

# **Finding Me Study Guide**

## **Finding Me by Michelle Knight**

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## Summary

“Finding Me – A Decade of Darkness, a Life Reclaimed” is the story of Michelle Knight’s abduction and confinement by Ariel Castro. Her story and that of her fellow abductees, Amanda Berry and Gina DeJesus, became international news when they were rescued in 2013. Michelle incredibly had been confined in Castro’s filthy and rundown house for eleven years. The other two girls were there for ten of those years.

Michelle Knight was born into a dysfunctional family. She was the elder sister of twin boys. She was close to her brothers and a young cousin who lived with the family. She was given adult responsibility at a young age being forced to care for the younger children which often caused her to miss school. Due to her absence at school and perhaps some learning disabilities, Michelle fell far behind in school and hated it. She was ridiculed for her small stature – as an adult she only measure 4’7” – and for her failing grades.

Michelle’s home life became increasingly toxic as she matured. The house will filled with a parade of relatives who were in and out of her life. There was one male relative who she did not name who sexually abused her for years. Her father left the family and her mother abandoned her emotionally. As a result of her horrid home life and unsatisfying school experience, Michelle ran away from home as a young teenager. She was homeless for a while and slept under a bridge and became a drug runner for a while to earn some money.

After a close call with the law, Michelle was returned home where the sexual abuse resumed. She was re-enrolled in school, and at age sixteen she was placed in the seventh grade. Life was no more satisfying than it had been. She had a baby, Joey, at nineteen. She loved her child and he became her whole life. She was determined to be a better parent that her mother. However, an altercation with her mother’s drunken boyfriend led to Michelle losing custody of Joey. On the day that she was abducted by Ariel Castro, she was on her way to a social services hearing in an attempt to regain custody of her child.

For the next eleven years, Michelle rarely saw the light of day again. She spent ninety percent of her time in chains and the other ten percent being raped by her captor. A year after her confinement, Castro kidnapped two other girls and the three of them suffered together for ten more years before they were rescued.

The story ends with the good news that Michelle is on the road to recovery. However, nothing will erase the eleven years of her life that was stolen from her. And nothing will completely heal the scars from the physical and sexual abuse that she suffered from during her long, nightmarish ordeal.



# Chapter One: Found & Lost

## Summary

Michelle Knight woke up early on that September 2013 morning. She thought about her son. What did he look like? Was he happy? Did he wonder about her? He'd been adopted when he was four and the family didn't want her to interfere with their lives together. Yet, Michelle longed to see him. Her lawyer, Peggy, received some photos of Joey from the family but they didn't want them publicized. As soon as Michelle looked at the first photo, she saw that Joey looked just like her. She was pleased that in all the photos, Joey looked happy. The photos made Michelle miss Joey all the more and long to be with him. She hoped to be with him again. She had lost him when he was two-and-a-half and again after she was rescued from her kidnapper.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

photocopied, rollerblading



# Chapter Two: My Family

## Summary

Michelle vividly remembered the inside of the family's dirty and broken down station wagon. When she was four, the family lived in the car. It was her home along with her two-year-old twin brothers, Eddie and Freddie, and her little cousin, Mikey. The children had to fight for enough space to sleep each night. When her father parked near an orchard, they ate green apples for their meals. Michelle never knew how they wound up homeless or in Ohio. Her parents didn't tell her much. Her mother was a mixture of black, Hispanic, Irish, Indian, Arabic and Italian. She was fluent in several languages.

The family spent about a year in the station wagon. They moved to a three-bedroom house in the ghetto, but they didn't stay there - or anywhere - long. Wherever they moved, however, it was always in the worst parts of Cleveland. She recalled seeing needles strewn around the streets in some of the neighborhoods. The kids hid in the closet when they heard gunshots which was a frequent occurrence. At different times, the house was filled with other relatives and people she didn't know. One man routinely forced her to perform oral sex on him in the dark of night. He threatened to kill her if she told anyone.

Being the eldest child, Michelle would tend to her little brothers and cousins. She helped them brush their teeth and get ready for school. They would eat breakfast if there was food in the house. Michelle only managed to get to school herself a couple times a week. She fell way behind in her studies. When she was twelve she was only in the fifth grade. Michelle had no friends at school and stayed to herself. She was ridiculed in class because she had trouble pronouncing certain words. Kids accused her of smelling which she probably did because of the lack of hygiene practiced in her home. When teachers weren't around she was bullied, told she was ugly and called vile names. All the kids were poor, but Michelle was the poorest. Her clothes were old and came from Goodwill.

Michelle got all Ds and Fs but she did excel at art. She drew all the things she dreamed of being or doing one day. She loved music which helped see her through many rough years that would be ahead of her. Michelle was recruited to tend to all the young kids that wound up living with the family.

Michelle had her first period at eleven. It hardly made a difference to her though, as she'd been bleeding from the sexual abuse since she was five and the abuse continued as she matured. Michelle had enough and one night, and after her abuser was asleep, she sneaked out the bathroom window with everything she owned in a backpack. She had no plan other than getting away.



## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

huddled, orchard, ghetto, hectic, generic, fleece



# Chapter Three: Under the Bridge

## Summary

Michelle found shelter a week after she ran away at a Baptist church that supplied hot meals for the homeless. It was Thanksgiving Day. She had been sleeping on a stack of newspapers in a small park. She didn't sleep well afraid of rats gnawing in the trash cans. She found a bat to protect herself when she slept. It was too cold out in the open, so Michelle found a bridge that would give her more shelter from the wind and cold to sleep under. The "bridge" was really a highway overpass. Michelle secreted herself in the tall grass at night to sleep. She felt safer there, liked her privacy and there were no cops around. She hoped she was far enough away from home that her parents wouldn't spot her. She stole a big blue garbage can from a yard which she turned into her "bedroom." She was protected from the wind but was still freezing.

By the time Thanksgiving came, she hadn't eaten in days and was starving. She was welcomed into the Baptist church by a tall black man. She was filthy and her hair was all matted. The man said he'd give her a coat after she ate. She had second and even thirds at the dinner buffet. The man gave her a large orange puffy coat that was three sizes too big but she was thrilled to get it. She was also given a supply of personal items including toothpaste and shampoo. After that, she went to the church every evening for a free dinner and every Sunday for service. At first she wouldn't sit by anyone because she knew she smelled. Then she began cleaning herself up a bit in the church bathroom before the service started.

One night when Michelle was in her garbage can bathroom, she heard the voice of a man tell her he could help her. She grabbed her bat but he assured her he wouldn't hurt her. The man who was named Sniper explained that he sold pot and E and needed a runner. He'd pay her well. She had a gut instinct to trust him so she followed him to his car. He had her hide in the backseat because he was going to do a deal. After they drove for a while, he stopped, got out and talked to a group of men. Sniper then drove them to his house and invited her to stay there. He showed her to the room where she would be staying. Another "runner" named Roderick also lived there. Sniper gave her a towel and soap and told her to clean up. She stayed in the shower for an hour.

Michelle slept well that night and woke up to the smell of sausage. Sniper and Roderick were at the kitchen table. They decided to call her "Chapo" which meant "little" in Spanish. Roderick was a sixteen-year-old Saudi boy and had been living on the streets since he was thirteen. His mother had thrown him out because he didn't want to go back to Saudi Arabia. They watched a movie that night which was something she'd never done with friends. She felt good to be a part of a group. Sniper told her that he'd be getting her a handgun and showing her how to use it.

That night in bed, she wondered how her brothers and cousins were doing. Sniper told her she'd be going on her first run. The thought of the gun scared her to death.





## Analysis

## Vocabulary

overpass, eyeballing



# Chapter Four: On the Run

## Summary

Sniper gave Michelle a .22 Glock the next morning. Sniper took her to a remote area that afternoon where she practiced shooting. He told her it was for her protection. By the end of the practice, she was able to hit the target that he had hung up. Michelle told Sniper how she had suffered and been abused at home. He was from a decent family and couldn't understand it. He dropped out of school because he could make more money selling drugs.

Michelle learned that as a runner she would enter apartment buildings or clubs and find out what drugs people wanted. She would return to the car and advise him of the drug requests. She'd return with the drugs. He warned her not to hand over any drugs until she had the cash in hand. He gave her a beeper so they could stay in contact. If trouble arose, she should leave but if she couldn't she had the gun.

That night was her first as a runner. They left Sniper's house with \$50,000 worth of pot. She stuck the gun down in her underwear. Sniper sent her into a large apartment building where she made a \$500 pot sale. When she returned with the pot, the buyer wanted the pot before he gave her the money. Sniper intervened and got the money.

Michelle, Sniper and Roderick operated like a functioning family for the next three weeks. It wasn't all work. They played cards, pool and pinball. In addition to a free place to live, Michelle and Roderick each made about \$300 a week. They helped pay for the groceries. Sniper got arrested and Roderick told Michelle that had to clear out before they were nabbed. They stayed under the overpass that night. One day when Michelle emerged from beneath the overpass, a friend of her parents saw her and called her father. Soon her father drove up and ordered her to get in the car. Roderick ran off and she never saw him again.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

reefer, courtyard, snickered, scandalous, wielding

# Chapter Five: Expecting

## Summary

Michelle's mother re-enrolled her in school. She was sixteen and initially placed in the seventh grade, but she took a test and was move up to the ninth grade. Michelle didn't do well in school and was often absent. There were about fifteen members of the extended family living at the house including the man who had abused her. As soon as she returned, the man resumed abusing her. She stayed in the house two more years and the sexual abuse went on the entire time. Michelle met a boy at school who took an interest in her. They did everything together including cutting classes. He told her he loved her. They began having sex and Michelle was soon pregnant. Michelle learned that Erik had a girlfriend named Cassie who went to another school. After being confronted by Cassie about Michelle, he claimed they were just friends. Michelle ended their relationship. She finally had to tell her mother that she was pregnant. Abortion was never an option for Michelle.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

miraculously, slathered, rarity, nauseous, revelation



# Chapter Six: Huggy Bear

## Summary

Michelle quit school in the tenth grade. She wasn't doing well at school and she was nauseous from her pregnancy and beginning to show. Her parents separated and the house was more peaceful without her father. Michelle was able to stand up to the man who had abused her all those years. She was able to fight him off at least sometimes. She learned that she was having a boy but was worried about how she could support him.

Michelle had her son, Joey, a month before the due date. Although she had her doubts because of all the abuse she had suffered, she believed in God again after she had her baby. Her pet name for him was Huggy Bear. She cared for her son and shared a small room with him in her mother's house. Michelle's whole focus was on caring for Joey and being a loving mother to him.

Michelle received a small check from Social Security, which paid for diapers and formula. During Christmas holidays in 2001, Michelle took some of her Social Security money to buy Joey some Christmas presents. Although Michelle was broke, she didn't regret the toys she bought for Joey and enjoyed every second of the joy it brought him.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

makeshift, nauseous, household



# Chapter Seven: Losing Joey

## Summary

In the spring of 2002, Michelle began searching for a job. She was anxious to earn money and was willing to do any kind of work. She applied at all the fast food restaurants but at only 4'2", it would be difficult for her to reach the cash register. Her height was working against her in her quest for employment. By that summer, she was still unemployed.

When Michelle came home one afternoon after job hunting, she was involved in an altercation with her mother's drunken boyfriend, Carlos. As the incident continued, he wound up becoming violent and fractured Joey's knee. Michelle was afraid to tell the hospital how Joey's knee was broken fearing that he'd be taken from her. She told them he'd fallen down in the park. However, case workers from social services knew the real story because Carlos had confessed. After Joey was released, he was placed in foster care. Michelle was devastated. She got to spend one last night with him in the hospital. She told him that he wouldn't be seeing her for a while. The police came the next morning and took Joey away. Michelle was crushed as Joey begged her not to leave him.

A few days later, Michelle attended a hearing in an effort to get Joey back. She learned that she would have to provide a safe environment for Joey in order to get back custody. She was granted visitation rights until her case was resolved. Michelle moved in with her aunt Lisa and rented a room for \$300 a month. It was a much safer environment than her mother's house. She was introduced to cousins she had never met before. One of these cousins was Deanna who introduced her to other young people one of whom was Emily Castro. Emily lived with her mother but still had contact with her father who lived in the neighborhood. Her father's name was Ariel and he worked as a bus driver. Michelle was impressed that Emily had a good relationship with her father who seemed to be a nice guy.

Michelle's first visit with Joey was around the Fourth of July. She had an hour with him and neither one wanted their visit to end. She missed the next visit with him due to a lack of transportation. It hurt her because she knew it would be a strike against her attempts to get her son back. During that hot July the only two things Michelle was focused on were Joey and getting a job. She had to walk to fill out applications. One day her glasses slid off of her perspiring face and broke. She was very nearsighted and had to squint to find her way without her glasses. Her blurry vision along with the heat made her feel very disoriented. She couldn't afford to have her glasses fixed until she had some income.

## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

reluctant, disheveled, nearsighted, disoriented



# Chapter Eight: Vanished

## Summary

An appointment with social services was scheduled on August 23, 2002. She had arranged for someone to drive her but at the last minute, the person cancelled. She was scared. She'd have to walk and was sure she'd be late. Her cousin, Deanna, agreed to walk with her. Even though they left hours before the appointment time, Michelle was still going to be late to the appointment. She decided to turn back because she was lost and told Deanna to head back without her. She would stop to find a pay phone to let social services know what happened. On her trek back home, she asked several people where social services was located. Suddenly she heard a man's voice say that he knew where it was. The man was Ariel Castro. He agreed to give her a ride.

Michelle was a little apprehensive about going with Ariel Castro. She didn't know him but he was her friend's father so she thought there would be nothing to worry about. The inside of the car was as scruffy and messy looking as Castro was. As they rode away, she told him about Joey and about how important it was that she make her appointment with social services. Castro told her he had to stop by his house before taking her downtown.

When they arrived at his house, Castro told Michelle to come inside and look at the puppies his dog had. He offered to give her one for Joey's return. The yard and the outside of the house showed signs of neglect. Castro backed the car into the driveway on the side of the house and locked the gate with a padlock – something that made Michelle nervous. She asked him why he was going to all that trouble when they would be inside just for a few minutes. He told her that it was a terrible neighborhood and couldn't take any chances. He coaxed her to come inside and see the puppies and assured her that Emily was inside. She thought for a moment and figured since Emily was inside and that she recognized his next door neighbor who had just waved at her, she wasn't afraid.

The inside of Castro's house was not surprisingly a big mess. He told her that Emily was in the basement doing laundry and that the puppies were upstairs. She was a little apprehensive but didn't want to offend her friend's father so she followed him upstairs. He led her to a room and told her that the puppies were under a dresser. Suddenly, he slammed the bedroom door shut. She screamed and told him she had to get to her appointment. He grabbed her and put his large hand over her mouth and warned her not to scream again. He told her he'd kill her. He pushed her to the floor. She tried to gather strength by thinking back on her life and what she'd gone through. But nothing could have prepared her for what happened.



## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

dehydrated, staircase, reluctance, grubby





# Chapter Nine: Trapped

## Summary

Castro left the room. He told her not to move and that he'd be right back. When he returned, he wrapped heavy orange extension cords around Michelle's ankles. She fought all the way but he overpowered her. He hogtied her with the cords and looped it around her neck. He took his jeans off and told her that his wife and kids left him and that he needed someone. She wouldn't have to be with him that long. After he pleased himself, he told Michelle he would be putting her up on a wire that was strung between two poles. She started praying. When she wouldn't stop, he punched her on the side of her head.

Castro strung her up on the wire where she hung about a foot off the floor. He gagged her with a sock and put duct tape around her head. He turned on a radio to top volume and left to get them food. She heard his truck start up and tried to see a way to free herself and escape but it was hopeless. Castro didn't return with food for Michelle. He left her hanging in mid-air all night, the next day and night. She had passed out a few times during her ordeal. He came back with a McDonald's hamburger for her.

Castro took the tape off and the gag out of her mouth and tried to force her to eat the sandwich but she kept her mouth shut. She was afraid it was poisoned. He cut the wire that was holding her up and she came crashing to the floor. He told her to stand but she wasn't able to. He carried her to another room where he raped her for the next few hours. The assault was so brutal that the old mattress he had slammed her down on was covered in her blood. She begged him to let her go home. She promised to not say a thing about what had happened. He lay down next to her and began telling her about his wife. He even cried a little. He beat his wife but blamed it on the abuse he was subjected to as a child. He suddenly got dressed and threw a few dollars down on the mattress as her payment. He left momentarily but returned when she was about to leave the bedroom. He dumped all the contents of her purse on the floor.

Castro was surprised to learn that Michelle was twenty-one. He thought she was much younger. He told her she wouldn't be there that long – maybe until Christmas. Christmas! She started to cry. He ordered her to put her underwear on and led her down the stairs. She had no idea what would happen next.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

frantically, fend, vile



# Chapter Ten: The Dungeon

## Summary

Castro dragged Michelle to a first floor door. He unlocked the padlock on the door that led downstairs to the basement. Michelle was scared to death. He shoved her down the last few steps; she landed on a big pile of dirty laundry. The basement smelled and was in as much disarray as the rest of the house. Michelle noticed rusted chains that were strewn all about. No natural light came through the narrow basement windows which were covered in filth. He bound Michelle's hand with plastic handcuffs securing them with twist ties. He then chained Michelle to a pole, wrapping her with an eight-foot length chain from head to toe. He stuffed her mouth with a sock again. He violently slammed a motorcycle helmet on her head. Michelle passed out.

It was pitch black in the basement. When Michelle came to she didn't know if it was day or night. She worked at freeing herself and finally, after hours of struggle, was able to undo the twist ties which allowed her to take off the suffocating helmet. She then worked at trying to open the padlock on the chain but stopped when she heard the sound of a car pulling up outside. Castro came right down the steps and scolded her for taking off the ties. She would have to be punished, he told her. He unlocked the chains and for the next three hours, brutally raped her and forced her to do things that she couldn't even describe. He paid her with a few dollars after he finished. He told her she would be staying in the basement until he could trust her. He chained her to the pole again and left her alone in the dark.

The next morning he brought her breakfast. He warned her to eat or she would die. He ate from the plate to prove that it wasn't poisoned. He fed her forkfuls of the spaghetti. She ate it all. At least she would die with a full stomach, she thought to herself. He loosened the chains so she could reach the "toilet" which was a green bucket.

Michelle was living in the dark and didn't know what time or day it was. She heard his alarm go off and figured it must be morning. He brought her an Egg McMuffin for breakfast. When he came down in the mornings, he was wearing his school bus driver's uniform. When he came home, she could hear loud porn movies. He'd often visit Michelle after his movie watching. She suffered the most horrific torture at night and on the weekends. She tried to block what was going on by thinking of pleasant things like Joey and songs she liked. After he was through with her, he often stayed to tell her that no one was looking for her and that no one cared that she was missing. Michelle was as shattered by this talk as she was by the physical abuse.

Castro told her he was in a band. One night the band members were coming over. He warned her not to make a sound. She figured it was Saturday when the guys came over for band practice. But it really didn't matter what day it was. All her days ended in the same brutal way. When Castro was gone to work, Michelle would pound the helmet against the pole and rattle the chains hoping to make enough noise to gain someone's



attention. The hours and hours each day that she was alone in the dark she thought of Joey and prayed. She had enough awareness of time to know that the days she had been there turned into weeks and that the weeks were turning into months. God must have forsaken her.

During her confinement in the basement she was never allowed to bathe or shower. When she had her period, he'd toss a few napkins her way. She was losing weight since she only ate once a day. She would fall into fitful sleep and dream of Joey and of eating her favorite foods. She was living in a horror story.

## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

strewed, mildew, padlock



# Chapter Eleven: Lobo

## Summary

Castro announced one Saturday that he was taking Michelle upstairs. She was hoping it meant it was letting her go. It was difficult for Michelle to walk after she'd been chained up for so long. When he opened the door leading to the first floor, the flood of sunlight that filtered in nearly blinded her. She had been in the dark for so long. He told her that she was going upstairs in one of the bedrooms. He chained her to the bed and supplied her with a bucket for her toilet. The chain was so tight that she could only sit not stand. He announced that she would be there for a while. To indoctrinate her to her new surroundings, he then raped her. After he was through abusing her, he told her more about his abusive childhood. He claimed that he was often beat up by black kids. She learned that he was very prejudiced.

Castro was aware of the Jon Benet Ramsey murder. He wished he could have gotten to her first. He knew about the Elizabeth Smart abduction that happened only weeks before he grabbed Michelle. He told Michelle that he couldn't help himself – he had to hurt and abuse her. As much as she pleaded with him to get help for himself and let her go even promising she'd tell no one about what he'd done to her, he refused to release her. He wanted her to be happy there with him. They were supposed to be a family. Michelle couldn't believe her ears.

Later, he warned her that if she screamed he would shoot her. When he left she tried to get out of her chains but to no avail. When he returned hours later, he brought a stack of boards and what she first thought was a gun. He pointed it at Michelle and despite her blurry vision she was able to make out that it was a hand drill. He announced that they would be boarding up all the windows in all the upstairs bedrooms. He unchained her so she could hold the boards for him while he secured them across the windows.

Michelle was moved to another room. Time was rolling on and she estimated that Thanksgiving and Christmas were coming up. It made her miss Joey all the more. Castro promised to let her go as soon as he abducted two more girls. She hoped that he got caught if he tried to take another girl. But then it occurred to her that no one would know she was chained up in his house. She would just perish. He gave her an old radio but warned her not to play it too loud and not play black music. She was thrilled that she could listen to music again. A short while later, he brought her a pitbull puppy with strict instructions to potty train it by making it use a cardboard box he brought. Michelle was thrilled with the puppy which she named Lobo. Michelle immediately fell in love with the puppy. She fantasized about being freed and taking the dog for a walk.

One night Castro came in her room drunk on rum. He started roughing Michelle up which Lobo didn't like. He kept barking and tried to bite him in the leg. Castro picked up the dog and broke its neck. Michelle was hysterical, beating Castro with her fists. She



didn't care what he did to her. He forced her to watch him downstairs as he threw the dead puppy over the fence. She sobbed loudly over the dog while also hoping that someone would hear her.

## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

queasy, radiator, abducted, gunmetal, wobbly, decaying, carcass



# Chapter Twelve: The Backyard

## Summary

Michelle was devastated from the loss of Lobo. She “talked” to Joey everyday and had her radio. That was her life. One afternoon, Castro announced that he was going to let Michelle sit on the back porch. She didn’t know what to think or expect. Before they went outside, he gave her some old clothes to put on and made her put on a wig and huge sunglasses. He also pulled a handgun and warned her not to try anything “stupid.” He put the gun in his back pocket and led her onto the porch. It was the first time in over three months that Michelle had been outside. The backyard was as junky as they rest of the house. She noticed rusty chains strewn about the yard. Castro made her help him with some wood he was cutting.

Once back inside, he made Michelle give back the old clothes and her underwear. Now she was chained up and completely nude. It was freezing but he told she’d stay naked as long as he wanted her to. He often reminded her that she was a nobody and that no one was looking for. She hoped that her not trying to escape and not calling out for help while outside built up his trust in her so that he would become more lax with her confinement. For Christmas he gave her a cake and raped her. She had almost lost the will to live. One thing kept hope alive in her – the thought of seeing Joey again.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

bristly, furious



# Chapter Thirteen: TV and A Shower

## Summary

Michelle was forced to stay naked through February. She begged him to give her something to put on but he refused. She was freezing; her lips were numb and she could see her breath in the room. In March he brought her a small color TV. He warned her not to get used to it because she wouldn't have it long. She was not allowed to watch the news or any black programs. But Michelle was able to sneak in some news shows. She watched the news story about Elizabeth Smart being found alive. She watched situation comedies which was an escape from her dire reality.

After almost eight months without a shower, Castro told her she could take one because she stank. The bathroom, on the first floor, was as filthy as the rest of the house. When Michelle looked in the mirror she hardly recognized herself. She was filthy, her hair was matted and her face was bruised. There was no hot water so Michelle was forced to take a cold one. The entire time, Castro was just outside the door pounding on it and telling her to hurry up. Surprisingly, he gave her a small pair of dull scissors which she cut off as much of her matted hair as she could. She had no towel and just had to shake the water off. When she came out, he led her to his bedroom on the first floor and chained her up there. He forced her to watch porn movies with him and to tell him she was enjoying being raped. He wanted her to call him Big Daddy. When she refused, he punched her. She had to "obey" him in order to survive but it made her sick.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

fetishes



# Chapter Fourteen: The Second Girl

## Summary

Michelle watched the news story about a missing sixteen-year-old named Amanda Berry. She was last seen near Castro's neighborhood. Michelle recognized Amanda's photo. She was a lot younger than Michelle but Michelle was so far behind that they wound up in the same art class. Michelle had a sick feeling that Castro may have abducted her. Three weeks or so after Amanda went missing, Michelle heard loud music blasting from the basement. One afternoon, Castro told her he wanted to introduce someone he had brought into the house. She surprised him by guessing that the new person was Amanda, the missing person. She heard about her on the news. He claimed that it wasn't Amanda and left the room.

Castro moved Michelle back to the first bedroom where she'd been confined. He took her TV from her and said he was going to give it to Amanda. Later he brought Michelle a tiny black and white TV. The next day he brought Amanda into the room. Michelle quickly covered her naked body with a thin piece of material Castro had given her. He claimed she was his brother's girlfriend. Amanda said nothing. It was obvious that she was frightened and in shock.

One day he unchained Michelle and took her to Amanda's room. Amanda was fully clothed but Michele was totally nude. He left the rooms and the girls acknowledged that they knew each other. They wouldn't talk again for months. They would see each other for just minutes but were unable to talk. Michelle had so many things she wanted to ask Amanda but never had the chance. Castro was always quick to tell Michelle that people were looking for Amanda but not for her.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

ordeal, chamber, cubbyhole





# Chapter Fifteen: Pregnant

## Summary

Michelle started being sick in the morning and had sore breasts. She knew she was pregnant. In her distorted way of thinking after being held captive for a year, she decided she'd like another child even though it was the Devil's offspring. Castro would often tell Michelle that he had to have sex with her because Amanda didn't want to. He had a kinder approach to his second prisoner. He didn't want to force her to do anything she didn't want to do. He didn't like seeing her cry. Castro figured out that she was pregnant. He called her a "slut" and told her that she wouldn't be having it.

Castro began starving Michelle so she'd lose the baby. He still made two visits to her bedroom for sex each day but stopped bringing food. After starving her for two weeks, he appeared one evening with a large barbell. He jerked her to the edge of the mattress and told her it was time to get rid of their little problem. Although she tried to get away from him, the chains restrained her and eventually he swung the barbell as hard as he could at her stomach. She was in severe pain and agony. He told her that it better be gone the next day. She was bleeding heavily and passed out. The next morning, she had a miscarriage. Castro accused her of killing his baby and slapped her around.

The rest of 2003 and the start of 2004 went by with no change. She was naked and in chains and was raped on a daily basis. There was no communication with Amanda although Michelle could tell she was still there. She was only allowed in the kitchen on rare occasions. She was stunned when she was led down one day to see that alarms had been placed over every door and window and that concave mirrors had been set up all over the place so he could see what was going on from every angle. Escape seemed more impossible than ever. Besides, she was sure he'd kill her if he caught her trying to escape.

In the spring of 2004, Michelle heard a news report about another missing girl. On April 2, fourteen-year-old Gina Dejesus had gone missing from the neighborhood. Michelle also knew who Gina was. Michelle had gone to school with her older sister. She prayed that Castro hadn't taken her but feared that he had. That night she heard a girl screaming for help. Her screams were coming from the basement. Michelle fantasized about helping her but she was chained to her bed.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

disoriented, fending, barbell



# Chapter Sixteen: The Third Girl

## Summary

Michelle didn't hear another sound from the basement the rest of the month. She saw a news report with Mayra, Gina's sister and the girl who Michelle knew, begging for Gina's safe return. Out of the blue, Castro gave Michelle a notepad and pencil to draw with. She was ecstatic. She could draw again. She would draw something at the start of every day. She also wrote poems and song lyrics. She was careful with what she said because she figured Castro would eventually read it.

In May Castro unchained Michelle so she could help him board up another bedroom. It was probably for Gina. Michelle was torn up inside thinking about the horrors the fourteen-year-old was facing. She told Castro she didn't want to help him commit a crime. But that fell on deaf ears. He brought Gina into Michelle's bedroom. Michelle was thankful that she'd been allowed to have a tank top and underwear on. Michelle looked so young and totally scared to death. The thought struck Michelle that there could be power in number. With the three of them, maybe they could escape. One day he took Michelle downstairs to the bathroom where Gina was waiting. Gina was going to fix Michelle's hair. They had a few moments alone. Michelle told Gina that she knew who she was and that she'd tell her more when she could. But then Castro was back.

A few days later, Castro brought Gina, who looked paler than ever, into Michelle's room. He ordered Gina to get in bed with Michelle. He chained their feet together. Castro left them alone. After a long time when they figured he wasn't coming back, they began telling each other their stories.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

interrupted, incredibly



# Chapter Seventeen: My New Little Sister

## Summary

After making sure Castro was gone, Michelle asked Gina how she had been apprehended. Gina had been walking down the street with Rosie, another daughter of Castro. The girls were best of friends. It was in the afternoon after school had ended. The girls separated at a certain point. Soon, Castro pulled up by Gina and asked if she knew where Rosie was. He wanted her to help him find her, so she got into the car with him. He told her he had to stop by his house for a minute. When they pulled up to his house, he gave her some money for her and Rosie to spend at the mall later. Ultimately, he forced her into the house and down into the basement. Michelle told Gina that she'd been chained up there for two years but didn't tell her the horrid details of her ordeal. Michelle felt protective toward Gina. Gina knew that Amanda was there. She said they had to try to escape.

Using their bucket toilet was even more difficult because they were chained together. For two weeks, Castro didn't force himself on the girls or hit them. Michelle figured he was trying in his own strange way to protect Gina. Once when he was drunk he told Michelle how he had followed all three of the girls. He claimed that he had followed another girl in Gina's class. They looked very much alike and he got the "wrong" girl – his daughter's friend. He told Michelle that he had helped Gina's parents search for her. He said that they'd never find Gina and reminded Michelle that no one was looking for her.

Castro reverted to his old self and raped Michelle while still chained to Gina. He also began raping Gina while still chained to Michelle. Michelle felt sorry for Gina because she was so young and terrified. She urged Castro to take her instead of Gina. Castro usually responded with a punch to Michelle's face. They only saw Amanda once in a while. They could sometimes hear Castro taking her downstairs to his bedroom. Michelle told Gina about Castro's psycho personality but still withheld telling her about some of the horrors she had been subjected to. They spent hours watching the little black TV together and drawing. There was nothing else for them to do. Castro read that Michelle referred to him as a monster in her notebook. It seemed to bother him. Although he knew what he was doing was wrong, he had convinced himself that it wasn't that bad. Seeing what she thought about him in writing seemed to shake him.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

overwhelming, paradise, psycho



# Chapter Eighteen: Voices

## Summary

One day, Castro told Michelle and Gina that he was going to let them meet his grandson. He told them to hide their chains although he was too young to question anything. If they yelled out, he promised to shoot both of them. A short time later, he proudly introduced the girls to his little grandson. The kid just cried for his mother and Castro whisked him back downstairs. The girls couldn't figure out why he took the risk of bringing the kid up to see them. They hoped the little boy would say something to his parents that would make them suspicious, but their hopes were dashed as weeks passed and nothing changed.

One day Castro announced that he was transferring them to the basement. The surprise was that all three of the girls were led down the basement stairs. All three were gagged but he warned them not to make a sound or he'd shoot all three of them. It was the first time all three girls were together but they were unable to communicate because of the gags. A short while later, Michelle heard voices coming from upstairs, and she figured he was having some of his family over. She heard a woman ask if she could look down in the basement, but Castro responded that it was too messy.

After his visitors left, Castro came down and removed their gags and gave them some food. After he went back upstairs, all three girls were able to talk for the first time. Amanda's abduction had resulted the same way as the others; he offered her a ride then lured her inside his house. She was suffering from the same sexual and physical abuse as the other two girls. The girls remained chained together in the basement for three weeks. When he wanted sex with one of the girls, he would unchain her and bring her upstairs. Their main topic of conversation was how they could escape. A few weeks later, they were returned upstairs. Amanda in her own room and Michelle and Gina chained together in another room.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

lunatic, hysterically, dungeon



# Chapter Nineteen: The Van

## Summary

One hot summer morning, Castro forced all three of the girls outside and into his van. His family was coming over. Michelle figured he wanted to show them the entire house in case they had become suspicious. The van smelled awful and was equipped with chains. Once the girls were chained up he left, warning them that if he heard a sound he'd kill all of them. It was unbearably hot in the van. Michelle passed out three times from the oppressive heat. They were made to stay in the van for five days. Michelle wasn't forced to have sex with him during that time but he raped Michelle in the van on the fourth day.

Michelle had been chained, raped and beaten for over two years. She feared for her life and had no doubt that he would kill her. She didn't cry out while she was in the van, because she began to think that death would be a relief. Finally, Castro brought them back upstairs and chained them in their rooms. Although they talked constantly about ways to escape, the fact that they were chained up made it impossible.

In 2004, he allowed the girls a little freedom around the house as long as he was there. He had them cook for him and was always toting his gun. The kitchen was filthy. Michelle even saw little bugs crawling in the rice before they prepared it. After dinner he sometimes gave the girls beer or rum. The girls hoped he would get drunk while he was trying to rape them so they could escape. One night Castro gave Michelle the gun. She just gave it back thinking it was empty. He put the gun to her head. She pleaded with him not to shoot her. She was able to knock the gun out of his hand. When it fell on the floor, bullets fell out of it. It was loaded! Michelle fainted. Castro treated Michelle worse than he did the other girls. He told her she was ugly and that he couldn't stand to look at her. Michelle was routinely raped three to four times a day. Amanda was the golden girl. He singled her out to talk to and be with.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

burgundy, sweltering

# Chapter Twenty: Hard Labor

## Summary

In early 2004, Castro began referring to Amanda as his wife. He began spending a lot of time downstairs with her. When they were downstairs in the kitchen, he had Amanda sit with him at the table. He had Michelle come in the backyard with him to work but it usually wound up in rape in broad daylight. He once told Michelle that he might make her his second wife. He began feeding Michelle and Gina less. Sometimes a whole day would go by without food. He stopped giving Michelle and Gina notebooks to draw and write on.

Michelle was raped and beaten the most. Amanda could even talk back to him without getting punched. It wasn't the other girls' fault – there was only one person to blame for what was happening to Michelle. She got pregnant four more times over the years. Each time he caused her to abort them.

In 2006, Michelle and Gina saw on the news that Amanda's mother, Louwana, had died. After her daughter's abduction, she had devoted her life to finding her. They had a short time out of their chains that day. Michelle offered her condolences to Amanda, but Amanda hadn't seen the news. Amanda was heartbroken. A short while later Amanda got pregnant. He wasn't going to make her abort it. He told Michelle he was happy that a baby was on the way. Michelle thought of Joey and all the babies he made her lose.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

demon, perception



# Chapter Twenty-One: Light of the House

## Summary

On Christmas Eve night in 2006, Castro woke Michelle in the middle of the night. Amanda was in labor and he needed her help. He led Michelle down into the basement. He needed her help carrying up an inflatable plastic swimming pool. He wanted to put it on Amanda's bed so the mattress wouldn't be soiled. If the baby didn't come out alive, he would kill Michelle. She helped Amanda as much as she could. The baby girl was born with a blue face which Michelle knew meant trouble. With Castro yelling threats at her, Michelle put the baby on the mattress and gave her CPR. The baby started crying immediately. Castro made her help him carry the swimming pool out to the backyard.

The baby cried all night. Michelle hoped that someone would hear her cries and wonder why the sounds were coming from Castro's house. Amanda named the baby Jocelyn. She wanted the baby to have her last name, not Castro's. Outside the house, he demanded, she would be a Castro. He was apparently distracted by the baby and left Michelle and Gina alone for a few weeks. He started feeding them more and gave them new notebooks. He allowed Amanda out of her chains completely but locked her in the bedroom.

Castro didn't like the clothes that Michelle and Gina made for Jocelyn out of old clothes. He would buy her all new clothes. Michelle hated Castro but it didn't keep her from loving Jocelyn. She brought new life into the horrid situation she was in. She didn't go one night not thinking of Joey and praying that she would see him again.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

distracted, worthless



# Chapter Twenty-Two: Juju & Chelsea

## Summary

It seemed that overnight Jocelyn became a toddler. Castro didn't confine her in any way. She went from Amanda's room to see Michelle and Gina as she liked. Michelle watched the baby when Amanda was downstairs with Castro or was taking a shower. He was allowing the girls to take a weekly shower. During her first year there, Michelle had had only one shower. When Jocelyn started to talk, Castro gave Michelle and Gina different names. He didn't want her to know their real names. Michelle responded that they'd make up the names they wanted her to call them. Michelle picked "JuJu" because she liked Jujubes candy and Gina picked Chelsea.

In 2009, when Jocelyn was two, Castro unchained Michelle and Gina. His action wasn't out of kindness. He had noticed that Jocelyn was becoming curious about their chains. He began to trust the girls more and more and allowed them more freedoms within the house. Still, he had a gun and running out the door wasn't really a good option. He constantly watched them, continually testing them to see if they would try to escape. Castro always wielded his gun but he didn't have to. After years of confinement, the girls were trained and didn't dare defy his orders.

They would all watch TV together like a family. Castro would have Michelle massage his sore back. A woman that he met in a nightclub kept calling him on his cell phone. Michelle had the thought of grabbing the phone and begging her to call 911.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

luxury, vibrant





# Chapter Twenty-Three: Mustard

## Summary

When Jocelyn was two or three, Castro began taking her out of the house and he began going to church. He wanted Jocelyn to learn about God. He was happy to have another child in the house. He complained that he had lost his family when his wife left him. He was proud of Jocelyn and took her down to meet his band mates. Michelle wondered what they thought of her and where she came from. Later, she learned that he told his friends that she was the daughter of his girlfriend. Michelle feared that as Jocelyn matured, he would abuse her, too.

Castro spoiled Jocelyn with toys and game systems and a free run of the house when he was home. Michelle would draw with Jocelyn and put her pictures on her wall. Castro tried to hide his abuse of the girls. Once, Castro flew off the handle and slapped Michelle for no reason. The little girl froze in her tracks, fearful and uncertain. He became enraged when Jocelyn started crying in the middle of the night. He raced upstairs and ordered Amanda to “shut her up.” Everyone was afraid he’d hit Jocelyn if she didn’t quiet down.

In 2012, Gina developed an itchy rash. Castro brought her an anti-itch cream but it didn’t work. Michelle figured out that her red spots were from bed bugs. Castro was only concerned that the bed bugs would spread to Amanda and Jocelyn. He had gotten the mattress from the alley where someone threw it away. All Castro did about the bed bugs was put a piece of plastic over the mattress hoping that he’d smother them. It didn’t work and Michelle started getting bitten. Between the 100 degree heat and the bed bugs it was a horrible summer.

Gina convinced Castro to use some of her money to buy Michelle a new dress. Surprisingly, he agreed and bought the dress she found in the newspaper. Michelle loved it. The daily rapes continued through the hot summer and into the fall. Michelle and Gina decided to get fit and stronger so they could escape. They started doing daily sit-ups and push-ups.

When Jocelyn was five, Castro took her to a carnival. They brought back hotdogs for the girls. But they were covered in mustard which Michelle was extremely allergic to. Castro knew she was allergic to mustard but insisted that she eat it any way. Michelle was pregnant and felt she was contracting a virus. Castro told her to eat the hot dog or he’d shoot her. She wiped off the mustard and took a bite. Within minutes, her face swelled up and her throat closed. Castro wouldn’t take her to the hospital and said she’d get over it.

The next day she was worse. Her face was swollen to twice its size, her body was as red as a tomato and she couldn’t feel her throat. Gina was terrified. By the fifth day she was worse and told Gina she couldn’t deal with it any longer. Gina told her she had to



fight and stay strong for Joey. Michelle passed out. Michelle saw a bright light and felt she had crossed to the other side. But it wasn't her time. The next thing she knew, she saw Gina sitting by her and encouraging her to fight. Michelle felt that God brought her back and that he was real. After another five days, Michelle began to recover.

## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

hypocrite, ventilation, catastrophe, allergic, slathered



# Chapter Twenty-Four: Broken

## Summary

In November 2012, Michelle figured out that Castro wasn't working. He admitted to her that he got fired. Now she was assaulted at all hours of the day and night. Michelle was depressed. Christmas was coming; it would be her eleventh Christmas there. Joey would be thirteen. She probably wouldn't even recognize him. Adding to her depression, Michelle was three-months pregnant. Castro seemed to enjoy her misery and relish the fact that she was missing her son. Castro did his best to make Michelle feel she wasn't part of his Jocelyn's birthday party which was on Christmas Eve. He told her to sit on the steps and watch from there.

After the birthday party, the others returned upstairs but Castro told Michelle to come with him to the basement. He shoved her onto the basement floor from the third step. He told her he was going to fix her so that she couldn't get pregnant again. He began kicking her in the stomach repeatedly. She begged him to stop. He told her that the baby had better be gone by the time she left the basement. He punched her in the head. She was screaming and moaning. He told her to shut up or he'd kill her. He literally dragged her up to her bedroom. She began bleeding four days later. The baby plopped into the water when she was on the toilet. She picked up the dead fetus. Castro burst in and slapped Michelle so hard that she dropped the fetus. He was angry that she killed his baby. He picked the fetus up and threw it in a bag and left.

One day in March of 2013, he took Michelle out to the back yard. He said he was putting in a garden. He gave her a shovel and told her to dig a big hole. Immediately, she was suspicious. He was never interested in having a garden and why would he need such a big hole! As she dug, he kept telling her to make it deeper. Then it struck her, she was digging a grave! She feared for her life but weeks went by without him mentioning the big hole they dug.

## Analysis

## Vocabulary

assaulted, fetus



# Chapter Twenty-Five: Found

## Summary

Michelle woke up around 10 am on May 6, 2013. Gina was already up and drawing on her notebook. As Michelle began drawing, she told Gina that she had a funny feeling at the pit of her stomach which she couldn't explain. She heard Jocelyn running around and heard her tell Amanda that Castro had gone to his mother's house. Was it their chance to escape? Michelle knew that he often lied about going somewhere to test them. A short while later, she heard Amanda go down the stairs. The house was strangely quiet.

Suddenly, there was a loud pounding on the front door. It sounded like someone was trying to break the door down. Michelle opened their bedroom door and then heard a loud boom. Michelle and Gina were scared and tried to hide. Maybe robbers were breaking in. They heard heavy footsteps and then a woman's voice yell, "Police!" Michelle thought it was a trick. Then they heard a two-way radio and saw part of a blue uniform. Michelle crawled into Amanda's room through the adjoining door. Then two people came in the room asking if anyone was there. Michelle could see that they were uniformed cops with guns. Michelle burst out of her hiding spot and embraced the female cop. Gina emerged crying her eyes out.

The cops asked if there were any weapons in the house. Michelle told them that Castro had a gun but she didn't know where it was. The cops set out to search the rest of the house. The cops told them to get dressed. They were leaving the house. Michelle and Gina couldn't believe it. At age 32, Michelle walked down the staircase for the last time. The cops opened the door for the girls and they stepped onto the front porch and into freedom. An ambulance with Amanda and Jocelyn was waiting for them. Michelle began sobbing. Amanda grabbed her hand and told her that they were free. When Gina climbed in, they all cried and hugged together.

The EMT techs noticed that Michelle look sick. They made her lie right down and put an oxygen mask on her. Michelle heard that Amanda and Gina were released from the hospital the next day but Michelle had to stay. Later, she would learn that she was at death's door. Michelle was given numerous tests and it was discovered that she had a deadly bacterial infection that was literally eating her up inside. They also found that she had a dislocated jaw from the beatings and nerve damage in her arms. She learned quickly that Castro was wrong. Plenty of people cared about her. Her room was filled with flowers, balloons and good wishes.

Michelle was told to get a lawyer. She wasn't suspected of any wrongdoing. She had to talk to the FBI and should have legal representation. She was interviewed by two female agents who asked her hundreds of questions. She had so much to tell that she wound up meeting with them on several more occasions. Her brothers, Eddie and Freddie, came to visit her in the hospital. She didn't want to see her parents. Her



childhood was a reminder of the abuse she went through as a child and then again as an adult. She really didn't want to see anyone else. She needed space and time by herself. Her lawyer arranged for her to stay in the hospital as long as she needed.

Four days after her rescue, Michelle left the hospital avoiding the press and curious onlookers. She was taken to an assisted living facility where she would live for the time being. The city had changed so much since she'd last seen it.

## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

radiator, bacterial



# Chapter Twenty-Six: Starting Over

## Summary

There were mainly old people staying at the assisted living house. After Michelle arrived, an eighteen-year-old came giving her someone closer to her age. Michelle really wanted to get out on her own. After eleven years, she was ready for real freedom. Michelle watched her story being covered on TV. She couldn't believe what a huge international story it had become. She learned how they were saved. When Amanda was sure that Castro was gone, she noticed that he had left the inner front door unlocked. She opened it but the screen door was chained and she could only open it a little. She stuck her arm through the opening and started waving and screaming to the top of her lungs.

Charles Ramsey, an African-American neighbor, heard Amanda. He ran up on the porch to help her. She begged for help. He and another neighbor, Angel, kicked the bottom of the storm door out and got Amanda and Jocelyn out. Those men and the police, EMTs and the doctors and nurses will always be Michelle's heroes. When the men escorted Amanda away from the house, they gave her a phone so she could call 911. She told the police that she'd been kidnapped and held captive for ten years. She gave them the address and help was on the way. When the police arrived, Amanda told them that Michelle and Gina were inside.

The police found Castro in the McDonald's parking lot with one of his brothers. Two of his brothers were initially arrested along with him but later released. They didn't know the girls were there and mentioned that he was very secretive. Castro was charged with four counts of kidnapping and three counts of rape. But that was just the initial charges. Later, in court he pled guilty to 937 crimes including rape, assault and murder. Castro tried to portray himself as the victim because he'd been abused as a child. He was to get a life sentence with no chance for parole and had to agree to allow the house to be destroyed.

Michelle decided she wanted to testify at his pre-sentencing hearing even though her lawyer advised against it. Other family members planned to speak at the hearing for the other two girls. She spoke before the judge and court relating the misery she had gone through and how she had missed her son and years of her life. Michelle felt strong after her statement especially because Castro was sitting there in an orange jumpsuit and in handcuffs. He had to listen to her for once.

Castro spoke on behalf of himself claiming that he wasn't a monster. He did admit that he was sick. He was given the stiffest sentence possible by the judge when he said that the sex he had with the girls had been consensual. A month later, Michelle learned that Castro had killed himself. Michelle was upset because she wanted him to rot in jail, be confined and chained like she was.



Michelle talked to Gina on the phone a few times. Eventually, they lost contact. Michelle understood the need for privacy in order to recover and put those years behind. Michelle had a female counselor but she found it difficult to open up to her. The only people who understood what she went through were Amanda and Gina. The FBI had confiscated their notebooks. Michelle got hers back a few months after the rescue. It was difficult to look at all the pictures she'd drawn and the poetry she'd written but she felt she had to face it in order to get past it.

Joey is who gave her strength during her eleven-year ordeal. The thought of seeing him again kept her going. Her lawyer told her that Joey had been adopted by a wonderful couple. The lawyer wasn't sure if she'd be able to see him. They didn't want her to become a disruptive element in his life due to what she'd been through. She wrote a letter to the adoptive parents thanking them for caring for him. She asked them for recent photos of him and updates about what he's doing. She asked her lawyer to get the letter to them.

The adoptive parents sent her a stack of photos which she looks at everyday and will cherish forever. She loved him so much but knew that she had to let him go. Michelle has good and bad days. She is still trying to recover. But she's giving herself the gift of time. All she has to get through is one day at a time.

## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

maniac, secretive, manipulative, hindsight, captivity, consensual, atrocities, asphyxiation, fetish



# Afterword: A Life Reclaimed

## Summary

Castro's house of horrors was torn down on August 7, 2013. The girls were offered to split the \$22,000 they found in the house, but they all wanted the money to go to improving the neighborhood. Michelle witnessed the destruction of the house that morning. She handed out yellow balloons to those who had gathered. She told them that it stood for the thousands of people who are missing. Michelle had mixed feelings that morning. She was ecstatic that the house was coming down but she was reminded of all the time she lost there and all the misery she was made to endure.

Michelle moved into her own apartment around Thanksgiving 2013. She loves being alone and in a neat clean place. Everything she does now is her choice. She is not taking orders from someone else. Michelle spends her time painting, reading and writing. She enjoyed Christmas with new friends she's met. She would like children but because of the damage Castro did to her she cannot have another baby. But she wants to find a way to help children in need.

Being confined all that time, Michelle was amazed at the advances in technology. She had never seen a Smart Phone; someone gave her an iPhone. FaceBook, Twitter, email and texting were all new to her. But it gets overwhelming for her at times and when it does, she shuts it all down. She had to catch up with the events of the world like Katrina and the Asian tsunami and the wars in the Middle East. She goes dancing with her friends and attends church on Sundays. She went to Disneyworld and made an appearance on the Dr. Phil show. She started taking cooking lessons and dreams of opening her own restaurant.

It has been difficult for Michelle to talk about her family. She did not hear from her father and doesn't know if he's even alive. She really doesn't want to see her mother again. Her mother issued a statement that she loves Michelle and hopes that they can reunite someday. She understands the horror that she went through and needs time to heal. Michelle is trying to have more understanding for her mother. She is staying away from her other relatives because it would lead to a reunion with her mother. She's not ready for that yet. She's learning to let go of hate – even for Castro.

Michelle still questions why she had to go through the pain and torture that she was subjected to. Somehow she wants to reconcile with her past and give it purpose. God kept her alive for a reason probably to help others, and by doing so she will find herself again.



## **Analysis**

## **Vocabulary**

demolition, biological, tsunami, profound



# Important People

## Michelle Knight

Michelle Knight was 21 years old when she was abducted by Ariel Castro and was held captive for eleven horrific years. Michelle was the eldest child of parents who were dysfunctional and should have never had a child. Michelle had two younger brothers who were twins. At a young age she was forced to be responsible for their care and that of a young cousin who lived with them. Because of the duties surrounding the care of her younger relatives, Michelle missed a lot of school and fell way behind academically. Her parents obviously didn't care that her school experience was a nightmare for her. She was ridiculed for being older than the other kids in her class, "dumb" and for her diminutive size – as an adult she was only 4'7" in height.

On top of being emotionally and mentally abandoned and abused by her parents, she was regularly sexually abused by a male relative who also lived with the family. The horrific conditions at home forced her to flee. She ran away as a young teenager and lived on the streets. She became a drug-runner for a dealer in order to earn some money so she could eat. After a close call with the police, she was returned home where conditions did not improve. She had a child, Joey, at nineteen. She loved that child more than her own life and dedicated herself to him. Unfortunately, her mother's drunken boyfriend hurt the boy in an altercation and he was taken from Michelle when he was two. She was fighting to regain custody and on the day she was abducted by Castro; she was on her way to a hearing at social services.

Michelle spent the next 11 years as Castro's sex slave. She was chained up for most of that time and threatened with her life should she try to escape. Castro kidnapped two more girls who also became his captives. The thought of seeing Joey again and her prayers and dreams of freedom kept Michelle going and saw her through the most difficult situation that anyone could imagine. Finally, in 2013, the girls were rescued and Castro was apprehended. Michelle is on the road to recovery, but she is taking one day at a time and knows that the 11 years that were stolen from her and the abuse she was forced to endure are forever part of her.

## Ariel Castro

Ariel Castro was a divorced man who lived in the same rundown neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio, as Michelle Knight. He was the father of an acquaintance of Michelle's. He lived alone although his young daughter Emily visited often especially after school was out. Castro was a school bus driver by profession.

One day when Michelle had lost her way to a social services hearing in which she was to request that she regain custody of her two-year-old son, Joey, Castro spotted her and offered her a ride. As it turned out, he had been following her and had targeted her for



abduction. Desperate to get to the hearing, Michelle took the ride. He told her he had to stop home for a minute and made up an excuse for her to come inside. After being inside his filthy house that was filled with trash and in disarray, he grabbed her and tied her up with an extension cord. That was the beginning of her abduction which lasted for 11 years.

Castro raped, beat, starved and taunted Michelle on a daily basis. A year later, Castro abducted two more girls, Amanda and Gina. They were both chained and held in his prison for ten years. Amanda had his child. Michelle was pregnant five times but Castro caused her to abort each time. At times, Castro would cry and tell Michelle how devastated he was that his wife left him and took his daughter away from him. He had a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality. After kicking Michelle repeatedly in the stomach when he found out she was pregnant, he cried and threatened to shoot her for killing his child.

As the years passed by, Castro thought of the girls as his family. He began to get a little sloppy with his security measures. One day when he was gone, he left an inside door unlocked. Amanda was able to reach through the locked screen door and scream for help. Two neighbors helped her and her daughter get out. She called the police and soon Michelle and Gina were rescued.

Castro was charged with over 900 felonies. He pled guilty to many of the charges to avoid the death penalty. However, he would never have another day of freedom in his lifetime. A short while after he was sentenced, he was found hanging in his cell. A coward to the end, he had committed suicide to avoid the confinement that he had subjected the three young women to.

## **Amanda**

Amanda Berry was one of the girls who was abducted and held captive by Ariel Castro. She was allowed to have a baby and was referred to by Castro as his wife.

## **Gina DeJesus**

Gina DeJesus was, at 14, the youngest of the girls that Castro abducted. She and Michelle were often chained together in a filthy bed. They became friends and were able to keep up each other's spirit during their confinement.

## **Jocelyn**

Jocelyn was the daughter of Amanda and Castro. She was 6-years-old when the girls were rescued. She had no idea that her father was the monster that he was.



## Joey

Joey was Michelle's son. When he was two-years-old, Michelle lost custody of him because of a family argument that turned violent. She was in the process of regaining custody of him when she was kidnapped. Thoughts and memories of Joey helped to see Michelle through her ordeal.

## Eddie and Freddy

Eddie and Freddy were Michelle's younger twin brothers. She loved her brothers and missed them when she was gone for 11 years. When they were young, Michelle's mother made her care for her little brothers. By making Michelle take on these and other duties Michelle's school work suffered and she fell way behind.

## Sniper

Sniper was an African-American man who found Michelle sleeping in a large trash can under a bridge. He was a drug dealer and took her in so that she could do some drug running for him.

## Emily Castro

Emily Castro was a friend of Michelle's close friend, Deanna. Emily lived with her mother but had a good relationship with her father, Ariel Castro. When Castro abducted Michelle, he coaxed her inside his house by telling her that Emily was inside.

## Lobo

Lobo was the puppy that Castro surprised Michelle with. She loved the dog. It gave her something to focus on during her long days of confinement. But when the dog barked at him for beating up on Michelle, he picked it up and broke its neck thereby breaking Michelle's heart.



## Objects/Places

### Cleveland, Ohio

The story of “Finding Me – A Decade of Darkness, a Life Reclaimed” takes place in Cleveland, Ohio.

### The Bridge

When things got too unbearable at home, Michelle ran away from home. She was homeless and slept in a trash can under a bridge.

### Sniper’s House

Sniper was a drug dealer who found Michelle under a bridge. He offered to take her in – give her a warm place to stay – in exchange for doing some drug running for him.

### Social Services

Michelle was on her way to a hearing at social services when she was abducted. She was in the process of regaining custody of her son. Castro offered to give her a ride. But instead of taking her to the hearing, he abducted her and placed her in chains.

### Assisted-Living House

After Michele and the other girls were rescued, Michelle was placed in an assisted-living house to allow her time to recover and decided what she would do with the rest of her life.

### Castro’s House

Michelle was chained in Castro’s house for eleven years. She was abused in every way possible during that nightmare that Michelle thought would never end.

### The Overpass

After Michelle ran away from home as a young teenager, she was homeless and slept under an overpass. Even though it was miserable, she felt free and relieved to be away from the abuse she was suffering.



## Blue Trash Can

When Michelle was homeless, it was freezing outside. She stole a large blue trash can from someone's yard and made it into her "bedroom." Crawling inside the trash can kept her out of the wind and rain.

## Chains

For over a decade, being chained to her bed or to a pole became part of Michelle's life. For the last several years of confinement, Michelle and Gina were chained to each other in the same bed.

## McDonalds Breakfast Sandwiches

Since Castro's house was close to a McDonald's, Michelle was fed a breakfast sandwich from the fast-food restaurant almost every day.

## Castro's Gun

During Michelle's entire confinement, Castro threatened her with a handgun. If she didn't obey him or tried to escape, he would shoot and kill her. She wasn't sure the gun was loaded until one day when the gun fell on the floor and bullets fell out.

## The Notebooks

Castro gave Michelle a notebook and pencil. She loved to draw and write poems and was thankful to get the notebooks. He gave her notebooks all along during her confinement. The FBI used the notebooks to chronicle her incarceration.

## The TV

Castro gave Michelle a color TV, which he later took away to give to Amanda. Then he gave Michelle a black and white TV. The TVs were the one connection that Michelle had to the outside world. She saw the news when both Amanda and Gina were missing and suspected that Castro had abducted them.

## Lobo

Castro gave Michelle a puppy that she named Lobo. She loved that dog and doted on it like a child. But when the dog barked and snapped at Castro, he picked up the puppy and snapped its neck. Michelle was devastated.



## **The Burgundy Van**

Castro put the three girls in an old van on the side of the house. He was having company and he had to get them out of sight. It was during the hot summer and the girls were chained inside the hot van for five days.

## **The Large Hole in the Backyard**

At one point, Castro had Michelle help him dig a grave-sized hole in the backyard. He said he was doing some gardening but Michelle didn't buy it. She thought it was her grave. Fortunately, she never was proven right because she and the other girls were rescued soon after she dug the hole.

# Themes

## Abuse

Abuse is the strongest theme contained in “Finding Me” which is the story of Michelle Knight who was abducted by a demented man and held captive for an unbelievable eleven years. Before Michelle’s abduction, she had suffered various forms of abuse during her entire life. Her parents didn’t seem to care if she got an education or not and apparently gave little thought to what she needed physically and emotionally.

A virtual parade of relatives moved in and out of the family house for Michelle’s entire life. At least one of these relatives, a man who she did not identify, sexually abused her for years. It seems that her mother, father or other relatives would have grown suspicious of the man who warned her that he’d kill her and her parents if she told them. But that wasn’t the case. Young Michelle was left to defend herself and deal with adult problems while still a child. The abuse and lack of support drove Michelle out of the house as a young teenager. Although she was on the street and sleeping under a bridge, she was free of the abuse which made her homelessness all the worse.

All forms of abuse are despicable. Even though Michelle had been sexually and emotionally abused for years, nothing could have completely prepared her for the years of abuse that were in store for her after she was kidnapped by Ariel Castrol and held captive for more than ten years. He usually raped her two or three times a day, punched her, chained her, kicked her, starved her, threatened her with a gun and caused her to abort five fetuses over the years she was there. That Michelle still was in her right mind after enduring such an ordeal is nothing short of a miracle.

## Abandonment

There are a number of ways that one can be abandoned. Michelle Knight experienced most of them in her young life. She was the firstborn in her family. A few years after her birth, her mother gave birth to twin boys. At a young age, she was made to care for her younger brothers; her mother had other things to do like get high and drink.

As a result, Michelle was forced to miss a lot of school and fell way behind, but her mother or father didn’t seem to care. They also didn’t seem to care that she was ridiculed at school and taunted by the other kids for being slow and extraordinarily short. As an adult, she was only 4’7”. Michelle’s parents had abandoned her by giving her adult responsibilities and not treating her as their child or caring about her education. Michelle’s parents abandoned their parental duties and cheated Michelle out of a healthy childhood.

But there are things that most would consider worse than missing and failing school. The family home saw a parade of relatives and friends who stayed on and off with the family. One male relative began sexually abusing Michelle when she was a very young





child. This abuse went on for years. The man warned her that he would kill her parents if she told them what was going on. But with the abuse going on that long, it seems that the parents would have been suspicious. She was abandoned by the male relative who took advantage of her and she was again abandoned by her parents who did not protect her as they should have.

Michelle had a difficult childhood and adolescence but it paled in comparison to the torture and abuse that she was to face after being abducted by Castro. This man was an adult with grown children and grandchildren. Michelle once again was abandoned by an adult who abused her and used her to feed his own sickness. At times during her ordeal, she felt that God had abandoned her, too. But she somehow hung on and kept praying. Finally, after 11 years of abuse, she was rescued. Hopefully, her life will finally be on a different path that will avoid those who will disappoint and abandon her.

## Survival

It's amazing what the human spirit can withstand. Despite the torture, anguish, loneliness and fear that Michelle and the other two girls who were held captive by Ariel Castro for a decade was made to endure, they somehow remained hopeful that they would one day escape. Michelle and Gina were often chained together on the same bed and therefore were able to talk about their dilemma quite a bit. When one was down, the other would lift her up with positive talk of a future outside their prison. The girls knew instinctively that without hope there could be no survival. Bottom line, all three girls wanted to survive and return to the lives they had before Castro abducted them. It is only by retaining that goal and vision that they maintained the will to survive.

Michelle naturally detested Castro and would have had plenty to say to him, but she had to survive. And to survive, she had to remain quiet and go along with the horrors that she faced. He threatened to kill her probably hundreds of times during the 11 years she was held captive. If she spoke out the way she wanted to, he might have killed her and she wouldn't have survived.

The girls were ever watchful for their opportunity to escape. But Castro usually thought of everything and there were little if any chances for them to safely flee. But he brought about his own downfall. When he began to think of the girls as his "family" he started to become a little sloppy. On the day that the girls were rescued, he made the mistake of not securing the front door. Amanda spotted the security lapse, and even though she couldn't get through the storm door, she was able to reach through the screen and scream for help.

The girls were all saved, although they will not be the same people that they would have been had they not had those years stolen from them. Despite the fact that the road to full recovery will not be an easy one for them, they were all able to survive a nightmare in hell that none of them could have imagined.

# Styles

## Structure

“Finding Me is comprised of twenty-six short to medium-sized chapters. A “Preface” by Michelle Knight precedes the first chapter which provides an overview of Michelle’s ordeal of abduction, abuse and horror. An “Afterword” following the last chapter is an update from the author on her life after rescue and the difficult road to recovery that she is facing. A section of photos of Michelle at various stages of her life is also included in the book.

This memoir is fundamentally told in chronological order and first details Michelle’s difficult childhood during which she was neglected and emotionally abandoned by her parents and sexually abused repeatedly and frequently over the years by a male relative. The circumstances in her home drove her to run away as a young teenager. She was homeless for a period of time and, to earn enough money to survive, she became a drug runner for a drug dealer.

After dropping out of school and having a baby, Michelle was beginning to accept her life. The focal point of her life was her son. When he was taken away, she was devastated. The story moves on to the day she was to appear at a hearing to regain custody of her two-year-old. She unfortunately accepted a ride from a friend’s father whom she trusted. That man turned out to be Ariel Castro. Needless to say, he didn’t take her to the hearing. Instead, he imprisoned her in chains for the next 11 years. The rescue of Michelle and the other two girls is most heartwarming after reading the horrors that those girls were made to endure.

## Perspective

“Finding Me – A Decade of Darkness, a Life Reclaimed” is told in the first person by author Michelle Knight. She is the person who went through the ordeal of being kidnapped and then abused and tortured and chained for 11 years afterwards. No one could tell Michelle’s story better. As she intimates in the book, she could not open up to her counselor because no one besides Gina and Amanda could fully understand what she went through as a captive of Ariel Castro.

Michelle told the story of her troubled childhood. She’d been emotionally abandoned by her mother, and her father left the family when she was young. She was forced to care for a parade of young cousins who came to live with the family from time to time. It didn’t matter to her mother whether Michelle went to school or not. Her most important role was to take care of the little children who moved in and out of the house.

Much worse, Michelle was sexually abused by an unnamed relative who also moved in with the family. This abuse went on years. Her unhappy home life and her unsatisfying



school experience led her to run away from home as a young teenager. She lived on the street, slept under a bridge, and became a drug runner.

Strangely, her childhood almost prepared her for the abuse - both sexual and emotional - that she was forced to endure after her abduction. Michelle is the living example of the saying that what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

## Tone

As in any tale about being taken and lost and alone, there are many references in "Finding Me" about feeling depressed, isolated and hopeless. But just when Michelle gets down, she seemed to be able to spring back and think positively about her future – a future she wasn't even sure was possible. But Michelle persevered.

There is also some graphic language and references. This story is not for the faint of heart. The brutal scene when Castrol promises to "fix" Michelle once and for all when he learns she's pregnant for the fifth time is almost unbearable. He viciously and repeatedly kicks her in the stomach while wearing heavy combat-like boots. Michelle learns later that he did "fix" her; she was told she would be unable to have children because of the damage done.

There is also rough language and references to rapes. The contrast between the reality and horror of what Michelle was going through and the celebration of a holiday is difficult to grasp. For one of the Christmas holidays she spent there, he gave her a Christmas cake and raped her.

Many of the comments he made in their conversations points to how sick he was. After he forced her to abort her baby, he raged at her for killing his baby threatening to shoot her over it. Not only did he abuse Michelle physically and sexually, he taunted her with hurtful comments that no one cared for her and that no one was looking for her.



## Quotes

There were prostitutes, pimps, and drug dealers standing on the corners. There were drive-bys. And down the street there was a liquor store that stayed open all night long.

-- Michelle (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 7, paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Michelle described the neighborhood her family lived in after being homeless for a year.

I knew the drugs we sold and delivered were making people's lives a big mess. But as much as I hated handing out weed and going to scary places, I didn't hate that as much as I did the terrible fear and loneliness.

-- Michelle (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 42, paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Michelle was a drug runner for a dealer for a period of time. She felt guilty but it was her way out of her homelessness.

I had been abused by a family member for years. I'd lived in a garbage can under a bridge in all kinds of weather, like an animal. But nothing could have prepared me for losing my child.

-- Michelle (Chapter 7 paragraph Page 60, paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Michelle describes her angst after her son, Joey, was taken from her and placed in foster care.

The basement – that's where he's taking me! My whole body started to shake. Just thinking about going to the basement scared the stuffing out of me. In all the horror books I'd ever read, nothing good ever happened in the basement.

-- Michelle (Chapter 10 paragraph Page 87, paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Michelle shares the moment that she realized that she was heading for horror. She was being taken to the basement where she would be imprisoned for years to come.

I was in so much shock and fear that all I could do was lie there like I was dead. In a way, I think a part of you has to die in order to get through a thing like that.

-- Michelle (Chapter 10 paragraph Page 90, paragraph 4)

**Importance:** In describing one of her brutal early attacks, Michelle explains how she tried to deal with the unthinkable ordeal she was being subjected to.

Some days he would bring you a radio and a puppy; other days he was a violent storm—a raging drunk who raped you and then snapped your puppy's neck.

-- Michelle (Chapter 12 paragraph Page 113, paragraph 4)



**Importance:** Michelle is describing the hell she lived under and the volatile nature of her captor.

I missed him [Joey] more than you can imagine. Only a mother can understand what it's like to have her child torn away from her. It's like having your soul ripped right out of your body.

-- Michelle (Chapter 16 paragraph Page 141, paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Michelle describes the most agonizing part of her abduction and confinement. She longed to see her son again.

I'm going to let you meet my grandson.

-- Castro (Chapter 18 paragraph Page 157, paragraph 3)

**Importance:** That Castro wanted the girls that he had kidnapped and raped and abused to meet his young grandson demonstrated the level of his madness and his disconnection to reality.

He had me convinced that if he heard us yelling, he'd get to us and shoot us before anyone could find us. And by that time, after being chained up, raped and beaten constantly for over two years, I thought he was capable of anything.

-- Michelle (Chapter 19 paragraph Page 167, paragraph 2)

**Importance:** This passage demonstrates the psychological and emotional abuse that the girls were subjected to.

Christmas was a day I had started to hate even more than I used to love it.

-- Michelle (Chapter 21 paragraph Page 182, paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Thoughts of Christmas with her son tore her apart as she languished beaten, raped and in chains in Castro's house.

I was way too sick to leave the hospital.... I hadn't felt great that morning in the house, but I had gotten used to feeling horrible. I had no idea I was practically at death's door.

-- Michelle (Chapter 25 paragraph Page 222, paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Michelle emphasizes how sick she was when she was rescued. If she hadn't been saved, she probably would have died in the house without anyone knowing what happened to her.

For eleven years my life had stood still, but Cleveland and the rest of the world had moved on. All I could do was weep.

-- Michelle (Chapter 25 paragraph Page 225, paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Michelle's return to "normal" life was bittersweet. Being free again reminded her of how much she had missed.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic for Discussion 1

Why was seeing photos of Joey a good but sad experience for Michelle?

## Topic for Discussion 2

Why didn't Michelle report the men who abused her?

## Topic for Discussion 3

Why did Michelle like staying under the overpass?

## Topic for Discussion 4

How did Michelle's father find her? How did this make Michelle and her father feel?

## Topic for Discussion 5

Why did Michelle want to have her baby that was fathered by Castro?

## Topic for Discussion 6

Why did Michelle lie about Joey's injury? What was Michelle required to do in order to get her son back?

## Topic for Discussion 7

After Castro assaulted her, how did Michelle try to prepare herself for what might happen to her? How did she react after the assault? How did Michelle try to block out what was happening to her?

## Topic for Discussion 8

What was Castro's excuse for abusing Michelle?



## Topic for Discussion 9

What kept Michelle from completely giving up during her 11 years of abuse in Castro's house?

## Topic for Discussion 10

Why didn't Amanda speak when she first saw Michelle? How did Castro make Michelle feel inferior to Amanda?

## Topic 10

Why was Michelle reluctant to tell Gina all the details of her ordeal?

## Topic 10

Why did Castro want the girls to meet his grandson? What pattern did Castro show in the abduction of his captives?

## Topic 10

Was Castro planning on killing Michelle or was he just trying to scare her?

## Topic 10

Why did Castro threaten to kill Michelle if the baby died? Why did Castro free Amanda from her chains?

## Topic 10

Why was it difficult for Michelle to open up to her counselor?

## Topic 10

Why did Michelle and Gina hide when the police announced they were there? Why did Michelle want to have time alone before she saw her family?

## Topic 10

How did testifying at Castro's hearing help Michelle?