

Michelle by Beulah Gross

As I wait for the door to open I remember the last time I saw her. She was only three years old, an exquisite child with large, liquid black eyes. I loved her as if she were my own daughter. Then my sister took her to England and now, fifteen years later, I am going to see her again.

My sister is nervous. 'Are you sure you want to see her? I want you to like her, but if you don't I'll understand. She's so loving. I hope she's in a good mood today.'

I don't know what to expect and steel myself for the worst. I'll pretend if necessary, for my sister's sake, and I pray I'll be up to it.

'It's only for the weekend,' I tell myself.

The door opens and there she is, unchanged except in size. She is still beautiful and the same lovely eyes look at me solemnly.

'Say hello to Auntie Bee, Michelle,' my sister says gently.

'Hello,' Michelle says obediently. 'Aren't you going to kiss me?' she asks.

'Of course!' I lean forward to peck her on the cheek but she grabs my upper arms and fastens her mouth wetly against mine. Her fingers are like pincers and I know I'll have bruises tomorrow.

'I love you,' she announces. My sister nudges me and I hastily reply, 'I love you too, Michelle.'

'Good.' She releases me and seizes her mother's hand. 'Come and see my suitcase. It's all packed.'

I follow them slowly. I must see where and how she lives, meet her teachers and warders, her companions. Oh God, that poor, gibbering little boy with his face covered in snot and dribble! I almost cry out loud but somehow manage not to. I hide my turmoil and hurry after Michelle and my sister.

I must see everything. I have to be able to report every detail to my parents who never have and never will accept the truth. Michelle is a slow five-year old trapped forever in an adult body. I resolve to edit what I tell them and even lie if I have to.

We drive to London and in the close proximity of my sister's flat I learn more about this child, my beloved niece.

She is pathologically neat and tidy, and sorts everything in my handbag and suitcase, her mother's wardrobe and on the bathroom shelf into an order that pleases her. What she doesn't like is thrown away.

She is clumsy, ungainly and gawky. Her elbows fly out at odd angles, she bumps into things, knocks others over, trips. She becomes inordinately upset if she drops or spills anything and needs extensive pacifying; she laughs uproariously if someone else has an accident. Her fingers hold things tightly and it seems difficult for her to let go.

Sudden, sharp noises or reprimands cause instant tears and sulkiness but, ever the child, she is easily distracted. Michelle needs constant supervision and she is very demanding. Is she capable of sensing our guilt because we are normal, because we're going to take her back to the hostel tomorrow? Will she feel abandoned? Does she play on our feelings? Who can say? Who will ever know? Everything about her is so basic.

From the balcony I watch her playing with other children in the garden. She is bossy but they are gentle and caring and I'm satisfied that it is safe to leave her with six and eight year olds. They will make sure she doesn't wander.

How heart-rending it is to see her playing with a teddy-bear or running after a ball with her awkward gait. How heart-warming to see the small Jamaican child lead her across the road to the ice-cream van.

Michelle sits on the grass in silence, doing nothing, just staring into space. I wonder what she thinks of. Does she think anything? Is anything there?

Suddenly she sees me on the balcony. A lamp is switched on in her eyes - a spark of animation, reminiscent of intelligence but as her smile fades the spark dies. She is empty once more.

Michelle uses quaint, old-fashioned phrases such as 'bone idle' and 'he's a real trial to me', but we dare not laugh. She has no sense of humour. Her speech, otherwise, is limited and of course childish. She is repetitious in the extreme, asking the same questions incessantly. My sister is unbelievably patient with her; I am soon almost at screaming point but somehow manage to maintain control. 'Hang on,' I tell myself. 'The weekend is almost over.' I feel cheap and nasty. I'm learning something about myself that I definitely don't like. I will have to analyse it but know I will put it off as long as possible.

I pretend all the time and must be doing better than I think because my sister whispers, 'I'm so glad you're getting on with Michelle. I was worried you wouldn't be able to cope.'

We take her to Covent Garden. It is noisy, crowded, alive, and Michelle is enchanted, especially the loud music and the street dancing. She talks to everyone who takes her fancy,

especially men. When a five-year old girl is arch and coquettish, it is cute and amusing, but in a large, apparently grown-up girl it is not. Most people, especially men, misunderstand. I am terrified for her. One of us keeps hold of her constantly but after the first time I avoid her hand, preferring to clutch her arm. Her palms are as heavily calloused as a navvy's from the hours she spends hanging onto the ropes of the swings at the hostel.

She finds a stall selling velvet things and hugs an expensive cushion fondly. My sister says that Michelle is besotted about velvet and only when I promise to send a similar cushion to the hostel for her does she relinquish the one she's holding.

People look askance at this large girl dressed in an 'Alice in Wonderland' pinafore and blouse but how else does one dress someone like Michelle? In any case, she has definite tastes and preferences and if thwarted will tear or cut up her clothing into tiny bits. She is exceptionally strong and when crossed becomes destructive.

My feelings about this child are confused. I feel love, sorrow and helplessness but today I am mainly angry because of the rude stares and sniggers we encounter. How strange it is that black people don't laugh at her or avoid her. They are kind and patient and accepting. I wonder why.

I think to myself, Thank God, Michelle doesn't seem to understand or even be aware of the tittering. But I'm wrong.

A particularly loud punk points and laughs vulgarly. She turns to me.

'Why is he laughing at me, Auntie Bee?'

That is when I cry.

Michelle

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Posted on the CHOL 'Share Your Stories' website in October, 2025