

Penguin



Readers

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF

MICHELLE OBAMA



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CHAPTER ONE

The Robinson family

“I wake up in a house . . . Slaves built it. I watch my daughters – two beautiful, intelligent, black young women – go to school, waving goodbye to their father, the President of the United States, the son of a man from Kenya.”

Michelle Obama

In 1850, a little girl called Melvinia was living in South Carolina, in the south east of the United States of America. Melvinia was six years old and she was a slave. Slaves did not have **free** lives. They worked for no money on plantations. These were enormous farms in the south of the USA.

Rich farmers owned the plantations and grew plants like sugar. They sold sugar to people in the north of the USA and other countries. But it was hard work to grow sugar, and the farmers needed a lot of people to work on their plantations.

Then some men started bringing slaves from Africa. They took men, women and children from

their homes and put them on ships for America. When they got to America, the men sold them for a lot of money to the plantation farmers.

The slave ships were really terrible and the journey was long and hard. The men on the ships kept many slaves together and they could not move. The slaves were very frightened and they did not have enough to eat. Many slaves became ill and died. Sometimes the men hit them and threw them into the sea.

The first slaves came to Jamestown, Virginia, on a Dutch ship in 1619. In the next 200 years,



about 600,000 more slaves followed. Their life on the plantations was often very difficult. Some farmers were kind to their slaves, but many others did horrible things. They took children away from their parents, and sold them to other plantation farmers. For many farmers, their slaves were not like people, but like farm animals or things. The **laws** about slaves were very hard. Slaves could not leave their plantations.

A farmer called David Patterson owned Melvinia and twenty other slaves. Melvinia had to work very hard on Patterson's plantation. She did not go to school, and she could not read or write. After Patterson died in 1852, Melvinia went to work for his daughter, Christianne, and her husband.



They owned a plantation in Georgia, hundreds of miles away from Patterson's plantation in South Carolina. On Christianne's plantation, Melvinia was one of only three slaves. She was still only eight years old, but she had lots of things to do. She gave food to the cows, and **looked after** the sheep and plants. In 1859, when Melvinia was about fifteen, she had a baby. She called him Dolphus. Later, she had three more children on the plantation in Georgia.

In 1863, things began to change for African-American slaves in the United States. Abraham Lincoln, the president at that time, made a new law and after that, some slaves had free lives. Most of them **had to continue** working on the plantations, but now the farmers had to pay them. So Melvinia continued working on the farm in Georgia.

When she was in her thirties or forties, Melvinia went to find her old friends on the plantation in South Carolina. She came back to Kingston in Georgia with some of them and worked as a midwife, helping women to have babies.

Melvinia became a very important person in the **community** because of her job. She **shared** a home in Kingston with her adult children and also looked after her four grandchildren. Later, her son Dolphus married and started a family. Many years later, Dolphus's **great-great-grandchildren** went to live in Chicago.

The story of Melvinia's life was not very different from many other slave girls in America in the 1800s. But the life of her great-great-great-granddaughter has been **extraordinary**.



Michelle LaVaughn Robinson was born in the South Side of Chicago, Illinois, USA, on 17th January 1964. When Michelle was a child, she had a happy life. Her parents, Fraser and Marian, had ordinary jobs. Fraser worked for the city's **public services**, and Marian was a secretary for a clothes **firm**. Michelle's brother, Craig, was two years older than her. The family did not have much money, so their apartment had only one bedroom. Michelle and Craig shared the living room, but they made it into two rooms by putting a bed sheet in the centre.

The children were very lucky because their parents understood that **education** was very important. When she was a child, Marian wanted to be a children's doctor, but she never had the **opportunity** to go to college. She was from a large family and both her parents had to work hard. Her dad painted houses and her mum was a nurse. Marian wanted Craig and Michelle to have a good education, and taught them a lot at home. This gave Michelle and Craig a strong start in life, and both children could read when they were four.