

Life with Sea Views

» MICHELLE DE KRETZER

*T*hey lived in a brown house on a green hill. At twilight bats swooped through lighted rooms and the little girls shrieked and covered their heads with their arms.

Beyond the fields lay the railway line, curving along the coast. While they slept under mosquito nets, cotton nighties tangled about their thighs, the night mail whistled round the bend. Limbs in flight, they dreamt of journeys (the promise of leaving, the sadness of arrival).

The tennis court was next to the railway station, separated from it by a grey-gone-green wall. Girls in white uniforms and pipeplayed tennis shoes ran about, hitting out with heavy wooden racquets. From time to time, they came to a halt: 'Our ball, please? Could we have our ball, *please?*' And someone, waiting for a train, would throw it back to their voices.

Halfway through a set, Monique looked up and saw that the sky had turned indigo. The sun still blazed overhead, an orange disk, slightly flattened and translucent like a sweet sucked thin.

Beyond the railway line was the sea. You couldn't see it, but you knew it was there: salt, secret, waiting for you like time.

Ned arrived late, after his parents had given up hope. He was a beautiful child, all dimples and lashes. Unable to do otherwise, the girls adored him. But sometimes Estelle seethed, whispering 'You are the fruit of withered loins' in her brother's ear. Then, overcome, she would kiss him until he grew bored and tugged away.

They never played under the palm trees because there was a little girl who did and a coconut fell on her head and her brains came out through her nose.

Monique learnt the cello, piano and violin. She liked the violin best, because it was her father's instrument. He had belonged to the municipal orchestra until a new conductor arrived and asked him to resign. As the only left-handed

(above)

Another Day in
Paradise IV (Koh
Phi Phi)

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musician, he was spoiling the symmetrical bowing of the string section.

Estelle excelled at Speech & Drama. Her Quality of Mercy took first prize in the inter-school competition and her picture appeared in the local paper. She had a small mole near the corner of one eye, like a tear. Her favourite colour was crimson, which is not suitable for a young girl.

The electricity faltered and failed. While they waited for candles, Ned plunged his hands into the ice-box and then, coming noiselessly up behind Estelle, closed cold fingers around her throat. It was a long time before she would speak to him again.

Rosemarie S was Captain of Games and had rosy, light-brown hair. Monique suddenly realised she could not do without Rosie, trailing her around at recess with a small group of the similarly afflicted.

She climbed the hill, books tied with a buckled strap and balanced in the crook of her arm. She had stayed late, for hockey practice. Rounding the bend, she came upon Father pitched head-first into a clump of oleanders. The soles of his shoes had worn thin on the instep, where his weight rolled over when he walked. Just like Ned's.

Rosie gave Monique her hanky, chain-stitched with a blue R. Ripples spread through the lower forms and Claudine G. said loudly that everyone had known about that black woman from the fishing shanties.

Money had to be set aside for Ned's education, there was never any question about that. But they had to let three servants go.

The girls stood side by side on the beach with their skirts tucked up, and waves sucked at the sand beneath their bare feet. They swayed deliciously on the curved rim of the world.

The magistrate's daughter fell into the road when the rickshaw puller stumbled in a

pothole. She landed on her head, but picked herself up, climbed back in and continued on her way. That evening she complained of a headache and asked for an Aspro. Then she lay down on the cement floor and died. The rickshaw puller got nine years.

The gardener's wife jumped down a well. That was the usual way among women of that class. Handy, cost nothing, didn't involve blood.

Ned, walking barefoot on the lawn as he was not supposed to do because of hookworm, felt a squishiness beneath his toes. He had trodden on a chameleon lying there on the grass with its inside outside.

Gordon L smiled at Monique during choir practice. They were both invited to a party, with dancing on the lantern-hung verandah and frangipani scenting the night. When he called at the house, he sat on the left-hand side of the sofa. Monique sat on the right-hand side and Monique's mother sat between them.

Shortly afterwards Gordon L qualified as a civil engineer, married a girl with buck teeth and took up a post in the interior.

Sundays as interminable as the view from the verandah.

The cost of living was what came of ignorant villagers voting for people who didn't even wear suits.

Monique's certificates from Trinity College, London hung above the piano, next to the photograph of the Queen. After school and all day on Saturdays children came and went from the house, dropped off by chauffeurs or toiling up the hill with violin cases and music under their arms.

Estelle said that she hoped whoever wrote *Für Elise* was still answering for it.

Ned was sent to board with relatives. Everyone stood weeping on the platform. But the decent schools were in the capital, ninety-nine miles away.

Ned couldn't eat a hardboiled egg if shelling had left even the tiniest imperfection on its surface. Nor would he accept marrow that had been cooked, extracted from the bone and spread glistening on toast. There were many such difficulties, relayed by his aunt in tight-lipped letters.

The monsoon brought a cyclone that lashed the south. Tiles blew off the roof, and rain overflowed from basins placed hazardously throughout the house. The shantytown flooded. A tidal wave was feared. They sat on the verandah looking out over the swollen grey expanse of sky and sea, straining to make out the invisible horizon. What would they do if it reared up to embrace their hill? Where can you hide from so much water?

There was a Grow More Food campaign. Buses carried Ned's class to paddy fields where the boys stood ankle-deep in muddy water, splashing each other and pulling out the weeds that sprouted between the tender shoots of rice. A government official rushed around trying to minimise the damage. Finally he retreated to the shade. Encouraging the urban young to appreciate farming was one thing, but in his opinion the farmers weren't enjoying it much.

The nuns ran a hostel in the capital. When Estelle left there was a floating sensation in Monique's chest. As if her heart had worked loose from its moorings, was riding anchorless on the tide.

His aunt detected 'cheap liquor' on Ned's breath.

So many rooms that no one entered.

Monique, at the station to farewell friends, saw a tall, good-looking stranger leap onto the platform before the train had quite come to a halt. He advanced on her party with a smile, running his hand through his curls: why, it was Ned.

She was troubled by a dream in which she

hurried after her father down unfamiliar streets hemmed in by huddled houses. But when he turned around she saw a man with coarse dark features, whose thick-wristed hands shot out towards her.

Everyone who could leave was going.

Islands are the places you set out from.
Continents are where you arrive.

Estelle came home for Christmas wearing an electric-blue pantsuit. 'Come back with me,' she pleaded. 'Three months to get your shorthand-typing certificate and then you'll be set.'

Their mother wouldn't leave her room, not even when Ned wanted to carry her out onto the verandah for the fireworks. She pressed her hand to her pintucked bosom and murmured that it would only be a matter of time. They sat around her bed, listening to distant explosions.

'There's a band every night at the Coconut Grove,' said Estelle, 'there are cocktails and foreigners.' 'I'm not staying,' said Estelle dabbing perfume behind her ears, 'and you wouldn't either, if you had any sense.'

Ned failed his varsity entrance for the third time. It was decided he would apply to the railways. The problem with the railways, as everyone knew, was drink. On the other hand, there was the pension.

She learnt to sleep lightly. Her mother often rapped on the wall, wanting a different arrangement of pillows or to be helped to the bathroom.

Afterwards, Monique would go out onto the verandah. Gradually, the sea detached itself from the coast, a different blackness. Sometimes there were ships, their lights like coded messages far out towards the horizon.

Estelle's engagement ring was an opal because of Harry being Australian.

There were young foreigners everywhere, with too much dirty hair and shapeless clothes. One of them tipped a boy from the shanties a hundred for running an errand. Some fellow from the market set up four bamboo poles on the beach, slung palm thatching over them and called it a restaurant. Next thing he was making money hand over fist. That class of person has no shame.

Now at night there was a string of coloured bulbs on the beach. Laughter. That music they liked drifting up the dark hill. Monique drew her housecoat close around her shoulders. People were right to call it disturbing.

Further down the coast was a palm tree with two heads. It was so tall that it was visible from the verandah, its twin heads like enormous feathery flowers swaying above the distant, uniform green.

That year lightning struck the tree one night, splitting its trunk and bringing it crashing onto the railway tracks. So that the next morning it was gone, the skyline jolted into difference.

There were few visitors now. The hill was daunting and so many people could no longer afford a car. The nuns still called, of course, hardship was no more than they expected; and Father André, roaring up on his dusty motorcycle.

A flimsy blue airletter came every fortnight if the Emergency hadn't disrupted the post. Estelle's writing was neat, spiky, illegible. It took a day or more to puzzle out a letter in its entirety. Even then, obscurities remained: 'lamingtons', 'nature strip'.

Ned turned up now and then. He would sit by his mother's bed in the shuttered room, holding her hand and telling her about the places he had been to on the trains. He could always make her laugh, with his stories of jumped-up stationmasters and the explanations people offered for travelling without a ticket. He kept the bottle on the verandah and slipped out from time to time.



After one of these visits, their mother asked Monique if she had noticed Ned's hands. It was the only time they ever mentioned it.

The shantytown was bulldozed one morning. The new hotel was rising slowly within its bamboo scaffolding and the shanties were an eyesore.

At the musical evening Corinne V. disgraced herself by breaking down halfway through her piece, that Chopin prelude in E minor. The child was hopeless, not a musical bone in her, she never practised and sat there slapping sulkily at mosquitoes when you tried to explain anything. No wonder she didn't get through the exam. But parents don't see it like that, of course, they blame the teacher.

How many pupils did that leave?

Estelle wrote that 'things hadn't worked out' with Harry. Hadn't worked out! But she had



met someone called – could it be Sloven? – and promised to send a cheque as soon as she was ‘back on her feet’.

Four headless bodies washed up on the beach. One of them was a woman; you could imagine what the soldiers had done before they’d finished with her. Not that you could blame them for cracking down after those suicide bombs in the city.

The ward had once been painted an insipid green. Hospital green, thought Ned, that was what his mother called that colour. People lay on iron beds and also on straw mats on the floor in between. There was the smell of bedpans, and of the meals brought in for patients by their families. A pair of wasps building a nest high in one corner of the ceiling flew in and out through the barred window.

Damp and other things had drawn islands and continents on the green wall. If he tried he

could make out the outline of a ship, the old kind with three masts. It reminded him that when he was a boy he had hung entranced over maps, dreaming of sailing to Australia. Funny how things you’d thought you’d forgotten were only stored away, waiting to swim into the light. Like opening a battered old chest with brass corners and coming on treasure kept safe, while the sea whispered and plucked.

There were dolphins on the wall and snakes as thick as a man’s arm, with dragon heads. He pulled the coverlet closer. He was the boy on the bowsprit. They were sailing towards the horizon.

Claudine G. wheezed all the way up the hill in her too-tight red shoes to say that her cousin, over on holiday, had ‘run into’ Estelle. Monique hadn’t mentioned that her sister was living in sin with a Communist, had it slipped her mind? Apparently Estelle hadn’t even been wearing mourning, although it had been only a few weeks after Ned.

All this while occupying the best chair, helping herself uninvited to another biscuit and drinking three cups of tea (four spoons of rationed sugar apiece).

‘Father,’ she called, weak with longing. But then he turned around.

Tourists stopped coming just when the hotel was completed. It stood vast and echoing, a ghost ship stuck on the reef of history. Slime spread up the sides of its empty swimming pools. Waves smashing against rocks sent spray arching through broken windows. The developer had hanged himself alongside the chandelier in the dining-room. No one went near the place after dark.

There were days when she woke to find that the sea had seeped in while she slept. Sea music washed through her, advancing, retreating, a rush followed by a swirl. She picked up her violin and tried to keep pace with it. The man selling snake beans was staring at her. She counted her change carefully, still humming.

In her good poplin dress, carrying an umbrella to protect her complexion, she picked her way down the main road. They kept her waiting thirty-seven minutes. The manager upended his plump little palms to signify apology and helplessness. What about the land, she asked, holding a chain-stitched handkerchief to her lips. He reminded her gently that it had already been sold.

The neighbours sent their servant to say her sister would be ringing back in ten minutes. 'What is there to stay for now?' asked a voice that was nothing like Estelle's. 'We'll send your ticket,' said the voice, 'Stefan will fit out the bungalow for you.' The neighbours' children nudged each other and giggled in the doorway. Somewhere a woman was crying, saying if only they hadn't been away when the news about Mother.

The new flats had taken a lopsided slice out of the view. But at night you could still stand on the verandah and imagine the whole hill floating out to sea, houses, oleanders, telephone poles, its cargo of sleeping people rocking dreamily on the swell.

It was obvious from her clothes and the way she hovered on the edge of the verandah that she was a common village woman. She began explaining that she had done her best, but the man she was going to marry didn't know about the boy, and anyway it was only right for him to be with his own people.

He stood beside his mother, clinging to her hand. He was wearing navy-blue shorts and a clean white shirt, and clutched a brown-paper parcel. At length he lifted his head, and Ned's eyes peered up at Monique.

Father André was in violation of the dusk-to-dawn curfew, so the soldiers poured kerosene over him and set him alight.

Now in the dream she was on a complicated journey that took her through a series of smaller and smaller rooms until she stepped through a window and found him waiting for her, a wild sky and creeping water.

Waking, she slid her tongue over her lips and tasted salt.

The envelopes gathered in a brass tray on the hall table. When the rains came she opened some of the letters and folded them into paper boats. These she launched from the edge of the verandah into the overflow from the gutter, consigning them to light and change.

She had spoken to the boy once, to order him off the lawn. He was frightened of her smell and of the knotted purple veins on her skinny white legs. He kept to the back part of the house, where the cook slipped him slices of mango sprinkled with chilli.

He had not really been asleep when the noise woke him. At first he was afraid, because he had told himself in the daytime that the house must be haunted. But there was bright moonlight in the curtainless room, so after a while he crept to the window. He was just in time to see her go past, her violin under her chin, her left arm bowing.

Long after she had gone out of sight, he could hear the music wavering up the hill. Then the night mail came whistling round the bend.

END



MICHELLE DE KRETSER FAHA began publishing fiction in 1999 and her novels have won or been shortlisted for many international and Australian awards. *Questions of Travel* (2012) won the Prime Minister's Prize for Fiction and the Miles Franklin Award and was chosen as Book of the Year in both the NSW and WA Premier's Literary Awards. The story included here won the 1999 *Age* short story competition.