it's not racist. Gramps and Toot cultivated a diverse circle of friends and Gramps often messed with tourists, alternately telling them that Barack was a Hawaiian monarch or that his roots were in Kenya and Kansas.

In this moment, Barack makes it explicit that stories don't simply relay factual information—Gramps embellishes stories to make sure that it seems as though he's on the right side of history. And while Toot doesn't entirely refute the gist of what Gramps says, she does make it clear that she and Gramps weren't as educated in the language of racism then as they later became, especially after gaining a Black son-in-law and a biracial grandson. And indeed, though Gramps seem to see his jokes on tourists as a way to call out tourists' racism, they're still not respectful to Hawaiian culture.

Barack supposes that the stories of his father are really about the people telling them and the changing face of 1960s America; they're stories of the progressive, can-do spirit that gripped the nation at that time. However, Barack's father disappeared, and the stories never explain this fact—what's more, Barack realizes that his father is merely a prop in others' stories. In high school, when Barack discovered an article about his father's graduation from the University of Hawaii, he was struck that there was no mention of him or his mom, as though they didn't exist. At the time that Barack's father left, Barack was too young to know that he was supposed to have a father at home and too young to know what race was.

With this, Barack makes sure the reader grasps that stories are as much about the person telling the stories as they are about the stories' content. He's encouraging readers to pay attention in the future to who's telling what stories, and what's possible to really know about the truths they claim to convey. By ending the chapter with the note that he's too young at this point to understand race or what his father should be, he sets the stage for later growth.

CHAPTER 2

Barack is nine years old. He's in a taxi with Ann, on the way to the embassy in Djakarta. After answering questions from Ann's boss, Barack sits in the library while Ann works. He browses the stacks and flips through *Life* magazines, looking at the pictures and trying to guess what each story is about. He gets to a **photograph** of a man whose skin has a ghostly, unnatural pallor to it. Barack figures he's a radiation victim, but he's shocked by what he reads: the man paid for a skin lightening treatment. The effects are irreversible, and many other Black people in America have done the same thing. Barack anxiously wonders if Ann knows about this, but as though in a dream, he can't voice his fears.

It's telling that even as a nine-year-old, Barack is interested in learning how to read stories. The pictures in the Life *magazines allow him to practice his ability to read what are essentially visual stories. The photo of the Black man tells Barack a story he doesn't want to hear: that maybe his identity isn't something he should be proud of. When his first thought is to wonder if Ann knows about skin lightening, it shows that Barack is beginning to see differences between himself and his mother. Suddenly, Ann and his grandparents seem untrustworthy on some topics.*

By this time, Barack and Ann have lived in Indonesia for three years, since Ann's marriage to Lolo. They began dating when Barack was four and they married two years later. After this, Lolo returned to Indonesia, leaving Ann and Barack to sort out visas. When Ann and Barack arrived in Djakarta, Lolo was heavier and had a moustache. He was friends with the soldiers manning the customs table, so Ann and Barack climbed right into Lolo's borrowed car. Barack suck his head out the window and stared. When they arrived at a modest bungalow, Lolo introduced an ape as Tata, a gift for Barack, and then showed off a menagerie of wild animals. Lolo let Barack watch a man butcher a chicken for dinner, and Barack went to sleep thrilled.

For Barack, moving to Indonesia is a once in a lifetime experience. Lolo is clearly willing to create experiences for Barack that are thrilling to a young boy who is interested in animals and intrigued by where his dinner comes from. It's telling that Lolo is so willing to do this, despite Barack not being his biological son. This makes it clear that anyone can parent a child and be a major guiding figure in a child's life; they simply have to put in the effort.

Two years later, Lolo teaches Barack to box, which Lolo feels is necessary, since boys recently threw a rock at Barack's head. Barack marvels at how familiar Lolo is to him now. It only took Barack months to adapt to Indonesia. Life there is one long adventure and Barack faithfully records his adventures in letters to his grandparents. He leaves out his growing understanding that the world is violent and cruel. Since Ann can't always help Barack understand what he sees, Barack turns to Lolo. Lolo always introduces Barack as his son, but he engages Barack with some distance. He teaches Barack how to deal with beggars (don't give them money and keep oneself from ending up a beggar) and servants (help the ambitious ones, fire those who are clumsy or forgetful). He says it's fine for Ann to be soft, but as a man, Barack will need to be sensible.

As time goes on, Lolo becomes a window into a world that seems fundamentally different from the one in which Ann, Toot, and Gramps live. Barack implies that this is in part because as a young child, he adapts to life in Indonesia much faster and sees more of it than Ann does (and he definitely sees more than his grandparents do). Indeed, Lolo makes it clear that if only because Barack is a boy, he won't experience the world the same way Ann does—it's his responsibility to be firm with the servants as a man, while Ann's femininity is why she's "soft."

After the boxing lesson, Lolo and Barack sit. When Barack sees scars on Lolo's leg, Lolo explains that they're from leeches in New Guinea. Barack asks if Lolo has ever seen a man killed. Lolo says he has, but the victim was weak. He explains that men take advantage of weakness in other men, and he encourages Barack to either be clever or strong himself. From inside, Ann watches her husband and son and thinks back to how innocent she was when she arrived in Indonesia. Ann had been prepared to live in a poor country, but she hadn't been prepared to be so lonely. Lolo used to be full of life, but in the year between when he left Hawaii and when Ann arrived in Djakarta, he changed. He doesn't talk like he used to—or much at all—anymore. She suspects that he's depressed; his job is boring.

Lolo's lesson is really a lesson in masculinity. He makes it clear to young Barack that if a man doesn't make a point to be strong, then he'll wind up in danger. Lolo's willingness to be so open with Barack highlights again his choice to step in and be a father figure. But by shifting the narrative to focus on Ann's experience of living in Indonesia, Barack begins to suggest issues with Lolo's lessons. For one, it doesn't seem that Lolo is being a particularly good or supportive husband, which suggests that his ideas of masculinity might be lacking.

Ann got a job teaching English at the American embassy. There, she learned about Sukarno, the nationalist leader of Indonesia who was deposed in a coup. She eventually realizes that she and Barack arrived in Djakarta less than a year after one of the most brutal suppression campaigns in modern history. Lolo refuses to talk about it. Eventually, one of Lolo's cousins tells Ann that Lolo, like all Indonesian students studying abroad, was ordered home and had his passport revoked. Many students are still in jail or have disappeared. Ann realizes that she's dealing with naked power of a sort that isn't visible in America, and Lolo has made peace with this power. He sometimes says that guilt is a luxury only afforded to foreigners. Ann thinks he's right, but she realizes with panic that "power [is] taking her son." Barack doesn't think Lolo had any idea what Ann was going through, since he concentrated so fully on his job.

Through this passage, Barack dives into how information and storytelling change a person's understanding of their situation. At first, Ann believes that she's just naïve and that Lolo is behaving oddly. But when the cousin tells her what really happened in Indonesia, Ann has to confront the fact that the world she faces there is more dangerous than she ever thought possible. To make things worse, she also sees that Barack is at risk of getting hurt or developing questionable outlooks on life by growing up in this situation, making Lolo's relationship to Barack look somewhat sinister (if only in Ann's eyes).

Over time, the family moves up in the world, though Ann often refuses to attend company dinners with Americans. Ann and Lolo are cordial through the birth of Barack's sister Maya, but then they divorce. Lolo dies 10 years later. But from the moment Ann realizes that she wants Barack to be American (not Indonesian) for the opportunities this would provide, she throws herself into the effort of Americanizing her son. She teaches him English for three hours in the mornings and tries to instill values like honesty, fairness, and good judgment in him—but few back her up in this, as the poverty, corruption, and struggle for security in Indonesia make it difficult to buy into those values.

While Ann understandably wants him to grow up to be honest and fair, Barack also sees the perspective of people like Lolo who find such values naïve in light of the reality of life in Indonesia. In some ways, Lolo's advice seems more useful for this context: it's probably better to be strong than honest, for instance. At this point, then, Barack is caught between two different stories of the world (Ann's and Lolo's) and two different ideas of who and what he should be (American versus Indonesian).

The story of Barack's father, however, backs Ann up: he grew up poor, worked hard and followed the rules, and he became successful. Ann gives Barack books on the civil rights movement and recordings of Dr. King's speeches, and she insists that being Black is a "special destiny." This is how Barack sees the world when he finds the *Life* **photograph**. He suspects that many Black children have these moments of revelation earlier than he did. While Barack already knew about bigots and death, the photo makes it clear that there's a "hidden enemy" in the world. That night, he stares at his face in the mirror and wonders if there's something wrong with him. Following this night, he begins to notice that Black characters never get the girls on shows, and that Santa is white. Barack tells no one about his observations, but he wonders if Ann mischaracterizes the world on purpose.

Ann tries to impress upon Barack that being Black is something to be proud of. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. looks like Barack, after all. And to a degree, Barack buys into Ann's understanding of what it means to be Black—this is what makes the Life *photograph so disturbing. The* Life *photograph illuminates the idea that being Black isn't actually desirable for some Black people. This is particularly disturbing to Barack because it's only Ann—a white woman—who has told him to be proud to be Black. Knowing that some Black people aren't proud may make Barack even less willing to buy into her ideas about the world.*

CHAPTER 3

At nine years old, Barack returns to Hawaii to live with Gramps and Toot. (Ann plans to come with Maya soon.) It's thrilling to be back with them at first, but then Barack realizes that he's basically living with strangers. Gramps and Toot have changed a lot; they now live in a high-rise apartment and Gramps is a life insurance agent, but his heart isn't in it. Some nights, he tells Barack about his schemes to write poems or build a house, but evenings always end with a fight between Gramps and Toot. They fight because Toot makes more money than Gramps, a situation she never foresaw given that she has no college education. As she gets older, she confides in Barack that she's proud of her work—but she secretly regrets not having led the life of a happy housewife.

Though Barack certainly still has lots of family members who care about him, his uncomfortable feelings about returning to live with Gramps and Toot speaks to the idea that even close family members like this can seem like strangers—especially to a young kid who doesn't see his grandparents often. The fact that Toot waits until Barack is older to share why she and Gramps fought so much continues the memoir's project of showing how stories change over time. By sharing, Toot not only helps Barack understand this time, but helps him understand Toot better too.

By the time Barack moves in, Gramps and Toot are no longer ambitious like they once were. They vote for Nixon in 1968 and get excited for new appliances. Barack is excited to start school and make friends, but Gramps and Toot are most excited that Barack will attend Punahou Academy. It's prestigious and Gramps excitedly pores over the school catalog. Gramps takes Barack to school on the first day and his chumminess with other students mortifies Barack. Everyone titters when the teacher reads Barack's full name—he goes by Barry—and asks what Kenyan tribe Barack's father is from. Throughout the day, children are rude and racist to Barack. He goes straight to his room when he gets home and feels that he doesn't belong.

For Gramps, Barack getting to go to Punahou represents an opportunity to better the entire family. Getting so excited about it is, in part, a way to try to get Barack excited about education and his future. But Barack also discovers right away that school isn't just about academics; it's about learning how to navigate a social structure that he discovers is racist. In this sense, Barack is caught between two worlds: he's smart enough to be admitted to Punahou, but he simultaneously feels excluded for having dark skin.

Barack and the only other Black student, Coretta, carefully avoid each other until one day, they chase each other on the playground. As they laugh, children surround them and tease them about being boyfriend and girlfriend. Barack shouts at Coretta and pushes her, and they never speak again. He fixates on her disappointed look and knows he can't fix it. After this, the other kids leave Barack alone. He feels like part of him is trampled, though he feels safe in his evening routines with Gramps and Toot. But one day, Toot reads a telegram announcing that Barack's father is coming to stay for a month, over Christmas. Barack tells the boys at school that his father is a prince, which earns him social capital. He knows it's a lie, but after his father arrives, Barack realizes that he prefers the distant version of his father.

School becomes difficult and anxiety inducing for Barack because of the racism he faces and his feeling that he's different from the other students. With his meanness to Coretta, he is buying the respect of the playground bullies, which contradicts the values that his mom taught him and instead seems more aligned with Lolo's pragmatic view of power. At home with his grandparents, his race doesn't matter as much because he feels safe and loved, but the news that his father is coming to visit throws a wrench in the safety of those routines. The arrival of Barack's father will mean that Barack will have to confront his race at home, an understandably difficult proposition.

Ann arrives a few weeks before Barack's father and she tells Barack what to expect. His father has recently been in a car accident, and Barack has five brothers and a sister in Kenya. Ann also gives Barack a book on Kenya, which he finds uninteresting. At the library, Barack finds a book on East Africa, but the single paragraph he finds on the Luo—detailing that they live in mud huts, wear leather thongs across the crotch, and raise cattle—is disappointing. On the day his father arrives, Barack gets out of school early and loiters in the hall. Then, his father rings the doorbell and hugs him. The entire family sits in Gramps and Toot's living room as Barack studies his father, who's thinner than expected. His father gives Barack small wooden figurines before leaving to nap.

Though it's somewhat unclear exactly what Barack finds so disappointing about the paragraph about the Luo (it could be, for instance, that there's so little about them; or he could object to what *the paragraph says about the Luo), it's nevertheless clear that the library book doesn't do a good job of describing the Luo culture. As Barack later learns, Luo culture is rich and varied—but the book paints the Luo as simple, provincial people who may seem not worth knowing. In this sense, the book may reaffirm Barack's suspicions that being Black isn't great.*

Over the next month, Barack accompanies Ann and his father around the islands. Barack notices that whenever his father speaks, Gramps and Toot seem to come alive again. This is fascinating. But after a few weeks, tension begins to build. One evening, when Barack tries to watch a cartoon Christmas special, his father sends him to his room to study—not just for school tomorrow, but for school after the holidays too. After this, Barack counts the days until his father leaves.

While the stories of his father's overbearing nature might have seemed humorous before, now Barack actually has to experience what it's like to live with him. While it's admirable that Barack's father cares so much about Barack's education, Barack sees this as stepping on his individuality and trying to squash his development as a young American boy.

Later, Ann says in passing that Barack's father is going to speak to Barack's class later in the week. Barack is mortified and knows this will expose his lies to his classmates. He tunes out during his father's presentation, but then notices that everyone is engrossed and excited. Afterward, people tell Barack his father is cool and Coretta looks satisfied. Two weeks later, Barack's father leaves. He gives Barack a basketball for Christmas and right before he leaves, he finds two records of "the sounds of [Barack's] continent." He teaches Barack to dance and laughs with joy. This memory sticks with Barack for the rest of his life.

Even if Barack's father isn't an African prince (as Barack told his classmates), Barack's father is nevertheless an engaging speaker. This impresses upon Barack that his father contains multitudes: he's both overbearing and an excellent conversationalist and speaker. And learning to dance from his father also introduces Barack to the fact that his father can experience unbridled joy—which helps Barack feel more at peace with who his father is.

CHAPTER 4

Barack, now a high school sophomore, grouses with his friend Ray about the "bullshit Punahou parties." Ray, a senior, moved to Hawaii from L.A. a year ago and talks often about the lush city life he used to lead. Ray introduces Barack to the Black parties on the island and Barack listens to Ray gripe in return. Today, Ray moans that no girls will date him because they're all racist. Ray insists that this is also why Barack is single and why he doesn't get a ton of playing time on the basketball team. Barack counters that white people here just want people who look and play like them, but that doesn't make them racist.

Now that Barack is older and has more Black friends like Ray, racism starts to become more real for him—though Barack still holds onto his desire to make peace between everyone, which is why he denies Ray's claims that their peers are racist. For Barack, people can have preferences about what people look like without being racist. But for Ray, it's impossible to ignore that he and Barack suffer more than others, presumably because they're Black.

It's been five years since Barack's father visited, and Barack is thrilled that his social standing at school has steadily risen. He lived with Ann and Maya for three years, but when Ann had to return to Indonesia for fieldwork for her degree, Barack decided to stay with his grandparents. They mostly leave him alone, which suits Barack fine. However, Barack is struggling internally to figure out how to be a Black man in America, and his father's letters aren't helpful. For a time, Barack occasionally accompanies Gramps to play poker with Gramps's Black friends. One of these men, Frank, used to be a well-known poet, and he fascinates Barack while making Barack vaguely uncomfortable. He has this same feeling whenever Gramps takes him to a bar in the red-light district, and he senses that Gramps—the only white person there—is possibly the *only* one there by choice.

Despite Barack's insistence that Ray is overstating Hawaii's racism, he is nevertheless trying to figure out what it means to be young and Black. These outings with Gramps introduce Barack to Black men and women who live lives very different from his own, introducing him to the idea that there is no singular Black experience in America. And especially at the bar in the red-light district, Barack is made uncomfortably aware of the power difference between Black and white people. Gramps can choose to waltz in and out as he chooses, something Barack sees isn't available to the Black employees there.

Barack turns to pop culture to figure out how to be a Black man. He plays basketball and by the time he's in high school, he plays for Punahou and on the university courts. There, Black men teach him respect, follow-through, and companionship. Basketball gives him a community and introduces him to Ray and other Black boys who are also angry and confused. They talk often about "white folks," and Barack thinks through the many racist incidents he's experienced. He learns that Black people can be mean, but white people seem to be arrogantly ignorant and cruel. The term "white folks" feels weird to Barack, since Gramps, Toot, and Ann are white, but they're not "white folks" as Ray means it. Barack decides that for Ray, "white folks" is just shorthand for "bigot."

Through basketball, Barack begins to discover a community. And this community can help him figure out what it means to be a Black man, in addition to teaching him where to direct his anger—toward "white folks." Barack sees, however, that a simple divide between Black and white is reductive and not especially useful for understanding his own life, since he lives with white people who aren't racist and who are kind to Barack and his Black friends. Deciding that Ray is simply talking about bigots, then, is a way for Barack to make peace with both his white grandparents and his Black friends.

However, Barack and Ray still disagree about some things. Ray seems to imply that they can switch their rage at the white world on and off whenever they feel like it, but Barack argues that they live in Hawaii, not the Jim Crow South—their white friends love them. Ray always reminds Barack that he's biracial, thereby ending the argument. Barack moves between his Black and white worlds, assuming that someday, they'll coalesce. Whenever people ask if he plays basketball or mention liking Stevie Wonder, Barack feels a bit tricked—but he can't figure out how.

Ray implies that because Barack is biracial, he doesn't experience racism in the same way that Ray does. Though to a degree this may be true—being raised by white people likely shields Barack from some racist incidents—clearly, Barack still feels undue pressure whenever people assume that because he's Black, he likes certain things.

One afternoon, Barack refuses a high five from a white football player because he thinks that the guy was speaking in a dialect meant to mock them. Ray is incensed, insisting that the guy didn't mean anything by it and saying that giving the high five is just "getting along," the same thing that Barack does whenever he sucks up to white teachers. The next day, Ray suggests that Barack bring their white friends Jeff and Scott to a party at Ray's house. This will mark the first time their white friends attend a Black party. Jeff and Scott are fine at first, but they seem self-conscious and ask to leave after an hour. When Barack tells Ray, they lock eyes steadily. Outside, Jeff says he gets how tough it must be for Ray and Barack at school parties. Part of Barack is enraged. Within an hour, he has a new view of the world: white men are in power and the only thing Black people have of their own is anger.

It's telling that Ray points out that as Black men, he and Barack are just trying to get by in a white world. Sometimes, this means accepting high-fives from popular white kids, even if those kids are being racist; other times, that means paying more attention in class. What really gets Barack, though, is his sudden realization that Scott and Jeff have no idea what it's like to be the only one who looks a certain way. They're content to go back to a world where they feel comfortable, a world that suddenly feels wildly uncomfortable for Barack.

Barack spends the next few months reading Black authors. Seemingly every author eventually admits defeat and retreats, bitter and angry. Malcolm X seems to be the only one who did better—but Barack is concerned by Malcolm's wish that his white blood would "be expunged." Barack knows he'll never get rid of his own white blood, and he wonders what he would give up if he abandoned his white family. Malcolm didn't discover until late in life that white people can be brothers in Islam, so Barack decides that reconciliation is possible, but far off. Barack and Ray meet a Nation of Islam follower at the basketball court, but he admits he's not moving to Africa or giving up ribs and women. Barack scolds Ray for laughing and reminds Ray he's never read Malcolm, but Ray insists that he doesn't need a book to learn how to be Black.

Barack's understanding that reconciliation between Black and white people is possible, but won't happen until much further in the future, can be read as either a practical recognition that things aren't going to change as fast as he wants in the present—or, it could be an excuse for Barack to stop trying to make inroads with his white friends or trying to convince Ray that it's not cool to be rude for the sake of being rude. What annoys Barack most about Ray is that Ray seems to know exactly who he is as a Black man. This makes Barack feel even more unmoored, as he likely feels less Black if he needs books to help him.

A few weeks later, Barack wakes up to find Gramps and Toot fighting. Toot tells Barack that Gramps doesn't want to drive her to work, and Gramps tells Barack that Toot wants him to feel bad. After going back and forth between them, Barack learns what's up: a Black panhandler harassed Toot yesterday at the bus stop—understandably scaring her—but Gramps is incensed that Toot was afraid of a Black man. When they're gone, Barack is sad. His grandparents love him, but he knows they're easily scared of men who could be Barack's brothers. That night, Barack seeks out Frank for the first time in years.

It's devastating for Barack to have to confront that his grandparents, as much as they love him, can and will sometimes behave like "white folks" as Ray means the term. In this moment, Barack is reminded that many white people still view Black people as dangerous threats, even if they may love individual Black people or even understand that this thought process is inherently racist.

After pouring whiskey, Frank shares that he and Gramps grew up 50 miles apart. He suggests that Gramps has never told Barack how Black people had to step off the sidewalk for whites, even in Kansas. He says that Gramps once told him about a Black girl they hired to look after Ann, insisting the girl was a "regular part of the family." Frank scoffs at this. Quietly, he says that Gramps can't know what it's like to be Black. He doesn't understand that Black people never get to relax—they have to stay vigilant to survive. Frank also says that Toot is right to be afraid; she gets that Black people have reasons to hate. Barack leaves, feeling entirely alone.

Frank gets at the idea that the power imbalance between white employers and Black domestic help inherently means that Black employees aren't family—they're paid to be there. Frank sees Gramps's choice not to tell Barack about the way that Black people were treated in Kansas as an indication that Gramps doesn't really understand what it's like to be Black, even though he pretends that he does.

CHAPTER 5

It's 3:00am. Barack pours himself a drink, looks around at his apartment—a mess after a party he and his roommate, Hasan, threw—and listens to Billie Holiday. Everyone but Regina enjoyed the party. Regina accused Barack of being self-centered and, in Barack's understanding, implied that he's "somehow responsible for the fate of the entire black race." Barack decides that Regina doesn't understand his journey to learning not to care. This journey began in high school when he started drinking and using drugs, which helped him forget. Drugs gave him a community and helped him laugh. He decided that while race and money matter, one's fate comes down mostly to luck—it was bad luck that his friends were arrested, had bad acid trips, or died in car crashes.

Barack's teenage insistence that luck governs a person's life is a recognition that he can't control everything around him. While to a degree, this is a normal part of growing up and learning about the world, Barack takes this a step further. He leans on luck in part to absolve himself of any responsibility to try to do better, which also seems to be part of the reason he turns to using drugs and alcohol in the first place. In the present, deciding that Regina doesn't care or understand is another way for Barack to try to escape taking responsibility for his actions.

Once, Barack tried to explain this to Ann and assured her that he wouldn't do anything silly. Usually this works, but Ann accused him of being cavalier about his future and of being a loafer. Wanting to assure his mother that she failed to do well by him, he suggested that he might end up like Gramps, who never went to college. Seeing Ann's reaction, Barack asked if this is her worry—and though she denies it, Barack sees he touched a nerve. Back in the present, Barack realizes that alcohol and drugs can't distract him from his emptiness. He remembers how successful Ann's talking-to had been—he graduated and was admitted to Occidental College. Despite these outward signs of success, people like Frank still insisted that Barack had a bad attitude.

Barack feels so disaffected by this point, he wants to make Ann feel just as hopeless as he does. But when he discovers that she just doesn't want him to end up like Gramps—who's idealistic, easily hurt, and often tries to make himself look better than he is—it has an effect. Essentially, Barack realizes that he does indeed have the ability to work hard and get somewhere, even if he still feels like a lot of life is pointless or not worth trying to make sense of. Realizing in the present that alcohol and drugs can't help is a major turning point as he comes of age.

Barack remembers his last visit with Frank. Frank told Barack the "real price of admission": giving up on being Black. Frank insisted that in college, Barack would be trained to believe that America is the land of opportunity for all—but one day, when Barack wants to run things, "they" will remind Barack that he's just a "well-trained, well-paid nigger." He warned Barack to keep his eyes open, but that's hard to do on Occidental's bright, encouraging campus. And most Black students there don't seem particularly worried. They all hang out together and though they sometimes grumble about "white folks," most of the time, they're worried about classes, sex, and jobs after graduation. Barack realizes that most Black people aren't interested in revolt. They don't want to think about race all the time—and being around other Black people is the easiest way to do that.

Frank essentially warns Barack that no matter where he goes or how successful he becomes, he'll never be able to escape the fact of his skin color—and he'll be denied opportunities because of this. At Occidental, though, Barack begins to wonder about this, since none of his Black peers seem too worried about race. Instead, they just want to find a sense of community, and most of them find it with each other. For the Black students, it's easier to find community with others who look like them and share their concerns. This means they don't have to educate their white classmates about their concerns or their struggles.

Barack, however, *can't* forget about race. He believes it's because he feels a bit like an outsider, since he didn't grow up in Compton. He's like other Black students from the suburbs, who "refuse[] to be categorized." Barack mentions Joyce, a "multiracial" classmate who has Italian, African, French, and Native American ancestors but feels as though it's only Black people who try to make her choose a race. Barack notices that people like Joyce always avoid talking about their Black ancestry. He understands that white culture is the only neutral, objective, nonracial culture, where people can be individuals—and so people of color who experience success as defined by white people try to distance themselves from their non-white ancestors. Then, they get upset for being mistaken for an "ordinary" Black person. Despite his frustrations, Barack feels he's being too hard on Joyce—and he recognizes himself in her.

Barack implies that, like Joyce, he wants to be seen as an individual. He implies that this is a normal thing to want for everyone, but because he finds himself between two communities (white and Black), this is more difficult for him. He essentially doesn't have an upbringing in a historically Black neighborhood or city to fall back on and make him feel more comfortable with being Black. And, for that matter, he uses "ordinary" to mean poor and unsuccessful—which he doesn't want to be. Since the only way he sees to be successful is to integrate into the white world, dealing with being Black becomes more of a struggle.

To not look like a sellout, Barack befriends the most politically active Black students. They discuss eurocentrism and post-colonialism while blasting music and putting out cigarettes in the hallway carpet—and they're "alienated," not careless or indifferent. However, Barack discovers that he still has to work to prove his loyalty to his Black friends. One day, Barack chats with Reggie and Marcus. Marcus is "the most conscious of brothers"—he's proudly Black and has had "authentic" Black experiences, like being searched by cops for no reason. Tim, another Black classmate who talks like Beaver Cleaver, walks in and asks Barack for his Econ assignment. Later, Barack tells Marcus that Tim should change his name to Tom. Marcus insists that Tim is fine—but Barack should stop judging others and focus on himself.

Barack very carefully cultivates his friend group so that he can look "more Black" by association with them. However, his perceived need to prove himself to them suggests that, at least in some ways, he still doesn't fit in. Because he sees himself in Tim, Barack feels the need to speak badly about Tim behind Tim's back, implying that Tim is an "uncle Tom" (a slur for a black person seen as too servile to white people). Insulting Tim is an attempt to distance himself from a Black kid who he perceives as acting "too white," but Marcus's snide scolding suggests that Barack doesn't fit in exactly because he's trying too hard to be a person he isn't.

Barack still burns with shame a year later, even though he knows he was living a lie his first year of college. The one person he didn't lie to was Regina. Marcus introduced them at a coffee shop one day and enlisted Regina to help him convince Barack to stop reading *Heart of Darkness*. After Marcus left, Barack explained with embarrassment that he knew the book was racist but it was assigned and, besides, it was teaching him things about white people and how they learn to hate. They discussed Barack's name and Regina asked if she could call him Barack instead of Barry. They spent the day together talking about her childhood in Chicago, surrounded by family. Barack felt envious of her childhood—but she laughed and admitted that she wished she'd grown up in Hawaii. After this, Barack began to feel himself growing and rediscovering his voice.

Barack's interest in figuring out how and why white people learn to hate makes it clear that his disaffected persona with his friends isn't his true identity—he genuinely wants to figure out how race works and how hatred grows. Those desires present a far more nuanced picture of who Barack is than his rudeness to Tim does. But Barack still doesn't feel Black enough, which is still a problem for him. This is why he envies Regina's upbringing in Chicago: to him, that is authentically Black, while being Black in Hawaii was an entirely different experience.

During that year, Barack gets involved in campus protests and campaigns against apartheid in South Africa. It starts as a way to prove that he's radical, but he begins to notice that people listen when he talks. He plans to give a speech at a rally and helps plan a bit of theater—students dressed in paramilitary uniforms will drag him offstage to make a point about apartheid. But as Barack writes his speech, it becomes something more to him. When he begins to speak, it takes a moment to get the audience's attention—but just as they start to listen, Barack's friends yank him away. Part of him really wants to keep talking. Marcus and Regina both speak and then Barack decides that they're all amateurs.

As Barack begins to write this speech, he starts to discover his own voice and what it can do. Part of his poor reaction to the acting portion of the event comes from having his voice shut down, just as he was starting to connect with the audience. In a sense, then, he recognizes that he's upset because he was silenced, not necessarily because the event was actually a bust. He discovers how important it is to be able to tell his own story—but because he's so focused on himself and getting his way, he's unable to see how this event works in the grander scheme of campus protests.

That night, Regina congratulates Barack on his speech, but Barack cuts her off and says he has "no business speaking for Black folks." He insists his words don't help; they just make him feel important. Barack also calls Regina naïve for thinking he cares, but Regina insists that Barack, Marcus, and the other guys are all the same—they think everything is about them. Reggie drunkenly wanders in and begins talking about a party they threw at the dorms last year. The Mexican maids began to cry when they saw the mess and Barack laughs at the memory. Shaking, Regina tells Barack that's not funny and says her grandmother cleaned up after people like him. She leaves.

Throughout this exchange, Barack shows how disillusioned he is; he suggests that he's not really Black and that he's not doing anything important by giving a speech about an issue he's invested in. Through her dressing-down of Barack, though, Regina impresses upon him that he is actually selfish, shallow, and rude. He's not being authentically Black by being a selfish jerk, and having more power than the Mexican cleaning staff doesn't give him the right to treat people poorly.

Barack thinks about what Regina said. He realizes that he's heard her words—don't make others clean up after him, don't pass judgment, don't make it about him—before. These virtues aren't the sole property of white people and being rude doesn't make him Black. Barack realizes he got this way because of fear. Fear is why he pushed Coretta and why he made fun of Tim. He thinks of Regina's grandmother and realizes that she and women like her want Barack to keep fighting and resisting. He realizes that all the older women in his life—Toot, Regina's grandmother, Lolo's mother—all ask the same thing of him. He might be Black, but that's not the end of his identity. Barack vows to call Regina later.

By confronting his own fear of being not authentically Black enough, Barack is able to get himself back on a better track. In this moment, he realizes that being Black doesn't mean being rude, just as being white doesn't mean always being racist. Rather, he has a responsibility as a person to be a good person. This is why he thinks back on women like Toot, Lolo's mother, and Regina's grandmother. Even though all those women are different, they all understand that the most important thing is to be proud of who he is in a way that doesn't hurt or diminish others.

CHAPTER 6

Barack spends his first night in Manhattan in an alley. The plan was to take over the apartment of a friend of a friend—but no one answered the door. Barack reads over a short letter from his father, the first he's received in years. The letter is an invitation to visit so Barack can "know [his] people," although he wonders if it really is that simple. He knows that he doesn't want to go back to Hawaii, but he doesn't believe he can waltz off to Africa and call it home. Deciding he needs community, Barack signs up for a transfer program with Columbia University. There's little keeping him in L.A., as Regina and Hasan have graduated and Marcus dropped out.

Barack seems to infer from this letter that his father knows exactly who they both are, which calls attention to Barack's own tenuous sense of identity. However, it's important to keep in mind that the letter, being so short and cursory, doesn't offer much information—so Barack might be wrong to suspect that his father has everything figured out. Barack is figuring things out all on as his own as he recognizes that Hawaii can't be home—and probably, neither can Africa.

The next morning, Barack calls his friend Sadik and takes a cab to Sadik's apartment. Barack introduces himself to Sadik's current girlfriend using the name "Barack" (not "Barry"), and Sadik listens to Barack's idealistic reasons for coming to New York. Sadik reminds Barack to look out for himself and shows him around the city. Eventually, they move in together. Around this time, Barack gives up drugs, starts running, and starts a journal. He applies himself to his studies and refuses invitations to go out. Barack chooses this straight and narrow path in part because the city so easily corrupts people and he's afraid that he's weak. Barack also begins to see America's race and class problems up close. He sees the Black community collapsing there and notices that while he's doing well, other Black people hold only low-paying jobs.

Beginning to go by "Barack" instead of "Barry" is another step in Barack's development, since the name makes his heritage more obvious. It's also telling that at this time, Barack cleans up his act. In this sense, he's starting to take Ann's advice and warnings to heart—while it's possible to argue that he was corrupted as a teen by drugs, alcohol, and anger, as an adult Barack wants to make sure to avoid all of that. In New York, Barack also gets a look at a historically Black community and doesn't like what he sees; he realizes that he doesn't suffer in the same way that many Black New Yorkers do.

Barack attempts to live in Harlem, but the brownstones are too expensive and the tenements are uninhabitable. He's offended, but others insist this is just how New York is. Barack senses that at some point, he'll end up where he doesn't want to be: avoiding subways at night, living somewhere with a doorman, and sending his kids to private school. Ann and Maya visit during his first summer. Barack works while Ann and Maya traverse the city, and at night Barack lectures them. One night, Ann takes them to a showing of the movie *Black Orpheus*. It was the first foreign film she saw when she was 16 and working in Chicago. Barack is disgusted, and embarrassed when he sees how much Ann loves the film. He realizes that people will always look for missing parts of themselves in people of different races.

Barack's vision of what he doesn't want for himself implies that he doesn't want to live a life that reads as white and wealthy—he'd rather be comfortable around Black people, particularly Black people of a lower class. Ann and Maya's visit and this film outing in particular are uncomfortable for Barack, as he has to confront that Ann may not truly understand what it means to be Black. The film presents childlike, idealized Black characters—and Barack suspects that that's how Ann views Black people, and that she might see him in this way too.

Several days later, Barack asks Ann for an international stamp so he can mail a letter to his father. With prompting, he mentions that they're discussing a visit. Ann says that right after they married, Barack's grandfather, Hussein Onyango, wrote Gramps a nasty letter saying he didn't want a white woman to sully the Obama blood. Onyango continued to write nasty letters and Toot became hysterical. Barack's father insisted on going to Harvard—the best school—instead of the New School, which would've paid for Ann and Barack to follow. She recounts the story of their first date, which Barack's father was late for. Barack sees that Ann was a child then, but she also begins to see her as a person separate from him. He realizes how genuinely Ann loved Barack's father and he thinks of this conversation months later, when he calls to say that his father died.

As Barack starts to see Ann as her own person, separate from him, who has undertaken her own journey of growing up, he can finally develop perspective on his childhood and his parents' marriage. Learning more about the circumstances surrounding his parents' marriage also helps him piece together who his family members are. And next to Onyango, Gramps looks far more progressive than he did in earlier chapters, if only because he never vocalized any racist thoughts about Barack's father. In Barack's mind, this begins to situate Onyango as a very traditional African man who disapproves of white people at large—but it's important to recognize that, at this point, this is all Barack knows of his grandfather.

After Barack's father dies, Barack calls his uncle Omar in the U.S. to tell him the news. He doesn't go to the funeral, but he writes a letter to the family in Nairobi. Barack puts his plans to visit on hold and feels no pain—just the sense that he lost an opportunity. A year later, Barack dreams that he meets his father in a jail cell, and then he wakes up crying and digs out his father's old letters. He realizes how much of a presence his father was in his life, even just as a story or an image. Barack decides he needs to search for his father.

Now that Barack's father is dead, stories are all Barack has left. As he works to figure out who this man was, he'll have to rely on recollections and accounts from others—recollections that are, by their very nature, biased and likely don't tell the whole, unvarnished truth. And with this, the memoir introduces the idea that, as Barack searches for his father through stories, he'll have to connect with his family—the people who can tell those stories.

CHAPTER 7

In 1983, Barack decides to become a community organizer. He wants to organize Black folks at the grassroots level, though his ideas are vague. At night, he thinks about the Civil Rights Movement. It makes him think that communities need to be created and nurtured—and during the Civil Rights Movement, there was a lot of nurturing. Barack also thinks that, by organizing, he'll be able to redeem himself. He spends the months before graduation writing to civil rights organizations, Black elected officials, and tenant rights groups. No one writes back. To pay off his loans, Barack takes a job as a research assistant for a consulting house.

As Barack develops his ideas of what a community organizer does, he also starts to develop his idea of what a community is and how one forms. He makes it clear that communities don't just arise out of nowhere; rather, they form because people put in the work, together, for a common cause. Not being able to find a job as a community organizer impresses upon Barack how difficult this work might end up being, and it tests how he thinks of himself—especially since he takes a high-paying job that isn't advancing his values.

Barack is ashamed to be the only Black employee at his level, but the Black secretaries treat him like a son. They seem secretly disappointed that he wants to organize instead, but only the Black security guard says outright that he doesn't approve. He tells Barack to focus on making money and let the people who are going to make it make it on their own. Barack pays no attention to this, but he sees his dreams disappearing as he's promoted. One day, Barack's half sister Auma calls him at his office. She asks to visit and Barack agrees. He excitedly prepares, but several weeks later, Auma calls with the news that their brother David died and she can't come. Barack wonders who Auma and David are—and who he is if he didn't cry for his brother.

Being the only research assistant who is Black is a point of shame in part because Barack is made to feel again as though he's the new kid at Punahou. The support of the secretaries might make this even worse, especially since they don't approve of his desired life path—he may feel as though he's letting Black people down by not trying to climb the corporate ladder and increase Black representation in high-level positions. His reaction to David's death, meanwhile, impresses upon him that he's totally cut off from half of his family. It's clearly a big thing for him that he feels no grief, and he sees this as a result of his estrangement.

Barack resigns from his consulting job a few months later and applies again for an organizing job. He works a few odd jobs and is broke within six months. One day, when he attends a talk at Columbia by a speaker proposing establishing economic ties between Africa and Harlem, the speaker and two Marxists lay into a woman who suggests this isn't possible. Barack feels like the movement is over. Not long after, a Jewish man named Marty Kaufman calls Barack, looking for a trainee to organize in Chicago. Marty is pudgy, unkempt, and insists that Barack must be angry if he wants to organize. He explains that he needs a Black person to help him. Most of his work is with churches, since the unions have so little power anymore—but the churches are notoriously hard to work with.

Seeing people (who are implied to be Black) lay into another Black person impresses upon Barack that the Black community is fracturing and it might be difficult to unite people through organizing. Marty's interest in Barack begins to push back against this, since he's organizing in a historically Black part of Chicago. Marty recognizes that many people feel more comfortable talking to someone who looks like them, hence why he's looking specifically for a Black person—but though he may be correct, he also seems to make the racist assumption that all Black people will naturally be able to connect with each other.

Marty asks what Barack knows about Chicago, and he really only knows about Harold Washington, the recently elected first Black mayor of the city, and that Chicago is highly segregated. Marty affirms that the segregation and polarization mean that not much is getting done. When Barack asks whose fault that is, Marty says it's not about fault—it's about whether Harold Washington can harness polarization and do anything. Marty offers Barack the job, and Barack tries to figure out what he thinks of Marty; Marty seems smart and maybe too sure of himself, and he's white. While Barack sits by the river to think, a boy asks him why the river sometimes runs in different directions. Realizing he's never noticed the river, Barack packs up and heads for Chicago a week later.

Here, Marty makes the case that when tensions are running high, especially due to racial segregation, politicians have an opportunity to figure out how to harness that energy. Those politicians, like Harold Washington, may have a bunch of very angry or emotional people willing to get out and fight for something better—if the politician in question can get them to mobilize. Barack chooses to go to Chicago when he realizes that he has no ties to New York—in that light, Chicago seems as good a place as any.

CHAPTER 8

Barack has only been to Chicago once, when he was 11. That was when Toot, Maya, and Ann traveled the country. He was impressed by the indoor swimming pool at their motel and fascinated by shrunken heads at the Field Museum. Arriving in July as an adult, the city seems much prettier. Barack drives around and thinks of the Black people who came to Chicago during the Great Migration. He imagines Frank watching Ella Fitzgerald perform and Regina skipping rope. He tries to make the city his own. On the third day, he stops in at Smitty's Barbershop. As he cuts Barack's hair, Smitty and the other men discuss Harold Washington's election. They talk about the mayor affectionately, like he's a relative. Barack wonders if the men would talk like this if they knew where Barack came from—but he knows they'd stop talking if Gramps walked in.

Since the South Side of Chicago, where Barack will be working, is historically Black, Barack has lots of history to draw on as he tries to fit himself into the city. Especially at Smitty's, Barack begins to understand that because he's Black, other Black people in Chicago will immediately accept him into their groups, no questions asked. He doesn't have to prove himself—at least as long as he doesn't mention that he was raised in Hawaii by his white grandparents. In this sense, although Barack feels more at home in Chicago, he's still hiding part of himself as he did his first year of college.

That afternoon, Marty picks Barack up and they drive to the old Wisconsin Steel plant. Marty says that lots of different people used to work there, but they all ignored each other outside of work. These people need to work together if they want their jobs back. Marty talks about his organization, the CCRC. He started it two years ago with the help of a Catholic bishop when he learned that both Black and white people were equally ashamed of being unemployed. Over 20 churches formed CCRC, while others joined a related group. CCRC just won funding from the state for a $500,000 job placement program, and they're headed to a celebratory rally. Marty allows that it'll take 10 years to rebuild manufacturing in the city, but people need victories *now*—they can go after politicians later. Barack realizes that Marty isn't actually that cynical.

It's telling that Marty got into organizing in Chicago because he sees similar problems affecting Black and white people. In this sense, it's possible to infer that Marty doesn't necessarily understand racism or the difference in how white and Black people move through the world—it'll likely be far easier to find unemployed white factory workers jobs, if only because they won't suffer from racism. However, for Barack, he sees that Marty is politically savvy and nevertheless recognizes that people need jobs and income to feel secure, dignified, and purposeful.

When they arrive at a school auditorium, Marty introduces Barack to Deacon Will Milton and they scurry away. Three Black women block Barack from following and introduce themselves as Angela, Shirley, and Mona. They start to tell Barack that they're thrilled to have him and imply that Marty is struggling, but Marty calls them onstage before they can finish. Barack watches the event, which includes a choir, a roll call of churches in attendance, and a number of speakers. To him it seems flat, but the crowd seems to enjoy themselves. Seeing Black and white faces united in this vision helps Barack feel cheerful. Marty can't take Barack home after, so Barack takes the bus.

Angela, Shirley, and Mona's implication that Marty isn't doing well adds more credence to the possibility that Marty, as a white man, doesn't entirely get what the Black people he wants to help face on a daily basis. Though Barack begins to have suspicions of his own—the perceived flatness of the event is an interesting critique—he nevertheless has to conclude, yet again, that Marty has an uncanny ability to bring people together around economic issues.

Barack sits next to Will and hears Will's life story. Will served in Vietnam and then worked at a bank, but when he was laid off, he turned to Christ. He makes a point to call out hypocrisy in the church when he sees it. He insists that Black people are obsessed with becoming middle-class and are less interested in following the heart of Scripture. Will chuckles that nobody listens, but he speaks anyway. He notes that many get upset that he wears a collar, since he's married and not ordained. But a collar gives him some standing, and even the cardinal doesn't care that Will wears it. Barack knows very little about religion, so he just nods. Will gets off at a church and encourages those on the bus to stay involved. As one woman gets off, she asks where the promised jobs are.

Even though Marty seems to bring people together over economic and job issues, Will seems to take issue with this, at least in part. He sees Black people as being obsessed with bettering themselves financially, to the point where they're less interested in helping their neighbors or developing Christian vlaues. But despite Will's skepticism and Marty's insistence that jobs will bring people together and restore dignity to Black Chicagoans, the woman getting off the bus makes a fair point: Marty's plan has to work.

The next day, Marty gives Barack a list of people to interview. His job is to "Find out their self-interest," because that will get these people to organize. The interviews are harder than Barack expected. People are tired and suspicious, but once he's in people's kitchens, most are happy to talk. He learns that most people in the South Side grew up on the West Side, where conditions were tough. Some followed their parents into industrial jobs; many more found jobs as social workers, teachers, or bus drivers. They were able to buy houses in white neighborhoods. These stories remind Barack of Gramps, Toot, and Ann's stories of moving to do better—but these take a different tone. Chicago never recovers from the racial upheaval, and though many people are proud of their accomplishments, they worry for the future.

In some ways, these interviews teach Barack that Black and white people's desire to better one's family are much the same. People save money, are able to move to better neighborhoods or cities, and then become more prosperous. But this simple story of self-improvement also doesn't fully speak to what Black people face as they grow wealthier and move to new neighborhoods. Instead, given Chicago's racist, segregated history, this moving creates "upheaval," not just better neighborhoods for everyone—and Barack implies that these people's progress is tenuous at best.

Many of these people have adult kids who live at home, and many see younger, less stable families moving into the neighborhood. The new families don't invest in maintenance and crime increases. Barack's interview subjects see that their progress is ephemeral, and he sees that Will is right. People are proud that they've achieved middle-class status and will do anything to try to distance themselves from those who are poorer. But in every home, no matter how poor or wealthy, Barack notices a photo of Harold Washington; Washington offers "collective redemption." However, Marty still accuses Barack of not digging deep enough.

As Barack speaks with Black people of all incomes, he realizes that climbing the status ladder is perhaps even more important to these Black people than it ever was for Gramps and Toot. However, Barack also sees the photos of Harold Washington in every Black household as proof that Black people in Chicago are still united in one thing: their love of their mayor, who looks like them and makes them feel as though progress is possible.

Finally, during an interview with a woman named Ruby, Barack starts to get it. Ruby talks about her son, Kyle, and his brushes with gang activity and she introduces Barack to other parents concerned about the poor police response. They organize a neighborhood meeting with the district commissioner and point Barack to Reverend Reynolds, whose church is on the block where a shooting took place. Reverend Reynolds is the president of the local ministerial alliance and invites Barack to a meeting. Barack is thrilled and gives an impassioned pitch. Though Reverend Reynolds is impressed, a Reverend Smalls isn't. He insists they don't need Barack and Marty, and they won't work with the racist Catholic archdiocese when they have committed Black aldermen on city council. None of the ministers take Barack's flyers with them, and none return his calls.

The experience of speaking to Reverend Reynolds's ministerial alliance is instructive. He begins to see that his suspicions about Marty are right: Marty doesn't necessarily see that targeting Black and white people the same way isn't useful. Black people are understandably wary about working with white church organizations, like the Catholics, who are known to be racist—it's not a huge leap to suspect that the Catholics will look out for themselves rather than the Black people working with them. As Barack learns this, he begins to come into his own and figure out how he needs to do things to be successful.

The community meeting is a disaster. Thirteen people show up and the district commander cancels. Barack spends his time directing elderly people to the Bingo game upstairs while Ruby sits sadly. Marty arrives halfway, helps Barack clean up, and takes Barack for coffee. He says that Barack needs a more specific issue than gangs and needs to make inroads with leaders. Marty laughs when Barack tells him about Reverend Smalls and says that Smalls is just a politician in a collar who is trying to take advantage of the polarized city. Marty says it's good Barack learned his lesson, but Barack doesn't know what he learned. He realizes that each faith group may say the same prayers, but they all are loyal to different people. Smalls and others don't want to hear that a Black mayor won't solve their problems.

As misguided as Marty may be in some ways, he also teaches Barack a useful lesson here: that Black people in Chicago don't want to hear that their struggle is more difficult than a Black mayor can fix all on his own. Barack has been going into these meetings believing that it's possible and necessary to find more nuance and dig deeper—and while he's not wrong, this doesn't change that the people in the community may have very specific ideas about what's happening and how to fix it. And if he wants to help the community, he must listen to their stories and what they want.

CHAPTER 9

At Chicago's southern edge sits the Altgeld Gardens public housing project, "the Gardens" for short. This nickname is ironic—there's a grove of trees and the Calumet River nearby, but the fish in the river are discolored and disfigured. There's a landfill on one side and a sewage treatment plant on another. Despite these location issues, Altgeld was designed with the same kind of hope as other Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) housing projects—but unlike in some of the other projects, Altgeld's occupants try to make the place feel like home. However, the CHA stops performing maintenance.

Barack's descriptions of Altgeld paint a picture of a community that's trying to make the best of a bad situation. Meanwhile, the proximity of the landfill and the sewage treatment plant suggests that the people in power when Altgeld was built didn't care about the quality of life of poor Black people—something that speaks to the city's racist history. Of course, Altgeld's residents still deal with this same kind of racism in the present, as shown by the city failing to maintain the building.

The choked gray sky makes Barack suspect this is hopeless. And the aftermath of the police meeting hasn't helped this outlook—working with the Catholic parishes in the city proves difficult, as the white Catholic priests serving in Black churches are disillusioned and feel that they can't help the neighborhoods. Others, including Angela, Shirley, and Mona, are also disillusioned. They feel like Marty doesn't listen to them, and they're disappointed that the job bank turned out to be a bust. Though Marty goes weekly to harangue the people administering the job bank, the women suspect he's pushing a secret agenda—the money went somewhere, after all. For his part, Marty refuses to listen when Barack suggests he be more tactful; he insists that it's not his job to make people like him.

With the failure of the job bank, Barack has to face the unfortunate fact that Marty cannot work miracles, as smart and as dedicated as he might be. And because the Black people he works with and tries to serve are naturally suspicious of a white man who comes off as tactless, Marty's failures seem even worse—and also, given Barack's involvement with Marty, he's implicated in Marty's mistakes. Overall, as Barack describes the state of things in Altgeld, he pulls out threads of hopelessness and disaffection, things he'll have to push against if he wants to make a difference.

One Saturday, Marty takes Barack and Angela to a meeting with a local union president. Marty insists that the steel company is going out of business and he lays out a plan to try to preserve jobs by working with churches, the city, and banks, but the union officials insist that they have to focus on negotiating with management right now. Marty is stunned. After the meeting, Angela confides in Barack that she didn't understand Marty's plan. Barack realizes that Angela is questioning whether they should even be trying to keep the steel plant open. That won't help those who are already unemployed, and the job board won't help Black people who don't have any education. Barack realizes that Marty wants to treat Black and white people exactly the same, with no understanding of how history keeps Black people from moving up.

In this instance, Barack figures out where Marty's perceived tactlessness comes from: Marty doesn't want to acknowledge that racism is alive and well in Chicago and that it still influences the lives of Black people in the city. By ignoring this, he ignores an important and instructive story about the city, one that Angela and many others seem to know very well. Learning this also helps Barack conceptualize his grandparents' story, as they were able to move up in the world because, as white people, they didn't face racism like Black people do.

Barack enters a church in Altgeld to find Angela, Shirley, Will, and Mary all looking morose. Angela announces she's quitting; after two years, she feels like she's accomplished nothing. Shirley backs this up. Barack feels panic and then anger. He remembers Frank saying that this is the way things are and looks out the window at boys destroying a boarded-up building across the street. He half wants to join them and asks what will happen to the boys outside if they're not going to fight for them. Barack isn't sure this play will work, but Will asks what they're going to do. Barack asks him for his opinion and they spend their time talking about their strategy to help Altgeld.

As a dreamer who believes in creating communities, Barack cannot simply accept that he can't do anything; he won't abandon Chicago to get even worse. But at the same time, he's also fighting years' worth of abandonment, mistreatment, and neglect of Black Chicagoans by their local government. As Barack regains Angela's support and starts to brainstorm solutions, he steps in as a guide and as someone willing to work for boys like he sees outside.

Later, when Barack calls Marty, Marty isn't surprised by what happened. He suggests that Barack find some new leaders so Will isn't responsible for their success or failure—Will is a known eccentric who struggles to connect with people in interviews. He has the idea to host street corner meetings in Altgeld's vicinity, as he knows the unemployed, struggling people there won't go to meetings at a foreign church. Barack helps Will and Mary prepare a flyer and stands with them on a corner. To his surprise, about 20 people show up and talk for an hour about what they want fixed in their community. Barack, Will, and Mary repeat these meetings on other blocks and eventually hold meetings in a church basement.

For as clueless or as uncaring as Marty might seem about how his behavior appears to others, he does recognize the importance of optics when it comes to other people—hence his telling Barack to find someone other than Will to be the face of this push, and hence his hiring Barack, a Black man, in the first place. And yet, Will still understands Chicago differently than Marty does, despite his eccentricities. As a part of the community, he understands better that outdoor meetings like these will be far more successful than Marty's preferred indoor meetings.

Before one meeting, Barack joins Mary at the coffee pot. Barack doesn't know Mary well, but he knows that she married a Black man who left her after they had two daughters. Her Irish family won't speak to her, and she reminds Barack of Ann. Mary asks Barack why he's doing this work, especially since he's not very religious. People arrive for the meeting before Barack can answer. Will leads the lengthy meeting and then, at the end, suggests they all reflect on their relationships to each other and to God. Everyone is uncomfortable, but Will shares his happy memories of growing up in Altgeld—and he cries as he says that kids here don't smile anymore. Others share their stories of loss. After the meeting, Barack tells Mary that their reasons for doing this aren't so different.

Mary's question to Barack seems to imply that wanting to help others and make Altgeld a robust and thriving community is something unique to people whose religion requires that kind of action. For Barack, though, his life experiences have shown him the importance of cultivating community of some kind, whether that's hanging out with boys in Djkarta, befriending Ray in high school, or seeking out radical Black students in college. For him, it's the community aspect that's important.

A week later, Barack tries to fit Angela, Mona, and Shirley into his tiny car so they can attend meetings and come up with a job strategy for Altgeld's residents. Barack figures they can get shops, restaurants, and theaters back into the area and encourage families to start businesses. They go first to the Roseland shopping district to meet with a Rafiq al Shabazz, whom Shirley knows as Wally, a neighbor's son. Rafiq forces a smile and explains that he's the president of an organization that helped get Harold Washington elected. He hands Barack a flyer accusing Arab shops of selling bad meat and accuses outsiders—Koreans, Arabs, and Jews—of mistreating Black people. Long term, their goal is to help Black people own local businesses, but Roseland residents just want to move to the suburbs. This will be a disaster, as white folks will move in when Black people leave.

What Rafiq essentially proposes is that Marty is wrong—it's inappropriate to look at unemployed people in Chicago as more or less the same, regardless of their skin color or country of origin. And while Barack has already seen that he must acknowledge and deal head-on with Chicago's history of racism and segregation, it's telling that Rafiq's flyer is described in a way that suggests that it's deliberately inflammatory and not factual. Rafiq, in this sense, is possibly trying to rally the Black community around hating others as a way to better themselves.

Rafiq excuses himself. Outside the building, Shirley says she's known Rafiq since he was a kid; he changed his name when he gave up the gang life to become a Muslim. The group heads to the Chamber of Commerce next. There, they find Mr. Foster, who was the president of the Chamber until he resigned last week. He tells the group that the Koreans pay their dues and are community-oriented. They give each other loans and pool their money. Black merchants don't do that—though they also don't work their families 16 hours per day like many Korean businesses do. When Angela asks about part-time work for Altgeld's youth, Mr. Foster explains that business owners turn down 30 applicants every week.

Mr. Foster presents a different view on the state of unemployment in Chicago: the Black community is fractured, suspicious of their peers, and won't work together to help everyone succeed. For Mr. Foster, the Korean businesspeople in Chicago are people to learn from, at least in terms of how they structure and support their community. Such a thing would likely not go over well with Rafiq, as acknowledging that Koreans do some things well would damage his attempts to unite the Black business community against a perceived enemy.

As Barack studies a Korean clothing shop outside, he remembers the markets in Indonesia and realizes that despite the poverty there, the markets were a mark of a coherent community. He figures it'll take a long time to put the culture and the community back together in Chicago. He also thinks of Indonesian workers who leave their markets when factories come in—and then are out of work without the market to fall back on when the factories go under. Barack and the women miss their final appointment at the Mayor's Office of Employment and Training (MET). An assistant gives them a brochure. Barack says they've found their issue: none of the programs MET facilitates are accessible to Altgeld's residents.

With this, Barack begins to see that poverty might not be the exact problem he thinks it is; it certainly wreaks havoc on communities in Chicago, but it's worth noting that poor communities elsewhere are more mutually supportive. But he also understands that it's impossible to simply ignore poverty in Chicago—hence him focusing his efforts on getting a MET center someplace where Altgeld's residents can access it. That will not only give them income; a job will give them dignity and a sense that they belong.

They quickly draft a letter to Ms. Alvarez, the director of MET, and Barack drills everyone on a meeting script. They plan to demand a job intake and training center in the Far South Side. On the night of the meeting, about 100 people show up. Mona forces Ms. Alvarez to promise a MET intake center in the area within six months, and the only hitch is a shouting drunk man. After the meeting, Barack feels like he can do this. He congratulates himself and notices the drunk man spinning in circles. Barack offers to help, but the man curses at him and wobbles away.

The drunk man is an indicator that, despite Barack's newfound belief that he can succeed, he's up against all sorts of obstacles. The job center isn't going to solve all of the community's problems, even if it's a promising start.

CHAPTER 10

Winter arrives, making work difficult. People fight over limited parking spaces and others don't come to meetings at all. Marty encourages Barack to take time off and create a life for himself outside of work, but Barack doesn't listen. Instead, he finds that his relationships with Angela, Mona, Shirley, and other leaders in the organization offer more than a traditional social life would. He joins people at church and parties, and he connects with some of the community members he interviews. A family tells of sacrificing so that their son could get a law degree, only for that son to be diagnosed with schizophrenia and become unable to work. Others tell him stories of debilitating medical issues or parents dead due to alcohol. Through listening to these stories, Barack feels comfortable sharing more about his own past.

Once again, Marty shows that he understands the necessity of community, which is why he tells Barack to throw himself into life outside of work. For Barack, though, he discovers that sharing stories and working so closely with people in Chicago helps him create a community for himself without even having to look outside of work. As he gets a sense of how tragic the lives of some people have been, it becomes easier for him to share some of his own tragedies—some of which share similarities to these stories (Lolo, for instance, turned to alcohol).

As time passes and as Barack swaps stories with other organizers, he feels like his world is coming together. He feels like he has a place and discovers that Marty was right: there's always community if one digs for it. Barack also learns things that are less cheerful, however. For instance, Ruby throws herself headlong into organizing after the botched police meeting, and Barack takes an interest in her son Kyle, who's alternately enthusiastic and sullen. Once, near Christmas, Barack invites Ruby to his office to give her his gift for Kyle. He's shocked to see Ruby wearing blue contact lenses and abruptly says her eyes looked better before. Barack feels awful and realizes he expected leaders to be able to ignore the draw of fashion magazines.

Barack's altercation with Ruby over the contacts shows how difficult it is to eliminate internalized racism—even for activists and organizers devoted to helping free Black people from the devastating effects of white supremacy, some vestiges of white supremacy (such as a preference for blue eyes) persist. Even though Barack is right to suggest that Ruby doesn't need to wear contacts to be beautiful, he also recognizes in this moment that he's being insensitive. By making Ruby feel ashamed about her insecurity, he's blaming her for a society-wide issue and distracting from the bigger work at hand.

One of Barack's Black female friends impatiently calls him out for being surprised "That black people still hate themselves." Barack explains that this isn't exactly correct—since seeing the *Life* **photograph**, he's learned about the divisions between "good" and "bad" hair, lips, and skin color among Black women. He notices that these conversations only take place in small groups and never in front of white people. Eventually, he dismisses the idea that Black people just need self-esteem to save themselves. Barack recognizes that while self-esteem might help, poverty does more harm than poor self-esteem. But Ruby makes him question this, as does hearing Black people speak poorly about other Black people or using the n-word to scold their sons. He realizes that Black identities stem from a history of hating and being hated—and he wonders if Ruby can love herself without hating blue eyes.

As Barack mulls over his thoughts on Ruby, Black beauty, and Black self-esteem more broadly, he must continue to contend with the fact that racism is still alive and well—and still guiding the lives of Black people, no matter how confident they may seem. And indeed, Barack suspects that Ruby chose the contacts in the first place because she felt like she needed to change her appearance to look beautiful. In other places, Barack confirms this: hearing Black people speak disparagingly about their own race suggests to him that Black people have internalized many of the racist, stereotypical beliefs white people hold about Black people.

One morning, Rafiq calls early, asking for Barack to try to get the MET center into a storefront near his office. Barack figures an alliance with Rafiq will be useful, as Ms. Alvarez proves difficult to work with. Rafiq, however, is awful to work with—during meetings, he shouts about how horrible Black people are to each other. He believes that all Black people hate white people, and that people who aren't bound by blood, religion, or race won't help each other. Barack takes issue with Rafiq's hatred of white people, though he sees this hatred has its uses: it avoids blaming Black people for their poverty and helps redirect their anger. Barack begins to understand how hatred and nationalism, as defined by the Nation of Islam, might be able to help Black people.

Remember that Malcolm X's ideas were instrumental to Barack growing up. Now, as an adult, he begins to see that some of Malcolm X's ideas may have their place, but that doesn't mean that people like Rafiq aren't playing with ideas that, in some situations, can be dangerous or reductive. To this end, while Barack recognizes that while it's possibly useful to encourage Black people to hate something other than themselves, Barack also knows plenty of white people—namely, his family members—who don't deserve that kind of hatred.

As Barack sees it, though, nationalism—at least as peddled by Rafiq—doesn't help much. Rafiq refuses to ask his congregation to show up to protests and is suspicious of any Black person willing to attend. And Barack sees that, unfortunately, nationalism is more of an attitude than a program due to the small presence of the Nation of Islam in Chicago. Barack occasionally picks up the group's newspaper, which runs stories that seem like they came from the AP—except they call out, for instance, that certain senators are Jewish. He watches a Nation of Islam toiletry line rise and fall, presumably because white people still control markets. This, Barack decides, is why nationalism is a successful *emotion* and not a successful *program*: white people still have power, and Black people and businesses need to survive in a world created by white people.

What Barack discovers is that ideas may have merit, but that doesn't mean that they always translate well into action. This is why the Nation of Islam toiletry line fails so miserably: despite the Nation of Islam's desire for separation between races, it's a much bigger project to actually create separation and be able to profitably run a business that has nothing to do with other white-owned or controlled businesses, like banks, landlords, or newspapers. It's also worth noting here that Barack implicitly calls out the Nation of Islam's anti-Semitic rhetoric; part of the group's push for separatism included vilifying other races and religious groups, especially Jewish people.

Barack realizes that Rafiq isn't interested in changing the actual rules of power; he just wants to put Black people in power. Barack notices that Rafiq's rhetoric begins to go against what Malcolm X wanted, as Rafiq and other Black politicians turn to race-baiting and peddling conspiracy theories about other ethnic groups. No one seems to take this talk seriously, but Barack sees it damaging efforts to build coalitions. Barack decides that racial or cultural purity can't give Black Americans self-esteem—instead, self-esteem must come from their stories and their experiences.

As Barack watches Rafiq's actions, he ultimately comes to decide that the Nation of Islam—an organization that he admired as a teen—cannot give Black people the dignity and hope they need. Rather, Barack believes that Black communities must focus on telling their stories to people who care and attempting to build coalitions with people who want to help—no matter who those people might be.

Several weeks later, Barack invites Ruby to come to a meeting with him on the north side. They eat at a Vietnamese restaurant and then Barack takes Ruby to a performance of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange. The Black actresses tell their stories and sing songs, dancing the entire time. The student group behind Barack and Ruby cheers when the show is over. Ruby thanks Barack and they drive home in silence.

The play For Colored Girls *does exactly what Barack believes Black people in Chicago should do: it tells the stories of Black women without shame, and it makes it clear that there are all different ways to be Black and experience life as a Black person. This allows Barack to essentially tell Ruby that she's not doing anything wrong—and he gets that now.*

CHAPTER 11

Barack rushes into the airport and studies the photograph in his hand. When he looks up, he sees Auma, the photo's subject, in real life. Barack knows immediately that he loves her. In the car, she tells him about how much she dislikes Germany. It purports to be progressive, but people there are still racist. It makes her think of what their father, the Old Man, must have felt when he left home. When Barack tries to convince Auma to nap, she accuses him of being stubborn like the Old Man. Barack takes her on a tour of the city and then to his office, where Auma, Angela, Shirley, and Mona cackle and talk about him. Barack tells her later that he's an organizer for people like them and for himself, but Auma says she dislikes politics—people end up disappointed.

Finally meeting Auma in the flesh connects Barack more to his father—especially since Auma seems to regularly bring up their father and what his experience must have been like. Even more importantly, though, it's telling that Auma suggests that she and Barack are probably going through the same kind of struggles that their father did so many years ago. This suggests that Barack, Auma, and their other siblings will inevitably have to retrace aspects of their parents' paths as they find their ways in the world.

Back at Barack's apartment, there's a letter waiting for Auma from a German law student that she's been seeing. She sighs and says that after watching the Old Man, marriage disturbs her—and she'd have to live in Germany if she married this guy. Barack says he understands. In New York, he dated a white woman. Their relationship was comfortable when it was just the two of them in each other's apartments, but when she took him to her family's grand house, he knew he'd have to give up his life to be with her. He took her to a Black playwright's play. She insisted she couldn't be Black and they broke up.

This conversation reaffirms what Barack mentioned when describing his revelations in college that "exotics" can only integrate into white culture, not the other way around. Both Barack and Auma recognize that marrying white Americans or Europeans would inevitably mean giving up on some of their Kenyan culture, and at least at this point, Auma and Barack aren't willing to do that.

The next day, Barack takes Auma around the city and they look through old photos. They don't talk much about their father until night. Auma thinks that no one really knew him since his life was so scattered, and she was afraid of him. She was little when the Old Man returned from America with Ruth and took her and Roy to Nairobi. The Old Man was doing well working for an American oil company. To show off, he'd go back to Auma's mother, Kezia. Their four brothers were born around this time: Abo and Bernard to Kezia, and David and Mark to Ruth. Abo and Bernard never came to Nairobi. Ruth was nice enough until David and Mark were born and the Old Man started working for the government. The Old Man couldn't live with tribal divisions in Kenya's government and spoke out—so the president blacklisted him.

During Auma's retelling of the Old Man's story, she makes the case that it's impossible to know exactly who he was because he lived his life in so many places and with so many different people—and each of those people had a different experience with him. And as Barack listens, it's important that he recognize that Auma's story may express facts, but it also tells him a lot about her experience. She focuses, for instance, on the fact that she *was afraid of her father, and that Ruth was nice to* her *until her own sons were born. This passage is about the Old Man, but it's also about how Auma experienced his downfall.*

The Old Man finally found a small job with the Water Department thanks to a sympathetic friend. He began drinking and his friends cut him out for their own political survival. Auma says she didn't understand this until she was older; at the time, she just put up with the Old Man's shouting at her and at Ruth. Ruth began to treat Auma and Roy differently and insisted they weren't her children. Ruth left when Auma was about 12 and the Old Man was in a car accident that put him in the hospital for a year. It was after this that he visited Barack and Ann in Hawaii. The Old Man lost his job and the family became homeless. His temper got worse and the Old Man refused to admit that anything was wrong. Roy eventually left, leaving Auma alone with their father.

Auma makes it very clear that her understanding of what happened to the Old Man has changed over the years, as she learned more about Kenya and about the other people in the Old Man's life. As a child, she associated the Old Man with fear and verbal abuse; as she got older, she became able to put this in a broader context of alcohol abuse, financial difficulties, and marital struggles. The Old Man's unwillingness to admit that anything was the matter suggests that he wanted to tell himself a more hopeful story and failed.

Auma survived thanks to boarding school. When the Old Man could no longer pay her school fees, a headmistress gave her a scholarship. The Old Man's situation improved in Auma's last two years of school, after President Kenyatta died. But Auma says their father never got over what happened and couldn't deal with his peers passing him by in rank. He lived in a hotel, saw different women, and when Auma got a scholarship to study in Germany, she left without saying goodbye out of fear that he'd force her to stay. While in Germany, she and the Old Man began to piece their relationship back together. She remembers telling him that he can't undo the damage he caused with her and with Roy, but he can be there for his newest son, George.

Compared to the story of his father that Barack grew up with, Auma's account expresses something very different. She tells Barack that their father wasn't just overbearing, as Ann said; their father couldn't deal with his own powerlessness and, in response, worsened his relationships with his own children. However, it's also telling that Auma escaped thanks to school—just like the Old Man survived and made a name for himself in the first place thanks to his American education. Some things still remain the same throughout the generations.

Auma sobs that the Old Man died not long after, just after she started to get to know him. She straightens up and says that Barack and Ann's letters used to comfort him. He'd read them out loud when things were bad, insisting that Ann cared about him. Barack prepares the sofa bed for Auma and sits up late, thinking that his image of his father as a scholar, a friend, and a leader is gone. He's noticed weaknesses in Lolo and Gramps, but he figured that their examples didn't matter as much—they weren't Black, after all. Now, he has to wonder who his father actually was. Barack feels both liberated and awful, and he now knows the consequences of never talking openly with his father. Ten days later, as Auma and Barack sit at the airport, Auma says they need to go home, to Alego, and see their father.

It's telling that Barack comes to the conclusion that the real issue here is that his father never spoke openly with anyone, especially his children. Openness, he seems to suggest, is how people can form robust, caring family structures and community, something the Old Man could have really used when he fell on hard times. As Barack looks back on his relationships with Lolo and Gramps, he also begins to reaffirm that any man can step in as a father and help lead children toward adulthood. Their skin color matters less than the fact that they were present.

CHAPTER 12

Rafiq fusses over the refreshment table and the photo of Harold Washington hanging in the new MET center in Roseland. Washington is coming to cut the ribbon. Barack reminds Will and Angela that they must get the mayor to commit to coming to their rally in the fall, too. A murmur goes through the crowd as Washington arrives. He smiles as he approaches Angela and greets her by name; Angela looks ready to pass out. The ceremony is quick. After photos, the mayor zooms away, and Barack finds Angela, Shirley, and Mona twittering about meeting him, but they failed to invite him to the rally in the fall. Barack is angry, but Will reminds him that meeting Harold Washington will be the highlight of Angela's life and he suggests that Barack will never be satisfied.

Given Barack's status as a newcomer to the city, Harold Washington doesn't hold the same star quality for him as he does for people like Angela and Rafiq. Barack is so upset with Angela in part because he's unwilling to acknowledge and celebrate just how amazing of an event this was for her. To him, Harold Washington is just another politician; to Angela, he's an almost religious figure and proof that change is coming for Chicago. Will's chat reminds Barack to be gentle with others and acknowledge their experiences.

After a year in Chicago, Barack is getting results, but he knows that Will is right: he's *not* satisfied. He wonders if it's because, since Auma's visit, he feels like he has to make up for the Old Man's mistakes. Barack also has issues with Marty, though they parted ways in the spring. Finding that the suburbanites he was organizing cared more about white flight and property values than about jobs, Marty started organizing in Gary, Indiana instead. He invited Barack to come work with him, but Barack refused, realizing that Marty wasn't tied to the Chicagoans they'd been working with and that he's fueled more by ideas than by people. While Marty insisted that Barack couldn't create "real" change in Chicago, Barack reflects that change is more complicated than he once thought. Instead of fighting evil racists like Bull Connor, he's struggling against something much more ordinary: cynicism, petty greed, and entrenched bureaucracy.

Even though, for all intents and purposes, Barack is an adult, the revelations about his father make Barack feel again like he's a child. And because he sees his work as a way to try to atone for his father's mistakes, Barack throws himself even more fully into his work. Barack refuses to go with Marty in part because he recognizes that Marty isn't part of the community that they're serving in Chicago, but Barack—even though he's a newcomer—does feel connected to the people and places he's been working with. And since Barack is part of the community now, he can also see that their antagonists aren't who Marty thought they were—the obstacles to change are more complicated and ordinary than he previously thought.


Barack finds that most people in Altgeld feel weary, believing that they can't fix the issues that plague them. This makes them feel cynical and lose all notions of personal responsibility or hope for the future. In a way, Barack knows that he has to prove that what he's doing matters. Once, when Barack tries to explain this to Will, Will chuckles that Barack wants Harold Washington's job. This, however, isn't true. Barack recognizes that Washington makes the city *look* more equitable, but not much actually changes. Barack wonders if Washington feels just as hopeless as he does. Dr. Collier, the principal of an elementary school, pulls Barack out of his funk. She asks Barack what he's going to do for the mother of one of their students, a junkie who can't make bail for her boyfriend. She explains how they try to help students and their teen mothers, but they can't help what goes on at home.

Given Barack's emphasis on the importance of community, it's no surprise that he feels like he has to prove that his work is meaningful and successful. What he's trying to do, in essence, is give the Altgeld community the sense that they really are a community—but he's fighting an uphill battle. Since so many residents don't feel as though they have a responsibility to the collective, it's much harder to harness people and rally them around a common cause. But Dr. Collier suggests that Barack should essentially focus on the children, a group that many will care about.


Dr. Collier invites Barack to a parents' meeting and shows him into the hallway, where a class of five-year-olds stands. Barack notices how happy they seem, despite the poverty they face at home. Dr. Collier says the change comes in about five years, when the children's eyes stop laughing. Barack spends a lot of time with those kids and their parents. Many of the mothers are in their late teens or early 20s. The women know how to survive but are ambitious and not cynical. Barack is struck by two sisters, Linda and Bernadette, who work together to care for their two children and one on the way. They dream of going to college and living in a house. They seem innocent—but Barack realizes how innocent he must look to them.

Though the wider community may not function cohesively, Barack nevertheless seems to come upon smaller instances of community. Linda and Bernadette offer the hope that there are others like them, with dreams and children to care for, who might be willing to work together to achieve those ambitious dreams. Dr. Collier also makes it clear that the stakes are high. She paints a grim picture of the future when she talks about the kids getting to the point where they're not laughing anymore—pointing to the devastating effects of fear, neglect, and poverty.

Barack decides to focus on improving basic services in Altgeld, like repairing toilets and windows. First, he asks the women to canvass their blocks to discover what needs to be fixed, but a woman named Sadie approaches him with a legal notice. It announces that Altgeld is hiring contractors to remove asbestos, and Sadie is concerned that there's asbestos in the apartments, so she sets up a meeting with Mr. Anderson, the property manager. Barack tells himself that a cover-up will generate lots of publicity—and publicity will help. He fights the urge to tell Mr. Anderson that he knows the problems precede him and they can work together. Mr. Anderson assures Sadie there's no asbestos, but sputters when she asks for the test results.

The possibility of asbestos in the Altgeld apartments provides Barack with the kind of narrow issue that Marty encouraged him to focus on. And indeed, though it seems at this point as though Sadie is the only one concerned, Barack recognizes that this has the potential to create waves all throughout the city. A refusal on the part of the city to properly handle asbestos would send the message that they don't care about the health and safety of the Black residents in the projects, the kind of publicity that the city doesn't want.

After a week, Sadie calls Mr. Anderson's office. As the weeks wear on, Barack helps her contact the CHA and the mayor's office. When they hear nothing, they plan to go downtown and demand information. Sadie, Linda, and Bernadette only manage to find eight people willing to go. Once at the director's office, Barack reminds the women that this office is here to serve them. As the secretary tries to shoo the group out, a news crew arrives. Barack cajoles Sadie into giving a press conference. As Sadie speaks, a harried woman—the director's assistant—takes everyone into a conference room. They learn thatthe apartments *haven't* been tested for asbestos and secure a promise to begin testing immediately.

The events of this afternoon begin to impress upon Sadie, Linda, Bernadette, and the other parents in attendance that when they work together to raise a fuss, they can get things done—and as they work together, they can create a sense of community that will carry them forward. They also confirm that Mr. Anderson lied about the asbestos. With this, it's easy to see how Mr. Anderson said what he thought was going to help him most in the long run—but he underestimated the power of this community.

Barack buys everyone caramel corn for the ride home and tries to conduct an evaluation, but Mona forces Barack to sit and eat. This moment changes Barack, as it shows him what's possible. The city erupts as the press discovers more asbestos in South Side projects, but even better, Barack sees the parent group developing new campaigns and drawing in more parents. Even their adversaries begin to come around as they plan an event. The leaders arrive at the event an hour early to discover that their sound system is dead. The maintenance man offers them a small amp and microphone and Barack warns Linda and Sadie to not let the director drone on. More than 700 people arrive for the event—but the director is late.

Barack's desire to conduct an evaluation and turn this into a learning experience for everyone reads much the same way as his annoyance with Angela when she met Harold Washington. Barack doesn't entirely understand the emotional impact of moments like these—and that allowing people like Angela and Sadie to feel victorious, special, and useful is possibly more meaningful than an evaluation. Those emotions will make them more willing to work in the future when things inevitably get hard again.

The director arrives an hour late. Sadie and Linda welcome him and ask if he's willing to commit to working with them to make basic repairs to Altgeld's apartments. The director asks to respond "in his own fashion," and a tug-of-war over the microphone ensues. Finally, the director bolts and pandemonium breaks out. Several people accuse Barack of embarrassing Altgeld by getting young people involved. Linda sobs and Barack assures her that this was his fault. Dr. Collier comforts him that this will blow over. But though crews do take care of the asbestos, the fallout is substantial and momentum wanes. Eventually, a government official informs the group that many of the repairs they want aren't federal priorities. Sadie drops out so she can focus on saving money to move away.

It's important to note that Barack didn't necessarily do anything wrong here. Young people, for one thing, were the only people to get involved—he's working with a parents' group composed entirely of very young women, after all. And despite the gains the group might have made with the city, they still have to contend with the much larger issue of federal grants for public housing projects. Sadie's departure from the group, meanwhile, reminds Barack that concerns haven't changed much—people still want to get out more than they want to improve Altgeld.

CHAPTER 13

Johnnie is in one of his expansive moods one night as he and Barack finish dinner. He tells Barack about witnessing a teenager commit suicide as they hear a sudden pop. They look and see young teen boys chasing each other, the pursuers with a gun. Both Barack and Johnnie drop to the ground. It's a year after the asbestos campaign. By this time, 1987, Barack notices a difference in the South Side. He watches boys snapping young saplings and sees other young men in wheelchairs. Barack realizes that what's changed is that now many people believe that some boys are beyond help. Johnnie grew up on the South Side and remembers how adults used to step in, but drugs have destroyed that sense of community.

What both Johnnie and Barack see happening in the South Side is an erosion of the communities that used to thrive there. In the past, there would be adults to scold the boys and scare them away from getting involved with a gang—but now, seeing kids running around with guns makes those adults much less willing to step in. It's telling that Barack notices a difference from only three or four years ago—the change is happening faster than he can organize.

Barack decides he's not afraid of these armed boys like some people are. Johnnie insists that even the good kids think they have to look out for themselves, something that Barack thinks is wrong—to him, that seems to imply that kids can dictate their own futures. He also thinks about Kyle, who's 16 and whose antics frighten Ruby. One day, Barack takes Kyle to play basketball and asks if he's still thinking about the air force. Kyle insists that they'll never let a Black man fly a plane; he'll stay in Chicago. As one player starts to get the better of Kyle, Kyle punches him. The man is too embarrassed to report Kyle, so Barack leads Kyle out and lectures him. Kyle agrees to tell Ruby what happened.

The way that Barack sees it, kids aren't in control of their futures. They face racism, adult meddling, and lack of opportunity, all of which dictates where they end up, at least to some degree. He sees in Johnnie's declaration that the community is essentially giving up on the kids that they decide are too scary to help. It's clear that Kyle is on the way to becoming one of these scary young men, but Barack hopes that by mentoring Kyle, he might be able to counteract some of the damage.

Barack sets his sights on the public schools, which are constantly in crisis. Teachers strike regularly and only half the students graduate. Few people are interested. Some, like Angela and Mary, send their kids to Catholic school. The most resistance to reform comes from the teachers and principals who attend church on Sundays. They insist there's no money, that reform efforts are attempts to put white people back in control, and that the students are lazy—and the parents are worse. All of this makes Barack angry. He and Johnnie start with Kyle's high school. They meet the principal, Dr. King, who introduces them to a counselor named Asante. Asante insists that inner-city schools are just mini jails and that education for Black youth is misguided. Black kids have to learn about white culture—the culture that oppresses them.

In the teachers' and principals' arguments as to why the public schools in Chicago are so bad, Barack sees that the teachers have also given up on the community. Their arguments seem to suggest that there's nothing to do, so it's not worth it to even try to improve the situation. In a way, Asante seems to echo this point. He makes the point that schools are, by design, not set up to serve Black kids. They consistently force Black kids to learn from curricula designed for white kids, which makes them feel even less willing to learn and think about the future.

Asante also says that the boys have it the worst, as few have fathers to guide them toward manhood. It's no wonder, he suggests, that they have issues. This is why he introduces kids to Africa. That gives the boys a sense that they're rooted in some tradition. A student knocks and Asante shows Barack and Johnnie to the door. Before they leave, Asante asks Barack about his heritage and talks about his last trip to Kenya. Barack admits he's never been. In the car, Barack tells Johnnie that he's afraid of what he might find in Kenya. Johnnie tells Barack about his dad, who raised him and his brothers; while he was a bit ashamed of his dad when he was younger, looking back, he realizes his dad never discouraged him. Barack notes that Johnnie's dad was there for him and thinks that Asante's presence in his students' lives is probably more helpful than the posters of Africa.

Asante also keys in on something that Barack returns to again and again throughout the memoir: that boys need father figures to guide them toward adulthood. Asante believes that connecting students to culture and community, as represented by Africa, will compensate to some extent for their lack of father figures. Focusing on father figures, however, ignores the difficult jobs of the single mothers who are trying to raise their children in an inhospitable city. But within Barack and Asante's understanding of the world, a male authority figure of some sort is absolutely necessary for young boys.

Barack, Johnnie, Asante, and Dr. Collier begin to develop a counseling network to provide tutoring and mentoring. Barack leaves Johnnie in charge one weekend so he can visit his brother, Roy, in D.C. Barack and Roy first connected during Auma's visit, when she and Barack called Roy. He's been in America since marrying a woman who served in the Peace Corps. Auma warned Barack that Roy is a lot like the Old Man—he doesn't show his true feelings. When Barack lands in D.C., Roy isn't there. When Barack calls, Roy reveals that he and his wife are fighting and asks Barack to stay in a hotel. Roy picks Barack up later for dinner, shocking Barack with his size and his resemblance to the Old Man.

Barack's shock when he's confronted with the fact that Roy looks just like the Old Man comes, in part, from the fact that Barack has always thought of his father as an island, disconnected from everyone and everything else. Before meeting Auma, he's never really thought about who his siblings actually are and how they might look or act like the Old Man. As Barack makes these connections and gets to know his siblings, he then gets to know his father in a broader sense—he gets to know the people who grew up with the Old Man.

Roy is a horrible driver, but he manages to get them to a Mexican restaurant overlooking a marina. After several drinks, he admits that he and his wife might divorce; she believes that he's becoming just like the Old Man and that he drinks too much. Roy says he doesn't like himself and he blames the Old Man for this. He tells a similar story to Auma's; that their father descended into poverty and Roy escaped by finding success at university. Barack admires Roy's tenacity, but he also sees that Roy still seems haunted by his memories of their father. Roy recounts how their father would drive them to get the best grades while "living like a beggar." He talks about organizing the funeral in Alego and the family fights over the Old Man's estate. After David's death, he decided the family was cursed.

While Auma seems to have been able to move past the Old Man's mistreatment for the most part, it seems to still haunt Roy. This may support Barack's belief that male role models and father figures are important for young men especially—as a woman, Auma may simply not need as much from her father as her brothers do. But in any case, Roy seeming haunted by the Old Man's abuse suggests that men can choose to step up and guide young men in their lives—or, whether through mistreatment or neglect, they can do long-term harm.

Roy says that he decided to move to the U.S. because he believed that he could start over. But he discovered that he doesn't have control at all. His voice slows as he says that it's his responsibility as the oldest to care for Auma and all their brothers. Barack offers to share the load, but Roy seems to not hear him. The next day, Barack flies home. He worries that Roy is in danger.

This is a very important moment for Barack, as Roy gives voice to the idea that one can't escape the past. This definitely holds true for Barack: even if he doesn't know the Old Man's whole story, he still feels like he can't escape or make sense of what happened to the Old Man.

Back at work, Johnnie says he met with Dr. King, who's thrilled to support their program—but King also offered up the resumes of his wife and daughter as candidates to work for the program. Barack and Johnnie dissolve into laughter, mocking the principal for supporting the program merely for his own ends. That night, a car pulls up in front of Barack's building, blasting music. Knowing the neighbors have a newborn baby, Barack asks the boys to leave. The boys say nothing and suddenly Barack feels exposed. The boys look like they could be Johnnie, Roy, or even Barack himself. Barack thinks back to when he was that age and thinks of how he would've seen his adult self. He realizes that he grew up in a more forgiving time. These boys see no order in the world—there's a world of difference between himself and the boys. He's afraid as they drive away.

Dr. King's attempts to get family members hired in Barack's program impresses upon Barack that self-interest exists everywhere, even in noble pursuits like this counseling program. These teen boys, meanwhile, drive home for Barack just how much he's grown up and how different the world is now. While Barack had plenty of people around to forgive his antics and point him in the right direction when he was a kid, Barack now sees that these boys might be beyond his help, given the economic issues and fractured community in Chicago.

CHAPTER 14

Barack sits with Reverend Philips, talking about historically Black churches. Reverend Phillips talks about slave religion, the Southern churches, and the history of churches in Chicago. He says that as a result of segregation, both well-off and poor Black people worship together. This allows the churches to circulate ideas better, but he's not sure this will continue. Many of his congregants have moved to the suburbs and are unwilling to volunteer for programs that keep them in the city past dark. Barack asks Reverend Philips for introductions to other pastors. Philips mentions Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ and says that Barack has good ideas, but churches do things their own way. When he learns that Barack doesn't attend church, he suggests he start going to win over the pastors.

As Reverend Philips talks, he makes a point to talk about the churches as institutions that foster community. And in particular, he appreciates the way that having exclusively Black churches binds people of different classes together due to their race. This, he suggests, helps create the sense that Black people are all in the fight together, which he believes creates a stronger sense of community among the congregants. This is, however, starting to slip away as Black people move out of the city. As Barack made clear earlier in the memoir, people must consistently tend to communities to keep them running.

Barack sits in his car. It's a beautiful September day and no one but Johnnie knows that Barack plans to leave for law school next year. Johnnie congratulated Barack and insisted it was just a matter of time before he left. This made Barack defensive and Barack retorted that he'd still return to Chicago. Barack plans to take a trip to Kenya after he quits his job, and he knows that law school will give him an understanding of how power actually works. This knowledge will help him make change. But Barack wonders if this is just a fiction and he wonders if he'll end up like the Old Man. Perhaps he's just trying to escape, like so many Black people before him.

As Barack wonders if he's trying to escape like the Old Man did, he's realizing that Roy was right: it's impossible to truly start over and leave one's past behind. In some ways, this is a good thing for Barack. He has no intention of abandoning Chicago for a fancy law firm elsewhere; he still feels like he needs to come back and help on the South Side. But this doesn't stop him from wondering if he's still making a mistake—if going to law school is really just a way to avoid some unsavory truth about the world.

Barack also recognizes that, in Chicago, he can live part of his life in the swanky downtown and part of it in the South Side and people will think of him as a role model. Johnnie and the other leaders don't think success like that is wrong—and indeed, most Black people he's met aren't judgmental and high-minded, like the Old Man in Ann's stories. Most people are more like Lolo and accept Barack just because of his skin color. Barack wonders if he came to Chicago just to find this acceptance, but he knows that he also came to serve the community and help it thrive.

However much Barack suspects he might mistakenly be following in his father's footsteps, he also recognizes that most people who love and support him now wouldn't be at all upset with him for becoming successful. The Old Man was unique in this regard, and in this sense, Barack begins to see that Lolo and even Gramps were better role models than his father. They pushed Barack to be who Barack is.

Barack continues to meet with Black pastors in the city. Once Barack gets to know them, he discovers that these pastors are thoughtful, generous, and hardworking. They talk openly about their struggles and ask Barack about his own faith. Several younger pastors point Barack to Reverend Wright; older pastors are more skeptical. At the end of October, Barack finally visits Reverend Wright. Children and older women mill around after finishing dancing classes, daycare, or Bible study. Reverend Wright's Black assistant offers Barack coffee and shares that she's moving out to the suburbs for her son's sake. Reverend Wright calls Barack to his office.

Connecting with these pastors throughout the city helps Barack discover that there are many mentors and father figures of sorts in Chicago, trying to help all congregants and possible congregants find the best versions of themselves. The pastors make it clear to Barack that anyone can step in and make a difference in someone's life—and indeed, asking Barack about his faith is likely their way of trying to help Barack be a better person.

Reverend Wright explains that he's trying to build a new sanctuary and is arguing with the bankers—they think the church will collapse if he dies, so they want him to take out another life insurance policy. But Reverend Wright explains that the bankers are wrong. The congregation will pull together even if he's not around. He shares some of his history and Barack realizes that it's Reverend Wright's ability to reconcile "the conflicting strains of Black experience" that makes the church successful. The church has 4000 members and a variety of clubs. Reverend Wright says that young men like Barack are the hardest to reach, as they think going to church makes them look weak. This makes Barack uncomfortable.

When Reverend Wright talks about the bankers' fears, he implies that the bankers think of Wright much like they think of Harold Washington—a unifying figure with no clear successor, which makes the durability of their work a bit tenuous. This isn't an entirely misguided way of thinking, but Reverend Wright has more faith in his congregation's love of God than the bankers do. Because of that, Wright believes that he's simply around to facilitate his congregants' spiritual education; he isn't the reason that their community exists.

Barack shares his goals and Reverend Wright promises to help. But he says his involvement might not be helpful; many other pastors don't appreciate Trinity, either for being too emotional or radical. Barack interjects that many think "the church is too upwardly mobile," which Reverend Wright says is nonsense. He calls out the people who think that former gangsters or Muslims don't belong in a Christian churches, and those who think churches who focus on education are suspect. He points out that cops don't check how much money he has when they pull him over and that this country is never safe for Black men, no matter where they are.

As far as Reverend Wright is concerned, everyone who wants to be in a church belongs there. It's a failure on the part of a church, he suggests, to turn away people who are looking for community or help simply because they come from a different faith or have led a harder life. The way that Reverend Wright responds to Barack opens up the possibility that exclusionary practices of other churches might be contributing to the crumbling communities in Chicago.

In the parking lot, Barack flips through a brochure detailing Trinity's "Black Value System." He comes to a commandment insisting that members refuse to pursue "middleclassness." It says that while it's fine to *be* middle class, it's not okay to achieve success and think of oneself as better than others. Barack thinks of this often in the coming weeks. He sees that while there are lots of teachers and secretaries in the congregation and while most of the church's funds go to helping the poor, there are lots of Black professionals at Trinity. All of them, however, came to Trinity to find themselves and a sense of belonging. Barack also sees that due to the different socioeconomic statuses of the congregation, the congregation becomes more unified in their Black identities.

Through reading the church's value system, Barack discovers that Reverend Wright is fighting the exact same fight that he is. They both want to try to keep Black people in the city so that the Black community can continue to improve and get stronger. The testimonies of the Black professionals in the congregation help Barack see the results of having such a socioeconomically diverse congregation: everyone gets to learn from someone different, which binds people from different backgrounds together as Black people.

Despite all this, Barack still wonders whether this kind of church will keep people from fleeing the city or keep young men out of jail. Sometimes he asks congregants these questions. Inevitably, they tell him he has good ideas and invite him to join the church so they can start a community program. But as Barack doubts his own faith, he shrugs these offers off.

The congregants who invite Barack to join and start a community program seem to imply that as a community-wide organizer, Barack is thinking too big. If he starts smaller and focuses on this one group that's already more cohesive, he might have better results.

Harold Washington dies unexpectedly the day before Thanksgiving, mere months after winning reelection. The streets are silent and people cry. Mourners visit the body at City Hall and, soon after the funeral, Washington's loyalists meet to decide who will take his place. But it's too late: the diverse coalition that elected him shatters. Barack watches constituents harass Black aldermen for cutting a deal with white council members; later, he sees two aldermen—one white and one Black, who belong to rival factions— whispering conspiratorially in their fancy suits, hiding their smiles from the crowd. Barack throws himself into work and into preparing Johnnie to take over once Barack leaves for Harvard. His acceptance packet reminds him of Gramps's joy reading the Punahou catalog. Barack had pretended to understand Gramps's joy, but he wanted to be in Indonesia back then, running barefoot. He feels a bit like that now.

Harold Washington's death proves that while Washington himself was a charismatic, talented politician, he was a more a symbol of what Black people could do than an effective leader. After all, he failed to nurture the coalition that elected him or groom a successor, so there's no clear way to continue the work he was doing now that he's gone. Immediately after Washington's death, Barack notices that the already tenuous community ties are fraying and politicians are using their power to cut deals that don't benefit their constituents while trying to hide their actions from the gathered crowds. This makes Barack's decision to leave for Harvard even more difficult, as he's well aware that he's leaving Chicago when it really needs him. But Barack also believes that he needs to go to law school to become the leader Chicago needs.

Barack arranges a luncheon for ministers and leaders and, at the end, he announces that he's leaving. Everyone but Mary congratulates Barack; she asks why men always want more than they have. Barack walks her to her car and then returns to Will, who insists that Barack will be back. That Sunday, Barack wakes up early, puts on a suit, and goes to Trinity. Several people wave to him as he squeezes in between an elderly woman and a young family. Reverend Wright's sermon is titled "The Audacity of Hope." It's a "meditation on a fallen world" and he insists they must keep hoping. People cry out and rise. Barack realizes that the church carries the stories of Black people forward and makes them accessible. As the choir sings, the boy next to Barack offers him a tissue. He didn't realize he was crying.

Reverend Wright's sermon impresses upon Barack that the Black church isn't just about finding a community that looks like him and that faces some of the same struggles. Rather, the Black church preserves the stories of the Black struggle for freedom and dignity so that future generations can learn about them. In this way, this service brings together many of Barack's big ideas. These stories will be able to help other young people find their way as the congregants build a sense of community with each other.

CHAPTER 15

On the plane from London to Nairobi, a young British student sits next to Barack. He's traveling to South Africa to work with mining companies; the companies are short on "trained people." When Barack suggests that Black South Africans would probably love to be trained, the student notes that Black people are starving in "Godforsaken" African countries and that he tries to stay out of politics. Barack turns to his book, which is written by a Western journalist who spent a decade in Africa. The author seems to imply that the current suffering throughout Africa makes the continent's history meaningless. Barack tries to figure out why he's angry and wonders if it's due to the student's assumption that, as an American, Barack would also look poorly on Africa.

While Barack doesn't go so far as to answer his own question about why he's angry, it seems that he simply finds the stories that white people tell about Africa dehumanizing and reductive. This echoes the single disappointing paragraph he found about the Luo when he was a child, and he sees that white people don't view Africa as a continent with a rich and varied history that, despite the struggles it faces, isn't worthless. But since those white people see only the struggles of the present, the past seems less meaningful or useful.

Barack has been feeling edgy throughout his entire stay in Europe. He traveled the continent for three weeks and eventually realized that Europe is beautiful, but is possibly just a distraction from his quest to come to terms with the Old Man. He wonders if Kenya will answer his questions and fill his emptiness, as Will suggested it would. But Barack knows that he and Will both think of Africa as an idea, not a real place, and going there will change things—and he might be disappointed. Barack thinks back to a Senegalese man he met and traveled with briefly. He wonders if he idealizes the man—but he also thinks that the man offered him water and coffee, and maybe small kindnesses are all people can expect.

Now that Barack is actually on the way to Kenya, he feels more comfortable admitting outright that he wants to come to terms with his father's legacy and figure out how to place that in a wider context. However, Barack also recognizes that, as an American, he idealizes Africa to a degree—it's the place of his ancestors and it represents a land seemingly untainted by the racism that plagues the United States. However, meeting the Senegalese man impresses upon Barack that people everywhere are just people and should be celebrated as such.

The Nairobi airport is nearly empty. A guard stops to smoke with Barack and asks if he knows his nephew, who's studying in Texas. The guard seems disappointed that Barack doesn't. Barack's bag doesn't appear, so the guard goes to fetch help. He returns with a Miss Omoro, who explains that the bag went to Johannesburg and asks if Barack is related to Dr. Obama. She explains that the Old Man was a family friend and they chat for a while. Barack is amazed that she recognized his name. This is a first, and he feels as though he belongs here—even if he doesn't understand what he belongs to. Auma arrives and while Barack greets her, Miss Omoro disappears.

The guard's query if Barack knows his nephew introduces Barack to the way things work in Kenya, where family ties rule everything and where it turns out to not be that odd for someone to be able to make a connection like this. This is evidenced by the fact that Miss Omoro does recognize Barack as the Old Man's son, even though the Old Man has now been dead a number of years and Barack has never been to Kenya.

Auma's VW Beetle barely runs. Aunt Zeituni, the Old Man's sister, insists that Auma is going to sell her the car when Auma goes back to Germany, but Auma sighs. The women chat as Barack studies the city. When Auma drops Zeituni off at work, Zeituni warns her to not let Barack "get lost again." Auma explains that being "lost" refers to being gone for a long time; it's often used in reference to men who move to the West and never write or visit, like Omar. They reach Auma's apartment, which is filled with books and a collage of family photographs. The next morning, they wander through Nairobi. It's smaller than Barack expected, comprised of colonial architecture mixed with modern high-rise buildings. There are Masai women and suited bankers.

The simple idea of being "lost," as Auma defines it, drives home even more how important family and connections are in Kenya. Losing family members to the rest of the globe is something to be avoided at all costs. Similarly, Auma's collage of family photographs shows how this focus on family works on an individual scale. Even as Auma plans to go back to Germany and lives part of her life as a Western woman, she still maintains her relationships with her family and tries to keep them with her wherever she goes.

In the market, Barack finds wooden carvings just like the Old Man brought him years ago. Another merchant offers Barack a necklace for Auma and lowers the price when Auma tells the merchant that Barack is Kenyan. The old woman in the stall laughs, cuts Barack a deal for a necklace and two carvings, and then, with Auma's help translating, tells them about her life. Barack looks around at the craftspeople and marvels at what it must be like to lead such a steady life in a place where being Black isn't an issue. It's just how the world is here.

What Barack reacts to here is the idea that, in Kenya, Blackness is the norm. In the United States, Barack consistently feels like an outsider and has to watch the way he speaks and acts to fit in with white peers—but here, he doesn't have to be on guard in the same way. Rather, when the vendor identifies Barack as American, Barack realizes he might not be African enough to fit in here—but the vendor seems to accept it when Auma clarifies that Barack is Kenyan.

Barack studies the tourists who come from all over, many dressed in safari suits. He remembers laughing at tourists in Hawaii, but these don't seem funny. They seem insultingly innocent—and in that sense, more free. Barack and Auma sit down at a cafe for lunch, but two African waiters leap to serve an American family instead. One waiter brings menus when Barack waves, but then ignores them. Auma angrily stands up as the Americans receive their food. She scolds the waiter and throws a 100-shilling note at him. Outside, she says she can't go anywhere with Africans—but if she's with a German, she can get into any building. She calls Kenya the "whore of Africa." Barack tries to comfort Auma, but he knows that not all tourists come for the wildlife—they come because Kenya shamelessly re-creates the colonial era for white tourists, even though Black Kenyans govern the country.

Barack recognizes that Kenya caters to white tourists by making it seem as though white people are in control. And to a degree, this does give white tourists to Kenya a great deal of control—they bring in the tourism money, after all. This makes Auma's anger understandable, as this country is her home and she should be able to eat at a cafe. But it's also worth noting that Auma is trying to differentiate herself from her poorer countrymen in the same way that Barack and his college-educated Black friends tried to separate themselves from the Black kids who weren't fortunate enough to pursue an education.

That night, Auma drives Barack to an apartment complex. There, he meets Aunt Jane, Kezia, Bernard, and about 12 others. They feed Barack and listen politely as he talks about Hawaii and organizing in Chicago. His work in Chicago confuses them, but they're thrilled that he's going to Harvard in the fall. Jane tells Bernard to study like Barack and explains that Bernard wants to play football, but Bernard says earnestly that he plays basketball. Auma tells Barack that Jane constantly accepts people into her home even though she can't really afford it; she's not sure how many live here now. Jane raised Bernard. Barack looks around and realizes that this apartment reminds him of Altgeld. There's gossip, TV, kids, and few men.

The reactions to hearing about the organizing work in Chicago give the impression that Barack's Kenyan family has very specific ideas about what constitutes success—and their excitement that he's going to Harvard suggests that success means education and a high-powered professional job. When Barack sees the similarities between Nairobi and Altgeld, he's faced with the undeniable fact that not much changes just because he's in Africa. Some in the U.S. didn't understand his organizing work either.

As Barack and Auma leave, Jane whispers to Auma to take Barack to see Aunt Sarah, the Old Man's older sister. In the car, Auma explains that *she* won't go see Sarah, but Barack should. Sarah is disputing the Old Man's will and has been insisting that Auma, Roy, and Bernard aren't the Old Man's children. The estate probably isn't worth much and will probably just pay for the lawyers, but since the family had previously believed that the Old Man was wealthy, they still believe that, if they wait, the money will appear. Even Bernard—who is so smart—believes this and is consequently doing nothing with his life. Auma adds that Barack himself is part of the inheritance, and that Sarah wants to see him because she believes that he might have the money. Auma is exhausted. She missed Kenya when she was in Germany, but now that she's here, everyone needs her help. She wants to build a family home for everyone, but she also resents the Old Man for not building the house himself.

Auma recognizes that their family approaches life with some sense of apathy. Especially when she mentions how smart Bernard is, it starts to seem as though she doesn't see her family taking the good parts of the Old Man's legacy to heart. Like Barack (who is struggling to piece together his American upbringing with his Kenyan family), Auma is struggling to balance her German life with the family obligations in Kenya. And a major part of that struggle is the fact that she has to confront how little the Old Man did for his children. He left them alone to figure it out, with very little to guide them.

When Barack's luggage hasn't arrived after two days, Auma and Barack spend the day at the airline office and then at the airport. They finally go to the British Airways downtown office, where the secretary refuses to help. But a relative appears who knows the manager, and with his prodding, the manager arranges to have Barack's bag delivered that day. Downstairs, Barack stops at a photo of Kenyatta, Kenya's first president. Auma says that no matter what a person wants, they have to go through their family, friends, or tribe to get it. The Old Man messed up because he thought his education would allow him to bypass those relationships. Later, Barack thinks of one of Auma's stories. Their father sent Auma to buy him cigarettes, insisting the merchant would let her take them on credit because they were for Dr. Obama. The merchant laughed.

This episode helps Auma show Barack how important familial ties are in Kenya. It is, in her understanding, the only way things get done. It's telling too that she understands this, despite her Western education. This suggests that the Old Man, who didn't understand the role of family in becoming successful, may have had a very different experience in the Western world. Relating the story of trying to find him cigarettes allows her to also drive home the consequences of not properly reading the culture. It must have been embarrassing for Auma—though none of what happened was her fault.

CHAPTER 16

Bernard appears on Auma's doorstep so he can play basketball with Barack. He teases Barack about reading and scaring away women and looks doubtful when Barack says they'll run to the courts. Bernard has to walk after a quarter mile. As they shoot, Barack thinks of how generous Bernard has been. He's sweet and patient, but Barack thinks that he's old enough to be more independent and more driven. Bernard announces that in America, everyone has a car and a phone. He says it'll be easy to find work there and that he'll come work for Barack's business (a business that doesn't exist). Barack pictures the basketball courts in the U.S. Some of them are dangerous and others are idyllic. Later, they get ice cream and Barack tells Bernard that he needs to set goals and follow through, but he thinks his words must sound hollow.

Barack may have looked at Africa as an idea and the answer to all his questions and problems, but Bernard's statements about how things are in the United States make it clear that Bernard is doing the same thing with his ideas about the United States. Barack begins to realize that the grass is always greener on the other side. Given that Barack is learning so much about Kenya, however, it seems likely he'll discover that no place is actually better than the other.

Barack wonders what family is. It might be a genetic chain, a social construct, or a group of shared memories. He says that in any case, he used to draw circles around himself to delineate family, friends, colleagues, and finally race and humanity. In Africa, though, this doesn't work. He meets people everywhere who are thrilled to see the Old Man's son. Family members go out of their way to feed and spend time with him. Barack embraces this at first; it confirms what he knows about the communal culture of Africa. But as days go on, Barack thinks more about what Auma noted about Barack's good fortune and his perceived responsibility to the family. The situation in Nairobi is tough and most young people are unemployed. Barack knows he has responsibilities, but the politics he turned to in the U.S. won't help his family.

Being in Kenya challenges Barack's understanding of what family really means. Here, where family seems to literally exist everywhere, Barack finds that he needs to expand his notion of who belongs in his world. As he considers his responsibility to all of these people, though, Barack begins to recognize that he doesn't know how to effectively help them. He may understand that they need money and perceive that many believe he has money to give, but he seems to imply that he doesn't have enough to actually be useful—and, furthermore, that his attempts to make change in the United States are completely irrelevant to helping his family. This recognition is disheartening.

Barack begins to see the importance of money and half wishes he were the wealthy corporate lawyer his Kenyan family thinks he is. He notices how Auma tries to live up to expectations by saving money to fix up Granny's house in Alego and purchase land outside Nairobi, but her schedule takes her away from the family and hurts their feelings. Barack realizes that Black people's success always threatens to abandon other Black people. He is unsettled in part because he sees the same patterns play out in America *and* in Africa. No one here can tell him how to be responsible to his family or to humanity at large.

At this moment, Barack begins to see without a doubt that he can't escape systems of power or patterns of hurt just by traveling to a different continent. As different as Nairobi and Chicago might be, Barack is still forced to contend with the fact that he's moving through the world as a Black man, something that disadvantages him. As he becomes more successful, moreover, he senses that he'll be leaving others behind and that there are consequences to doing that.

Zeituni takes Barack to visit Aunt Sarah. Auma drives them most of the way, as her mechanic lives nearby. They drive to Mathare, a valley that houses a vast shantytown. Zeituni and Barack walk down alone. They enter a crude apartment building and knock on an upper-story apartment door. Sarah only speaks Luo. She wants to know why Barack took so long to visit, suggests his hosts are telling him lies, and she says that he should be caring for her. Then, in English, Sarah spits that Akumu, not Granny, is Barack's grandmother and asks why he isn't helping them. Zeituni and Sarah argue in Luo and Zeituni stands to leave. When Sarah asks, Barack gives her money.

Aunt Sarah clearly has very definite ideas about who's family and who isn't—and to her, family members who are related by blood are the only ones worthy of Barack's care and attention. This would mean that Barack shouldn't, for instance, care about Kezia, Aunt Jane, or Bernard. But Barack also sees that those other family members have showed him kindness and are helping him navigate this new world, so they matter too, even if they're not entirely blood relatives.

Zeituni drags Barack outside when Sarah invites him to stay longer. After a few minutes, Barack asks Zeituni what she and Sarah were fighting about. Zeituni sighs that she doesn't know the whole truth, but Sarah was always closer to her real mother, Akumu, while the Old Man adopted Granny as his mother after Akumu left. She says that Sarah and the Old Man were a lot alike as kids—Sarah was independent and left several husbands who were lazy or tried to abuse her. She eventually decided that the Old Man should support her, which is why she dislikes Kezia. Zeituni explains that while the Old Man was married to Ruth and visiting Kezia—who was technically still his wife—Kezia was also seeing another man. The Old Man accepted Abo and Bernard as his sons, but there's nothing to prove their paternity.

By explaining the rift between Sarah and the rest of the family, Zeituni makes it clear just how important it is in Luo culture to remain loyal to one's blood family and clearly delineate who that is. It's also important to pay attention to the fact that the rift began when Akumu left her children. The mistakes or hurts of a generation before, in this sense, still affect the present—it's still impossible to fully escape one's past. However, it's also worth noting that it seems like Sarah hasn't had an easy life; she certainly deserves compassion and help of some sort.

Barack looks around and wonders if he should feel differently about Bernard. Zeituni says that now Barack sees how the Old Man suffered. The Old Man's heart, she says, was too big. He gave to everyone who asked and took Zeituni in when she left her husband. Zeituni says that when the Old Man's luck changed, everyone forgot him. They abandoned him, and the Old Man never held that against them. Indeed, later when he was doing well again, he started helping again and told Zeituni that those men might need things more than he does. Zeituni warns Barack to not judge the Old Man too harshly, but to learn from his example: draw the line and decide who's family.

It's perhaps easy to say that Barack shouldn't feel any differently about Bernard. The Old Man accepted Bernard as a son, after all, and Aunt Jane raised him as an Obama. In this moment, then, Barack begins to realize that blood ties aren't everything—there's also the question of who takes the time to care for others. Still, though, Zeituni says it's important to decide who constitutes family and what Barack's responsibilities to those people are. That will make his life easier.

Barack remembers speaking to a woman in Chicago. As he listened to the woman's stories, he eventually realized that two of the sisters she spoke of died at birth—but she spoke about them like they grew up with her. Barack begins to feel like that as people on the street mistake him for David. Auma explains that she hasn't seen Ruth and Mark since David's funeral. After Ruth and the Old Man's bitter divorce, Ruth married a Tanzanian, changed her sons' last names, and sent them to an international school. Mark went along with it, but David insisted he was an Obama and ran away. Roy found David and David soon became the family favorite. He died while living with Roy. It broke Roy's heart, but Ruth believes the Obamas corrupted David.

Recall that David died several years ago while Barack was still working in New York. Learning David's story introduces Barack to yet more family intrigue. He begins to see that his family isn't even as simple as his father's wives and his children with them—indeed, Ruth complicated things by trying to distance her sons from the Obamas as much as possible. David's choice to return home, however, points to the idea that it's damaging to try to give up on one's heritage and one's family—especially when one's family is as supportive as the Obamas were to David.

A few days later, Auma receives an invitation for her and Barack to have lunch with Ruth and Mark. Barack insists they go. Ruth lives in an expensive neighborhood that reminds Barack of some of the wealthy Hawaiian neighborhoods. Those houses were pretty, but they always seemed lonely. Ruth says she wants to see how the other Obama son turned out and asks why Ann didn't change Barack's last name when she remarried. Barack asks Mark about his program at Stanford. Ruth alternates between talking about Mark's accomplishments and the Old Man's failures. She makes Mark show Barack their photo album and old photos of the Old Man. Barack realizes that these photos reflect what might have been had the Old Man taken him and Ann to Kenya. He realizes that Ruth isn't over the Old Man.

Notice that when Ruth refers to Barack as "the other Obama son," she essentially ignores the Old Man's other four sons (Roy, Abo, Bernard, and little George), in addition to ignoring Auma. By ignoring them, she makes it clear that she, like Sarah, sees few of the Old Man's children as legitimate and worthy of attention or any of the estate. But in realizing that Ruth isn't yet over the Old Man, Barack also sees that this is far more complicated than he initially thought. Everyone in the family is, in their own way, still grieving the Old Man's loss, and that seems to be coming out in exclusionary practices.

A week later, Barack invites Mark to lunch. Mark is more relaxed and says he's glad to be back in Kenya with family, but he doesn't ever want to live here. He says it'd be silly to be a physicist here and flatly says he's cutting himself off from his roots. He resents the Old Man for being a drunk who didn't care about his wife and children. Mark says he loves Shakespeare and Beethoven, but he's not afraid to be half Kenyan. He begins to say something about acknowledging who he really is, but he says it's too stressful. Barack pays the bill and they promise to write, both knowing they have no intention of doing so. When Barack tells Auma about this, she laughs—Ruth has the documents to prove that the Old Man is Mark's father, unlike any of the Old Man's other wives.

Mark is the only son who knows, without a doubt, who he is and who his father is—so it's safer and easier for him to reject his ancestry. (Though it's also worth noting that Barack, as another son with proof of his parentage, also shares this distinction.) Barack begins to see that, for Mark, it's exactly because he has this security that he feels comfortable rejecting Kenya and the Obama side of the family. That's not to say it isn't stressful, but Mark seems to tell himself a story that it's better to reject the Obamas than get caught up in the messy intricacies of the family.

CHAPTER 17

It takes Barack several days, but he convinces Auma to go with him on a safari. A driver named Francis takes them and several others out into the countryside. Barack thinks about Zeituni's advice to decide who is family and notices that he's getting no closer to bringing his different worlds together—if anything, his worlds are multiplying. He remembers Auma's irritation that they booked their safari tickets through an Asian-owned company. He'd lectured her on "Third World solidarity," but he sees that his simple theory has no place in Kenya, where the Indian residents are successful businesspeople, exploit the "racial caste system," and are hated because of it. And among older Kenyans, there's also the question of tribal loyalty and stereotyping. When Barack tries to push back on his aunts' stereotypes, they say he's naïve like the Old Man was.

Likely because Barack grew up outside of Kenya, he holds a somewhat flattened view of Africa that doesn't make room for the loyalties many of his family members and others throughout Africa feel. For him, the issues are bigger than tribe or country of origin—the real issues are racism, poverty, and giving people opportunity. But his family members who have lived their lives in Kenya understand that life is more complicated and some of the political rhetoric—such as the notion of Third World solidarity—that abstractly makes sense in the States does not fit the reality in Kenya. Furthermore, while his aunts' stereotyping might not be appropriate, it's impossible to ignore that different tribes face different struggles.

Francis stops the van and picks up his young teenage niece, Elizabeth. Barack and Auma greet Elizabeth and share cookies with the other passengers. Finally, they reach the Great Rift Valley. It's slow going for several hours, but they begin to pass gazelle, wildebeest, and zebras. They also pass Masai herdsmen. The Masai earned the respect of the British, something that annoys the other tribes who are ashamed of the Masai's provincial ways. Barack wonders how long the Masai can hold out.

Even as Barack rails against his aunts' insistence that loyalty to one's tribe still matters, he still recognizes just how important it is to the Masai to preserve their way of life—and just how much prejudice they face for attempting to do so, even from other Black Kenyans.

On the other side of a rise, they reach the savannah. Francis drives the van slowly through a herd of wildebeest, and Barack notices both Auma and Elizabeth smiling. They set up camp near a stream and then drive to watch animals drink at a watering hole. Over supper, Francis tells them about his life. He has a wife and children on his homestead tending coffee and corn. He'd rather farm than work for the travel agency, but the Kenyan Coffee Union shorts Kenyan farmers. Francis says he feels compelled to speak up so that maybe something will change, but he allows that it's not just the government's fault. Kenyans don't like to pay taxes and though the poor are right to be suspicious, wealthy men are selfish and want to keep their profits at the expense of everyone else.

The very fact that Francis has to supplement his preferred farming work with work for the travel agency—which primarily caters to white tourists—reinforces Auma and Barack's earlier assertion that, despite being under Black rule, Kenya still caters to the white, Western world. And for that matter, Kenya's tax issues mean that the country isn't able to finance projects that might help someone like Francis do what he wants to do instead of essentially forcing him to perform work that doesn't interest him.

Two Masai men, the night guards, arrive. Barack steps away from the fire to look at the stars and notices a hazy spot in the sky. Mr. Wilkerson, an Englishman, says that it's the Milky Way. As the days pass, Barack learns that Mr. Wilkerson grew up on a tea plantation in Kenya. His family moved to England after independence, where he went to medical school. After marrying his wife, they moved to Malawi to work with the government. They never have enough supplies, but he's not cynical. Mr. Wilkerson eventually explains that this place is his home, odd as it sounds. He knows that, ideally, Malawian doctors will take his place, and he allows that he might never to be able to call this place home—but he loves it.

Mr. Wilkerson provides Barack a very different look at the idea of home and family. Mr. Wilkerson recognizes that in order to atone for the horrors of colonialism, he can never really claim Kenya as his own—but that doesn't mean that he doesn't feel a connection with the place where he grew up. He accepts that as part of fixing the issues caused by colonialism, he needs to eventually leave to help elsewhere. Telling this story helps Mr. Wilkerson take responsibility for Britain's part in colonizing Africa and make a better future for Black Africans.

Barack is struck by the beauty and the stillness of the land and the animals. He imagines the first humans in this landscape. In the evenings, he speaks with the Masai guardsmen who are warriors and killed lions to prove their manhood. Auma asks the Masai what they believe happens to a person when they die. The Masai smile; they don't believe anything happens. Francis, who's Christian, argues with an Italian man who left the church about whether Christianity brought colonialism, but Francis insists that those white missionaries did good *and* bad things. The conversation dies and Barack looks at everyone around the fire. All of these people are courageous, and Barack thinks that courage is probably what Africa needs most.

Francis appears to see the Christian church as something akin to a person. It has the power to do good or bad, and it has the power to bring people together or destroy communities. Over the course of colonialism, it did both—but in his opinion, that doesn't mean they should write it off entirely. Rather, they should take what works from the church and use it going forward. To Barack, this looks like courage because it represents the kind of critical thought he appreciated in Chicago.

When Barack and Auma return from safari, they get word that Roy arrived early. The family plans a huge feast and when Barack and Auma arrive, Roy sits in the middle of everything. Kezia proudly introduces Roy as the head of the family and Roy introduces a plump woman, Amy, to Barack. After dinner, Roy shares that he's going to start an import-export company, selling Kenyan crafts in America. He shows Auma several woodcarvings and tells Auma what he paid for them. She's aghast that he paid so much. Roy says he also plans to marry Amy—she's an African woman and won't argue with him. He announces this to the room and pours a beer onto the floor. Auma is disgusted, but Jane rushes to clean it up.

Roy's reasoning for marrying Amy suggests that he's struggling still to adjust to life in the U.S.; wanting to marry Amy because she theoretically won't assert herself shows that, in many ways, he's still far more comfortable with traditional Kenyan ways of life. Kenyan or Luo culture might also look far preferable to Roy because of the way the family treats him, given that he's the head of the family. They shower him with attention, affection, and whatever else he wants—something he might not have gotten in the U.S.

The family goes dancing. Auma grouses to Barack that the Obama men can get away with murder—and Amy is bad news. But she suggests that the family just feels less judged around Roy than they do around her. At the club, Auma asks Amy about her marriage to Roy. Noticing that both Roy and Amy look a bit too drunk, Barack asks Zeituni if she's been to this club before. She insists she's the best dancer and the Old Man was the best partner. Once, when the Old Man was young, he took Kezia out dancing instead of doing chores for Onyango. Onyango was livid when the Old Man got home, but the Old Man put on a record and called Kezia to come dance. After a minute, Onyango called his wife, Granny, to come dance.

Auma implies here that when the family is faced with what are presumably Western sensibilities (like the notion that men shouldn't be able to get away with so much), they reject her. In this sense, because of her education and because part of her life is so firmly planted in the Western world, Auma is a bit of an outsider to the rest of the family. Hearing this fantastical story about the Old Man reminds Barack that not all the stories about his father seem plausible—but they all paint a picture of a man who contained multitudes.

The band starts playing and the family takes to the dance floor. As Barack watches Roy, he thinks back to when the Old Man taught him how to dance. Roy wears the same look of freedom and happiness that the Old Man did. Barack and Roy step outside and, as they chat, a fight breaks out. Roy stops Barack from getting involved, insisting that being in jail in Nairobi is awful. When the altercation breaks up, Roy says he was in jail the night David died. Roy had gotten in a fight with a man at a club and didn't have papers. David begged for the keys so he could go get Roy's papers. Barack assures Roy it was an accident and Roy leaps up to dance.

It becomes clear here that Roy feels responsible for David's death. Especially as the oldest child and now the head of the family, Roy is under a lot of pressure to live up to expectations—and it's possible that he feels just as much pressure as Auma does, just pressure of a different kind. The fact that Roy feels so much responsibility and pressure suggests that the Old Man may have struggled under the same kind of pressure and taught Roy that he'd one day do the same.

CHAPTER 18

Barack and most of his family board a train headed for Kisumu. He stares out the window at the track; when it was built, it was the biggest engineering effort that the British ever undertook. Upon its completion, there was no one in Kenya to ride the railway—so the British pushed white settlers to come to Kenya. Barack's grandfather, Hussein Onyango, was born in 1895, the year construction began on the railway. In the dining car, Auma and Roy explain that it'll take a day to reach Home Squared—that is, the ancestral home in the country known as Alego. They reminisce about how much fun they had in Alego with Granny and "The Terror," their grandfather. He'd hit people with a stick for not following proper British etiquette. Zeituni says that she was his favorite, but she was still afraid of him—and he'd even punish adult guests.

Taking this trip with so many family members immerses Barack in his family life in a new way, since it puts him in closer contact with family history. As they travel, he learns about his grandfather Onyango, thereby adding more information to his understanding of his family. Again, though, Auma and Roy's memories say as much about them as they do about Onyango. Onyango may have been terrifying, but they were also children facing down an imposing, exacting man. Their memories reflect that.

Zeituni explains that Onyango was nevertheless respected, as he learned British farming techniques while working as a cook and serving as a captain in the British Army during World War I. She tells the story of how once, a man with a goat asked to walk across Onyango's property. Onyango warned the man that he'd kill the goat if it ate anything—and beheaded the goat the instant it started to nibble. Auma says the family's problems started with Onyango. Onyango was the only person the Old Man feared. As Barack falls asleep, he vows to piece together Onyango's story.

Auma's suggestion that the family's issues started with Onyango introduces another layer to Barack's journey: he needs to figure out what his father's relationship was to his own father. By adding another generation of intrigue to the story, Barack begins to make the case that his male family members might have been intimidating the next generation for many years.

The train arrives in Kisumu in the morning, and the family walks to the bus depot. They take two *matatus* (minibuses) and get off at a clearing where Barack's uncles, Yusuf and Sayid, greet the travelers. Yusuf and Sayid lead them to a compound where Granny greets Barack warmly. She leads him into the house, the walls of which are covered in the Old Man's Harvard diploma and family photos. Auma points out Onyango and then a photo of the Old Man as an infant with little Sarah and their mother, Akumu. There's one photo of a dreamy white woman, whom Granny says is a Burmese woman—another of Onyango's wives.

The discovery that Onyango purportedly married a Burmese woman makes it clear that the Old Man wasn't the first to marry non-Kenyan women; again, Barack is dealing with family history, practices, and traumas that go back several generations. Seeing all the memorabilia of the Old Man in particular, though, makes it clear how much of a beloved part of the family he was, even if many family members found him trying in his idealism.

As Granny serves tea, she explains that she and Yusuf couldn't work the land all by themselves, so she's given some land away and sells lunches to school kids to make up for the lost income. The roof is leaky, and she hasn't heard from her son Omar in over a year. She asks Barack to ask Omar to come home if they see each other. Roy takes Barack outside to two cement tombs. One bears Hussein Onyango's name; the other, covered in yellow bathroom tiles, has no nameplate. Roy tells Barack to make sure his grave gets a name when he dies. Over the afternoon, Barack feels as though a circle of his life is starting to close. He feels at peace and as though he recognizes himself. This feeling only disappears once, when he and Granny are unable to talk. She says he shouldn't be too busy to "know his own people" and learn Luo.

Seeing that the Old Man's tomb doesn't have a nameplate impresses upon Barack that he has unfinished business here. Barack's journey is as much about honoring his father's memory as it is about figuring out who he is, and part of that would be making sure that the nameplate ends up where it should. However at home Barack feels, though, he can't forget that he grew up in the U.S. and this is all foreign to him even if he is with family. Due to his father's absence and abandonment, he doesn't have the skills to truly connect with his family.

After dinner, Roy leaves to visit friends. Yusuf brings out an old radio and, in the distance, they hear a moan. Auma jokes that it's the night runners—spirit men who take an animal's shape at night and can hex people. Zeituni scolds Auma for talking as though the night runners aren't real and tells Barack that Onyango was the only person who wasn't afraid. He once caught a huge, man-like leopard trying to kill a baby goat. Once Barack and Bernard squeeze onto a twin-size cot, Bernard asks if Barack believes in the night runners and why he came home. Barack says it was time, but he's not sure about the night runners.

The night runners represent a part of Barack's familial identity that his generation may or may not choose to accept. They speak of an earlier time, when stories of spirits held sway with more people and when the family's young people might not have dreamed of living in America or becoming high-powered professionals. Bernard's skepticism reflects the changing times and the differences between the generations.

In the morning, Sayid and Yusuf show Auma and Barack around the land. Yusuf explains that the land is good, but the people here are uneducated and stubborn, so they won't learn "proper agricultural techniques." Barack notices Sayid frowning. Yusuf turns back, but Sayid leads them along a stream. They stop next to one woman who remembers the Old Man. She tells Auma that life is hard now—young men leave the elderly, the women, and the very young here. Auma gives the woman a few shillings and, as they turn back, she asks Sayid what happened—begging like this didn't used to happen. He says that now people come back from the city and tell people here that they're poor, and poverty is a new idea out here. Granny is also poor, but she takes pride in what she does. Most others give up instead.

Barack recognizes that, in some ways, Sayid believes that people are upset about being poor because they choose to be—something that Barack saw was in no way true through his work in Chicago. By insisting that Granny is poor but still takes pride in the work that manages to support her, Sayid suggests that all rural Kenya needs is a little bit of pride and dignity in one's lot in life. While Barack might not disagree with that entirely—part of his work in Chicago was certainly about helping people recover dignity through work—Sayid also presents a view that doesn't get at the reasons why people are so poor.

Sayid notes that Yusuf doesn't work and suggests that education doesn't do much without sweat. Barack thinks that Sayid might be correct that the idea of poverty may be an import, but that doesn't make it fake—there are people who have a lot and many who have little. In this way, he sees that the situation is much the same as in Altgeld. Sayid talks about his own hope to start a business so that he doesn't have to know someone or pay a bribe to get a job. He says this was the Old Man's error, but then he insists that it's not worth it to worry about the past. He tells his sisters often to forget about the inheritance and to stop paying the lawyers, offers a saying popularized by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, and says that Africans have more in common than they like to think.

Barack begins to draw out here that while subsistence farmers and ranchers (like the traditional Luo) may have been objectively poor, it's true that they had enough—but acknowledging that doesn't also make poverty less real or impactful. It's possible that as Sayid speaks like this about poverty, it's more for his own benefit than for that of anyone else. His stories and ideas, in this sense, confirm his understanding of his world and help him make sense of his own situation.

When they return to the compound, Roy explains that he, Bernard, and Kezia are going to travel to Kendu Bay to fetch Abo and he invites Barack. Barack and Sayid pack bags and, after several hours, they reach another compound in the countryside. Roy points out their great-grandfather's grave. This is where the first Obama settled, but Kezia doesn't know why Onyango moved the family out to Alego. Outside a low house, Roy introduces Barack to a woman named Salina and then to Abo. Abo asks what Barack brought him from America. He doesn't fully hide his disappointment that the cassette player isn't a Sony. Barack thinks that Abo looks calculating, like he knows he's been wronged. He reminds Barack of the men in Chicago.

It seems to be a bit of a shock to notice that Abo looks and behaves much like the young jaded boys in Chicago. This drives home yet again that not much changes just because Barack is now on a different continent. Even with the major differences between Kenya and the United States, Barack still sees that poverty, racism, and eroding family ties can make young men less open and less willing to trust others. While Barack doesn't mention it, Abo might feel this way in part because he didn't grow up with a father figure.

Salina serves cookies as a handsome young man walks in and greets Roy excitedly. Roy introduces Billy, Salina's son and his childhood friend. Billy tells Barack that when he and Roy were young, they were wild and chased women. He asks about American women and Roy seems uncomfortable. Over dinner, Billy explains that his father and the Old Man were friends, and he and Roy often went to the other's father for advice. Roy says quietly that their fathers were good to others' children, but they didn't want to look weak in front of their own. Billy agrees and says that marriage settled him and that his wife obeys him. Sayid insists that the biggest issue in Africa is gender relationships—men try to be strong, but they mess up. They take multiple wives who become jealous, and children aren't close their fathers.

Sayid, Billy, and Roy all begin to get at the same idea: that it was their fathers' overbearing and closed relationships with their sons that wreaks havoc on their families. Along with that, Sayid suggests that men are also afraid to admit when they make mistakes, which gives them no room to show their sons how to gracefully change direction and likely leads to a lot of anxiety about messing up. But, Roy and Billy note, their fathers were still great mentors to their friends' kids—reminding readers again that one doesn't need to be a blood relation to help raise a child.

After dinner, Billy leads Barack, Abo, and Roy to a house. Inside, an old man pours everyone shots of a potent alcohol and asks for a gift from Barack. Billy waves the man off and leads Barack into a back room where Onyango's brother sits. He says, through Roy, that it's good Barack came home. Barack struggles to remember the rest of the evening. They drink for hours until Sayid leads Barack and Bernard out. Barack meets Roy's eyes as Roy accepts another drink. Outside, Sayid says Roy is like the Old Man, who used to buy drinks for everyone. He was a good man, but he couldn't understand that he couldn't write economic policy *and* buy drinks. Sayid believes the Old Man just wanted to belong and warns Bernard to respect his elders but to learn from their mistakes.

Sayid affirms Auma's earlier assertion that Roy is shockingly like the Old Man in his habits and his concerns. This would suggest that Roy learned from his father how to be a man and internalized his father's lessons, good and bad. However, Sayid also suggests that the Old Man and Roy are right to have some of these concerns—wanting to fit in, after all, is a very normal concern. That concern, for that matter, also plagues Barack as he stares down law school—suggesting that even if Barack doesn't think of things in the same way, he also can't escape his father's legacy.

CHAPTER 19

Roy and Abo are too hung over to travel, so they stay in Kendu. Barack returns to Home Squared with Sayid and Bernard. He joins Auma, Granny, Zeituni, and an elderly woman. Auma introduces the woman as Dorsila, Onyango's sister. Zeituni brings Barack a foul potion to settle his upset stomach and reminds him that Onyango was an herbalist. Barack asks Auma to ask Granny to tell him about Onyango.

For Barack, Granny seems to hold the keys to understanding his family, as she knew both Onyango and the Old Man. However, as he listens to her story, he should still keep in mind that this isn't an unbiased account—and for that matter, Barack might take away only what's useful to him.

Granny lists the men in the family going back seven generations. Barack's great grandfather, Obama, was orphaned as a boy, worked for a wealthy family, and married their eldest daughter. He had four wives and became an elder. At this time, before white men came, families lived in compounds and men and wives each had their own huts. Everyone worked together. But Onyango was odd. He wouldn't play with other children and instead stuck his nose in everyone's business. This is how he learned to be an herbalist. The white men came while he was still a boy. Elders warned people to stay away from the white men until they knew more about them.

By insisting that Onyango was an odd figure even as a small child, Granny seems to cement the idea that it's no surprise that the Old Man and, eventually, his sons have struggled to figure out their place in the world—they're from a family that's been on the outs of society for several generations. However, Granny also makes it clear that this individuality has its uses, as Onyango's skill as an herbalist proves. Without being willing to step outside of what's normal, he wouldn't be able to help people.

Onyango disappeared and returned months later, dressed in white men's clothes. Obama decided that his son was dressed like this to hide that he'd been circumcised (which is against Luo custom) and so he disowned Onyango, leaving Onyango to return to Kisumu. There, most people found the white men to be silly and expected them to leave. Finally, the first district commissioner arrived, along with war. He imposed taxes, conscripted men, and installed chiefs in villages. During this time, Onyango worked for white men and oversaw road building, as he was literate and spoke English and Swahili. He cleared land in Kendu.

Obama disowning Onyango for going out on his own shows that a sense of abandonment by one's father has plagued the Obama men for generations—especially since Obama himself was orphaned as a young child. Onyango's ability to find success working for the English, however, shows that one can still find success despite a rocky family situation.

Africans couldn't ride the train at this time, so Onyango walked to Nairobi. There, he joined many others who, after the first World War, worked for white people. At this time, taxes increased and rural men were compelled to work on white farms. Some people tried to demonstrate against this, but it was a losing battle. With the new land laws, there was no room for sons to start their own plots. Many men began to drink—and they realized that, compared to white men, they were poor. Onyango, however, prospered. He worked in the estates of important white men, bought land and cattle, and built a house. But unlike most people, he kept his house spotless. He ate at a table, bathed constantly, and wouldn't let anyone touch his property. People found him strange, but he was generous.

Just as Barack saw poverty and racism destroy Black livelihoods in Chicago, he hears the same thing happening in Granny's story. As Black men were forced into new ways of living due to colonialism, they found that they didn't have the same opportunities or futures available to them as they once did. While this proved debilitating for some men, Onyango appears to have harnessed this new environment. By accepting Western customs and mannerisms, Onyango might have ingratiated himself with white colonists—but he alienated himself from his Black neighbors.

Onyango decided that he needed a wife, but most women couldn't keep the house to his standards. Though beating women was normal, many felt that Onyango was *too* harsh with his wives—many returned to their fathers. Finally, he found and married Helima. She stayed in Kendu while Onyango worked in Nairobi, but they discovered that she couldn't have children. This was grounds for divorce, but Onyango stayed married to her. Granny suspects that it was lonely for Helima. At one point, someone suggested that it was Onyango who was infertile. After this, Onyango set his sights on taking Akumu as a wife. Akumu was beautiful and promised to someone else, but Onyango paid a hefty price and his friends kidnapped her.

Onyango was clearly a difficult person to live with long before Auma and Roy knew him, as evidenced by his difficulties finding a wife. As he set out to build his own family, he essentially required a woman who was willing to operate in a way that she was probably not raised to expect. In essence, he asked her to give up some elements of her culture in order to be his wife, and this understandably didn't go well for him in many situations.

Granny pauses for lunch. Auma asks Granny and Dorsila if Onyango raped Akumu. Granny says it was traditional for women to play hard to get, necessitating the woman's "capture." Auma presses, but Granny and Dorsila insist it was normal to marry an older man, to not worry about love, and to put up with beatings. Auma snaps that this is why men are so awful to women. Very seriously, Granny tells Auma that she's right. Granny wonders if she'd think differently if she were young today, but back then, it was normal. Barack sees both sides, and like Auma, he feels betrayed. He realizes that he always thought of Onyango as resisting white people because he'd written Gramps an awful letter when the Old Man and Ann wanted to marry. Barack asks Granny if Onyango ever mentioned his feelings about white people.

Despite her age and her belief in the righteousness of Luo tradition, Granny is also surprisingly understanding of the fact that, as times change, people begin to look at tradition differently. Her grandchildren, she recognizes, will hear this story and think badly of their grandfather, which she doesn't necessarily want them to do. As Barack mulls over his own sense of betrayal that Onyango never resisted white occupation, he has to confront the fact that he hoped his grandfather would've taken more pride in his identity as a Black person. Instead, he sees that Onyango compromised to survive.

Granny says that Onyango was purposefully hard to read. She knows that he respected white people for their power, machines, and weapons, and that he hated that Africans wouldn't accept new ideas. But she also thinks that Onyango didn't *really* think white men were superior and even lost many jobs because he wouldn't let his white employers beat him. Onyango respected strength most of all; this is why he followed Luo traditions so strictly and rejected Christianity. He eventually converted to Islam. Onyango's hardness is why he and Akumu had so many problems.

Granny paints Onyango as a multifaceted man who was undeniably difficult and rigid, but who was also caught between two worlds. It's likely comforting to Barack to hear that Onyango refused to put up with abuse at the hands of white employers, as this is proof that, in some ways, Onyango stood up against ill treatment. But the fact remains that he was still complicit in Kenya's colonization.

Granny was 16 when she married Onyango. Akumu already had Sarah and the Old Man, and they lived with Helima in Kendu. Granny lived with Onyango in Nairobi, but she could tell that Akumu was unhappy. Akumu chafed under Onyango's demands. Helima tried to help, but Akumu was young and possibly still loved the man she was originally engaged to. Akumu tried to leave several times, but Onyango brought her back for his children's sake. During World War II, life got easier. Onyango went overseas, so his wives all lived at the compound. He returned after three years, having supposedly married the woman in Burma.

The time when Onyango is fighting overseas was, in some ways, a harbinger of what was to come: in the present, Barack's family is run by women, even if Roy is technically the head of the family—and it's far more peaceful than it ever was when the Old Man was alive. While the memoir as a whole proposes that men should be around for their children, this shows that men have to be there in an open, loving way in order to make a difference.

When Onyango was almost 50, he set his sights on returning to Alego, where his family used to live. Granny didn't resist, but both Helima and Akumu had family in Kendu and refused to go. Onyango forced them to move anyway. Having studied Western farming techniques, Onyango had a profitable farm within the year. He sold his cattle because they eroded the soil and built large huts for Akumu, Granny, and himself. He also installed an oven in the cooking hut and baked bread and cakes. His neighbors found him odd, but they came to respect him—especially since he could protect them from witchcraft. Once, he exposed a shaman as a fraud in front of the elders and then asked the shaman to show him how his potions work.

Even though Onyango embraced Western ways of dressing, farming, and keeping his home, it's telling that he still followed Luo tradition in terms of taking multiple wives, housing them in this way, and tackling shamans. Despite being overbearing and possibly self-centered, Onyango managed to walk a difficult line as he tried to figure out who he was as a Luo man and as a Black man living in a white world. This, Barack proposes, is simply what it means to be a Black man.

Akumu, however, remained proud and scornful. Onyango beat her often. Finally, when the Old Man was nine and Sarah was 12, Akumu told her children to follow her when they're older and disappeared with her new baby. Onyango was furious, but Akumu's family refused to send her back. Indeed, they had already accepted a dowry for Akumu to marry another man. Onyango told Granny that she was Sarah and the Old Man's mother, but Sarah remembered Akumu's instructions. A few weeks later, Sarah tried to take the Old Man and run away, but a woman returned them to Onyango when she realized who they were. They never tried to run away again, but Sarah remained loyal to Akumu. The Old Man pretended that Akumu didn't exist and accepted Granny wholeheartedly. He sent Akumu money later in life, but he was cold to her to the end.

Again, just as Onyango was disowned and abandoned by a parent as a child, the Old Man felt the same sense of abandonment when his mother left him. Onyango's insistence that his children accept Granny as their mother without a fight may have contributed to some of the Old Man's issues with Onyango later in life—it may have seemed to the Old Man as though his father didn't understand how traumatic it was to be abandoned.

Onyango was very strict with his children. Granny let the kids run wild while Onyango was gone, but she would scrub them before he returned. The Old Man was a trying child; he did whatever he wanted behind his father's back. He also learned quickly, even as a toddler. Sarah did too, but this didn't concern Onyango—he didn't care about educating women. This caused a rift between Sarah and the Old Man, especially since the Old Man didn't take school seriously. He was so smart that he didn't need to study—and when he grew older, he started only going to school for exams. He was usually at the top of the class and boasted about it often, but he also helped his friends. As an adult, when the Old Man reminded his school friends of this, it made them angry.

Though Granny doesn't get into it, it's possible that Sarah felt betrayed by Onyango for a whole host of reasons—and since Onyango seemed to favor the Old Man in terms of educating his children, Sarah then moved some of her anger to her brother. This may explain why Sarah feels in the present like she deserves something from Barack and from the Old Man's estate; she may believe that the Old Man is somehow responsible for her not getting an education. The Old Man's behavior with his friends suggests that he may not have been skilled at helping his community.

In the years after World War II, things began to change. Kenyans who fought in the war saw Black Americans flying planes and performing surgery, which led them to agitate for independence. Luo men began to organize with the oppressed Kikuyu tribe. Onyango was skeptical of independence and believed that Black men wouldn't win. Though he believed that white men were unintelligent and thoughtless, he recognized that they worked together—while Black men simply believed themselves to be superior. Onyango was detained once and when he returned, matted and dirty, Granny saw that he was an old man. The Old Man only learned about this later, as he was busy causing trouble at school. Onyango beat the Old Man when he found out about his son's antics and arranged for him to work as a clerk on the coast.

Independence might seem to threaten Onyango's way of life, as he's only as successful as he is because he's cooperated so fully with the white colonists. This might not change his thoughts on the respective qualities of Black and white people, but he may believe it's better to think himself intelligent and actually be successful than to fail. His choice to beat the Old Man for acting out at school suggests that Onyango wants his family members to best reflect how Onyango thinks of himself. If the Old Man looks rude and wild, it won't make Onyango look good—showing that family ties rule, even at this time.

The Old Man took the job but quit. Too proud to ask for help, he took another job that didn't pay as much. Onyango scolded his son and sent him away, ashamed. Onyango later refused to bail the Old Man out of jail, though the authorities let him out after a few days. At this time, the Old Man was already married to Kezia, who soon had Roy and Auma. Finally, the Old Man met two Americans. They noticed how smart he was and offered to help him get into an American university. Though this made Onyango happy, he couldn't pay the university fees. The Old Man wrote letters to American universities. One in Hawaii accepted him.

Though Granny characterizes the Old Man as being too proud to ask his father for help, it's also very likely that the Old Man knew that his father wouldn't be pleased and was simply trying to save face. Given how Onyango has treated the Old Man thus far, this makes sense and begins to illuminate how the Old Man's relationship with his father soured and drove him to secrecy.

The Old Man left Kezia, Roy, and Auma with Granny and disappeared. Two years later, he wrote that he wanted to marry Ann. Onyango disapproved of the marriage because white women don't understand Luo customs, but the Old Man married Ann anyway. Onyango correctly predicted that the Old Man would return to Kenya alone, though Ruth showed up soon after. Even though Ruth and the Old Man got married, Ruth wouldn't accept Kezia. Onyango taunted his son about this for the rest of his life. As the Old Man fell from power, he tried to hide it from his father. Granny gave the Old Man what she believes he needed most: someone to listen to him. The Old Man behaved with his children just like Onyango did. He knew he was pushing them away, but he didn't know how to fix it.

Again, as the story progresses, Granny makes it clear that Onyango didn't do his son any favors or do much to foster a more loving, generous relationship between them. Whenever he had the opportunity, he picked at the Old Man's perceived flaws or mistakes, something that must have been hard for the Old Man to handle. But in spite of certainly being unhappy with his relationship with his father, Granny notes that the Old Man simply repeated the cycle with his own children. In this way, Barack realized that these ways of dealing with one's children are learned—and it's essential to break the cycle of silence and impossibly high expectations.

The story complete, everyone troops into the house. At Barack's request, Granny brings out a leather trunk and hands Barack a small book and some papers. Auma and Barack study the book, a register for domestic servants. It gives the rules for domestic servants and lists Onyango's employers. The papers are the Old Man's letters to American universities, asking for applications. Barack thinks that these items are his inheritance. He goes outside, stands in front of the graves, and sees Granny's stories come to life. He thinks of Onyango and of his father, both trying to figure out how to make it in the world. Barack realizes that the Old Man almost succeeded in escaping Onyango's shame.

Both the register and the Old Man's letters tell the stories of men trying to make it in a new world ruled by white people. In this sense, Barack begins to realize that his inheritance, so to say, is to have to continue their struggle as he too attempts to figure out how to be a Black man in a white world. And possibly, because Barack doesn't have his father around to shame him or to live up to, he may have more room to negotiate with this inheritance and come to a healthier relationship with his brothers and his future children.

Crying, Barack thinks that the Old Man didn't need to be ashamed and confused—his only crime was staying silent. Barack thinks that if only his ancestors had spoken to each other honestly about the changing times, they might have been able to focus more on the happy parts of life. Barack feels as though all the parts of his life are connected to this plot of land. He feels connected to his father's pain and as though he's asking the same questions as his brothers. It begins to rain and Bernard arrives with an umbrella.

The realization that the real enemy is silence impresses upon Barack that the same ideas govern building communities as govern building families. Had his ancestors been more open and honest about their struggles, their sons might have known that it's okay to not know how to make it in the world. As Barack realizes this, he undergoes his final coming of age moment.

EPILOGUE

Barack stayed in Kenya for two weeks after that day. Before leaving, Barack and Auma decided to go see George, the Old Man's last child. Zeituni drove them to a school and led a little boy over to them. Barack realized right away they'd made a mistake—he remembered his own fear when he first met the Old Man and had to confront that he was part of something bigger. That night, Auma took Barack to a friend of the Old Man's, Dr. Rukia Odero. She was thrilled that Barack was leaving Kenya with questions and lamented that Black Americans romanticize Africa, just as young Africans romanticize America.

Because Barack now understands how much there is to sift through when it comes to his family, he recognizes that showing up out of the blue is a lot to put on little George. Barack suspects that George is happy in a life that presumably includes his mother and stories of his father—and Barack remembers how frightening it was to have his own stories of the Old Man come to life before his eyes when he was a child. But because they're family, Barack and his siblings will be there for George when George is ready.

When Barack asked why many Black Americans are disappointed by visiting Africa, Rukia pointed out that they come looking for "the authentic"—but that doesn't exist. For instance, their spices are from India and Kenyans love their tea, which is British. Rukia said that Black Americans' desires are understandable—Europeans have historically treated everyone horribly, so the idea of pre-European Africa is exciting. Rukia suggested that the only way forward is to learn the truth and to look objectively at history and customs. To her, it's necessary to try lots of things and choose what works. But still, Rukia feels connected to Africa and the culture. She laughed when she acknowledged that her daughter's first language is English, and she emphasized that she is more interested in having a daughter who's true to herself than who's authentically African.

Rukia essentially suggests that it's fruitless to try to think of Africa as an idyllic place unaffected by racism or globalization. Rather, what's more important is to cultivate one's own individual identity. This may well include traveling to Africa and experiencing the culture of one's ancestors, but Rukia encourages Barack to understand that even that is just a small part of who he is. By mentioning her daughter, Rukia also demonstrates how Black parents can guide their children toward adulthood. They can be open and accepting of who their children are—even if they're not who their parents expect.

It's been six years since Barack went to Kenya for the first time. At Harvard, Barack discovered that law can be disappointing—it seemed, at times, to just explain why some people have power and others don't. But Barack sees that the law is also the nation's memory. The law details who is part of the community and how people turn power into justice. Though Barack has faith in this process, it's hard to sustain the faith—returning to Chicago, he found things in a worse state than when he left. In his legal practice, Barack works with community groups and occasionally takes discrimination cases.

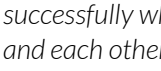
After attending law school, Barack comes to understand that the law—comprised of court cases, personalities, and stories of how court rulings impact people in society—tells its own story about the United States. But it's also easier to see this story if one takes a long view; working as a lawyer, it might not be as apparent to Barack that he's a part of that story.

Barack believes that he's more patient now, mostly thanks to his wife, Michelle. She grew up on the South Side of Chicago and reminds Barack of Toot. After they get engaged, Barack took Michelle to Kenya. Everyone loved her. But life in Kenya seemed more difficult; Sarah and Kezia still weren't speaking, and Bernard, Abo, and Sayid were still unemployed. Billy died of AIDS not long after their visit. Despite the deaths of Michelle's father and Gramps, Michelle and Barack proceed with their wedding at Trinity, which is officiated by by Reverend Wright. Everyone from Barack's past is there, from Johnnie and Scott to Angela, Shirley, Mona, and Auma.

As Barack gets married, he stares down the fact that he'll have to make some of the same decisions that Onyango and the Old Man made before him—how to engage with Michelle, how to engage with his children, and how to engage with the wider world around him. The vast number of people from all parts of his life who attend the wedding suggest that Barack has every intention of continuing to cultivate a diverse community around himself and his family.

Roy, however, makes Barack the proudest. He now goes by Abongo, has converted to Islam, and plans to move to Kenya and start a business when he has enough money. He still scolds Auma for her "European ways," but he's becoming more comfortable as a Black man—and his laughter is still magical. Abongo looks dignified and acts the part of the older brother at the wedding. Near the end of the reception, Barack sees him with his arms slung around Toot and Ann. He tells Barack that he has two new mothers now, and Toot says she has a new son. They drink to those who aren't with them and dribble their drinks onto the floor.

Now that Abongo is more sure of himself and where he stands within the family, it no longer reads as a stunt to pour out a little alcohol for his ancestors. And drawing Toot and Ann into the tradition helps cement the idea that, although Barack got married, Abongo now has new individuals to think of as family. With this, Barack proposes finally that families and communities are always growing and reinventing themselves, and they can do so more successfully when members are open and honest with themselves and each other.



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