
MICHELLE

Veronica Guijarro

I was born on July 5, 1959 to Blanche and Henry Awad. They did not have a name for me when I was born, so for the first three weeks, I was called Female Awad. Three weeks later, my parents named me Michelle Gabrielle Awad. Both of my parents are of Middle Eastern decent. Your *Judd* (grandfather) is from Syria, though raised in Massachusetts, and *Sito* (grandmother) is Lebanese, though raised in Michigan. I am the fourth child of the family. The oldest is my sister Adrienne (the perfect student), then there is Roger (the oldest son, not always perfect but the leader), third is Giselle (the gorgeous one), then me, and finally the baby of the family is Johnny.

Growing up, I felt left out of the family history. By the time it came to me, my parents had no time to teach me about our culture. My older sisters and brother went to school to learn Arabic, and my mom taught my sisters to cook. When it came to me, she was too busy with herself. My mother used to tell me to act like a young lady. How do you know what a young lady acts like when you have not been taught? I was the monkey, climbing trees and swinging from the clothesline. I think, by the time my mother had me, she was just too tired to spend time with me, or she did not want to because I was the disappointment. I was the one who flunked second grade. I was the little dummy of the family, and for years, I had that drilled into my head. Did they ever think that I acted that way because I just did not think children should be taught with fear?

I never knew either of my grandparents. The only stories I remember my mother telling me about my grandmother was that she cooked and sewed well. I suppose it influenced my thinking that women cooked and sewed. I know my mother wanted to be an opera singer, but had a family instead. The women who had the greatest influence on my life were my mother and both of my sisters. I knew I did not want to be like them, those debutants of the world. If acting like a young lady meant sitting in front of the mirror for hours, putting on makeup or putting your hair in curlers, and sitting under a hot hair dryer at the laundromat like my mom and sisters, forget it. I have no time for that. Just cut my hair short and let me get dirty. I have more important thing to do, like roller-skating, bike riding, and swinging from the trees.

I do not think my brothers' influence made any difference in my life. My brothers and I did not really spend time together. They did not really pay attention to me except when they blamed me for things to get me in trouble. My father taught me to do a good job or to not do it at all.

I grew up in Hollywood, California. We all attended the same private elementary school until my parents could not afford it anymore, which was fine with me because I hated those nuns. They would do mean things. They really do hit you with a ruler if you do something wrong. I attended all the local schools, Los Feliz Elementary School, Thomas Star King Middle

School, John Marshall High, and I even took classes at Los Angeles Community College.

Around the neighborhood, I really did not have friends my age to play with, so I played with the younger girls, Donna, Susie and Nicole. I used to love to bug my older sisters and brothers when they had their friends over at the house. We used to go on family vacations to Las Vegas which is where I met my first boyfriend. Also, we would go to Palm Springs and Big Bear Lake. The last family vacation was in 1978 when we went to Massachusettes. That is where my father was born and where I met my cousins for the first time.

My father had several jobs. His main job was working for McDonnell Douglas Aircraft and he also ran an Arabic newspaper called The Star News and Pictorial. But when he got laid off by McDonnell Douglas, he would take part-time jobs. He would help my uncle at the carpet store. I would work there with him. He owned a California Donut shop for a while. We all worked there. He also worked at the theater for a while. My dad would take jobs at different aircraft plants along San Fernando Road. He ended up retiring from a teaching job at McDonnell Douglas. My mother helped him with the newspaper and she also worked at the *Los Angeles Times*. She retired from the State Bar of California.

On April 11, 1981, even though my parents disapproved, I married Adan Guijarro Mora. We were married in a small nondenominational chapel a few blocks away from Adan's apartment. I met Adan in the summer of 1989 right after I graduated from high school. I used to sit on the grass in front of my parents' house listening to music with my friends and I would see him across the street, going in and out of the apartment. Then, on one very hot day when the ice cream truck came, we all went out to the corner to buy ice cream. I also bought a grab bag for twenty-five cents, and in it was a little plastic skateboard. As I turned around, there he was. I said "hi." He said "hola." I looked at him and said "hola." Why are you speaking to me in Hawaiian? My friends started laughing at me and said, "No, he is saying hello in Spanish." I said, "Oh, okay." He just smiled. I think that is when I knew. It did not matter if he did not speak English and I did not speak Spanish. He was the one. I noticed that he had a charm around his neck, so I took the little plastic skateboard, peeled back the sticker a bit, and stuck it on his chain. He wore it for a long time.

Your father came to the United States when he was eighteen years old. He left his family to come to this country to make a better life for his family. During the summer, we would see each other every day before he went to work in the morning. Then, after he got off in the afternoon, and then again when he got off of work at night. This went on for about three years. Several times, he asked me to marry him. When I would tell my mother she would say, "Absolutely not! You are going to marry a nice Arabic man." Like I am really going to meet some nice Arab guy. That was not for me. The next time Adan asked me to marry him, he said if I said no, he was going back to Mexico. He did not want to live here alone anymore. I knew what I wanted. I wanted to get married and have children. I went through the yellow pages and found the chapel and called them. The next day, we got

his friends to be our witnesses and we got married. Like I said, the day I met him and he smiled at me, it did not matter that we did not speak each other's language. I knew I was going to marry him. To this day I do not think my mother realized I spent the night out.

After we got married, we went to tell my parents and they told me that they did not want anything to do with me anymore. That only lasted a few weeks. Finally, after four months, my father told my mother that your father and I were moving in the back house, and she was going to have to get used to it. Your grandfather was more accepting of the idea of our family. A few months after we were married, I took my first trip to Mexico to visit my in-laws. The whole family was so inviting and welcomed me into each and every home. Your dad comes from a large, close family. Your grandparents Elena and Cescerio had, in total, seventeen children, though six died during birth, leaving your dad with eleven brothers and sisters.

I married your dad, a wonderful man. Though at times, I could not see it. I think we had a lot of interference from my family. My family did not approve of him and my mother would always tell me what he should be doing for me and how many jobs he should have. She kept pushing me to push him, and we would argue and fight. He would drink a lot and there was domestic violence, but I would get in some good punches too. Veronica, I know you remember a lot of these situations, and that caused a big rift in your relationship with your dad. You have seen the bad in him. You have been hurt by him at times and once you came to my rescue and took a stand, even if that meant calling the cops on your own dad. I know you two love each other very much and have a lot to work on, but I believe you will both work through it. The funny thing is that the minute I stopped listening to my mother, your dad and I stopped arguing. I learned to live with a lot of his imperfections, and he just has to deal with mine. Many times, you have told me to leave your dad. Sure, I could have left him, but that would have been easy. I'm a strong woman and love a good challenge.

My view on marriage is that everyone should do it, walking away is too easy when you can just live together. When you are married, you really have to think about the consequences of divorce. I know they are just words, but you make a promise in front of witnesses to love and care for each other. If you really meant it at the time, it should stick. Walking out is easy. Marriage is work, and I think it is worth it.

Three years after we were married, your father and I decided to start our family. On April 14, 1984, our first pride and joy was born. You were born on my father's birthday. Veronica, with you, we had a hard time trying to come up with a name. We had two in mind: Adana (after your father) and Rose (after my grandmother). Although, not long after you were born, your dad called you Veronica. So, we named you Veronica Rose Guijarro. You are the eldest grandchild. Around your first birthday, I found out I was already a little over a month pregnant with my second child, at least for a while. After five months, it was obvious I was too big to be only five months pregnant. I went back to the doctor and he said something was interesting. I found out that I was blessed with twins. On December 30, 1985, I gave birth to Erika Marie Guijarro and Amanda Elena Guijarro. Erika,

as always, you were in a hurry to get out. You are a minute older than your twin sister. Amanda, you were just mellow and wanted to relax a little bit longer inside. You girls were very lucky that you had the opportunity to meet your grandfather. Veronica, you are the only one who has pictures with him. Erika and Amanda, I know you do not remember him, though he loved you two as if you were his only grandchildren. He spoiled and loved you girls with all his heart. Grandpa died in April 1986.

When you were younger, I got a Sesame Street book that showed the body parts of boys and girls. I taught you about good touches and bad touches. I taught you about getting your periods, even though Erika and Amanda did not want anything to do with it. I told them that when they were old enough and fell in love, they would have sex and give birth to babies. I also told them that they would have to finish school and get their education first because I was not ready to quit my job and take care of their children yet. So, yes, I taught you about your gender identity.

Unlike the way I was raised as a young girl, I decided that I wanted to be different. Once Erika and Amanda were born, I decided to take time off work and stay at home raising my girls. I was lucky to have the support from your dad to do so. I even started a daycare with other children in the neighborhood to help bring in some money. I believe that children need to be children; they need to enjoy playing and having lots of friends. You girls remember Friday nights when I had all your friends over at the house to play baseball, eat pasta, and just hang out. I did this for many reasons. One of which was to know the children you were friends with. Girls, I do not know if you remember, but when you were toddlers, your psycho aunt Adrienne caused many problems. While growing up, she called social services on your father and me, telling them we abused you. Never could they find any sign of abuse, and that was because you were never abused. She tried many times to get you guys taken away from us, but she failed each time.

My first job was house cleaning. My sister Giselle would put up signs in the laundromat, and the older ladies would hire her. When she would get tired of the job, she would give the signs to me. I was about nine years old then. As a teenager, she would get babysitting jobs. Then she discovered boys and gave those jobs to me too. During junior high, I worked at my father's donut shop. I would go in at 5:00 am and open the window to sell donuts and coffee to the truckers. In twelfth grade, I got a job at The Broadway department store. I worked in the stationary department. I have also worked in a collectables shop, a pharmacy, a restaurant, and an advertising company. I worked at Woolworth's until they went bankrupt. My last job was at Costco. While at Costco, I developed carpal tunnel syndrome in both of my hands and later I was placed on light duty. I was told not to lift anything over twenty pounds. What they considered light duty meant ringing-up the convenient store orders all by myself. With no help, one day, I was lifting a bottle of dish soap and my back gave out. I fell to the ground and, since then, I have been out of work. I think I liked the collectables gift shop the best.

Being a woman, I have had to overcome many obstacles in my life. I overcame the fact that I was fired from a job because I had a baby and

could not come back to work for two weeks. I also endeavored to take typing classes because I was told that being a secretary was the only job a woman could have outside the home. Eventually, I came to the realization that some people are just plain stupid and women can do anything. This is a man's country, and as long as a man is running it, no matter what, a woman will never be his equal.

