

Michelle on Tape
By Anita Vacation

As I pulled into my parents' driveway, I realized how loud the radio was. I turned it down, peeled my legs off the blue vinyl seat, and lugged my pile of laundry up to the front door. The doorknob wouldn't turn and I still hadn't gotten around to making myself a duplicate key.

I rang the bell and waited. Nothing.

Leaving my basket of dirty clothes on the steps, I tramped through the bushes in front of the living room window. Pep was across the room sitting in his usual chair and reading the paper. He was a familiar sight in his plaid flannel shirt, striped clip-on bow tie, and tweed cabby hat.

I knocked on the window. He turned around, startled, and focused his eyes on me. I smiled and waved at him, but he just stared at me. I gestured toward the front door. His face had that hollow look, but something made him get up and let me in.

"Hi, Pep." I kissed him on the cheek. He made way for me and my laundry.

"Hello, how are you?"

I headed for the washing machine. Pep trailed closely behind.

"Kevin and Clare aren't home, but they should be here soon. Do you want to wait for them?"

"Yah, I'll be here." I began separating whites from darks.

"Do you want anything to eat? There's meat and bread in the ice box and some cookies in there."

"No thanks."

"I don't know where Kevin and Clare are. They took Katie out somewhere. Do you know Katie?"

I paused. Here we go. This was going to be one of those conversations. I should just say, "Why, yes, I know Katie." But perhaps if I venture a bit further, something might jog his memory and we wouldn't have to go through the whole routine. Dad says that Pep has a tape recorder in his brain, and bits and pieces keep getting erased.

I decided to give it a shot. "Pep, Katie is my sister."

It didn't work. Pep responded as though I hadn't said a word. "Yah. Well, they went down to . . ." He doubled his chin and scratched his chest with both hands.

"You know, down . . ."

"To the Donnellys'?"

"Yah, that's it. What did you say?"

I repeated, "Donnellys'," loud and clear. It was usually best to speak with as few words as possible. The name Donnelly had a vague significance in Pep's mind, but he had no idea that the Donnellys were my mother's sister and her family.

"Yes, that's right, they went to the Donnellys'. How did you know? What did you say your name was?"

"Michelle."

He smiled politely. "Oh, are you a friend of Clare's?"

"Pep! I'm her daughter."

"Yah, well, I just want to tell Kevin and Clare who was here in case you leave before they get back."

"I'm home for the weekend. I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay," he said, with an offended tone that left me feeling guilty. He turned around and headed for his chair. He truly did not know who I was. He had let a perfect stranger into our house to wash clothes.

When I was a child, Pep would spend hours with me, patiently teaching me all fifty states and their capitals. When I had those down, we moved on to state flowers, birds, and slogans. He would read me his poetry and tell me never-ending bedtime stories about giants and fairies and magical

castles. We would sit in front of the Christmas tree and try to guess which ornament the other was thinking of. On this day, though, I had more important things on my mind. Whites. Darks. Delicates.

Pep returned a few minutes later with a pen and his notebook.

"Here, write down your name so I can tell Kevin and Clare you were here." The prospect scared me. I was hoping he would realize who I was after a while and forget that he had forgotten me. But this was putting everything on the line. What if he saw my name and still couldn't recognize me? As he eagerly offered me the pen and paper, I couldn't say no. I wrote M-i-c-h-e-l-l-e in his notebook and gave it back to him.

He looked at it for a few seconds and then wrinkled his eyebrows and bit his lip. He looked at me with a hint of disbelief.

"Michelle."

He said it with the expression of a disappointed but amused parent. The name seemed to hang in space. I imagined what would come next. He might say, "You're not Michelle" or "Who in the world is Michelle?"

But he said, "All this time you were Michelle?"

"Yes." That giant lump shot into my throat and tears crept into my eyes.

"Well, thank God for you."

I smiled. He patted me on the shoulder and walked away, shaking his head and chuckling. I was relieved. I did still exist in his mind, on his tape. But I was only a part-time visitor now, and I couldn't help wondering how long it would be before I was permanently erased.

Word Count: 864