

Chapter 1: If You Were Raised by Wolves

“I noticed you crossed your arms when I asked you about your mother. Are you experiencing discomfort?” I asked.

“I’m so highly discomforted right now,” Vince said.

“C’mon!” I said, throwing my papers on the counter in defeat. We weren’t in a classroom or a counseling office. We were in the kitchen of our house pretending to be in a counseling office.

“I’m sorry,” Vince said, laughing at my reaction while helping me gather the papers I’d thrown. “This is serious and I need to support you.”

“No, this is stupid! How am I supposed to be empathetic and genuine while working from this script?” I said, waving the papers before shoving them into my backpack. “You’re not a client but I’m supposed to pretend you are. You don’t have serious issues but I’m supposed to pretend to empathize . . .”

“Don’t think of it as a script,” Vince said. “Think of it as a template. You’re still a graduate student. You’re not a counselor yet. Something to help you practice will only make you better.”

“But this ‘template’ isn’t even real. ‘Are you experiencing discomfort?’ Who says that shit?!”

“Well, what would *you* say? What would you ask your clients if you were writing the script?”

That’s a question no one bothered to ask. Not my professors. Classmates. Or even myself. But Vince asked. And because he asked I took the time to think before answering.

“If I were writing the real script,” I said, “there’s only one question I’d ever need my

clients to answer.”

“Then let’s start over with the real script,” Vince said, “that begins with your real question.” He sat straight in his chair and asked, “Counselor, what is it you’d like to know?”

My pretend smile gave way for a real one before I genuinely asked, “Who would you be if you were raised by wolves?”

Wolves’ Den

I was going to jail. I’d always known this day would come I just never really knew what would prompt it or how long it would last. But by this point, I’d lived three decades on the receiving end of exasperated sentiments thrown at me like daggers from very pissed off people.

In my first decade, every “¡Ay, que muchita!” spewed from the mouths of my Spanish speaking relatives confirmed that when I was in the room, so were boiling points. My second decade had already outgrown the casts, stitches, and fat lips of the first. But it did bring a trail of broken hearts, bruised egos, and budding crimes of passion.

I was far from ever being the sharpest tool in the shed but I’d always been quick to recover from my mistakes. Yet there I was, in my third decade, still wondering if – or maybe when – I was going to be arrested for domestic disturbance...

“Are you psycho? That’s a brand new laptop, Michelle...”

“Oh, yeah? Watch how it flies onto your fucking front lawn!”

...lewd conduct...

“This is a church, Michelle, not a hotel room.”

... or aggravated assault...

“Jesus, Michelle! Are you aiming for my head?!”

To know me was to know that my sensibilities veered toward the extreme sides of energy output. Effortlessly. My physical energy matched my emotional energy pound for pound. I was headstrong and passionate wrapped up in a body that would not quit. Ideal qualities for a football player ... or prostitute.

But I wasn't either. I was a girl who would still be these things – even if raised by wolves – because I'd *always* been these things. Regardless of who was watching or the environment I was in, I'd always had too much passion; too much drive; too much energy to stay out of trouble.

Yet, as I was driving myself to jail in this third decade of my life, I wasn't turning myself in over the trouble I'd roused. I was going to work.

“You? Wait. Let me get this straight. A counselor is someone who cares about people, right?”

“Mother, don't act so surprised.”

“I love you, my daughter, but I thought a counselor was someone who could sympathize and understand emotions.”

“Yeah, but that's not all there is. There are specialists. People that work with specific

issues. Specialize in specific issues that aren't always so touchy/feely."

"School counseling? Family counseling?"

"Sex."

"Go to your room!"

A person who anticipates ending up in jail at some point during their lives is not usually a person who becomes a counselor. A person known for being anything other than sensitive and sympathetic is not usually a person who would make a good counselor.

From where I'd stood, good counselors were people who were swathed in sympathy and emotion. They put their hand on your shoulder to support your emotional breakdown. They furrowed their brow and tilted their head to ask, "How does that make you feel?" They favored emotional regulation over emotional volatility. And they wrapped up each session with a hug and blessings.

"Could I be a good counselor?" was a valid question to ask, especially since my reputation as an unsympathetic automaton left a Sasquatch-sized footprint everywhere I went. But no matter how many presumptions I had about the field, or how many preconceptions I had about myself in the field, I was more drawn to this type of work than I'd ever been drawn to anything.

It's true that counselors were known for being the things I could never be. But it was also true that counseling, as a field, spoke to my sensibilities in a language I could understand.

That language, as it was written on paper, often included the words advocacy, tolerance, inclusion and dialectical approaches. Although, it wasn't what was written on paper that compelled me. It's how my sensibilities translated that language.

Advocacy was just another word for fight. Tolerance was just another word for resilience. Inclusion was another word for justice. And a dialectical approach was simply a fancy way to describe good ol' fashioned logic. All of which culminated into a translation exposing what was written between the lines of the presumptions I'd come to trust as fixed.

Yet, had I known what was written between the lines all along, I might have attended grad school earlier than my third decade. But determining what I wanted to be when I grew up didn't come until I was already good and grown.

By my third decade, I probably job-hopped at least ten times.

"Don't worry, this stripping gig is temporary."

"Excuse me, ma'am? My name is Michelle and I'm wondering if you'd like to take a brief survey..."

"Why do I always get shoved in the back making hot dogs?"

Yet my job-hopping wasn't a reflection of a poor work ethic. It was actually a reflection of a strong one, fueled by passion. Passion that, when connected, was capable of investing a limitless amount of dedication, commitment, and loyalty. Sounds great on one hand. But the other?

If passion wasn't there, neither was the investment. And for me, lack of investment equated idle hands. Idle hands on a body with too much energy. It'd then only be a matter of time before I'd get bored and start looking for the greener grass.

Whether it be a job; a boy; a book; or conversation, if it couldn't compel my passion,

then my passion would go elsewhere. And nothing exemplified this more than conventional learning environments. The kind you need to become a counselor.

Rules of life and living were born out of conventional ideologies with a tendency to dictate the way we lived our lives. The 9 to 5 job. Church on the weekends. Mom takes care of the kids. Dad takes care of the finances. Kids go to school. Then kids go to college.

My relationship to this road-to-education formula was basically an arranged marriage. I did it because it was familiar. I did it because it's what was expected. I did it regardless of whether I was passionately invested because all my head could wrap itself around was, *That's just what you do, right?* So I did. And ended up college hopping to the greener grass of state college; then off to city college; let's try another city college in another city until finally ending up at a proper university with a proper undergraduate degree. *Yay?*

Despite hating conventional learning environments, learning was something I loved because of my love for knowledge. I was hopelessly inquisitive.

"And then what?"

"And then what did you do?"

"And then what did she do?"

"And then what was the look on their faces?"

Inquiry was so effortless for me, I'd still be an inquisitive provocateur even if my role models howled at the moon. And for some reason, my parents understood this. So they humored me for fear of the alternative. Helping me establish context by answering my questions. Helping me understand validity by their commitment to their positions. All of which helped my mind not sit idle because my idle mind was much more destructive than my idle hands.

Knowledge gave me something to do. Something to think about. Something to enrich what I thought I already knew. It broke down presumptions (what was written on paper) and exposed the method (what was written between the lines). It loved questions and loved answers even more. Yet the only question I ever really needed an answer to was, “Can you make this make sense to me?”

And even though conventional learning environments made no sense, gaining knowledge had the power to make almost anything make sense. So I thrived on it even when not gaining it in conventional learning environments.

“Are all these books yours, Michelle?”

“Yeah. I’m kinda’ in the process of building my own stand-alone research lab and library.”

“‘XXX: A Woman’s Right to Pornography.’ ‘SM 101.’ ‘When Abortion Was a Crime.’ Jesus, are you a feminazi or a dominatrix?”

Conventional learning environments didn’t teach the things I wanted to learn. And I wanted to learn about women and sex. Or rather, unconventional women and unconventional sex.

Prior to my third decade, I never had use for feminism. As a movement, it failed to compel my passion. My passion was most certainly invested in strong women, but in my puny worldview, strong women weren’t conventional. And strong women didn’t need a movement. They just needed to not take any shit. Like my mom.

“Honestly, Fred, you think that since you’ve had a hard day you’re going to leave me with the kid while you go to the bar?”

“Rose, I can’t believe you can just leave your daughter and new baby to go to Europe.”

“They have a father!”

I grew up surrounded by women who may not have worn the pants in the family but they sure as hell chose the color and style for those who did. Reinforcing my passion and reinforcing the notion that the only thing separating a woman from strength was how much/how little she whined. But then I gained knowledge. And then I got a clue.

You’d be hard-pressed to gain knowledge surrounding the issues that affect women without gaining knowledge surrounding sex. Both of which stoked my inquisitive fire. Or, at the very least, compelled me to wonder why so much around women and sex failed to make sense.

The irony: “If she floats, she’s a witch. If she sinks, she’s innocent.”

The double-standard: “Sexually active men are healthy. Sexually active women are damaged.”

The senselessness: “Women must be responsible for their birth control. Their pregnancy. Their childcare. But that doesn’t mean they’re responsible enough to know what’s good for them.”

As my worldview opened up, I got a clue in understanding there were systems at play ... longstanding systems that reinforced conventional ideologies when it came to women and sex. The same conventional ideologies that seemed to reinforce standards of operation too archaic to be relevant, making no sense whatsoever.

Yet knowing I was never the sharpest tool in the shed, I was, at least, sharp enough to know that maybe what I expected from conventional systems was more idealistic than

realistic. Maybe I was too “hopey-changey” to see how systems worked logically? Which made sense, up to a point.

I was a strong woman. I was a strong sexual woman – unapologetically – and I was victim to many of the systems and ideologies that suppressed strength in sex *annnnnd* femininity. The same systems that had a tendency to convince us that the level playing fields designed for everyone were truly level for everyone.

In my first decade, I totally trusted this to be true. In my second decade, I started to get the sense my trust might be misguided. Especially when so many of my peers had no concept of pleasure in sex. Or even strength in being a woman. “Him go down on me? Ewwww ...” they’d say. “I’d rather be taken care of than be strong ...” they’d say. To which I’d reply, “Isn’t it dangerous to depend on someone who could leave you?” To which they’d defend by saying, “That’s why I go down on him instead of him being forced to go down on me.”

Then my third decade hit and I was forced to see that the level playing field I played on wasn’t leveled by convention. It was actually leveled by me. But not because I was special, or enlightened, or privileged, or even magnanimous enough to warrant such “leveling.” In my third decade, I was forced to see that I leveled my own playing field simply because I was taught to take no shit.

All of which stoked my hopeless need for justice in teaching others how to do what I was taught to do. How to see that simply presuming the playing field to be level did not a level playing field make. A passionate attempt to expose the logical reality in there being nothing level, or just, about promoting scripts promoted by systems, that promoted the oppression of those who colored just outside the lines. Enter: grad school.

If the Shoe Fits . . .

What the fuck am I thinking going to grad school? How on earth am I going to stay focused? Why would this experience be any different than my first miserable one? It's as if my head put those thoughts on repeat as I began to prepare to do something I swore I'd never do again.

"But grad school's different," they said. "Grad school's challenging," they said. "Grad school is where you study the things you couldn't study as an undergrad," they said. So, I trusted what they said and imagined grad school would teach me everything I wanted to know.

Grad school would promote independent thinking and discourse. It would further expose the injustice found in conventional ideologies, and inquire as to their existence. It would revel in the liberties of discussing alternative philosophies to sex and gender without the "Beevis and Butthead" mentality of high school. It would challenge my perceptions to sex and identity in ways I couldn't do by simply reading/researching.

As students, we would find provocation stimulating. We would debate points of view, ultimately enriching my own. I would be surrounded by others anticipating the same things, lusting to encourage diversity of theory; perspectives; lifestyles. Or so my presumptions thought.

"Welcome class. Let's check-in. We'll go around the room and describe the color you feel today. Hannah, we'll start with you."

"I feel red. I'm on fire! I was at the bank before class and the teller was being all condescending. Normally, I just smile and try not to cry but I used one of the tools we learned last week and it helped. I was assertive and expressed myself. Felt so good!"

“It’s good to practice using the tools you’d expect to use with clients. That’s a great check-in, Hannah. How ‘bout Christopher. What color are you today?”

“I’m a little blue, so, I guess I’ll say, blue.”

“Awww, Christopher.”

“Thanks Hannah. Yeah, I just think that the classes are stirring up emotions I never thought I had. It’s tough, ya’ know?”

“It’s important, for students, to be aware of their issues/challenges to avoid making your issues/challenges your clients. Thank you, Christopher. Thank you for being so open and honest. Good qualities of a counselor. How ‘bout Michelle? What color are you?”

Really? I’m in fucking graduate school and my class is wanting to know what color I am? “Hmmm ...” Furrow that brow, makes ‘em think you’re being considerate. “I’d have to say purple.” Please don’t ask me why ... Please don’t ask me why ... Please don’t ask me why ...

“Michelle, I’d like to invite you to share with the class why you feel that way, but only if you’re comfortable.”

It reminds me of the bruise my head is getting from being asked such stupid fucking questions! “Purple is the color of royalty. And I feel royally enthused about the work we’ll be doing today.”

“Yes! Our mock-counseling exercises. Some of you may be nervous but ...”

Grad school took my presumptions of what grad school would be and boofed them, big time. Week after week, semester after semester, left reality biting me in the ass. Standing, red-handed, gripping the presumptions I wanted to morph into truth. A true shape of graduate learning. Socratic learning. But that’s not what was happening. And based on the

presumptions of my classmates, that made me the dumbest tool in the shed.

Where my presumptions were lying lifeless – lacking truth/lacking substance – my classmates' presumptions remained locked and loaded. If it looked like a duck, then it had to be a duck. If she's not crying, she's stuffing her emotions. If she's not sharing, she's defending vulnerability.

I was faced with presumption after presumption, sizing me up before ever taking the time to accurately measure my size. No curiosity. No inquiry. No, "What makes you tick?" or even, "That doesn't make sense. Can you make that make sense to me, Michelle?"

It became evident early on, grad school had no interest in a spectrum of perception. A spectrum that deems "this, that, and everything in between is valid." As opposed to being rigidly fixed.

"Michelle, I'm going to use you as an example. Class, what's your first impression looking at Michelle's body language?"

"She's tense." I am? *"Arms crossed over her chest."* But I like resting my arms on my boobs ...

"She's nervous or anxious." I am? *"Her leg is shaking."* But I'm most relaxed when my leg is shaking ...

"It's important to be able to assess body language in your clients. That will tell you more than words can." Or ... God forbid, just ask questions ...

Grad school's presumptions were fueled by stereotypes of what it was to be a "type." Or, rather, perceiving that if you weren't this "type," then you can only be the "type" which exists on the alternate end of the extreme.

“If you’re not sensitive, Michelle, you can only be insensitive.”

“Your lack of emotion, Michelle, is just a reflection of you not being in touch with your emotions.”

“I’m not really sensing sympathy from you, Michelle. It’s difficult for me to feel safe with you in this class exercise.”

I had several scarlet letters strung around my neck exposing me as, “Unable to focus on the feeling since you don’t really have any” ... “Too insensitive to truly understand the sensitivity required to discuss sexual issues” ... and “Lacking in the skills of effective communication.”

What the fuck?! Not crying simply because you’re crying makes me a bad communicator? Being too inquisitive during this moment of silence makes me an incompetent counselor?

If I’d been prone to pulling out my hair, scratching my wrists, or clutching my fists in a fit of rage, I would’ve screamed, “Please make this make sense to me?!” because nothing about this was making sense.

Grad school accused me – presumptuously – of not being sensitive to the challenges of life and living. Not being sensitive to the challenges of effective communication. Despite the fact that, *We’re in fucking grad school! Shouldn’t we have the communication bit down, already?*

I didn’t want to be challenged in how to learn to communicate per some textbook script. That wasn’t going to help me in the real world. And that was the problem, right there. Grad

school was under the impression they were preparing us for the real world. Yet I was under the impression that teaching us to recite a textbook was preparing us for fantasy island.

By this time, I was very aware of what the real world did to people, and what the real world did to me. Had grad school put aside the presumptions long enough to effectively communicate – through inquiry and discourse – they may have known how much real world experience I had, up to that point. How much the real world fucks up cookie-cutter *anything*, compelling us to think on our feet. The one thing grad school failed to teach us because they kept throwing me in shoes that didn't fit reality.

And honestly? I could deal with that. I could handle that. It wasn't the responsibility of everyone around me to accommodate my thoughts, experiences, history. That, in itself, wasn't the problem. The problem was found in what happened when I tried to accommodate my own thoughts/experiences/history through inquiry and discourse. Evidently, a futile effort.

“In conclusion, I'd like to know if anyone has any questions about my research on being 'Kink-aware' in therapy ... or any questions on alternative sexual lifestyles ... Questions? I'd love to answer them ... Anyone? Any concerns? ... Anyone?”

“I'd like to ask the group a question, Professor Davies. Given that therapy, as a field, is predominantly women, why are our discussions so averse to feminism? ... Anyone? Do I need to clarify my question?”

“Professor Allen, I understand that communication tools are important but this textbook formula just seems a bit too idyllic for reality. And I'd like to ask you and the class, why is

improvising ... thinking on your feet ... considered a threat to the safety of the client?

Anyone? ... Do I need to clarify my question?" ... Bueller? Bueller?

My interest in sexuality wasn't compelling interest. It was compelling my classmates to clutch their pearls. My interest in feminism – and the systems responsible for it – wasn't galvanizing advocacy. It was galvanizing antagonism. And to consider thinking on your feet as an asset to therapy was too threatening to consider.

"The therapy dynamic needs to feel safe and supportive, class. It's important for the client to know what to expect. Stability over volatility." But what's wrong with volatility? What's wrong with spontaneity? What's wrong with a little risk? The real world shit that people – our clients – will experience every day?

Week after week, semester after semester, I could see that grad school simply promoted the conventional scripts of what a woman should be, what sex should be, and what a counselor should be. And week after week, semester after semester, I could feel the conditioning begin to wear me down.

Reluctantly, I started to believe that all of the qualities that came effortlessly to me were not suitable for the field.

My logic.

"Too cerebral."

My passion.

“Too feisty.”

My judiciousness.

“Too vigilant.”

These were qualities I never thought twice about because thinking about myself took the focus off of thinking about you. And the “you” I was talking to, playing with, loving, or thinking about was much more fun than thinking about myself.

Self-consciousness was such a drag, and a bore. Never before had I ever considered the footprint I left behind, even when I should’ve.

Yes, officer, it’s not safe driving autocross over speed bumps.

I failed to see the appeal in thinking about myself; being conscientious of what others thought about me. Yet grad school kinda’ fucked that one up.

It made me timid to be myself. *Because they said your self can hurt your clients, Michelle.* It made me second guess my instincts. *Wait! Should I even ask that question?* It made me try to be something that I wasn’t. Taking on qualities that weren’t my own. Wearing those textbook shoes they swore looked so good on me.

And when I did, my classmates and professors beamed in their finally seeing me make such an effort, exhausting my energy to become the cookie-cutter therapist: safe, sensitive, sympathetic.

I should've been grateful. I should've been gratified. I should've loved the fit of these shoes, despite the fact they looked like shit. But how much did that matter if those responsible for my degree loved my new shoes? They were the experts. They were the authorities in this touchy-feely field that was so foreign to me.

Had grad school not had the leverage that was my degree hanging over my head, my passion would've confronted such a conventional approach to therapy more than it already had. But my logic paid attention to the patterns, no matter how bad they hurt.

And the patterns – presented by classmates and professors – suggested I could harm people who were most vulnerable with my “improvising,” and my “confrontation,” and “provocation.” Yet even though I hated the idea of being conventionally led, I hated the idea of hurting someone even more.

So, if conventional ideologies being rammed down my throat had the potential to make me a better therapist, I'd be the conventional therapist whether I liked it or not. I could go through the motions classmates and professors pined to see, so long as I trusted *they* were the ones with the presumptions. *They* were the ones being led by convention.

But wouldn't you know, had I not been paying so much attention to *their* presumptions and *their* conventional mindset, I would've been standing in a better position to see the stupid ones I'd been harboring. The ones I never knew I had ... until I started working in the field with the population I swore, and therefore presumed, I'd never work with.

“Michelle, why don't you tell us about your case. Olivia?”

Olivia. My first client as an intern. Olivia. Victim of domestic violence *because she was too fucking weak to leave his ass*. Olivia. The weak woman I could never work with because, *I'm sorry, but if you choose to stay with someone who beats the shit out of you, I can't really*

give any fucks about it. And then, Olivia opened her mouth. And then, Olivia: The Presumption, morphed into Olivia: The Badass.

“I thought the DV population was a population you didn’t want to work with, Michelle.”

“Yeah, so did my presumptions, Professor Davies.”

“What do you mean?” *An opportunity to school them on the detriment of presumptions.*

Yes!

“I always presumed that victims of domestic violence were victims because they were too weak to fight back or too weak to leave. But Olivia gave me a lot of insight into this population.”

“Your first case gave you a lot of insight?”

“Olivia struck me as anything but a victim ...”

“Michelle, I doubt this was your intent, and I don’t want to call you out in front of Professor Davies, but that’s a very insensitive comment.”

“Well,” *easy killer* ... “there was something very insightful, for me, about her evaluation.”

“What did you assess?”

When you hear a first-person account of someone getting the shit kicked out of them, it can be quite unnerving. But to say I was unnerved would have been a meek attempt to save my ego. I wasn’t unnerved. I was flustered by the conflict between my head and gut. A conflict I’d never experienced before grad school.

I met Olivia during my first field internship. Remarkably, there was nothing weak about her. In fact, she stood over 5’9” with a physique that looked like she could drop-kick my ass

in the blink of an eye. But in my eye, she was still a walking, talking presumption.

“But I love him so much.” *Check!* “I don’t think I could live without him.” *Check!*

“Maybe he won’t do it anymore if I was just more patient.” *Check!*

No fight? No flight? No survival. Just victim. As black and white as my presumptions. And, unfortunately, there she’d stay while I refereed my head and gut, fighting over how to be a competent therapist.

Are you reflecting/paraphrasing/summarizing? Did you ask the “magic wand” question? Are you mimicking her body language?

I felt pinched and backed into a corner, trying to see treatment through the presumptuous lens of grad school. Cornered between black or white. All or nothing. And despite how inauthentic this felt, my head was screaming for me to do what grad school enforced me to do. Which took my eye off the ball, sinking in my gut.

I wanted to ask her which parts of her would still exist if she were raised by wolves. I wanted to ask her to make sense to me why she stayed. I wanted to ask why she trusted him when he proved himself so untrustworthy. And I wanted to know why her story reflected so much gray in a presumably black/white context. Why what was written on paper looked so different than the gray matter between the lines.

Her level of intelligence.

“I got pregnant when I was 16, but I’d already graduated from high school.”

Her sense of self-assuredness.

“My mom did little to intervene with my dad’s sexual abuse so I filed for emancipation after I had my kid.”

Her effortless sensitivity.

“For the longest time, I wanted to sympathize with my dad because a father who can do

that to his child has to be more fucked up than the actual abuse.”

Why does she show this sense of strength in almost every other aspect of her life except her marriage? If she's smart enough to graduate from high school two years early, why does she stay in abuse? She was strong enough to escape her dad, why isn't she strong enough to escape her husband?

But grad school wouldn't want you asking those questions, Manning. Grad school would want you asking about the risky sexual behavior that led to pregnancy at 16. Grad school would want you focusing on how the sexual abuse influenced such risky behavior. Grad school would want you to teach her deep breathing. And grad school would want you to offer sympathy for all of her misfortune that led to her being a victim.

My head and my gut were dueling banjos trying to take the lead. My head told me to, *Stay the course, Michelle. You'll bring harm if you don't.* My gut was telling me, *Fuck the course and blaze your own trail! Follow the gray matter.*

Which is exactly what I did. And by doing so, meek, weak, Olivia showed me how truly strong DV victims were.

Conventional points of reference told us there were two types of survival mechanisms: fight and flight. Such tenets were so rooted in our cultural vernacular, I even trusted them to be true.

Strong women beat his ass right back. But ... I guess ... if you can't do that, then leaving him won't be as strong, but it's strong enough, I suppose ...

But Olivia's story kinda' suggested there was more truth between the lines. The truth of survival suggesting fight and flight weren't the only power players. Survival also involved freeze.

Freeze? Wasn't that reserved for people too weak to do the other two?

“In all honesty Michelle, I freeze. I see him walk through that door and I freeze, and then I hate myself for it.

“I feel like I should be fighting back ... like I should be running out of the house to the neighbor’s. But when he puts his hands around my throat or kicks me in the stomach, all I can do is freeze. All I can do is just stay there and take it.”

“Olivia, do you think he’d kill you if you didn’t?” *Not a grad school approved question, Michelle.*

“I know he’s got a gun. And he’s threatened to use it. But maybe that was just to scare me?”

Huh, “freeze” sounds pretty fucking smart, considering.

“So, Professor Davies, I gave Olivia the list of shelters, support groups, and hotlines.”

“Wonderful job, Michelle! Resources are integral to our work as therapists. I always knew you had it in you.”

But I didn’t want to talk to her about shelters! I didn’t want to talk to her about hotlines! I didn’t want to talk to her about support groups or ways to get stronger self-esteem. I wanted to blurt out everything my gut was screaming. Everything that contradicted the grad-school approved presumptions telling me what to say. Exerting effort playing the part as opposed to effortlessly telling the truth as I saw it.

And from what I could see, “freeze” was one of the smartest things Olivia could do! It may not have looked as pretty as the “Fuck you!” send-off I would’ve employed, but picking and choosing my battles took too much effort for a blunt tool like me. Potentially leaving me lying on the floor with a bullet in my back. *Yeah, that’d be a real strong move, Michelle.*

Olivia and her survival skills were functioning from the spectrum – *all, nothing, and*

everything in between – while I was functioning from the conventional presumptions – *if it's not "this" or "that" then it can't be valid*. The extremes that filled us with so much judgment as to what it means to survive. Yet what my time with Olivia exposed were the many layers of survival.

And wasn't survival the ultimate goal? The true desired outcome? So long as the desired outcome – survival – is fulfilled, then how you survive should never be called into question. Or discounted with presumptions ...the same presumptions now trying to follow me into jail.

A Girl Walks Into a Cellblock

Despite the lessons learned with Olivia, presumptions were the sidecar I walked into jail with. The second field internship. The one where I so readily presumed the women were going to be crazy-eyed butches. The men were going to be crazy-eyed serial killers ... or pedophiles. I would have to divert my eyes from men dropping the soap and I'd have to fend off the advances of the bull-dyke trying to recruit me.

I trusted (presumed) the penal system was designed to correct maladaptive behavior in an effort to rehabilitate criminals, and solitary confinement was a reasonable consequence for conduct unbecoming. Jail cells would be crowded, but then criminals shouldn't be too comfortable. And I'd be working with inmates who acted out by spreading feces all over their cells.

No one would be surprised to know that the presumptions were certainly based on facts. I did walk in on my first day to the "feces in the jail cell guy." But it did surprise the fuck out of me to see how little relevance those facts had on the questions spewing from my gut.

Contrasting the presumptions.

Why are homeless being incarcerated? Is being homeless a crime? Why were the mentally ill incarcerated just for being mentally ill? Why are there dozens of cots in these cellblocks as opposed to beds? Would they incarcerate someone without providing a mattress to sleep on?

What I observed by paying attention was that all of the ideas and constructs feeding my presumptions were in stark contrast to what I witnessed. And what I witnessed wasn't making sense. And for a girl who just wants this to make sense, I wasn't liking the nonsense of my observations.

Jail, in what my presumptions came to trust, should have been a correctional system designed to rehabilitate criminals back into society. But I failed to see how any type of rehabilitation for *anyone* could exist in these circumstances I was now observing.

These circumstances that left dozens of men and women sleeping on the floor night after night after night. These circumstances that offered a slice of cheese between two slices of bread, and a fruit cup as sustenance. These circumstances which could only afford two C.O.'s to man a pod of fifty. And these circumstances promoting solitary confinement as reasonable.

Walk-in closets were bigger than the space reserved for solitary. A window smaller than a shoe box was the only access to the outside world. Inmates were given an hour of recreation a day, broken up in two, thirty-minute increments. And the stainless steel bunker didn't come with blankets. *And it's cold in there!*

What began to make crystal, clear sense was the fact that solitary confinement was anything but reasonable. It would make someone crazy who didn't start out that way, or make the crazy crazier. Not a situation you want for someone struggling for peace of mind.

But you're not here to observe, Manning. You're not here to do research. You're here to be a therapist. To reflect/paraphrase/summarize. To ask the "magic wand" question. To

mimic body language. To be sensitive and sympathetic to their challenges. So do it!

“Can you tell me what drove you to murder?” *That’s sensitive and sympathetic, Michelle?!*

“The boy drove me to murder.” *Ahhh, the boy, of course. Always the boy when it comes to little jailbirds.*

And God, it would’ve been so easy to just allow this answer to slide. It would’ve been so easy to just take what was written on paper and derive the ultimate conclusion. *Yup, criminals deserve to be locked up!* But “easy” was not who I’d be if raised by wolves. I wanted the Hard! Fast! Loud! that could only come from questions.

“The boy, you say? Okay, make this make sense to me ...” *You’re goin’ rogue, Manning. Settle down...* “I looked at your chart.” *Head nod, Manning. Just look at the chart and head nod.* “I know you took over your family business right out of high school. I know that it was a pretty successful business. So, you’re smart enough to run a business at eighteen, and you’re financially secure. How does a boy take that away from you?”

On paper, this heinous criminal was in jail/should be in jail for murder. But when reading between the lines, it wasn’t quite so simple.

My “jailbird” did commit murder. But she murdered the drug dealer of her boyfriend. *Oh, of course ... drugs. Should’ve known she wasn’t as smart as she seemed ... now she’ll tell me about her drug-induced violence leading her to murder. So, tell me, Jailbird, what did the drugs make you do?*

“My boyfriend played football in high school. I hated jocks. I thought they were stupid. But he wasn’t like that. He wanted to study environmental science. He just had so many back problems from football. His doctor and parents gave him oxy like it was candy. He got

addicted. They turned their backs. But he was still addicted.”

Long story short? Boyfriend dealt with his addiction illegally. And since he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed when it came to illegal drugs and how to purchase them, his dealer wasn't all that composed. When his dealer lost his composure, he went looking for boyfriend at “jailbird's” house, first beating the shit out of her with a hammer until the struggle for the hammer left it in her hands ... which she proceeded to use to defend herself ... which ended up killing the dealer.

“But what can I say, Michelle? He was White and I'm not. And it was drugs. So, here I am.”

So, here she was, in an environment meant to rehabilitate a heinous criminal such as her. And yet that was the presumptive word that kept bumping up against my logic: rehabilitate. Logically speaking, I was left wondering how, this system that I'd come to trust as being one of rehabilitation could ever rehabilitate anyone.

Inmates were treated like useless cattle. No one really gave a fuck about them. And if they did, they'd be too outnumbered, too underpaid, and too overworked to give any fucks to people who needed so much, because the basic necessities (including feminine hygiene products) were elusive. Not to mention the food.

“Breakfast,” “lunch,” and “dinner” was the only food inmates had access to, unless they could get their hands on some cash. If they could get enough credit to their accounts, they could buy supplements that I considered to be more in line with basic necessities. Underwear. Snacks. Hygiene. But then if you had credit to buy supplemental goods, those supplemental goods were more than likely stolen by someone who needed them just as bad but had no credit.

On the days I was invited to eat “breakfast,” “lunch,” and “dinner,” I found myself so

consumed with hunger it was difficult to think straight, let alone act accordingly. Couple that feeling with barking orders and temperatures that were either fifteen degrees too hot/cold, and you've got one agitated person who has no interest in rehabilitation. Only survival.

Had I had a bleeding heart, this insight into "rehabilitation" would've caused it to bleed all over the floor. But I only had logic. And nothing about my observations seemed logical.

A system designed to rehabilitate that promotes agitation. A facility not even big enough for criminals, incarcerating people that weren't criminals. Counselors, psychiatrists, and C.O.'s, there to serve, with no time or funding to do it. And solitary consequences that more closely resembled torture, than a reasonable bottom line.

To know me was to know I didn't carry a lot of emotion so sympathy wasn't driving this bus. It was simply a matter of $a + b$ not equaling c that confused the hell out of me. *But you should know better, Michelle, than to rely on your logic. You should know that a counselor's role is to sympathize, empathize and sensitively ask, "How does that make you feel?"*

But you should also know I didn't get in this because I wanted to be a counselor. I got in this because I wanted to change the world.