

# A Moral Murder

*Other Tales From The Blue Hills*

*By*

*Sangeetha Shinde Tee*

ISBN: 978-81-920202-0-4

**INKWELL  
PUBLISHING**

## The Story of Michelle

**N**o one knew what became of her, but everyone agreed that Michelle had been a heartbreaker. Men had flocked to her; her height, light eyes and pale skin attracting admirers from beyond the little Anglo-Indian coterie that lived in the tiny hill town of Coonoor. Her mother had been very strict with her, allowing her none of the freedom that was part and parcel of the community that hovered on being English, but not quite, years after the British had packed up and left for home. Michelle's mother and her Nana had stored all their hopes in Michelle, for they knew that she would be the one to attract the attentions of an Englishman, ensuring their place in society and a passage to the land they felt they truly belonged to.

Michelle's mother had finally married a humble railway worker when she was thirty years old, after waiting for better offers to come her way. Her husband, Michelle's father, was as dark skinned as a native – it was Nana's constant complaint and she never let him forget it. The day she died, Michelle's father was found at a wine shop in the Coonoor market celebrating his release from his mother-in-law, who had lived in his home after he had married her daughter.

Michelle came as a complete surprise to her mother and father. Both parents were remarkably ordinary looking, and it was a shock when the nurse in the local Government hospital handed them a brown-haired-baby girl with piercing green eyes. It was evident to anyone who saw Michelle, even when she was a day old, that she would grow up to be an absolute beauty. Thus her grooming for the fine life ahead of her began from the moment she was taken home wrapped up in ancient flannels, fitted with brand new booties and a cap knitted for her by her doting grandmother.

As soon as Michelle was laid upon the large old teak cot in the small, gloomy room she was to call home, she opened

her mouth and cried. She didn't stop. For weeks and weeks all she did was cry. The only time she was quiet was when she was feeding and when she fell asleep, the latter usually following the former. As a result, Michelle's mother fed her far more than was needed and Michelle grew to be an exceptionally healthy toddler.

It was deemed that the spicy local food was not to be fed to Michelle. After all, she was being prepared for life as a fine lady in England and not for a dreary existence in India. The little girl was brought up on a diet of succulent pies and delicately flavoured stews, which she consumed with a vigorous appetite. At two, she was as big as a four-year-old with strong bones and the strength to match.

It was soon after her second birthday that things began to go wrong, certainly for Michelle's parents and Nana, if not for the toddler herself. It began when Michelle's mother was out hanging the washing for the day – she came back and found her daughter missing. A frantic search revealed that she wasn't in any of the three small, dingy rooms that made up their little row house in Alwarpet. Michelle's mother threw open the front door and rushed out into the little cemented space to scream for help. The sight over the

dividing wall of the neighbouring house stopped her in her tracks. There sat Michelle, smiling blissfully, stuffing handfuls of *sambhar* and rice into her rosy mouth. The neighbour's five-year-old boy was attempting to feed her as well and was getting most of it over the snowy white polyester dress the little girl had on. Michelle's mother stood rooted, staring aghast at the sight of her daughter feasting on native delicacies.

Relief that she was safe was swiftly replaced with horror. Not at the possibilities of what could have happened, but horror that her beautiful daughter was sitting in such close proximity to the neighbour's son, being defiled by his very presence. Anger and desperation lent wings to her feet and in seconds she was in the neighbour's front yard, scooping up her daughter and rushing her back to the safety of their home. As soon as they entered she sat Michelle down on the big bed in the front room. A large statue of the Virgin Mary looked down upon them kindly. Michelle's mother uttered a quick prayer to the benign-looking clay figure, asking that Michelle be protected from further such temptations. She then sat down on the floor in front of Michelle and very sternly gave her daughter a telling off.

“Now, my girl, you cannot go and play with these Indian children. They will teach you all manner of bad things. *You* must learn to be a lady and eat with a fork and knife so that when you go to England you can be a lady there.”

Michelle stared at her mother with her great big solemn green eyes. She was enchanting and her mother could not be angry at her much longer. She pulled her daughter onto her knees and rocked her gently, crooning to her, telling her how beautiful she was and how she would one day live in England with all the fine things that she would experience there. Michelle, her stomach full of *sambhar* and rice, burped gently and fell asleep in her mother’s lap.

Six months later as Michelle was sitting before the TV watching *My Fair Lady*, something she was subjected to constantly as part of her training, her Nana looked up from the onions she was peeling and remarked cautiously, “Has Michelle started speaking yet?”

Michelle’s mother looked at her daughter, staring earnestly at the screen, and defensively replied, “She laughs and cries. She’ll be talking soon.”

Her confident tone, however, was a mask that hid the anxiety that had been growing within her for several

months now. For all her remarkable features, Michelle's mental faculties did not seem to be developing at the same rate as her physical body. She was a placid child and seemed not to react to very much. Food, however, evoked an immediate response. At the sight or smell of food, Michelle would smile radiantly and crawl or stumbly walk across to the source of the attraction and put out her hand engagingly, her heart-shaped face bearing the most beautiful but vacant of smiles. Her mother, however, did not breathe a word about her fears to anyone and, as if by tacit agreement, no one else mentioned it either. Certainly Michelle led a charmed life as a result. Visitors to the home, the rare ones from the Anglo-Indian community who were deemed fit to associate with the little princess, were entranced by her milky skin, vivid green eyes and the curling brown hair that fell to her shoulders now.

The years flew by and before Michelle's mother knew it, the little girl was ready for school. She had begun to speak, much to her family's relief, but it was a slow drawling talk, reminiscent of a child much younger. Her physical perfection was deemed to be the antidote for these minor flaws, however; her parents were convinced their daughter

would shine wherever she went, which was not to be any of the local schools in Coonoor. After much discussion, they took a loan from the bank, putting their little three-roomed house up as collateral, and Michelle was thus admitted into a feeder school for the District's most prestigious private school.

Michelle trotted off to school gaily enough on her first day, and her mother saw the fact that she did not scream and cry like the other children leaving home for the first time as another sign of the greatness that was destined for her daughter. She waited the whole day for her daughter to return, and was at Bedford Circle half an hour before the school bus was due to arrive, bringing her daughter back.

Bedford Circle was bustling as usual, with traffic and roadside vendors, stray dogs and loiterers, and all manner of people who were weaving in and out, going about their daily routine. Michelle's mother wondered if she should step into the popular Alankar Bakery to buy her daughter some of the apple cakes that the establishment was famous for, but decided against it. After all, with the loan and other expenses, money was fairly tight these days at the little row

house in Alwarpet. She nodded courteously at the people she knew and then there was the bus taking the corner.

As soon as it stopped, Michelle was off it and, tearing down the short distance, she flung herself into her mother's arms. After she had been checked over thoroughly to make sure no damage had been sustained to her perfect little body, her mother took her hand and led her down the steep slope towards her home. Judging by Michelle's cheerful countenance, the day had gone well and her mother breathed an inward sigh of relief. When she unpacked the little girl's bag, however, she found a different lunch box than the one she had originally packed. This one was yellow, quite common, and the traces of a south Indian meal, some bits of *dosa* and *chutney*, were all too evident.

Michelle was summoned and appeared in the back kitchen beaming.

"What is this? Whose lunchbox have you brought back?" her mother said.

Michelle responded with a guarded glance and a closed off expression. "Michelle not do it," she lisped glibly.

"Tomorrow, my girl," her mother replied, sighing, "You must return this lunchbox and get your own back."

Michelle nodded in understanding and returned to fiddle with the ancient TV.

However, every day was a repeat of the first. Michelle would return with someone else's lunchbox that always had the remnants of a spicy meal in it. Questioning Michelle shed no light on the situation. And everyone in her doting household was convinced that the child was being bullied in school to give up her delicate sandwiches and pies in exchange for the dreadful food that the other children were given from their homes. After a month of the incident repeating itself, Michelle's mother decided to make a trip to the school.

She met Michelle's class teacher, an ancient Anglo-Indian lady who considered herself a cut above the rest of her own community owing to the fact that her husband, now long dead, had been a decorated army officer. She loftily informed Michelle's mother that her daughter was, in fact, the one who used her superior physical strength to force the lunch boxes out of her classmates' possession and gave her own sandwiches away to anyone who was happy to have them. For the first time ever Michelle's mother's hands itched to slap her beautiful daughter's face.

That evening pandemonium reigned in the little house. Michelle's mother accused her husband, claiming his native genes were the cause of her daughter's cravings for Indian food. Michelle's Nana rocked back and forth spurring her daughter on. Michelle's father shouted back, slurring over his words, claiming that his wife was nothing more than a pretentious Anglo-Indian upstart and that Michelle's inability to speak properly resulted from defective genes from her mother's side of the family. The battle raged though the entire evening and through it all Michelle sat serenely in front of the TV. No one noticed she was avidly watching an old Tamil film with rapt attention, the Gods and Goddesses on screen appealing to her far more than the polite ramblings of Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn. She turned off the TV once the movie was over, unconcerned by the turmoil around her. She got into bed, still fully clothed and went to sleep peacefully, a little smile on her face.

The next morning, it was decided that Michelle would discontinue her studies at the exclusive feeder school and study closer to home where a closer eye could be kept on her activities. There was no question of the feeder school returning the fees for the year, and the household was even

more impoverished as a result. Michelle was admitted a week later into Mountain Home, a school that a large number of Anglo-Indian children attended.

Every afternoon, Michelle's Nana would make the long journey from Bedford Circle to the Lower Coonoor bus stand. From there she would wind her way through the crowded, pot-holed road, past the railway crossing and up through Mount Pleasant till she reached Michelle's new school. There she would unwrap the delicate cucumber and tomato sandwiches and the salads, and make sure Michelle consumed every last crumb. She then made the long trek back, stopping along the way to chat with the many friends she had at the Lower Coonoor market.

Michelle seemed to fit nicely enough into the new environment. It was her mother's greatest pride that she seemed to fit in anywhere. She gloated over her daughter's adaptability to her friends and relatives, all of who smiled and agreed with her, but behind her back commented on Michelle's intellectual capabilities rather disparagingly. In their defence, it had to be said Michelle did not shine at school, that she was a slow learner and the despair of her teachers.

Years went by and Michelle grew even prettier. By the time she was fifteen, she was a tall, statuesque figure and the envy of many of her schoolmates. The local male population could not keep their eyes off her and she was constantly receiving offers through her friends to meet for coffee with some love-struck local Lothario. Not that she ever paid much attention to her numerous conquests.

She sailed through life faring badly in school, scraping through from class to class, relying more on her charm than her aptitude to pass her exams. In fact, it was often said later that the chemistry master, who himself was attracted to Michelle, helped her cheat her way through the board exams. Throughout her school years, her friends were mainly the Hindu girls in her class. If Michelle's mother had known she would have keeled over immediately, for from them Michelle begged and received all manner of spicy delicacies.

The only other thing besides food that truly interested her and kept her mind occupied for hours was the times she went for walks with her friends to the local temple at Mount Pleasant during the short twenty minute break each morning between classes.

She would gaze with wondering eyes at the big white walls with their red stripes, and the chanting that came from within held a strange fascination for her. She had never ventured inside the place. But at home before she fell asleep, she would spend hours imagining what it would be like to enter those sacred walls and to be a part of its rituals.

A little after her fifteenth birthday Michelle's Nana died. While Michelle's mother cried and beat her chest in sorrow, and while Michelle's father made merry with drink and his mates down at the Lower Coonoor wine store, Michelle rejoiced inwardly at the end of the policing that had so marked her days. Michelle's mother could not afford to leave her poorly paid job as an administrative assistant in the office of a chartered accountant, especially as Michelle's father was now drinking away most of his salary. So Michelle was now free to come and go as she pleased. The week after her Nana died, Michelle returned to school.

During her lunch hour, instead of scavenging a meal of rice and curry off her friends, she went out of the school and walked towards the temple. She stood outside the steps looking up, and as if led by an unseen force, she walked up and stood poised for a moment on the threshold. Then she

stepped into the cool inner sanctum and sat down before the gaily-clad deity that smiled from within the little alcove it was placed in. She stared at the tendrils of incense smoke that wound around the deity and floated up into the air as if reaching for some higher presence. Michelle closed her eyes and lost herself in the peaceful, quiet atmosphere of the temple. She was dimly aware of people coming and going, but she was beyond all external perceptions, lost in a world of inner serenity. When she opened her eyes, she was surprised and dismayed to find it dark outside. It was well past sunset and she rushed out. She fled to the Coonor market and breathed a sigh of relief when she was offered a lift from an elderly gentleman who had been a friend of her Nana's. She reached home and found her mother beside herself with worry. For the first time ever Michelle's mother caught hold of the girl by her shoulders and shook her hard.

"Where have you been? It's past six o'clock. Is this how I have taught you to behave?"

Michelle shook herself free and smiling at her mother calmly said, "I went to Nana's grave after school."

Michelle's mother was only slightly mollified by this. "You could have phoned me from a booth and told me," she sniffed, her annoyance still apparent.

Michelle did not answer but went and sat down on the old teak bed, and opened her school bag. She pulled out a textbook and looked at it, and her mother left her alone to get on with her schoolwork. Michelle stared with apparent concentration at her book, but all she saw was the fragrant smoke in the temple and the gaily-coloured idol that seemed to have been looking only at her. Michelle knew she had to go back again.

And she did. Every single day. She became a regular visitor to the temple and often skipped classes to go and sit there. The priest at the temple was glad to see such a devout worshipper and always had a smile and *prasad* for her. He told her tales from the *Ramayana* and *Bhagvad Gita*. He was an able storyteller too and under his soothing, gentle voice, Michelle was transported to different settings each day. Her favourite tale was that of virtuous Sita, who left all to follow her husband through a forest, sharing in his hardship during exile.

“Will I ever meet my Rama?” she asked the priest one day, her eyes wide and innocent and glowing like jewels in the afternoon light in the temple.

“Our destinies are already written, daughter,” said the priest. “But aren’t you going to go to England and become a grand lady?” he asked laughingly.

He had heard about the aspirations of Michelle’s mother from the young girl, and thought it a pity that she was not allowed to explore her individuality in her own way. Michelle smiled at him in that slow, special way that she had, and for a second, the old priest almost forgot his priestly calling. He shooed her out saying it was time for her to return home and then went about cleaning the temple, trying to regain some of his lost composure.

Michelle went home in a trance-like state. The temple had a powerful effect on her, one she was hard pressed to explain, even to herself. She was almost eighteen now and ready to leave school. Her mother’s greatest concern was how to get her daughter across to England, for higher studies. A scholarship was out of the question. Her academic record was poor to say the least. Michelle’s mother had resorted to writing to relatives and friends

overseas in the hope of finding a sponsor for her education. But the results had been disappointing thus far.

Michelle's forays to the temple had not passed unnoticed. Many of her admirers followed her and stood outside waiting to catch a glimpse of her. Michelle ignored them all. Until one day she was walking back to school and saw a mendicant, standing by the temple. He was dressed in saffron rags, his hair was matted and dirty, his feet dusty and cracked. But it was his eyes that drew Michelle. They had a piercing quality, and like the temple idol, they seemed to slice through her very being. She walked across to him and dropped a coin into the tin can he was holding out. Their gaze caught and held for a long moment and it was Michelle who looked away first. He was there every afternoon, from that point onwards. Every afternoon Michelle would walk up to him, give him the coin that was her bus fare and walk home. She returned home one evening to a jubilant family. Even her father was there, smiling as she had not seen him smile for years. Her mother waved a letter triumphantly in front of her. And then she caught her daughter up in a great hug and kissed her on both her cheeks.

“You lucky girl! I knew it would happen. My cousin in London works for a rich businessman. He told him about your college education and he has agreed to sponsor you. You will go to a fine university and he will take care of all the expenses. As soon as you finish your exams you are to leave. Isn't it wonderful?”

Then without waiting to hear Michelle's response she swept out of the house to find someone else to share the glorious news with. Michelle's father looked at her warmly.

“I think this calls for a celebration. I think I'll nip out and get us some wine. Your Auntie Rosie has just made a fresh batch of bilberry wine and she's promised me a bottle.”

And with that he was gone and Michelle knew he would not be back for a quite a while. Michelle went and lay on the old teak bed, and for the first time in her young life cried, fat tears rolling down her heart-shaped face. The next morning she went to school having hugged both her mother and father in a rare display of emotion. She went straight to the temple. The mendicant was not there. She sat in front of the idol and swiftly peace returned. She knew what she had to do. When she stepped out of the temple into the afternoon sun, the mendicant was back. She walked up to him. She

Excerpt from *A Moral Murder and Other Tales From The Blue Hills*

looked into his eyes and he stared at her for several seconds. Then without waiting for the coin she normally gave him, he turned and walked away.

The priest said that Michelle waited until he had taken the corner, and then she followed him. It was the last time he saw her. It was the last time anyone saw her.

Visit [www.aMoralMurder.com](http://www.aMoralMurder.com) for more information.