

Chapter 1: If You Were Raised by Wolves ...

“Why do you have so many stress toys on the table?” Alex asked, walking into my office and taking a seat. Between the squeeze ball, fidget chain, bendy creature, and Silly Putty, she instantly reached for the red egg, opened it, and began to sculpt the contents inside.

“These are for your clients, aren’t they ... because of all the stress?”

“Actually, they’re mine,” I said.

“These stress toys are for you?”

“Well, I refer to them as ‘chew toys.’”

“Is it because your clients make you stressed?” she asked.

“No, my clients don’t make me stressed. My restlessness does.”

She smiled despite being focused on her putty sculpture. “So, without your ‘chew toys’ would you be chasing your tail?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m that kind of dog. But the fact that *my* stress toys are in an office for stressed people, kinda’ keeps my secret safe ...”

“Unless someone asks ...” she said. “Do you feel outed now, Michelle? Should I be the one taking notes and nodding my head?”

“And how would that make *you* feel, Alex?”

She rolled the putty into a ball, put the contents back into the red egg and said, “I guess that’s my cue that fun’s over?”

“Alex, the fun has just begun. But there’s no way it begins with *that* question.”

She grabbed a pen from the table as if ready to write. “Then it begins with more paperwork, I’m sure. The depression/anxiety worksheets. We didn’t get to those when we met last time.”

“I hate to disappoint you but I’m really not that type of therapist.”

“No more forms?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“What about deep breathing? Teaching me how to breathe in ... breathe out.”

“Nope.”

“Then what, Michelle? If you’re ‘not that type of therapist,’ how do you gather the information you need?”

“I ask one simple question, Alex: Who would you be if you were raised by wolves?”

1974: East Los Angeles

“Look at this hair!” my mom yelled, hacking the brush through my unruly mane as if breaking up weeds. “¡Ay, que muchita! They’re gonna think you were raised by wolves,” she hissed through her pursed lips, before jerking my head up/down, right/left.

“That hurts, Mom!”

“Then stand still,” she threatened.

At three, it was rare to see a girl with hair as long as mine. The mane on my head looked at least six years old. But since my dad loved long hair ... and since I was too restless to let anyone groom me on a regular basis, the occasional day in the bathroom with Mom was just how it was going to be.

“Don’t you give me those eyes,” she said, smacking my noggin with the hard, wood brush. “Your Dad’s already gone to work. Now, stand still.”

At three, I’d yet to be punched in the stomach but I couldn’t imagine it feeling any worse than my stomach did in this moment. In this moment of need. The moment I needed

my dad to save me. Save me from this green manalishi (with the two prong crown).

He didn't whack me in the head with the hard wood brush. He didn't yank my pigtails in order to yank me back into submission. He didn't yell at me and pinch my arm for not standing still. And he didn't try to make me look like a girl. But that's not to say he wasn't grooming me.

My dad put me on the bare back of a horse before I could walk. I never asked for this. I was too young to speak. But not too young to show enthusiasm and remarkable skill for what I was being groomed to become.

My dad was a bull rider. He rode beasts heavier than one ton whose objective it was to gore/stomp/or head butt you into unconsciousness ... at best. No helmet, protective vest, or mouth guard to protect you. This was rodeo circa, 1974. Putting the extreme in sport.

Rodeo was a sport. In my three-year-old eyes, it was the best sport around. Cowboys were like rock stars! They commanded the audience as well as their livestock. They were tough. Never cried. Acted and cursed like pirates. And were every bit as restless as I was.

And though I was intent on being in this world, my dad was intent on the two of us being in charge of it.

My dad was a cowboy who competed in bull riding and calf roping. And he had every intention of grooming me to be a cowboy as tough and skilled as he was. But my dad had ambitions beyond being a cowboy. He wanted to be a producer. A rodeo producer.

He wanted to produce the greatest show on earth that featured bulls rather than lions. And he thought it even more ambitious to pursue a business that stayed in the family. Grooming his daughter to eventually perform in, compete in, and operate the sport and production of rodeo. Which was no small feat.

The sportsmanship, alone, rivaled no other. Never simply a matter of knowing your own capabilities, you had to know, and often intuit, the behaviors and reactions of the animals you were working with.

Sometimes the animals you were working with wanted to kill you. Sometimes they wanted to merely buck you off on to the hard ground. Sometimes, they wanted to perform just as practiced but would become spooked by a random noise in the stands. Regardless, a rider was only as good as the steadiness of the livestock they were working with. But let's not forget the competition.

Despite the pageantry, skill, and entertainment, rodeo was a competition. A timed competition. One that had you competing to hold on and ride stronger than the eight seconds against you. Or one that had you competing to perform the fastest time.

A competition involving speed, agility, and the audacity to do it all with livestock that could kill you intentionally or unintentionally. With so many variables, you were lucky if you walked away. And sometimes my dad wasn't so lucky.

By three, heading into four, I'd attended many a rodeo bearing witness to my dad's body, lying lifeless in the middle of the arena. I'd seen him hung up, stomped on, gored, and lifted in the air by horns stretching two feet on either side of the bull's head. But this was all just another day at the office ... for a demigod.

Only a demigod was capable of riding an ornery bull in one moment and gently brushing my hair in the next. He could anticipate the moves of his horses as well as he could anticipate the moves of his friends.

He could control my behavior with a knowing glance and control my mom's moods with a sucker punch grin. He was an ex-con who failed to let that deter his pursuits. And was tough enough to keep fear from distracting him.

If I was going to stay the only place I wanted to be – by his side – I’d have to be every bit as determined, smart, fearless, and tough. Because if I wasn’t, I’d be relegated to the grandstands ... the place where you watched the determined, smart, fearless, and tough performers. The place where my mom sat.

I loved my mom but she wasn’t my dad. Where he was patient, she was moody. Where he was charming, she was reserved. Where he was wise, she was naive. And where he was tough, she was timid. I could take moody, reserved, even naive, but ... timid?

“Why don’t you get on, Mom?”

“Honey, that horse is too big and fast for me.”

“Will you ride this ride with me?”

“Honey, it’ll make my stomach sick. I’ll wait here for you.”

“Come, sit up here, Mom ...”

“Honey, that’s too high. I’ll stay down here and read my book.”

God, my mom was such a party pooper! She was incapable of making a decision without consideration. She stopped. Second-guessed. Retracted. And doubted. And even with consideration, she still remained in the stands while I hopped around, crazy like a fox.

By the time three became four, the rodeo arena was the only playground I knew. The livestock were the only pets I had. There was a lot of freedom for me to get into trouble, and a lot of danger to bring trouble to me. Yet while my dad had his hands full, grooming my

restless energy for the rodeo arena, my mom had her hands full, harnessing my energy outside of it.

When I was with my mom, there was no arena. There was preschool and our house. Confined spaces. Respectable spaces. Spaces expecting appropriate conduct. Spaces resembling a round hole to my square peg. Yet despite my mom's unwillingness to be fearless in the face of fear, she had a funny way of softening my square edges to the point of submission.

"Put that down, you'll break it. And since we're in a store, they'll make us pay for what you break."

"But I want to play with it!"

"Michelle, I said put it down."

As a square peg with the freedom to roam, not getting my way wasn't something I was all that accustomed to. But since I was crazy like a fox, my precocious child-brain couldn't help but wonder, *and now my timid, little Mom is going to try to tell me what to do?*

"Michelle, if you don't ..."

"Ouch! Don't pinch me!" Ha! If I make a scene, she'll back down ... just watch and wait. Why is she pinching me harder?

"You want to scream? Let's go!"

Um, I don't think this will end well.

And it never did.

Whether it was my reluctance to listen to her first warning; my insistence that hiding from her in the clothing racks was more fun than shopping; or my incessant desire to want what I want when I wanted it, the timidity I thought defined her would turn to wrath faster than a horse pivots on its hind legs.

When I'd hide in the clothes, she'd leave me. When I screamed to embarrass her, she gave me something – on the back of my butt – for me to scream even harder about. When I'd get whiny, she not only showed me her two prongs she came after me with them.

My mom had her own brand of true grit. And it wasn't rare for her to team up with my dad to exert it.

Not only were my parents a team in marriage, they were also a team with me ... or against me, depending on my behavior. Fortunately, they didn't expect a lot. So long as I remained respectful of others and the animals that worked for us, I'd be okay. And I'd be granted the freedom I longed for.

I could understand this. I could get behind this. My parents being a team made sense. But there was something I just couldn't get behind. Something that snuck up and bit me in the butt every time my dad walked in from work, singing the song my mom had playing.

"... 'in love with a good-timin' man' ... turn it up, Rose!"

"Dad's home!"

"Get over here, Mitch!"

Please pick me up! Please spin me around and dance with me!

"... 'she loves him in spite of his wicked ways she don't understand' ..."

Don't ever put me down! Let's keep dancing!

"'With tear drops and laughter' ..."

Don't sing, Mom! Go back into the kitchen. He's dancing with me! Dad, don't put me down ... don't put me ...

"Go on, get! It's your Mom's turn!"

Not if I get in the middle. Ha! I'm in between you guys. I'm the ruler of the world. Wait, no ... don't kiss. Please don't kiss. Ewwwww ... I'm going back to my room.

What was the point of hanging out if I wasn't the center of attention? The place I stayed most of the time. The place my parents held me, most of the time. But sometimes, I was bitten with the reality that despite the attention on me, when it came to my parents' relationship to each other, their relationship to me was secondary.

How Much Rope ...

At around four, it's pretty safe to say I wasn't all that self-aware. I just did what I wanted until some barrier halted my pursuits. Sometimes that barrier was the pain of a fat lip. Sometimes it was the soap used to wash my mouth free of the dirty words I found so creative. Sometimes it was the two prongs my mom used as a weapon. Sometimes it was the belt around my dad's waist. And sometimes, these tactics worked. But not all the time.

I was fearless. I was dauntless. I was incapable of consideration and simply beelined to the object of my desire. These qualities are not inherently bad. And can actually be necessary in the rodeo arena. But typically, it's adults who play in the rodeo arena.

"Mitch, you can't climb into the bull's pen. You could've been hurt."

"They couldn't reach the hay, Dad. I needed to help them."

I was fearless of things I should fear. I was undaunted by risk or threat to mortality. But in my world, there was no threat to mortality. I was too young to really know that it existed, despite living so dangerously. I was old enough, and aware enough to know danger existed; broken bones existed; unconsciousness existed; and hospitals existed, but I'd yet to see death.

And without death, the only thing I had to fear was pain. But that was no big deal. Even though I'd never broken a bone, been unconscious or admitted into the hospital, I trusted these to be my future. A future I wanted. A future my dad would intend to correct.

“Mitch, how much rope do you need before you hang yourself?”

“I don't know. What does that mean? Like Tarzan rope? Like hanging upside down and swinging in circles?”

“If you're old enough to get yourself into trouble, then you have to be old enough to learn how to get yourself out.”

“Because I hid in the dryer from Grandpa?”

“Because you hid in the dryer from Grandpa. Because you were riding your Big Wheel under the moving truck. Because you tried to jump off the roof. So, if you're going to get into trouble – which you will – you have to learn how to keep trouble from being something you can't get out of.”

I may not have been aware of the predilections led by my authentic sensibilities but something told me my parents were. They seemed to know how much rope I needed before I hung myself. How far I'd go if left to my own devices. What part of my disposition drove me toward trouble. And now, my dad wanted to teach me how to get out of trouble.

Being fearless as an adult was a quality to aspire to. But most adults are aware of mortality. It was a different picture altogether for the fearlessness of an adult to be encased in the body of a child. Especially one with a head like mine.

My head was proving to be every bit as relentless as my tough exterior. Something not lost on my parents. Something they may have even encouraged.

I have no recollection of being one of those kids who got up Saturday mornings and watched cartoons over a bowl of cereal. Cartoons had their place in every kid's life, but if I had the choice to watch cartoons or spend the day with my dad ...

I also have no recollection of being one of those kids who yearned to play with other kids. Playing had its place in every kid's life, but if I had the choice to play with others or play with the thoughts in my head ...

I loved my head almost as much as I loved the arena. When in the arena, I didn't need my head. I needed my tough exterior and my undaunted will. But when I wasn't in the arena, I loved the trouble my head could conjure.

"Is that your Mom's car, Michelle?"

"Yes."

It was actually a Dodge van, more suited for cruising Van Nuys than the parking lot of a preschool. But for some reason, my preschool teachers needed to walk me to it.

"Hi, Mrs. Manning?"

Since this was the Dodge van, 1970's style, my mom had to reach over to unlock the door for me, and roll down the window for my teacher. While I climbed up to my seat, and my mom turned down Linda Rondstadt's 8-track, the teacher explained.

"Mrs. Manning, we just wanted you to know that Michelle was put in the corner today

for bad behavior. She pulled down her top while trying to kiss one of the boys. But when her 10 minutes in the corner was up, she asked if she could stay in the corner for the rest of the day.”

Do they not know how many songs I can play in my head? Do they not know how much I love to think about the arena? Do they have no idea how much I love the thoughts that move into daydreams? The ones where I get to kiss the Bay City Rollers?

A kid with all the restless energy I had would seem an unlikely candidate for sitting still. But in all honesty, I was pretty good at it. So long as I had a reason.

Patient impatience. A contradiction that suited me beautifully. Probably because I was taught.

“Mitch, if you don’t settle down and let me finish this cigarette, I’m gonna beat your butt and leave you here.”

Patient impatience was my ticket to the stables. With the horses. With the cowboys. With the arena and the freedom that came with it.

And since I wanted the arena more than I wanted to be restless – as hard as that was – I had to figure out a way to be restless without getting on anybody’s nerves. Which proved easier to do on my own.

When I didn’t depend on someone else getting me the thing I wanted, sitting still wasn’t as much of a challenge. Especially when music was involved.

I could sit, alone in my room, for what felt like hours, listening to my mom’s 45’s on my Holly Hobby record player. And while they played, I could sit, for what felt like hours, staring at the back of my own records. Letting them take my thoughts wherever they’d go.

Would Andy Gibb wear his white, satin pants on our wedding day? Would a mustached producer discover me singing into my hairbrush? Will I be the first professional bull-riding girl? How can I be as tough as my dad?

Or even when banished to the corner, I could think about the stables. *What color horse do I want? How old do I have to be to barrel race?*

My thoughts didn't need a lot of rope before they'd hang themselves on daydreams/fantasies. Anything that would take me out of my head, despite being in my head. A welcome respite for my parents, completely aware of the alternative.

When told to, "Go in your room," it wasn't so much a disciplinary move on my parents part as much as it was strategic. They knew that so long as it was quiet, I was more than likely safer than what I would've been up to, otherwise.

But if my room wasn't an option of choice, then I'd beg ...

"Can't I stay here while you work?"

I didn't need attention. I didn't need to be entertained. No coloring books. No videos. No games. No kids. Just me and the freedom to roam in my head, even if I was just sitting at the desk while my dad worked from the other side.

It was my way of knowing how to get out of trouble. A way that reinforced the fact that if I was given something to think about, I'd be restful enough to not drive people to lose their minds. Something I'd seen plenty of times by this age.

Most of the time, I did a good job of coming up with my own thinking material. But sometimes, it was so much fun getting a push.

"Granny, tell me about Auntie Martha and Auntie Majella, and the broom."

"I chased those girls around the room with that broom, and they were lucky your dad

started laughing.”

“But then you chased him with the broom!”

“He shouldn’t have distracted me.”

I could get so lost in the stories people would tell me about their lives and their experiences. So much color. So much excitement!

“But Granny, what about the time the police tried to get my dad?”

“Ooo, your dad was a trouble-maker. ‘Diablito’ they used to say. But he had a great heart. He just found himself making more trouble than he knew what to do with.”

“And the police got him?”

“Well, Grants was a small town. And the police knew your dad. They knew all of us because of the times we had to call them when your grandpa was hitting me or the kids. And even though your daddy was so young, they didn’t like him too much. Probably because all the girls did.”

“And then what would happen?”

“And then, when they pulled him over for speeding, that one time, the deputy drove him outside of town and told him he was going to give him a five-minute head start before ...”

“Before what?”

Since my mind was so active, it was easy for it to be vivid in the way it conceptualized experiences. Even the experiences of others. One push from my granny telling me stories of her family was enough to entertain me in my solitude for hours.

I could see the colors of the landscape. The rooms in the house. The clothing people

would wear without ever being there, or even being alive. I could look at my mom's year books and scan the pictures of her classmates as if I knew them all.

I wonder if my husband will look like him? I wonder if my hair will be cut like that? I wonder if I'll ever be as beautiful as my mom?

Beauty wasn't something that necessarily preoccupied my thoughts. I never really cared since beauty couldn't help me ride a horse better. But when I saw my mom with her head full of jumbo rollers running around the house running after me, I couldn't help but see she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

And for a hot-minute, I aspired to be like her. For my ponytail to fall, casually along one side of my neck. For my ears to carry big hoop earrings underneath the bandana wrapped around my hair. For my eyes to have eyelashes as long as hers ... until I looked in the mirror.

Yup. I was a hellion through and through. And even though I may have had aspirations to look like a girl, the dirt under my fingernails brought me more pleasure than paint on my lips. It was like I was getting to know myself. Even at such a young age. More than likely as a result of the autonomy I'd been granted.

I felt free. I felt independent. I felt encouraged to feel these things. It's as if I was four, going on five, with the sensibilities of a teenager. Yet despite the freedom, I still had the sense I was tethered.

Something inside me gave me the sense that my parents were always watching. And although there was no hovering or quick intervention pulling me out of a dangerous situation, something told me they were developing a gauge. A gauge in which to see what I would do if given enough rope to hang myself. But also to see what I would do once that rope found its

way around my neck, metaphorically speaking.

They could see what to trust dependent on how much I trusted myself. Witnessing the struggle. Watching the surge of fear. Waiting to see my next move, the one that would push through that fear.

If they understood what I was capable of, if left to my own devices, they'd know, precisely, what my devices were capable of. Then they could begin teaching me, precisely, how to use my own devices to save me from the trouble those devices got me into in the first place.

Their hands-off approach may not have been intentional. They were both barely old enough to be adults themselves. But that approach, whether intentional or not, promoted my own sense of true grit. The one that reinforced my gut. The gut that now told me my dad was the meanest dad on the planet.

Walk it Off

I didn't know my dad was the meanest dad on the planet until he almost killed me. At least that's what I thought, anyway, when he left me out to die in the middle of the arena.

"Is she alright, Fred?"

"Yeah, she'll be fine. Just got the wind knocked out of her."

She, who would be fine, was not fine in this moment. Nor was She, who would be fine, fine a few moments before. Because a few moments before I was on top of the world. Literally. Until I wasn't. Literally.

More than a few moments before that moment my dad left me out to die, I waited,

patiently impatient for him to finish his cigarette so we could go to the stables. And once there, I waited, patiently impatient while he saddled the horse I was too little to saddle on my own.

“She’s big, Mitch. You sure you want to get on?”

My horse was big. Sixteen hands, to be precise. Too big for a little girl. But I wasn’t a little girl. I was Fred Manning’s daughter. Every bit as tough as he was. And I had to prove it.

“I want to ride her, Dad.” *I so don’t want to ride her!*

When it came to decisions for myself, I had none. The only decision I ever made was doing what my dad wanted, even if he didn’t say as much.

“I warmed her up, Mitch. She’s ready to go. Ready for you to hop on. But I’m thinkin’ she’s still a bit too big ...”

“I don’t need a pony, Dad ...”

And though I may have been too small to get on that horse by myself, there was a type of “arena cred” on the line. A respect and admiration granted to those who were fearless. An “arena cred” bestowed on my dad for not only being fearless but producing offspring every bit as fearless as he was.

And though I may have been too small for anyone to notice I was shaking in my boots, I wanted that credibility more than I wanted to succumb to the fear trying to take me over.

So with a knowing glance from dad, he picked me up, fixed me atop my mini saddle, nodded his head and let me go.

The beam of pride in his eyes, watching his four-year-old hellion do what most men wouldn’t, was enough to get me lost in my head. Atop this horse. The horse that was now running. The horse I was now sliding off of.

Why am I staring up at the stars? Why am I lying flat on my back? Why can't I breathe? WHY CAN'T I BREATHE?...

Trusting my dad would save me was a trustworthy position to hold. If he was in the house when my mom brushed my hair, he would save me from the assault. When my mom's assault involved pots and pans hitting walls, he would save me with, "Mitch, get your things ... let's go!"

When my Granny would want nothing more than to take me shopping, he'd conveniently need me to help him at the stables. Saving me from all the things he knew would truly hurt me.

His love made me feel like the only kid in the world. A kid who was adored, emboldened, and rescued. But that was a different moment than the one I was in now.

I'm lying on my back in the middle of the arena still waiting for you, Dad ... still waiting, dying, not breathing, not moving. But you'll save me ... I know you'll save me ... Why aren't you saving me?...

Oh, I knew it! Here he comes. Oh, Dad, hurry. I'm dying. I'm dying. Run! Faster! Why aren't you running? Why are you just looking over me with a smile on your face? Is this funny? THIS ISN'T FUNNY!

"Get up, Mitch. Walk it off."

What did you just say?

"C'mon. Get up. Walk it off."

There was so much happening, in this moment, that I failed to comprehend. I knew I'd fallen off the horse I should've never been on in the first place. But I also knew my dad would save me from anything I needed rescuing from. Although that was before he became the meanest Dad in the world.

In this moment, I had a decision to make. I could react in the way my heart and body wanted me to. I could cry. I could whimper. I could simply lie there and wait for my dad to pick me up.

I could respond to this tragedy with the reaction of a girl. But my head, and the will driving its decision making, wanted to be tough more than it wanted to be a girl. So I did exactly what my dad asked me to do.

I walked it off. And I hated him every slow step I took. Not thinking for a moment I could hate him more than I did. Until he said ...

“Good. Now, go get your horse and get back on.”

“What?” *I must've not heard you right.*

“You gotta get back on, Mitch.”

“I do?”

“Yup. Go get your horse. Lead her here and I'll give you a boost up.”

I silently shook my head. He silently paid no attention and simply expected me to be everything I said I wanted to be. I was Fred Manning's daughter, after all. And if I wanted “arena cred” I'd have to do what he said to do. So regardless of what my little nervous system was screaming at me, I got my horse, led her to my dad, and got back on.

“That's Fred Manning's daughter. Have you ever seen a little girl ride like that?”

“No, no, she doesn't need help. That's Fred's daughter. She can do that by herself.”

“Shit, Shorty, you think you ride better than Fred's girl? I'll take that bet.”

The night my dad was the meanest dad in the world, I walked into the arena like a B-list actor. But when I did everything he said – whether I wanted to or not – I ended up walking out of it like a rockstar.

I could get used to this!

All because I walked it off. Who knew? Who knew there was such a difference between those who walked it off and those who didn't. My mom wouldn't have walked it off. Some cowboys never walked it off. And those who didn't were either considered timid – like my mom – or poseurs, never to be taken seriously. Something I was not.

This experience was a confidence booster before I really knew what confidence was. But there was a lot I didn't know, at that time.

I didn't know kids weren't really expected to walk it off.

“But my leg's twisted, Michelle ...”

“You can walk it off. My dad said so.”

Nor did I know that for a working class family, my life was pretty extraordinary.

So I occasionally woke up to strangers surfing on our couch. So I occasionally escorted my dad in and out of the hospital. So I occasionally fell hard off of a horse; a steer; an 8-foot fence; and/or any building I could scale. It simply never occurred to me that others weren't having my experiences. Nor did it occur to me that I wasn't having theirs.

My mom and I never experienced play dates or book clubs. We talked to the cholos on the corner while we waited for our tacos. We didn't attend “Mommy & Me” classes. We

danced in our living room singing *Boogie Fever* at the top of our lungs.

My parents drank, smoked, cussed, and kissed in front of me. I asked if I could drink, smoked my cigarette gum, and kissed my teddy bears in front of them. The only thing I didn't do in front of them was look at my dad's *Playboys*. But not because I didn't think it was ordinary. Quite the contrary.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"We're just looking at the Playboy, Uncle."

"Michelle, you don't show these things to your little cousin. Why are you even looking at this? What is wrong with you?"

It was probably an appropriate question to ask, in retrospect. But at the time, it seemed a silly question.

Why *wouldn't* I be looking at this? Wasn't this ordinary? Wasn't the feeling it gave me and my quest to share this feeling with boys ordinary?

As far as my head and body were concerned, wanting to do things with my body like adults did with theirs seemed pretty ordinary to me. Even my parents thought so.

"Were you looking at your Dad's Playboys?"

"Why Mom? Does he like the pictures too?"

"No, he reads them for the articles. How did you get them, anyway?"

"I found them in his drawer."

"These magazines are not yours. They are your father's. You have no business invading his privacy."

I remember feeling guilty. And I remember feeling shame. I also remember the look in my mom's eyes as she blamed me for doing something bad. But what seemed so ordinary to me was her reason for blame in the first place.

My mom drew a line in the sand. You'd think that line was influenced by my exposure to adult contexts and themes. But how could it be, since I'd been exposed pretty much my entire life.

I'd stomp into my parents' bedroom and pounce on their bed interrupting their naked morning. I'd storm into their bathroom and find them in the shower. I'd see them making out on the couch and exert all of my energy to wedge myself between them. All of which was pretty standard. Because a couple acting affectionate seemed pretty standard.

That's not to say my intrusions were welcome. Usually, they'd be welcomed by some fashion of, "Nice to see you, dear ... now go away." Which I did, all the while thinking, *Just hurry so I don't have to wait too long.*

And despite mild annoyance, I was never met with the modesty scramble. My dad scrambling to cover his bits or my mom scrambling to pull the sheet up to her chin. Nor did they ever follow up with the "apology tour" for having been caught in "special hugs" they weren't proud of.

My parents led me to trust that nudity happens, special hugs happen, two adults in the shower happens, and even fights happen.

Unlike other parents, mine failed to feel or project shame/blame/guilt onto things that happened when agents mixed. When adults mixed. And sometimes that mixture would look like romance ...

“Mitch, get outta the way. I gotta turn this song up and grab your mom by the hand.”

Sometimes that would look like anything but ...

“Mom, why is Dad getting out of the car? He was driving ...”

“Well, he pissed me off and now I’m driving. Don’t worry. He knows how to hitchhike.”

Maybe being expose to adult contexts and themes happened because I was just around so many adults. Maybe being exposed to so many adults desensitized me to sensitive things. All I remember is that the life lessons imparted to me by this point revolved, not so much around things adults did, but more around things adults should *not* be doing. Especially if anyone else’s safety/sanity was lost at the expense of my own.

Beating up my own body? Fine. Beating up animals or anything smaller than me? Not fine.

“You think stepping on that snail was funny, Mitch? Let’s see how funny my belt thinks it is ...”

Exploring parts unknown? Fine. Exploring parts that aren’t mine? Not fine.

“¡Ay, que muchita! You do not touch anything in this car when I’m not in it! You could’ve rolled right into that intersection!”

Being a daredevil in the arena? Fine. Expecting kids down the street to be just as impetuous?

Not fine.

“You can’t expect your friends to do what you do. You had no business putting Samantha on that calf! She nearly broke her neck!”

There was so much lost on me, in respect to what was ordinary and what wasn’t. What was standard and what wasn’t. Doing what I want when I wanted to do it ... whatever it was ... seemed pretty ordinary, pretty standard. Until the gates would come crushing down, telling me otherwise.

But I was four, moving into five, as a kid capable of walking it off. A kid capable of being as tough as my dad. A kid who liked debauchery as much as cowboys. And a kid under the supervision of two people who really didn’t seem to mind.

And yet, I’m not sure if it was their age, the distractions of being broke, their full-time jobs, or their lack of knowledge in raising a kid. But for some reason, I never got the impression my parents were raising a kid. I was left with the impression they were raising an adult.