

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

Prologue

During the first two years of life, children learn to crawl, walk and jump, to point and play, to repeat words overheard in conversations, and to follow simple instructions. These are the basics, they don't define who or what we will become.

Learning to be human isn't a simple process, the lessons are often emotionally and physically painful, but that is what makes us who we are.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

**Mother's Great Escape;
3rd Time Lucky?
(July 1963)**

She had planned it for months, stealing insignificant amounts of money from Wilfred's trouser pockets when he was drunk, and hiding it in the lining of an old dress hung in the cupboard, impatient, her resentment growing toward the baby as days blurred into weeks and then months, and then finally, nineteen months after Laurie's birth, the timing just right, Wilfred had gotten so drunk he'd passed out.

She'd whizzed around the small log cabin like a miniature tornado, packing her things and the children's clothes into the wooden chest her father had given her as a wedding gift in order to hold her dowry. It had at one time been filled with silver cutlery, beautifully embroidered towels and table clothes, scented wax candles, ivory porcelain cups and saucers, lovely blue patterned dishes and bowls—there was nothing left. What hadn't been broken had been sold.

Changing into the dress she had used to hide the money stolen from him, she had piled the children into his car after she'd confiscated the set of keys tucked in his coat pocket, locked the cabin door behind her and looked around the camp for what she hoped would be the last time.

She had never learned how to drive, but she had been watching him closely for months, planning her escape. She'd stuck the car key in the ignition, turned it, and when the motor had roared to life, she'd finally allowed herself to relax. Taking a moment to check on the children in the back seat, Nicole sitting in the middle cuddling Laurie who was sleeping, Denise and Diane sitting on either side of her staring out the windows, she glanced to her left and smiled at Jocelyn who was sitting next to the window in the passenger seat, while Danny quietly snored between them on the front seat. Satisfied that all was fine, she'd put the car into drive and gently pressed her foot onto the accelerator, her heart pounding in her chest. She'd expected Wilfred to come running out of the cabin, but he hadn't.

Her intention had been to drive all the way to Quebec City; unfortunately, just outside Montreal, she'd fallen asleep and gotten into an accident. Fortunately for them all, when she'd fallen asleep her foot had come off the accelerator and the car had coasted into a wood barrier flanking the road. She'd come awake with a jolt, blinked her eyes, made certain everyone was all right, and then quickly herded the children toward the city lights she could see in the distance.

Finally arriving in Montreal, 1000km and 21 hours after she'd run away from the lumberjack camp, she'd gone to the first Catholic church she could find, and boldly lied to the priest, telling him she was a widow and needed shelter until she could find work. Twice before, after managing to escape Wilfred, she'd been made to go back to him. The first time by her mother who'd promptly called him and told him to pick her up, and the second time by a priest who had given her black eye and split lip a cursory glance before telling her that her place was with her husband, and had then proceeded to evict her from the church. She'd learned her lesson—she would lie, even to God if she had to.

She was offered food and shelter by the kindly priest, whom she did eventually feel guilty for lying to, although in the end it had been revealed that he had suspected

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

that she'd escaped from a violent husband, and had wanted to help her and the children regardless of the teachings of the church.

Two months later, having found a house to rent and work as a seamstress, settled the children into a new school and found a babysitter for Laurie, Wilfred had appeared on her doorstep, furious. The police had found his car on the road and contacted him. Although Montreal was a big city, he'd known that her options would be limited and therefore had gone from one church to the next. It had taken longer than expected to find her, and he'd ended up visiting every church in the city, Protestant and Baptist included. He'd almost given up when he'd spied a group of children walking home from school in a poorer area of the city—Nicole, Denise and Diane amongst them. All he'd had to do at that point was follow them.

She'd called the police for assistance thinking that they would make him leave, but instead they'd told her, regardless that the house lease was in her name, that she was his wife and therefore they could do nothing to help her. She and the children were his property. Wilfred had then moved his things in and taken over, just as he always had in the past, except that this time she was the one who went out to work. Every Friday she would hand over her pay-packet to him and he would give her just enough money to purchase food and keep the rest for himself. The rent had fallen behind, the electricity hadn't been paid, and they had received a notice that the electricity would be cut off unless the bill was paid; and then she had discovered that the lump in her breast was cancerous.

She'd had to go in to the hospital the day after the electricity was cut off in order to have a mastectomy. In the midst of the coldest winter on record, she'd had to leave the children with their drunken father, in an unheated house, knowing that she might not survive. It was the hardest thing she had ever done.

She'd cried a billion tears since her wedding day, and she would cry a billion more, she was certain of it.

She'd been only 16 when she'd married and so full of hope. Twenty-two years later, ten pregnancies—four miscarriages—in the midst of fighting breast cancer, she felt ancient and wanted nothing more than to curl up and die.

Mother's story... told to me in the summer of 1978

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

First Memories, And The Dangers Hidden In Glittering Snow *(December 1963)*

Yesterday, today, tomorrow—they were all the same to me—each one a measurement of time that eluded and therefore confused me. I knew that one hour was the length of time I was given in order to play before bedtime, or the length of time I had to stay in my room when I was punished. An hour was something I knew well; however, a minute was something entirely different. It could be a really short period of time which passed in the blink of an eye, or incredibly long; it all seemed to depend on who was telling me to wait a minute, what I wanted from them and what they were doing at the time—except for those times when they were speaking on the telephone; those minutes were endless, and I knew to walk away instead of insisting because I would get slapped.

It wasn't just time and days that confused me, there was always so much going on in my cluttered mind, so much information that had yet to be processed. I was constantly besieged by thoughts, and this inevitably opened the floodgate to questions. Everyone hated my questions, some responding to them by shoving me aside, others responded with a slap, and some took a deep breath and shooed me away like a bothersome fly. Nicole was the kindest of all my brothers and sisters. She seemed to understand my need to question everything, and had even told me that it was a sign of intelligence. I liked it when she took the time to explain things to me; it calmed the chaos in my mind.

There were times, after particularly restless nights with strange and sometimes frightening dreams—which I could never remember upon awakening—when my mind was calm, and I just seemed to know things. Nicole had explained that the brain worked while people slept, that it stored information to memory, sort of like putting toys away in a toy box; this kept them safe and when they were needed, we knew where to find them.

Nicole constantly teased me about my memory, telling me it was like a sieve because I often asked the same questions. Her teasing was often accompanied by smiles, but sometimes I could feel her frustration and her voice would sound sharp and this would make me feel bad. I hated upsetting her.

My brother Jocelyn, unlike Nicole, was rarely kind. He was the eldest of us all, nearly all grown up. Nicole was younger than him by two years, and slightly smaller, but she wasn't afraid of him. I had seen her slap him once and he'd run off in tears to find mother who had ended up shouting at her. Mostly Jocelyn ignored Nicole, and she liked it that way. I hated drawing his attention because his teasing was mean, and he would stop only if Nicole or mother made him stop. Because he was mother's favourite, I knew not to turn to her for help when Jocelyn told me I was adopted, insisting that I wasn't one of them because my hair was blonde and I had blue eyes while as they all had black hair and brown eyes. His teasing was cutting at times, he'd call me stupid, ugly, fat, or any other mean thing he could think of, and Danny, who was seven years older than me, would snigger and smile when Jocelyn teased me. Jocelyn could be very mean, but not as mean as Danny.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

There were six of us; Jocelyn was the eldest at 17, Nicole was 15, Denise was 13, Diane was 11, Danny was 9, and I was two. Mother had miscarried four babies, but rarely spoke of these; when she did it was with a very matter-of-fact attitude.

People rarely called us by name, we were simply referred to as the *drunk's litter*, sometimes in hushed tones filled with pity, but mostly louder in an unkind manner.

None of my brothers or sisters seemed to care how they were referred to by the neighbours, but I felt the neighbours' anger and resentment, their disapproval when father was away, or the fear when he returned. People treated me differently depending on whether or not he was home; unfortunately, he was rarely home. He was a lumberjack, and therefore went where work was available, either in Ontario or Quebec, and spent most of the year in the camps.

When father was home, Jocelyn and Danny would treat me kindly, patting me gently on the head and smiling nervously when I cringed away from them. They would even invite me to play with them, but I would remain perched upon father's lap, content to be cuddled, feeling safe. Father was always kind to me, and unlike my older brothers and sisters who tended to stay in their rooms when he was around, I loved it when he was home—even when he smelled of beer and his voice grew loud. He had a terrible temper, but it was mostly directed towards Jocelyn and Danny who were constantly squabbling. Denise and Diane were terrified of father, not because he hit them, mother was the one who mostly did that, but because he had a very loose hold upon his temper and was just as likely to punch a hole in a wall with his fist, slam his hand down on a table or throw things around the house. Mother tsked at him constantly, harping on and on that he was a violent man, a drunk, and that she deserved better; when that happened, everyone hid. Everyone wished at those times, even me, that mother would hold her tongue, but she never did, she went on and on, screaming at him, insulting him, and when words turned to hitting, father was not one to step back and allow anyone to hit him; not even mother. Their fights were so loud that sometimes the police were summoned by the neighbours to interfere, which was probably why the neighbours called us the *drunk's litter* in hushed tones after each incident involving the police.

My first life defining moment came on the day I turned two.

Everyone had been so excited the weeks leading to Christmas, even Jocelyn and Danny had been nice to me, telling me stories about a fat man called Santa who had flying reindeer—I had no idea what those were at the time—and flew around the world giving presents to good children. Jocelyn had punched Danny on the arm during one of his stories and sniggered that he was permanently on Santa's bad list. I had asked if I was on the bad list too, and Nicole had quickly reassured me that I was not. I had been relieved to hear this, although I hadn't been certain why because there were prettily wrapped presents under the tree already, with shiny bows and tinkling bells—except for my birthday gifts, which were stacked at the back of the tree, against the wall, and did not possess bows and bells. My birthday was, officially, the day after Christmas, but would be celebrated on Christmas day.

The laughter and joy, the excitement surrounding Christmas, all of it came to an abrupt end on 'Boxing Day'—happy birthday to me.

Hearing Jocelyn and Danny arguing in the kitchen, I paused outside the doorway and shrank back against the wall so I would not be seen whilst I eavesdropped. I wondered what the argument was about this time. I thought it odd that neither mother nor Nicole were putting an end to the argument. Father was obviously not home. I vaguely remembered waking up during the night, startled by angry shouts and crying. Nicole had come to my room and crawled into bed beside me, telling me to shush. I'd

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

fallen asleep in Nicole's arms. Perhaps the police had come and taken father away again.

Pushing away from the wall, I entered the kitchen. A few things struck me as odd: a dark purple bruise under mother's eye and a swollen bottom lip with an angry red split in it. Jocelyn's eyes flashed with anger, and as he leaned over to punch Danny on the arm I recognised the look in his eyes, it was the same look that came into father's eyes at times, a look that was always followed by a violent outburst. Nicole appeared restless, fidgeting with her hair, biting her fingernails. Denise was angrily attacking a bowl of cereal, her spoon dipping into the bowl with such force it caused the milk to splash over the rim. She was doing her best to ignore everyone in the kitchen—it was what she did best. Diane had tears in her eyes and sat in silence, her bottom lip trembling as she stared at mother. Nicole leaned forward and stroked Diane's back for a moment before she looked up and noticed me standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Come, have some breakfast. What would you like, Laurie? Cereal or toast and jam?"

Moving forward on trembling legs, the atmosphere in the kitchen filling me with dread, I nodded my head and glanced at the available chairs. No one ever used the same chairs when sitting at the table, except for mother and father who sat at opposite ends of the table. Father's seat was available, but I was not allowed to sit in it, which left only one empty seat: between Jocelyn and Danny. My bottom lip quivered as I crawled onto the chair. Danny leaned sideways and nicked my arm with his fist when he attempted to punch Jocelyn in retaliation, and I was nearly knocked off my chair when Jocelyn bolted to his feet and smacked Danny behind the head.

"Stop it!"

Everyone froze and turned to look at mother. She was breathing heavily, as though she was out of breath, and her fingers were clenched into fists at her sides. She eyed us, one after the other, her expression one of rage and despair. No one spoke. No one dared.

"Get out of the house! All of you," she shouted. "Now!"

"But where will we go," Jocelyn asked, mother's favourite, not fearing her rage. She focused on him, her expression unfailingly hard, and he looked down at his empty plate.

I wanted to run and hide in my room.

"I... don't... care."

Hearing the coldness in mother's voice, I blinked back my tears and looked at Nicole.

"Let's give the toboggan a good christening," Nicole exclaimed, feigning happiness she probably did not feel.

Danny gave a loud whoop of joy and hopped off his chair, his anger at Jocelyn giving way to happiness at the thought of playing outside in the snow. Diane quietly followed him out of the room, followed by Denise and Jocelyn. Nicole lifted me from my chair and shushed me when I complained that I hadn't had breakfast yet. It wouldn't be the first time I missed breakfast. When father was home, he always made us a giant breakfast with bacon, eggs and toast. I wished he was home.

Jocelyn and Danny worked together to carry the toboggan until Nicole suggested that they set it down in the snow so that Denise, Diane, Danny and I could sit down on it. She then grabbed a hold of the twisted red and white rope Jocelyn held in his hand, and together she and Jocelyn pulled the toboggan through the streets of Montreal.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

We were headed towards Mount Royal. It was my favourite place because it was where Nicole took me when it was just the two of us, to Beaver Lake, situated right at the top of the mountain. It wasn't as beautiful in winter because it was buried in snow and the swans and ducks stayed away, but in summer it was magical. My memory wasn't great, but I remembered feeding the swans and ducks, and it made me smile regardless of the bitter cold I felt as the toboggan threatened to spill us out onto the road as Nicole and Jocelyn hurried across it.

My nose was runny, and it was impossible to wipe it with my rabbit fur mittens. I was starving and feeling quite miserable. I hated the snow. I hated the cold. I hated going outside because my boots always got wet, my scarf developed tiny ice chunks where it came into contact with my mouth, and my legs felt like ice cubes because I didn't wear trousers like the boys; I had to wear wool stockings with skirts and dresses. Yet, as the toboggan slid over the ice and Diane's arms tightened around me from behind, I felt excitement bubble up within me.

Arriving at the base of Mount Royal, I was startled by the noise. It was so loud, the laughter, the excited cries and shouts as dozens upon dozens of sledges and toboggans careened down the side of the mountain. The sun was out, and the cold hush of winter was drowned out by the excitement of the revellers. Mostly children, but a few parents stuck out like sore thumbs. I was envious of the children who were accompanied by their parents.

We had to pile out of the toboggan before it was hauled by Jocelyn to the top of the slope, and I was grateful when Nicole offered to carry me to the top. As she carried me, I watched the toboggans and sledges shoot past. A few inventive children slid down on flattened cardboard boxes, and I watched them, fascinated.

It was a really lovely day, and I felt happy basking beneath the sun, feeling safe in Nicole's arms, loving the way the sun sparkled on the snow, making portions of it glitter like broken glass. I watched my warm breath puff out into dense clouds and was fascinated by that, too. There wasn't much that didn't fascinate me, regardless that I didn't like winter, because there was so much to see, to discover, like tobogganing.

We reached the top of the slope and Nicole tucked me under the front of the toboggan before climbing on behind me. Denise, Diane, Danny and Jocelyn pushed in behind us, and they clung to each other as the toboggan slowly tilted forward. My fear burgeoned into terror as the toboggan picked up speed, and soon we were shooting down the mountain, some laughing, some screaming, someone shouted "ice", and then I realised I was alone, everyone had jumped off, and I discovered that the sun shining off a bank of snow, making it glitter like broken glass... was actually ice.

Silence enveloped me; it was deafening. I blinked my eyes and looked up. Nicole, Jocelyn, Denise, Diane and Danny stared down at me. I noticed that they were standing in a circle around me, and from my position, lying on my back in the snow, it was like looking up at the sky through a tunnel. It started snowing, the flakes getting bigger and bigger as they got closer, and I blinked when a flake stuck to my lashes.

"What were you thinking," Jocelyn growled at Nicole, staring down at me in horror. "Why didn't you pull her off with you?"

The front of the toboggan had splintered under the impact with the icy bank, and I had been ejected a few feet away. My leg was hanging at an odd angle, and all he could think to do was lay the blame elsewhere. It didn't matter that he was the eldest, it was Nicole who had been seated behind me, and therefore it was her he would point a finger at. Everyone else would do the same because they, too, were afraid.

Nicole fell onto her knees beside me in the snow, tears sliding down her red cheeks as she reached for me. "I tried, but she was wedged in," she replied, her voice

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

sounding like a frog's grating croak. "And then I was pulled sideways and off the toboggan by Denise when she fell sideways," she sniffled, tears cascading down her cheeks.

"We are so dead," Danny exclaimed, staring daggers down at me. As far as he was concerned, everything bad that ever happened to him was my fault.

"I'll take the blame," Nicole promised, glancing sideways at Danny as an elderly man pushed them aside in order to help me when I began to cry.

My memory wasn't very good, but I knew that I would never forget the day when the sun had made the snow glitter like broken glass.

* * * * *

Learned; shouting, hitting, breaking things and name calling are normal behaviour when venting anger, and it is normal for mothers to have a 'favourite' child. Fathers, too, have a 'favourite' child... luckily for me. Being the youngest child in the family, being bullied, teased and excluded come with the territory.

Observed; if you watch people closely, you can spot anger in them before they explode.

And from listening to my neighbours; I learned to feel shame.

Angry Words And Hard-Earned Freedom *(January 1964)*

"I hate it here," mother stated unhappily. "It's all your fault. This... all this... it's not what I wanted. We're living in a dump with cockroaches and bedbugs. The cupboards are empty; there are a few scraps to be found in the refrigerator, but not enough to feed us all."

"You're giving me a headache," father grumbled in annoyance.

"I hate you."

Tears burning my eyes, I turned to look at Nicole. "Why did she say that," I whispered, ignoring the finger Nicole had pressed against my mouth in order to keep me quiet.

"Shush Laurie," Nicole whispered back, gently brushing the tears that had spilled onto my cheeks. "Everything will be fine."

Glancing down at the grubby cast the doctor had put on my leg after the toboggan accident, I frowned. I idly traced a finger along what was supposed to be a drawing of a rabbit—I was certain Danny had done it on purpose to ruin Nicole's beautiful bird drawing which could now just barely be seen beneath it—and gave a heavy sigh. Nicole said the cast would come off soon. I couldn't wait. Then maybe everything could go back to how it used to be. Maybe Nicole could go back to school and mother could go back to work and father; I wasn't sure about father. He was rarely home, and when he was the police would take him away and tell him he needed to sleep it off. I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but I did understand what the police meant when they told mother that she should learn to keep quiet. Jocelyn and Nicole often told mother she was provoking the arguments—I often wished mother wouldn't shout at father or hit him because maybe he wouldn't lose his temper and the police wouldn't take him away. As my thoughts wandered, I could hear my parents' voices in the background—I leaned into Nicole for comfort.

"You hate everything and everyone, Albertine, including your own children," father remarked, giving a grunt of annoyance.

"No, I just hate *you*," mother replied, bursting into tears.

I heard father let out a string of curses, just barely audible through the thick wall that separated the kitchen from the lounge where Nicole and I had been watching television. It was just as well that Jocelyn, Denise, Diane and Danny were at school because Jocelyn would have tried to help mother if he'd heard her crying. Denise would have locked herself in her room and cried, Diane would have sat quietly with them with her head down, staring at her feet, and Danny would have been standing with his ear pressed against the wall so he could hear better.

Nicole had been pulled out of school after the accident because the babysitter, who had found fulltime work, could no longer look after me during the day when everyone was at school and mother was at work. Father didn't work and could have taken care of me, but he was always drunk and mother didn't trust him to take care of me—Nicole had explained it was because he'd gotten so drunk last time I was alone with him, that he'd given me a bottle of children's orange flavoured aspirin instead of candy, which had led to me being taken to hospital—and so it was left to Nicole to become my babysitter until the cast was removed and I could walk again. Nicole didn't mind being taken out of school, she'd told me that she hated school and preferred being at home with me during the day while everyone was out.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

Nicole pressed her cheek against the top of my bowed head, and we listened to father as he attempted to console mother. This argument was different. I think we both sensed that something important was happening.

"Why does she hate him," I asked.

"I think she's just very unhappy since the operation," Nicole replied.

I nodded my head, although I didn't really understand any of what was happening between my parents. All I knew was that mother was very ill. Jocelyn had told me that mother had cancer, and that although it had been removed, she was still suffering from the effects. When I'd asked Nicole to explain, she had simply said that I was not to worry about it. But I *did* worry about it because, in addition to the frequent arguments between mother and father and the police visits, there was a terrible underlying silence in the house, and no one laughed any more.

"Is she unhappy because of us?"

"No. Sometimes I think she was just born that way," Nicole sighed.

Father stumbled into the room just then, and both Nicole and I looked up at him in surprise. He stared back at us in silence, his eyes red-rimmed and bright with tears, and raked trembling fingers through his greying hair.

"My beautiful girls," he sighed, advancing towards us. Dropping to his knees, he pulled us both into his arms and held us close. "Whatever happens, don't forget that I love you both."

"What's happened," Nicole asked, her voice trembling slightly as she returned father's hug. It was not unusual for him to show us affection; he did so often, however, this time his tears were a frightening sight to behold.

"It's for the best. I'll come back and visit you and the others whenever I can. Take care of your brothers and sisters, Nicole. They'll need you," he advised, his voice sad.

Looking at me, he ruffled my short blond hair, and leaned forward to kiss the spattering of freckles on the bridge of my nose. Giving me a reassuring smile, he wiped my tears away. "Listen to your mother and to Nicole," he ordered gruffly, and pushed to his feet.

Not knowing what to say or do, Nicole and I watched him leave in silence. A few minutes later, mother entered the lounge. She paused, appearing somewhat dismayed to see us there. She shrugged her shoulders and glanced down at the crumpled tissue she held in her hand. She dabbed at the corners of her eyes with the tissue before blowing her nose with it and shoving it into her pocket.

"Is... are you... all right," Nicole asked, her voice soft and filled with concern.

"I will never be all right. I'm going upstairs to bed. Feed the children when they get in from school and tell them to be quiet. I have to get up early for work in the morning."

"Did the doctor say it was okay to go back to work so soon," Nicole questioned.

"We'll need the money," mother replied, her voice harsh. "I can't rely on your father. He'd rather waste his money on alcohol and gambling than spend it on his children... good for nothing drunk," she spat, removing the crumpled tissue from her pocket and wiping her nose.

"He isn't good for nothing," I shouted in his defence, angry with mother for insulting him. That's all she ever did.

"If you love him that much you can go with him," she hissed, glaring at me. "How dare you take his side? If anyone is deserving of sympathy, it's me! Not that drunken excuse for a man. I wish I'd never met him. I wish he'd never come back from the war," she hiccupped, swiping angrily at the tears that ran down her pale cheeks.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

“Don’t say such things,” Nicole pleaded, blinking back her tears.

“I’ll say what I want to say in my own home,” mother growled. “I married your father to escape my parents and the farm, and not a day has gone by that I haven’t regretted it.” She paused and pressed her hand against the thick bandages bulging under her blouse. She winced in pain. “Your father isn’t a saint. He got some girl pregnant, and he didn’t want to marry her, and I didn’t want to go back to the farm to be married to some old farmer. People got married for so many different reasons during the war, not just for love, so when your father asked, I said yes. I didn’t think he would come home from the war, but he did, and each time he did he got me pregnant and I hated him more, and then he returned for good.” She paused and gave Nicole a sad smile. “That’s when we ended up on the farmstead allotted to us by the government as a reward for serving in the army during the war.” Giving a heavy sigh, she ran a trembling hand through her thick black hair before turning away.

“We were happy there,” Nicole reflected aloud. “I was happy there.”

“I know you were,” mother sighed, pausing within the doorway leading out into the hallway. She glanced back at Nicole and gave her a sad smile. “I wasn’t happy leaving the city, but I loved the countryside, and your father did try to make the small farm a home for us at first... but he was never a farmer. He mortgaged the farm to purchase farm equipment, which he never used, and when he fell behind with the mortgage payments the bank repossessed the farm. With nowhere to live, he went back to being a lumberjack, and we ended up being dragged from one camp to another. It was a miserable time, and then I got pregnant again.”

Mother looked at me then, and Nicole pressed a kiss against the top of my head.

“You were born during the worst snowstorm ever. We made it as far as the convent positioned halfway between the lumberjack camp and the hospital in Sault Ste. Marie. It was the most painful delivery of them all, and definitely made worse by the nuns who burned dozens of candles around me and prayed for hours on end that you would be born on Christmas day. But you wouldn’t have any of it.” She laughed and smiled at me. “You just always do your own thing. Too smart for your own good.”

She left the room.

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*Learned; marriages can end, and when they do, children are expected to take a side.
Not taking a side equates to taking the wrong side.*

Sibling Rivalry And The Art Of Manipulation *(July 1966)*

Sitting on the third step from the bottom, which lead directly to the front door of my new home, I watched people walk past, wishing that I could leave my step and go with them.

I didn't think anyone would miss me; they probably wouldn't even notice that I was gone. Perhaps Nicole would miss me... at some point. Nicole had changed, she no longer seemed to want to be home anymore, not since she'd fallen in love.

Sighing loudly, I glanced up towards the second-floor balcony where Mrs. Charbonneau was seated, her enormous girth flowing over the sides of the fragile-looking kitchen chair she was sitting on. As I watched, she planted her feet against the railing and pushed backwards, forcing the chair onto its hind legs; and giving anyone who walked past an unfettered view up her dress. Noticing that she wasn't wearing any panties, I quickly focused my attention on my new black patent shoes. They pinched my toes and created blisters, but mother said that there were more important things in life, things far more important than tight shoes and hand-me-down clothes. I believed her, but I still wished that I owned shoes and clothes that fit properly.

"You get up here, *now*," Mrs. Charbonneau shouted down, scowling at me. "Don't think I don't know what you're up to."

I cringed and scooted sideways, pushing up against the wrought iron railing. When Mrs. Charbonneau's feet hit the deck of the wooden balcony with a loud thud, I immediately jumped to my feet, self-preservation kicking in. I glanced towards the door at the top of the stairs, situated on the same landing Mrs. Charbonneau was on, which opened onto an interior staircase, a staircase which in turn lead to the front door of my home, but I knew it would be locked. Mrs. Charbonneau had requested that mother keep it locked when she babysat me after a previous escape.

I remembered that day well. It was the day Manon, Mrs. Charbonneau's daughter, was hurt. That day we had been playing rather loudly, and Mrs. Charbonneau had taken exception to our laughter and excited squeals. Grabbing onto Manon, Mrs. Charbonneau had spun her round and round in circles in the centre of her lounge, and then released her. Manon, who was the same age as me but slightly smaller, had flown across the room and slammed into the wall so hard that she'd bumped her head and slid unconscious onto the floor. I remembered screaming in terror, and then Mrs. Charbonneau had slapped me across the face. I'd bolted out the door and hidden, trembling, in the staircase leading to my front door. Manon had eventually awoken, and apart from a bump at the back of her head and a headache, both of which Mrs. Charbonneau had blamed on our boisterous revelry, a story mother had believed without question, she had recovered, and I'd received a spanking for causing Mrs. Charbonneau undo worry.

Staring at Mrs. Charbonneau, my heart pounding in my chest, I slowly made my way up the stairs to the second-floor landing. Manon came out of the house at that moment and Mrs. Charbonneau slapped her behind the head before stomping off into the house. Blinking back her tears, Manon looked at me and together we entered the house.

Later that evening, I told mother that I was afraid of Mrs. Charbonneau. Denise, who had been drying the dinner dishes, remarked that Mrs. Charbonneau was a 'disgusting pig who was constantly flashing her fat ass at teenage boys'. Shocked by

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

such language, mother had reprimanded Denise and sent her to her room. This could have been interpreted as sibling loyalty, but I knew better. The only thing Denise loved more than herself, was upsetting mother. When I attempted to continue our discussion after Denise flounced out of the room, I, too, was sent to my room.

The following day Nicole stayed home, but we didn't spend the day alone. Nicole's boyfriend, Alain, showed up just after breakfast, and he and Nicole spent the day locked in her bedroom while I played with my toys in my own room. Shortly before the others came home, Alain exited Nicole's bedroom and left the house. Nicole made me promise not to tell anyone about Alain, stating that if I did mother would have Mrs. Charbonneau babysit me instead. I was only four, but I understood the consequences, and although I wasn't a tattler, I was no match against Denise's expert manipulation whenever she attempted to dig up dirt on Nicole—which she did just a few hours later after getting into a row with Nicole and Diane.

Denise cornered me in the washroom just as I was brushing my teeth before bed.

"I bet you can't wait for kindergarten," she said, picking up a brush and working it through my hair.

My mouth filled with toothpaste, I slowly nodded my head in agreement, somewhat wary of Denise's proximity.

"Did you go out with Nicole today?"

Shaking my head, I winced when the brush snagged on a knot.

"Stand still," she hissed. Noticing that I was watching her in the mirror, she forced a smile. "I bet she let her boyfriend into the house when everyone was gone."

I blinked my eyes and looked away. She roughly pushed the brush through my hair, hurting me, and my eyes filled with tears.

Satisfied with my reaction, she sauntered from the room.

Spitting the toothpaste from my mouth, I rinsed the sink with water and slowly made my way out of the washroom. I was standing just outside the kitchen doorway when Denise told mother that Nicole had let Alain into the house earlier that day. It took no more than a minute for silence to erupt into chaos, and I burst into tears when Nicole turned to look at me, disappointment in her eyes. It was all my fault.

"I'm seventeen," Nicole stated calmly, standing just out of mother's reach.

"Until you turn eighteen, you answer to me," mother stated, her voice sharp. "You shame me..."

"That's nothing new," Nicole interrupted. "None of us can compete with Jocelyn."

"For fuck sake," Jocelyn growled in annoyance. "It's always the same story. I'm done here. I found my own place, so that's me done with this fucking family," he declared, glaring at Nicole.

"You might as well leave! It isn't like you actually help out around here. You haven't given mother a single penny since you started working. You're just a spoiled moocher," Diane piped up, snorting in disgust.

"When were you planning on telling me," mother questioned, her voice sad.

"I was going to tell you on Saturday morning, before I packed my bags," Jocelyn replied. "I'm not a kid anymore. I need to make a life for myself."

"What about me," mother demanded. "I've worked my fingers to the bone for you, and you're just going to turn your back on me?"

Jocelyn stared at mother for a moment. "I don't want to be the man of the house, the one who brings home the money for the rent and food. I don't want to spend another

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

second in a house filled with petty arguments and accusations. I want a new life for myself. I need my own space.” His voice broke, and he looked away.

The silence was deafening. Mother bit back a sob, and Nicole circled her arm around her trembling shoulders in an attempt to comfort her.

Danny pushed me aside roughly, and entered the kitchen just as Jocelyn brushed past him. He opened the refrigerator door. “I’m hungry,” he whined.

“Have a cracker,” Nicole offered, opening the cupboard door and handing him an open pack of saltines.

Pulling out a cracker, Danny glanced up at mother and stuffed the cracker in his mouth. “Does this mean I get my own bedroom?”

Mother let out a shuddering sob, and quickly exited the kitchen.

“Nice going asshole,” Denise chided, following mother from the room.

* * * * *

Observation... some people just like to stir up shit.

Some Things Can Never Be Unseen *(November 1966)*

Jocelyn had been gone four months, and a tiny reshuffling of bedrooms had brought much needed peace and calm.

Denise had gotten Jocelyn's old bedroom and had therefore vacated the bedroom she shared with Diane and Nicole. That had greatly reduced the quantity of arguments the trio got into, and Danny had ended up sleeping on a folding bed in the kitchen. I kept my bedroom, a small room tucked away at the front of the house with a door leading out onto a tiny exterior balcony. The only reason I got my own bedroom was because no one else wanted to share with me. Oddly enough, in a house filled with people, I was incredibly lonely most of the time.

I had just started kindergarten, and thought it incredibly boring. I liked having new friends though, although I was never allowed to go to their homes or invite them to mine. Mother told me that friendships were for later, when I was older. "Whatever friendships you make now will lead nowhere and are just a waste of time," she said.

Kindergarten, like school, was for learning; yet I learned nothing new. When I said as much to mother, she asked me why I had to be so difficult all the time. I didn't have an answer to that, but sensed she wasn't really wanting one so just kept quiet.

While my classmates were learning the alphabet and how to write their names, I would sit at the back of the room with a storybook. The teacher was kind, allowing me to read the books neatly stacked in the bookcase at the back of the room. Sometimes she would even let me read out loud for everyone.

Nicole had taught me to read and write in French and English, and I had gotten a library card the previous month. I could take out four books at a time, and I did, every Saturday when Nicole took me to the library. I returned the books I'd read, and picked new ones. I had just finished *Alice in Wonderland*. The librarian hadn't believed me when I'd told her I'd read the massive book on my own. When Nicole had assured her that I was speaking the truth, the librarian had just stared at me in surprise, her eyes wide. I'd felt a sense of pride at her reaction, and wanted desperately for mother to be impressed, too, by how quickly I was learning. My kindergarten teacher was impressed, Nicole was impressed, but not mother. She complained that I was mixing French and English words in sentences, and that I should learn to separate both languages. I was frustrated, but I needed her approval, so I tried harder.

I was curious. I wanted to learn, and wasn't afraid to ask questions. During Sunday school, although it wasn't really a school because you didn't really learn anything apart from what was in the bible, I asked Sister Theresa how Adam and Eve could be banished from the Garden of Eden and end up in a town filled with people if they were the first created by God. She told me to leave the room.

When Nicole picked me up from the church and I told her what had happened, she laughed. When I told mother what had happened, she slapped me and sent me to my room, telling me how ashamed she was of me.

I was sitting in the cab of Jean Guy's truck. He was mother's new boyfriend. They worked together at a dry cleaning and clothing repair company. Mother was a seamstress, and Jean Guy was the delivery truck driver for the company. I was sitting in the back of the truck because kindergarten was closed for the day, and Nicole was working. She, too, worked in the same company as mother and Jean Guy, as a

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

receptionist. Denise had found a job, too, working in the office of a large clothing manufacturer situated on St. Lawrence Boulevard. Jocelyn, too, worked for a large clothing manufacturer in the same area, as an accountant. Diane was attending Pie IX High School, and Danny was still in elementary school because he'd failed a year, and it was likely, I had heard mother telling Nicole, that he would still be attending Holy Family School when I started first grade next year. I had burst into tears upon hearing this, but Nicole had assured me I would not be seeing him in school because boys and girls were kept apart. I had been relieved.

As I sat in the back of the truck, waiting for Jean Guy to return, I grabbed one of the large white canvas bags holding dirty laundry he'd picked up earlier, and peeked inside. Shirts. I was so incredibly bored.

“Don't touch that!”

Startled, I let out a squeal and dropped the bag just as Jean Guy tossed another bag next to where I was sitting.

“I need to go to the washroom,” I told him.

“Can't stop now. You'll have to hold it in until lunch time,” he grumbled, frowning down at me.

“How long is that?”

“Another hour.”

He climbed into the driver's seat, and started the engine. The truck vibrated, and my need for the washroom increased. “I can't wait that long.”

“Nothing I can do about that,” he barked, his voice angry.

I knew he didn't want me around, he never did, but he never said no to mother when she asked him to do things for her. He particularly disliked Denise and Danny because they were constantly insulting him, telling him his belly was massive. They called it a Santa Claus belly, and would shout ‘Ho Ho Ho’ whenever they saw him. Mother would tell them to stop, but she would often glance down at his belly and frown.

I didn't mind his belly, or his constant frowning, but he smelled funny, and put too much gel in his hair. His hair was sparse, and always looked greasy. He also had a way of looking at me that made me uncomfortable. Nicole didn't like him much either, she said he was a ‘dirty old man’. Her tone of voice and facial expression, when she called him that, led me to believe that she wasn't talking about his greasy-looking hair or funny smell.

The truck shook and vibrated, and it was incredibly loud in the back. Everything creaked and groaned, and when Jean Guy turned the heating on, the hot air blew out in a deafening whoosh. I was desperate.

Spying the two spare tires shoved beneath a pile of canvas bags, I quietly removed the bags, and crouched over one of the wheels with my panties down around my ankles. I had to hold on to the sides of the wheel while I peed to keep from falling into the hole. Feeling much better, I stacked the bags over the tires and made my way to the front of the truck. There was no passenger seat, so I stood looking out of the front window.

A motorcycle whizzed by, and I watched it weave in and out through the traffic. Jean Guy muttered a few curses under his breath and told me to stay in the back, reminding me that I was not allowed to be in the truck. Company rules. I didn't really care, but as I turned to leave, the truck came to a shuddering halt and I was pushed forward against the back of Jean Guy's seat.

Minutes later, ambulances screeched past us as the truck crawled through traffic, and I watched in horror as we slowly drove past the same motorcycle I had seen earlier,

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

wedged under the back end of a truck, the rider hidden behind medics as they attended to him... or her.

“Fucking asshole,” Jean Guy cursed under his breath. “Had it coming, and now I’m stuck in traffic!”

“You shouldn’t say mean things,” I shouted at him, angry. “He’s hurt.”

“Get in the back,” he growled, glaring at me.

I no longer felt guilty for peeing in his tire.

Later that evening, listening to Jean Guy tell mother how he’d very nearly been in an accident because of a careless motorcyclist, I frowned. His story was different to what had actually happened, but when I opened my mouth to correct him, he tossed a chocolate bar over to me and told me to go eat it in my room.

Chocolate bars were a rarity in the house, not because mother thought they were unhealthy, but because they were too expensive. Suddenly being given one, which I didn’t have to share because everyone else was out, I forgot all about the motorcycle accident and ran to my room carrying the chocolate bar.

A few minutes later, the chocolate bar now a delightful memory, I wandered through the house. Darkness came early during the winter, and none of the lights had been turned on in the house. Spying a light from under mother’s bedroom door, I paused in front of the door and turned the handle. The door opened on silent hinges, and I found myself staring at something I didn’t understand at first. Bits of the image imprinted on my brain began to make sense; Jean Guy’s hairy bum, his underwear around his ankles, mother’s bare legs sticking up in the air on either side of him, strange groaning noises. It felt wrong, me standing there, them doing whatever it was they were doing... I bolted for my room and locked the door. I would never be able to unsee what I had just seen.

* * * * *

*Learned; what goes on behind closed doors should remain behind closed doors.
ALWAYS KNOCK BEFORE ENTERING A ROOM WITH A CLOSED DOOR!*

Observation; unless you’re the favourite child, meeting a parent’s expectations is impossible.

Flying Is For Superheroes - The Unwanted Baby And The Telephone Book *(January 1967)*

Glancing sideways at Danny, his broken arm encased in a gleaming white cast with his fingers protruding, I frowned. He was still wearing the shiny red superman cape he'd received at Christmas, and looked a bit ridiculous.

It had snowed all night, and upon seeing the massive snowbanks covering the ground in the yard, Danny had donned his winter boots, coat, hat and gloves, tied the cape around his neck and pinned the end of the cape to the clothesline with wooden pegs. I'd shouted at him through the open back door that he was going to hurt himself, but he'd shouted back at me to shut up. I'd closed the door, shaking my head at his stupidity, and watched him climb over the railing and fling himself over the edge. The wooden pegs had shot off like arrows, hitting the kitchen window, and he'd fallen, screaming, into the yard below. There was no end to the misfortunes that might have befallen him, strangulation being top of the list, instead, he'd merely plummeted into the yard below. Unfortunately, he'd somehow forgotten that the clothesline was positioned above the boundary to the neighbouring building, and that there was a picket fence hiding beneath the snowbank separating the yard below with the neighbour's yard next door. I considered a broken arm to be a lucky outcome.

As I watched him, he stuck his tongue out at me and crossed his eyes.

Denise walked past him and slapped him behind the head. "Idiot," she remarked, glowering down at him. "Next time use a rope," she snickered.

"For chrissake, don't give him any ideas," mother reprimanded. "He'll go out and hang himself!"

"Good riddance," Denise replied, leaving the room before mother could reply.

Shaking her head in disapproval, mother looked from me to Danny.

"It wasn't my fault," I quickly defended myself, upset by her disapproval. "I told him he was going to get hurt."

"You've got more sense than your brother," she sighed, turning her attention to Danny. "You could have killed yourself. You're twelve! Start acting your age, and for chrissake take that damned thing off!"

Mother pointed to the cape and held her hand out to him. Danny's bottom lip trembled as he fumbled with the thin cord tied at his neck, but he managed to pull it loose with one hand and gave the cape to her. She gave a heavy sigh and left the room.

Lost in thought, I didn't realise I was still staring at the empty doorway until Danny reached forward and pinched my arm.

"I hate you," he hissed at me.

Blinking back my tears, I glared at him. "I hate you, too."

He tried to pinch me again, but I was quicker than he was and was out the door before he realised that he'd missed.

I had just managed to fall asleep when I was awoken by shouting in the kitchen.

Tiptoeing to the door of my bedroom, I opened it a crack and listened. Nicole and mother were arguing. Nicole sounded like she was crying.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

“How could you be so stupid,” mother shouted. “I told you to stay away from him and that biker gang of his. We’re lucky we haven’t been evicted yet with all the noise they make when they come here.”

“I love him,” Nicole interrupted. “We were careful.”

“Obviously not,” mother grunted. “All you have to do is uncross your legs when you’re in the same room as a man, and he’ll find a way to get between them.”

“What am I supposed to do,” Nicole sniffled.

“There’s nothing to be done now, is there? You can give it up for adoption once it’s born.”

“I don’t want to give the baby up. I love Alain, and he loves me. We want this baby.”

“Not while you’re living under my roof,” mother shouted.

“Fine... I’ll go pack.”

Hearing the latter, I flung the door to my room open and ran into the kitchen, flinging my arms around Nicole’s waist. “Don’t leave me,” I pleaded, crying.

“Go to your room,” mother shouted at me. “This has nothing to do with you.”

Still holding on to Nicole’s waist, I looked up at her. She was crying, but she managed to give me a smile. “Everything will be fine, Laurie. Go back to bed.”

Denise entered the kitchen, a smirk on her face, and made her way to the sink where she poured herself a glass of water. “He’s not going to marry you,” she remarked, taking a sip of water. “His parents are filthy rich. You’ll never be good enough for them.”

Mother’s brows drew upward, and she looked at Denise. “Rich? If he’s from a rich family, then why is he in the Hell’s Angels?”

Denise smiled, but the smile wasn’t reflected in her eyes. “Beats me.”

“Did he say he was going to marry you,” mother asked, looking at Nicole.

“He’s not going to marry her,” Denise laughed. “I bet he’s never even brought her home to meet his parents.”

“He doesn’t get along with them,” Nicole defended, glaring at Denise.

“I told you to go to your room,” mother shouted at me.

I’d hoped that she would forget about me, but she pointed towards the door, and I had no choice but to obey. As I approached the open doorway, I spied Danny pretending to be asleep in the folding bed pushed up against the back wall. He opened his eyes a crack, and wiggled the fingers protruding from his cast at me in a bye bye gesture. I stuck my tongue out at him and left the room.

When I woke up the next morning, Nicole had packed her bags and left.

Two days later, desperately missing Nicole and feeling very angry at mother for letting her leave, I was awoken by yet another argument, this time between mother and Diane.

Sneaking out of bed, I opened the door a crack and spied mother dragging Diane down the hallway towards the kitchen at the back of the house.

“Take your fucking hands off me,” Diane shouted, attempting to pull her arm from mother’s grasp.

Mother paused beside the telephone table, grabbed the telephone book and swung it at Diane’s head, knocking her to the ground. “Don’t talk to me like that,” she screeched. “You were supposed to be home by ten.”

“I’m not a child anymore,” Diane shouted up at her, rubbing her head. “I’m seventeen!”

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

“Not till March. Until then, when I tell you to be home at a certain time, I expect you to do as I say.”

“You didn’t have to embarrass me in front of my friends,” Diane shot back. “You were like a crazy woman.”

Mother leaned down and slapped Diane across the face before dropping the telephone book down onto the small telephone table and disappearing into her bedroom.

“I hate you,” Diane hissed in anger. “I can’t wait to get out of this fucking place, and when I do, I’m never coming back!”

Quietly closing my bedroom door, I leaned back against it and blinked back my tears.

* * * * *

Learned; there is a lot of anger and hatred in my family.

Observation; boys are immature and don’t possess common sense.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

First Grade, Getting Lost, Night-Time Monster And Guess Who's Not Coming To Dinner *(September 1967)*

My first day of school.

Mother and Denise had left for work, and Diane had left for high school. This left Danny; he would be walking me to and from school every day, heating up a tin of soup for me when we came home for lunch, and babysit me until someone else got home in the evening. Mother was hoping that Danny might actually graduate from elementary at the end of the school year, he'd already failed twice, and join Diane in high school next September. I hoped so, too. Being alone with him was never a good thing. He was too unpredictable.

"Come on, we're going to be late," he shouted from the corridor.

Grabbing my coat, I ran after him. He locked the door, and we hurried down the flight of stairs. It was cold, and I buttoned the front of my jacket as I hurried after him down the street.

I was breathing heavily as Danny wove his way through the streets, up one then down the next. It didn't make any sense. We came to an intersection with traffic lights on all sides, and waited for a green light. The moment it blinked to green, he was off, running so fast I started to lag behind. He disappeared around the next corner, and I lost sight of him. When I made it to the corner, relief flooded through me. Danny was nowhere to be seen, but I could see the school.

I heard the school bell, and ran. I could see the children separating into two groups up ahead in the schoolyard. Entering the schoolyard, I noticed that the girls lined up at the bottom of a set of stairs situated on the left side of the school, and the boys lined up in front of a set of stairs situated on the right. I ran towards the girls' line-up, and was pushed further up the line by some of the older girls until I reached the front where the younger girls stood.

As we waited for the double doors to open at the top of the stairs, I noticed a carved stone above the door. It said GIRLS. There was a similar sign above the boys' door which stated the obvious.

Entering the school into a large auditorium, I could hear the boys on the other side of a heavy partition that separated the auditorium into two halves. The partition was similar to curtains, it could be opened or closed, and was made of a rigid brown vinyl.

We separated into five rows, the first grade at the front, the fifth grade at the rear. Five nuns and Mother Superior stood at the front, facing us, silent, a finger touching their lips telling us to be quiet. Loud music was piped into the speakers, and everyone began to sing the national anthem; Oh Canada. I didn't know the words, but I made believe that I did.

"First grade! Turn to your left. Quietly!"

Staring at the nun who had shouted, I took in her stern expression and did as she asked. We lined up and followed her to our classroom in silence.

Choosing a desk at the front of the class, I stood beside it, watching the nun, waiting for instructions. Her eyes met mine, looked me up and down, then went on to the next girl. She told one of the girls to straighten her skirt, told another to pull her stockings up, and told yet another that she looked messy and needed to tame her ungodly red curls. Following this, we were told to sit and join our hands together in prayer. We said an 'Our Father', and then first grade schoolbooks were passed out to us.

"I am Sister Agatha. There are strict rules to be followed in this class."

The rules we had to learn were endless, these included holding your hand up in order to ask a question, it was against the rules to speak unless spoken to, going to the washroom

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

required precise indication; hand up, one finger pointing to the ceiling to indicate a pee, two fingers for a poo, and three fingers for both. Endless rules, including a dress code. Short hair, or ponytails and braids. No coloured ribbons, jewellery or ankle socks. The school uniform consisted of knee-high navy wool stockings, black patent Mary Jane shoes, and a pleated navy tunic over a short-sleeved neatly pressed white shirt with a Peter Pan collar. Chewing gum was strictly forbidden. Sister Agatha said that girls who chewed gum looked like cows, and she wasn't going to allow cows in her classroom.

When the lunch bell rang, I ran out into the schoolyard and waited near the boys' stairs for Danny. He gave me a cursory glance as he came down the stairs, then bolted for the gate the moment his feet touched the ground.

Having expected that he would try to lose me, I ran after him, shouting at him to slow down.

"We've only got an hour to get home, have lunch, and get back to school," he shouted back at me. "Move it!"

Running as fast as physically possible, my short legs no match for his longer strides, I lagged behind but managed to keep him in sight. When we finally turned onto our street, I relaxed and watched Danny bolt up the steps to our house and unlock the door. By the time I entered the house, he'd heated up two tins of soup and was pouring them straight from the pan into two bowls. Chicken noodle, my favourite.

He carried his bowl to the table, set it down for a moment and turned on the small black and white television set that stood on a wobbly metal stand next to the table. We'd missed the first ten minutes of *The Flintstones*, but I didn't mind because it was a rerun.

I carried my bowl to the table and sat two seats down from Danny. I never sat next to him, not if I could help it. I quickly ate my lunch, and before I knew it, I was running down the street after him, trying to button my coat, as we rushed back to school.

My first day of school passed without any incidents, however, the return home did not go as smoothly. Carrying the heavy schoolbooks I had been given in order to have them covered in brown kraft paper, I could barely hold on to them let alone run after Danny. I lost him at the first corner, and gave up trying to catch up.

I thought I recognised the street we'd gone down earlier, but I was halfway down the street when I realised I'd taken a wrong turn. Backtracking, I stood at the corner of the street, confused. I walked to the next street and looked down. I didn't recognise it. Backtracking once again, I walked down yet another street. I didn't recognise the houses. Blinking back tears, I hugged my books to me and backtracked once again. It was getting dark.

I'd never gotten lost before, and was therefore uncertain of the procedure. Was it okay for me to break the rules and ask a stranger for help? I wasn't supposed to speak to strangers. I wandered up and down streets, trying not to panic, but when the streetlights came on, I burst into tears.

A man approached me, his expression one of concern, and I blurted out that I was lost, uncaring that he was a stranger and I was breaking the rules. Nicole had made me memorise our address when we first moved into the house, so I was able to tell him where I lived when he asked. He took my hand and walked me home, telling me everything would be okay, and I believed him. I smiled up at him, liking his kind face, and he smiled down at me and gently squeezed my hand.

Mother opened the door, her expression frantic as her gaze lowered to me, and she gave a sigh of relief. I noticed she was wearing her coat, and Diane was standing behind her, also wearing her coat.

"Oh, my lord, thank you so much," mother exclaimed, grabbing my coat sleeve and pulling me into the house.

"She's a bit young to be wandering the streets unaccompanied," the man remarked.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

I glanced back at him just as Diane pushed me down the hallway, and saw him frowning at mother. He looked older than her, his expression stern and disapproving, and I recognised that look. It was the same look mother often gave me, Danny, Diane, Denise and Nicole; but never Jocelyn. Mother never disapproved of anything Jocelyn did, even though he was constantly disrespectful towards her, calling her names like 'old bat' and 'old hag'.

Mother spoke to the man for a few moments while Diane took my books from me and deposited them on the kitchen table. I noticed, from the corner of my eye, that Danny was standing in the corner of the kitchen with his face to the wall. He was in trouble. I was glad.

Removing my coat, I hung it near the boiler which was positioned in the hallway just outside the kitchen, and neatly placed my boots next to it. Mother closed the door and turned to look at me. She stroked my hair as she walked past me, then entered the kitchen and paused beside the table. She glanced down at my books, and idly traced a finger along the binding of the top book.

"Stupid piece of shit," Diane stated, shoving Danny against the wall as she walked past him.

"What you did is unforgivable," mother stated calmly, waving Diane away from Danny when he turned to look at her. "She's your little sister. It's your responsibility to make certain she is safe when you are looking after..."

"It's her fault for being so slow," Danny interrupted.

Mother leaned forward, and her hand shot out. Taken by surprise, Danny was unable to duck out of the way. Her hand caught his cheek, and he was knocked back against the wall.

"Don't you dare interrupt me when I'm speaking," mother shouted.

Diane left the room, and although a small part of me was happy that he was being punished, I also felt sorry for him. I went to my room and closed the door, pressing my hands against my ears as mother continued to shout at him.

The following Saturday, Denise and Diane, ignoring mother's instructions, left me alone with Danny. Mother was working, as she often did on Saturdays in order to earn extra money, and Denise had convinced Diane that mother would never find out. The two of them threatened to beat Danny up if he told on them, and warned me that I would suffer the same fate if I tattled.

Blinking back my tears, I watched them leave the house. I didn't look at Danny because he'd been angry at me all week, and whenever I dared to look at him, his eyes would fill with hatred. I heard him walk into the kitchen behind me, and glanced back at him. He turned the oven on, and opened the hinged door. He turned to look at me, his expression frightening, and I bolted towards my room. I managed to make it into my room, but was unable to bolt the door. He grabbed me by the hair and dragged me towards the kitchen. The oven was hot, the top and bottom elements were red. I tried to twist free, but he grabbed me by the back of the neck and pushed me down onto my knees in front of the oven. I could feel the heat from the oven on my face.

"Everything was great until you were born."

"Stop it, you're scaring me," I shouted, tears burning my eyes.

"I'm going to kill you one day."

I screamed, and it was then that he released me. I pushed to my feet and looked at him. His eyes were cold and empty, and as I watched him, he seemed to wake up. He shook his head, shoved me aside and slammed the oven door shut. He turned the oven off and I watched him pull his boots on, grab his coat and leave the house.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

By the time mother got home—accompanied by Jean Guy—Denise, Diane and Danny were seated on the sofa in the living room watching television, and I was in my bedroom reading.

Denise and Diane spent the evening watching me, no doubt afraid that I would tell on them. Danny was unusually quiet, keeping to himself, not looking at anyone. His behaviour was odd, but no one seemed to notice. As we ate dinner, I listened to mother and Jean Guy discussing the company they worked for, but my thoughts soon wandered. I could hear Diane and Denise speaking, but they sounded far away.

After dinner, Denise and Diane left the house in order to meet with their boyfriends in the park, and Danny, mother and Jean Guy watched television in the living room while I washed in the old claw-foot bathtub. It was an old bathtub, pitted with chunks of white enamel missing and no longer quite white, but I loved it.

I was wearing a bathing suit. Mother constantly told me that bath time wasn't a beach or even a swimming pool, that I couldn't wash properly in a bathing suit, but I was stubborn and refused to take a bath without it. There was no privacy in the washroom. The lock was broken, and no one ever knocked when I was in it. People just barged in wanting to brush their hair, apply lipstick or moisturiser, wash their hands; and even poo, especially Danny. Jean Guy had done it a few times, too, mostly to shave, but mother had told him off. I thought it might be because he wasn't my father. I wasn't certain.

I wasn't allowed to fill the tub, but I didn't mind because I loved sitting on the back rim, which was higher than the front, and slide down into the water. Less water meant less mess, which meant one less reason for mother to tell me off if she walked into the washroom and saw me wearing a bathing suit.

My fingers and toes were wrinkled like dried prunes when I pulled the plug in the bathtub, and climbed out onto the cold black and white honeycomb tiles. The floor was slippery and cold, so I jumped onto the plush pink rug. Pink was mother's favourite colour. I hated it. I hated pink, especially if it was something I had to wear, like a blouse or dress. Luckily, mother never insisted that I wear girly pink clothing. I hated girly. I liked comfortable and safe, like trousers and shorts, white vests under my blouses, or loose-fitting tops. I loved dark colours, like purple and indigo, dark green, the colours of the forest, of the sky and oceans, of nature. Nicole was constantly reminding me that pink was a natural colour, too, found in flowers and in the sky on a hot summer's eve when the sun went down, but to me it was a washed-out colour, a mixture of red and white. To me, white was not a colour, it was a non-colour.

Wriggling out of my bathing suit beneath the large towel I had wrapped around me, I stared at the closed door, anxiously expecting it to burst open at any moment. Still damp, I pulled clean panties on and pushed my arms through the sleeves of my nightgown. My wet hair was plastered to my face, and I quickly wiped it away from my eyes just as the washroom door opened.

"I came to check on you," mother stated, glancing down at the wet bathing suit crumpled on the floor beside the rug. "I told you not to wear a bathing suit in the bathtub," she grumbled, picking it up and wringing the water from it over the bathtub before placing it on the warm cast iron radiator. She then grabbed the discarded towel, and wiped the floor with it before dropping it into the clothes hamper. "Time for bed."

I wasn't tired, but didn't argue. I would sneak a book under my blanket along with a flashlight, and read in bed. Mother never checked up on me.

However, when I climbed in to bed a few minutes later, my hair still damp, I stared up at the ceiling, humming to myself, and promptly fell asleep.

It was dark in my room when I woke up. I didn't know why I was awake. The house was quiet, and I was curled up on my side in a foetal position. I felt the bed sag behind me and

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

froze, listening for a sound. Breathing. Not my own. A hand slammed down over my mouth and I felt a body press up against mine. Bigger than me. There was a movement beneath my bottom, not quite touching me. It was hurried, a jerking movement, the breathing behind me grew slightly louder and I could feel a warm breath on the back of my neck. The hand tightened over my mouth; tears burned my eyes. I was terrified. I had no idea what was going on. A warm liquid spread over my panties, making them stick to my bum, and I started to hyperventilate, panic growing inside me. I tried to break free, but the hand tightened, and then an arm circled my waist and pulled me back against a hard body.

“Tell anyone, and I’ll kill you.”

The voice was like a serpent’s hiss, muffled and indistinct. The mattress sagged, soft footsteps, a door creaking, and silence returned. The monster was gone. I started to shake and pulled the blanket over my head. I cried myself to sleep.

The following morning, sitting across the table from Danny, I stared at him. He glowered at me, but said nothing, turning his attention to his cereal. His silence was uncharacteristic. Jean Guy remarked on how nice the silence was, and I turned to stare at him. He gave me a wink and glanced towards the door just as Diane stumbled in, still wearing her nightgown and rubbing her eyes.

“Go get dressed,” mother ordered, giving Diane a look of disapproval.

Diane glanced down at the short nightgown she was wearing, and glared at Jean Guy who was eyeing her. “I wouldn’t need to get changed if he wasn’t such a pervert,” she grumbled.

Jean Guy winked at Diane, obviously amused, and then smiled at mother. “She’s got a really good imagination,” he remarked.

Mother frowned, Diane left the room followed by Danny, who hadn’t touched his meal, and I stared down at the empty bowl mother placed in front of me. I felt the urge to cry but had no idea why.

Denise entered the kitchen and went straight to the kettle, filling it up and plugging it in. “I invited my new boyfriend for dinner tonight.”

“Fine,” mother replied, spreading a spoonful of orange marmalade over her burnt toast. “What’s his name?”

Denise made herself a cup of instant coffee, and stuck two slices of bread in the toaster. “Maurice.”

Mother took a bite of her toast and glanced towards me. “Eat your breakfast.”

I made the effort, reaching for the box of fruity cereal loops that had been placed next to my bowl, but Jean Guy grabbed it before I could take it and smiled.

“Let me do it for you. Tell me when,” he advised, pouring the cereal into my bowl. I stared at him, my mind blank.

“For heaven’s sake, that’s enough,” mother exclaimed. “She’ll never be able to eat all that.”

I jumped at the sound of her voice, startled, and burst into tears.

“What the hell,” Denise remarked, setting her plate of toast on the table across from me.

“What’s wrong,” mother asked, leaning sideways in her seat in order to wipe my tears away with a crumpled tissue.

Mother always had tissues in her pockets, stuffed up her sleeves, in her handbag, all of them having seen better days. I was never quite certain whether they had been used or not, so I dodged them whenever she tried to use them on me, just in case. I did so now, earning one of her dark frowns, but I didn’t care.

“What are we having for dinner,” Denise asked.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

Mother's attention drifted away from me, and I was glad. I glanced down at my bowl of cereal, and stuck my finger in a red loop before repeating the gesture with my other fingers and thumb. I wiggled my fingers, absentmindedly admiring the coloured loops.

"I haven't decided yet," mother replied.

"You make a nice shepherd's pie," Denise remarked.

"I'll pick up some beef mince later," mother stated idly. "Don't play with your food," she ordered sharply, having noticed what I was doing.

Startled, I burst into tears.

"Enough. I don't know what's gotten into you, but you need to sort yourself out before I lose patience. Go to your room," mother ordered.

Sliding off my chair, I ran to my room, still wearing my fruity cereal rings. I spent the entire day in my room, reading my library books between bouts of tears.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, because I was startled awake by the doorbell. It was dark in my room, and I could smell mother's shepherd's pie in the oven. Feeling groggy, I rubbed my eyes and stepped into the corridor just as Denise welcomed her boyfriend into the house. I stared up at him for a moment, and smiled when he said hello to me and stroked the top of my head. He had the nicest smile I'd ever seen, and such amazing straight white teeth. I liked him.

I walked down the corridor towards the kitchen, Denise and her boyfriend following behind me. Danny and Diane were already seated at the table, and mother was removing her shepherd's pie from the oven. Jean Guy was not present. He didn't live with us, but sometimes I forgot because he always seemed to be around.

I slid into the seat next to Diane and looked up at mother just as Denise's boyfriend took a seat across from me at the table. Mother seemed to freeze into position, the casserole dish she held not quite touching the wooden board positioned in the centre of the table. She stared at Denise's boyfriend, her expression not one I had ever seen before.

"This is Maurice," Denise stated, smiling widely at mother. She slid into the seat next to her boyfriend, and reached for a slice of bread. "Would you like a slice," she asked Maurice.

I saw Maurice's nice smile tremble slightly, and looked from him to mother. They were staring at each other in silence. Maurice seemed uncomfortable.

"Come on, I'm starving," Danny exclaimed.

"Smells nice," Diane remarked, shaking her head at Denise and frowning.

I agreed with Diane, my stomach grumbling, and reached for a slice of bread just as mother slammed the casserole dish down onto the board. I jumped slightly, and looked up at mother as she sat down at the head of the table.

"We'll eat just as soon as Maurice washes his hands," mother stated, staring at Denise.

Frowning, Denise told Maurice where the washroom was and he pushed from his seat. He had nearly reached the door leading out into the hallway when mother added; "He can return to the table when his hands are white."

Danny snickered, and Diane leaned towards him and punched his arm. "Shut up, asshole," she growled.

Confused, I looked at Denise. I couldn't read her expression, but I could feel her anger. She pushed back from the table, knocking her seat over when she stood, and followed her boyfriend from the room.

Mother reached for a serving spoon, and began dishing out our dinner.

Danny was rubbing his arm, glowering at Diane who was staring at mother in shocked disbelief.

"Is Maurice leaving," I asked mother.

She ignored me.

"Yes," Diane replied.

Laurie Ann Butcher
LEARNING TO BE HUMAN

“Why, “ I asked, confused.

“Because his hands will never be white enough for mother,” Diane answered, staring at the food mother ladled onto her plate.

I looked at mother, hoping she would explain, but she continued to ignore me. “I don’t understand,” I grumbled in frustration.

“He’s black, dumbass,” Danny exclaimed, rolling a piece of bread into a ball and throwing it at me.

The ball bounced off my chest, and I watched it roll across the white tablecloth until it wedged itself under the casserole dish where it stuck out over the board.

Holding the tomato ketchup bottle over my plate, Diane smacked the bottom of the glass bottle a few times before the ketchup slithered out onto my food.

Denise entered the kitchen a few minutes later, and straightened her overturned chair before sitting down at the table. She glowered at mother, but mother ignored her; she ignored all of us.

We ate in silence.

My schoolbag was particularly heavy, and I struggled with it. The handle dug into my hands, hurting my fingers. Every schoolbook I had been given was in my bag, because I had been given homework on every subject. It would take me hours to complete my homework.

I watched Danny round the corner and disappear. I wasn’t worried about losing him and getting lost, although I suspected he thought I was. I knew the way home now, so I took my time, looking around at buildings, people, cars, whatever caught my attention. I particularly liked watching people, their expressions fascinated me. I was curious. I wanted to know what made them behave the way they did, what their lives were like, what their fears were, what they felt deep inside.

I heard the honking of a car horn and the screeching of tires as I rounded the corner, and hurried my pace. A crowd had gathered at the corner as I approached, and I carefully inched my way through the throng of people. Making it to the curb, I realised that someone had been hit by a car. Danny. The light turned green, and I started crossing the street as he slowly retrieved his books off the paving and angrily shoved them into his schoolbag. He glared at me as I walked past him, but I ignored him and walked on.

Danny didn’t tell mother he’d been in an accident when she’d gotten home from work, probably because he would have had to tell her he’d been running away from me. He just glowered at me all evening, obviously blaming me for the accident.

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Learned; home is not the safest place to be, and people are judged not only by how they dress and whether they are rich or poor, but also by the colour of their skin.