

# LATE LEARNING

BY

Marj O'Neill-Butler

## LATE LEARNING

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## LATE LEARNING

*To Roger Martin, my first audience and forever encore.  
This play is the echo of every breath you cheered.  
You believed in my whispers before they became dialogue,  
in my midnight doubts before they shaped scenes.  
Your laughter was the spotlight that found me  
when I felt too small for any stage.  
I keep writing because you taught me  
that love can curtain-call beyond the final bow.  
Though the seat beside me is empty,  
I still hear you whisper, "Go for it, Babe,  
make them feel what we felt.*

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LATE LEARNING is a raw drama about the obstacles born from generational trauma, finding your power, and how it is never too late to end the cycle of abuse.

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Marj O'Neill-Butler

### CONTENT WARNING:

Discussion of sexual assault and rape, rape and sexual abuse of a child, child abuse and neglect, incest, addiction to alcohol and drugs, fetal alcohol syndrome, depiction of abuse, anti-semitism.

### CAST OF CHARACTERS:

MURIEL BELL: speaks poorly, common as dirt, uneducated but smart underneath. Late 30's F

RHONDA BELL: Muriel's daughter, slovenly, user, drunk, brash, cunning, sexy, works at a strip club. 20's F

BUCK BELL: Big, oafish, developmentally challenged, affected by fetal alcohol syndrome, he can get emotional easily, son of Muriel. 20's M

SHAINA SOCLOFF: Wealthy volunteer library aide who befriends Muriel. 45+ F

### SETTING:

The Bell's old farm in north-west North Carolina.

### TIME:

1991

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*A slow spot up on Muriel.*

**MURIEL.** I'm always doing what other people want. Always. Even as a kid. You're probably thinking what a great kid you were. No, my life wasn't about good things or fun things. My life related to what other people wanted to do to me or use me for or...(Beat)It first happened to me when I was ten. I had seen the animals in the field doing it, so what did I know? Except it hurt. I didn't know that before. And I couldn't walk after the first time. He took me from the back, like a goat. He was drunk, so I'm guessing he didn't remember. Or maybe he did, because it started to happen more and more. I'd hide in Sissy and my room, but my mother would say go out to the barn and do your chores. If I didn't go, I'd be...so I'd go. I'd hurry like mad trying to finish up, but he'd always catch me. It was like he was watching for me and waiting. I could never escape. After the first few times it didn't hurt so much, but I never liked feeling like an animal. I never told my mother. I think I knew she'd never believe me. Tell me it was my imagination. Or my fault. Or that I asked for it. It's not like I had a figure then. I was stick straight with long spindly legs. He...uh...gave me something to drink before and after each time. I learned to like that. It numbed my feelings. Kept at it. Rhonda was born when I was thirteen. Scrawny and mean. Yes, babies can be mean. No amount of cuddling would calm her down. She'd thrust out her arms and legs and dare me to make her feel better. Squawk like a chicken just before its head was lopped off. Horrible little thing. She's pretty much the same way now. My mother decided I should live with the man and invited him into the house. The barn man. He stank, like old whiskey and manure. Now that he had me, he took me all the time. Pressing his flabby body into me. Banging me into the headboard like a horny pig. I drank more and more to dull the pain. Buck came along when I was fifteen. He came out feet first as if trying to hang onto me for dear life. Poor creature. His face was all mashed up, like

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someone punched him. He looked like a piglet. His nose was turned up so you could see right into it. Took him forever to learn anything. And his cry...like someone was killing him. A year or so after Buck was born, he left. The barn man. Left the farm, left me and the kids. I still can't get the smell of him out of my nose. (*Transition - crossfade into Scene1*)

### SCENE 1

*The sound of banging on a door...no response...more banging.*

**MURIEL.** Let me out. I have to pee. Buck, come on! Unlock the door. (*Lights up. Rhonda and Buck are finishing breakfast. More desperate banging.*)

**RHONDA.** Don't answer her. She fine. I going up to sleep. Long night. Get to work...you be late.

**BUCK.** She need to get out.

**RHONDA.** Do not open her door.

**BUCK.** She went to town. She need a lesson. She have to pee.

**RHONDA.** I'll make her clean it up. Get.

**BUCK.** You make my lunch?

**RHONDA.** No.

**BUCK.** Mama make my lunch.

**RHONDA.** Not today. Buy it.

**BUCK.** Too much money.

**RHONDA.** Here...some of my tips. Go. (*She hands him some wadded up singles and Buck leaves. More banging on door.*)

**RHONDA.** You stop that, Mama. I need to sleep. (*Rhonda exits as Muriel knocks and calls out. Black out. More knocking.*)

### SCENE 2

*Several days later. Shaina is at Mrs. Bell's door.*

**SHAINA.** Mrs. Bell? Mrs. Bell?

**MURIEL.** What you want?

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**SHAINA.** I'm Shaina Socloff. I've been sent by Mrs. Green at the library. I understand there was a problem getting your library card.

**MURIEL.** Problem? Didn't get one.

**SHAINA.** I think we've had a misunderstanding.

**MURIEL.** Ya think? Go. Don't have time now.

**SHAINA.** It'll only take a minute.

**MURIEL.** Been a minute. Goodbye.

**SHAINA.** Please Mrs. Bell, I'd like to talk to you about our program.

**MURIEL.** Why you here?

**SHAINA.** I'd like to sign you up for our classes.

**MURIEL.** Tried that.

**SHAINA.** But you didn't...sign up.

**MURIEL.** How do I sign up? I went. People don't listen?

**SHAINA.** Do you want to take the classes?

**MURIEL.** Course. Why the hell I go all that way? The man on the radio said it was for everyone. But they wasn't interested in a woman like me.

**SHAINA.** We are. We're interested in everyone.

**MURIEL.** Yeah, right.

**SHAINA.** May I come in?

**MURIEL.** You selling something? Cause I don't need nothing.

**SHAINA.** Let me sign you up for the program. *(Muriel hesitates and then moves to the side of the door, begrudgingly letting Shaina in).*

**MURIEL.** I got nothing to offer you.

**SHAINA.** I don't need anything. Thanks.

**MURIEL.** Don't sit there. That's the cat's chair.

**SHAINA.** You have a cat?

**MURIEL.** Did.

**SHAINA.** Aah... Um... So Mrs. Bell...

**MURIEL.** Muriel.

**SHAINA.** Yes...Muriel. The program we've started is for those who may not have had a full education.

**MURIEL.** Huh. That me.

**SHAINA.** You left school.

**MURIEL.** At fourteen. Couldn't read. Couldn't write. Still can't.

**SHAINA.** But you'd like to? Be able to read and write?

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**MURIEL.** My kids think it a waste of time.

**SHAINA.** What do you think?

**MURIEL.** I...I'd like to...learn more.

**SHAINA.** So...I can help you with filling out the form if you'd like.

**MURIEL.** Don't want my kids to know.

**SHAINA.** I won't tell. But...why don't you want...

**MURIEL.** Don't want me smarter. They can't read neither.

**SHAINA.** They could take the classes too.

**MURIEL.** No! This for me. (Beat) What I do?

**SHAINA.** Let me explain. *(The sound of a truck driving up and slamming on its brakes. Muriel freaks.)*

**MURIEL.** You gotta go.

**SHAINA.** But...I...

**MURIEL.** If he finds you here, I'm...quick out the back way. *(Muriel forces Shaina to go. Truck door slams.)*

**SHAINA.** Can I call you?

**MURIEL.** No. Yes. I...

**SHAINA.** What's your number?

**MURIEL.** Get out!

**SHAINA.** Here's my card.

**MURIEL.** Quick. Go! *(Shaina leaves. Buck enters the front room all excited.)*

**BUCK.** That car. Who car that?

**MURIEL.** Some saleslady.

**BUCK.** Nice car! Could use me a car like that.

**MURIEL.** That not your car. You got a truck.

**BUCK.** I like that car. See if she give it me.

**MURIEL.** Threw her out the back door. *(Buck starts back out. Shaina's car is heard leaving.)*

**MURIEL.** She's goin. Leave it be. Why you home so early?

**BUCK.** Felt like it. Hungry.

**MURIEL.** You can't leave the job like that. Stay all day. Man told you.

**BUCK.** Couldn't. Hungry!

**MURIEL.** I made your lunch.

**BUCK.** Ate it dis morning. Hungry!

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**MURIEL.** You're not supposed to... *(Buck raises his voice.)*

**BUCK.** Tole you! Hungry!

**MURIEL.** Go out back and do your chores.

**BUCK.** Maybe she let me drive that car.

**MURIEL.** She gone. Leave it. Git. *(Buck starts to go out.)*

**BUCK.** You fix me some food.

**MURIEL.** Okay. I'll fix supper early. Go. *(Buck goes. Muriel looks at Shaina's card, then goes to the wall phone and dials.)* Uh...hello...this is...are you there? *(Beat)* Oh. So...this is Muriel. I want to do it. Can you come back? Morning. Not after that. Only morning. My number is...I...morning. *(Muriel hangs up as she hears Rhonda coming into the room.)*

**RHONDA.** Who you talkin' to?

**MURIEL.** No one.

**RHONDA.** Heard you.

**MURIEL.** Wrong number.

**RHONDA.** The kids are coming home! Got word.

**MURIEL.** When?

**RHONDA.** Tomorrow morning. Tole the people you be here.

**MURIEL.** No.

**RHONDA.** What you mean no? Where you goin'?

**MURIEL.** I'll be here, but...I can't do the kids.

**RHONDA.** You got to do the kids. I tole them. Tole them you'd be looking after them

**MURIEL.** They're your kids. You do it.

**RHONDA.** Got appointment.

**MURIEL.** Oh, like you're some big boss.

**RHONDA.** The club need me to organize. Harry pick me.

**MURIEL.** Then let the kids stay where they are.

**RHONDA.** You're their grandma.

**MURIEL.** And you're their mother.

**RHONDA.** I tole them already. It's all set.

**MURIEL.** Done my mothering. Terrible job I did. Don't need to do it no more.

**RHONDA.** They'll keep the kids...

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**MURIEL.** Should a thought of that afore you messed up.

**RHONDA.** I didn't. It was Buck's fault. You know that.

**MURIEL.** You're the mother. Where were you?

**RHONDA.** Watch your mouth.

**MURIEL.** Watch your own.

**RHONDA.** Don't you back-talk me...you know what'll happen.

*(Rhonda moves toward Muriel.)*

**MURIEL.** Don't Rhonda.

**RHONDA.** I need to call Buck? You be here tomorrow when they drop off the kids. Got it.

**MURIEL.** This place not good for them.

**RHONDA.** They're my kids. And I have them here.

**MURIEL.** You better be watching Buck every minute.

**RHONDA.** You mind your own self. I take care of Buck.

**MURIEL.** Like you did when you were fourteen?

**RHONDA.** Shut it.

**MURIEL.** No. Not anymore. *(Rhonda goes to the back door and yells.)*

**RHONDA.** Okay...time for the room. Get in here Buck. Momma need a lesson.

**MURIEL.** Okay. Okay. But...can't stay here for good. The kids...

**RHONDA.** Where they gonna go?

**MURIEL.** This my house...I want it back.

**RHONDA.** Where I suppose to take them?

**MURIEL.** Don't know. It's time for you both to go.

**RHONDA.** What ya gonna to do with Buck?

**MURIEL.** There's a house for...for people like him. I checked.

**RHONDA.** You send away you own son?

**MURIEL.** It's time.

**RHONDA.** No, it be time for you to do what you're told. *(Buck enters carrying a tool.)*

**BUCK.** What?

**RHONDA.** Momma need her lesson.

**BUCK.** Again?

**RHONDA.** Again. Take her to the room.

**MURIEL.** I go by myself. Don't lock the door. I need air.

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**RHONDA.** Buck, lock her in. Teach her. She not in charge.

**BUCK.** She not in charge!

**RHONDA.** Right. I goin. *(Buck grabs Muriel by the arm and starts to drag her off to her room as Rhonda leaves the house.)*

**BUCK.** Momma, how come you never learn your lesson?

**MURIEL.** I was about to cook your supper. Don't lock the door...I come out. Fix you food. Who gonna cook your supper?

**BUCK.** But Rhonda say...

**MURIEL.** You hungry?

**BUCK.** Hungry!

**MURIEL.** Alright. You go back out to your chores...I'll fix supper.

**BUCK.** Rhonda be mad at me...

**MURIEL.** No. She not be mad. Go on. *(Buck leaves by the back door. Muriel heads to the phone, dials and leaves a message.)* Not a good time. Don't come in the morning...when it's a good time, I'll call you *(She hangs up and stares at the card and, stares at the phone. She dials the operator.)* I need the number for the people who take in children. You know, took from their parents...Guess that's it. Say again...slowly ...thanks. *(She scribbles the number down, then hangs up and quickly dials the phone.)* I need to talk to a person about my grandchildren. *(Blackout.)*

### SCENE 3

*A week later. Shaina is at Muriel's door.*

**MURIEL.** Come in quick. Don't want the neighbors to see you.

**SHAINA.** Are you...never mind.

**MURIEL.** Sit here. Right here...

**SHAINA.** The table might be better.

**MURIEL.** It's dirty.

**SHAINA.** So next time, can you clear it off? It's better for working.

**MURIEL.** Yes. Sit here. Don't want the neighbor to see you.

**SHAINA.** They can see my car.

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**MURIEL.** Oh. Yes. Didn't think...

**SHAINA.** So anyway, here's how it works. Move that chair and sit next to me. You have to sign up for a library card, so the county knows you're local and able to take the classes. Do you think you should start with the intermediate class?

**MURIEL.** I...need beginners...don't know how to write proper.

**SHAINA.** Cursive. No worries. They hardly even teach that anymore.

**MURIEL.** What? Why? Always wanted to connect my letters like that.

**SHAINA.** This course is more like how to read...recognize words.

**MURIEL.** But..I want to...

**SHAINA.** Maybe later I can teach you.

**MURIEL.** Even Rhonda can't do it.

**SHAINA.** Rhonda's your...

**MURIEL.** Daughter.

**SHAINA.** That's nice.

**MURIEL.** Don't want to get into my kids. They won't be here much longer

**SHAINA.** They're moving?

**MURIEL.** Soon. I hope.

**SHAINA.** You said kids..

**MURIEL.** He's...slow...don't know what happened to him. Buck's my son. Borned that way.

**SHAINA.** There are lots of reasons that happens...is he the one in the truck yesterday?

**MURIEL.** Don't want him here no more. He too big. He...

**SHAINA.** Are you afraid of him?

**MURIEL.** No. Not...he does what Rhonda say and sometimes...

**SHAINA.** Has he hurt you?

**MURIEL.** Not hurt...Don't like being locked away. There's a room..

**SHAINA.** They put you in a room?

**MURIEL.** A closet like...lock me.

**SHAINA.** Muriel, things are going to change. You're going to learn to read and write. And...I'm going to help you get your house back. Let's start. Here's the form for the library card.

**MURIEL.** Don't know all the words.

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**SHAINA.** We'll read it together. Here. Let's start with your name.

**MURIEL.** I can do that.

**SHAINA.** Take your time. Do you have a piece of mail with the address? You could copy it.

**MURIEL.** Rhonda do the mail.

**SHAINA.** All the time.

**MURIEL.** Never get a letter anyways.

**SHAINA.** But...you must get some mail...

**MURIEL.** She say no. Don't have no friends to write.

**SHAINA.** What about the government...taxes and things like that. Do you get help from the government? Help with food?

**MURIEL.** Don't know. Rhonda in charge.

**SHAINA.** How long has she been in charge?

**MURIEL.** Since she was about...fifteen.

**SHAINA.** And she's what now?

**MURIEL.** Twenty-three, I think.

**SHAINA.** And you haven't had mail since she took over...

**MURIEL.** She say I don't need to know.

**SHAINA.** How long have you lived here.

**MURIEL.** Borne here.

**SHAINA.** In this house?

**MURIEL.** On the kitchen table.

**SHAINA.** That's a new one for me.

**MURIEL.** The farm belonged to my grandmother. Passed down.

**SHAINA.** Lucky you. Not many people can say that. So your husband moved in with you?

**MURIEL.** Not my husband. Never married..

**SHAINA.** Oh. But...your kids are his kids?

**MURIEL.** Yeah.

**SHAINA.** So you're separated from him?

**MURIEL.** He left after Buck was born. Walked out. A drunk. Messy drunk. Me too. I think that's why Buck's...not right.

**SHAINA.** He was smart enough to get his license though. Drives a truck.

**MURIEL.** He don't have no license.

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**SHAINA.** But the truck...it's registered.

**MURIEL.** Guess.

**SHAINA.** That's dangerous. Is it insured?

**MURIEL.** Don't know.

**SHAINA.** Remind me to avoid going on the road when he's driving.

**MURIEL.** *(Beat)* You made a joke...ha.

**SHAINA.** I wish it were funny.

**MURIEL.** What kind of name is Shaina?

**SHAINA.** I was named after my grandmother Sarah.

**MURIEL.** That's not the same name.

**SHAINA.** Same letter though. S. It's a tradition in my religion. My mother told me it means beautiful.

**MURIEL.** So you...you a Cath-o-lic?

**SHAINA.** No. Jewish.

**MURIEL.** Oooh! Not many here. Heard about you. People don't like them.

**SHAINA.** Why's that?

**MURIEL.** They cheat and steal.

**SHAINA.** Rhonda tell you that?

**MURIEL.** Always heard that. Since I a kid.

**SHAINA.** I don't cheat or steal.

**MURIEL.** Good. Cause I like you.

**SHAINA.** Thank you. I like you too. And I think you'll do very well in the classes.

**MURIEL.** When I went to school the teachers always said I was smart. Family made fun of me. So, I stopped being smart.

**SHAINA.** Now you'll get to be smart again. And I'll help to make sure you get your mail.

**MURIEL.** Rhonda's not going to like it. Too bad. Not gonna raise her kids no more.

**SHAINA.** I didn't realize. How many?

**MURIEL.** Two. Eight and almost seven. Don't live here. Got took away.

**SHAINA.** That's too bad.

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**MURIEL.** No, it's good. She didn't raise them good. After my mother died...they ran wild. Like little animals.

**SHAINA.** So your mother helped raise them.

**MURIEL.** She tried. But she was sick by then.

**SHAINA.** And you?

**MURIEL.** I was done. Shoulda helped her but...too much drinking. I can say it...I was a drunk.

**SHAINA.** How did the kids end up in...

**MURIEL.** School called the people.

**SHAINA.** Ah. She married...Rhonda?

**MURIEL.** No.

**SHAINA.** The father doesn't help out?.

**MURIEL.** He too stupid.

**SHAINA.** Ah...well at least now they're being cared for.

**MURIEL.** Want them to stay there. Better for them.

**SHAINA.** That's good. Your teachers were right.

**MURIEL.** You...you...no one ever talk nice to me..It feels...it feels good.

**SHAINA.** It doesn't take much to be kind.

**MURIEL.** Never knowed about kind. Like that word.

**SHAINA.** You're going to learn and experience lots of good words.

**MURIEL.** Thank you...for coming back out. *(The sound of a car driving up. Muriel gets in a panic.)*

**SHAINA.** Is that your daughter? I'd like to meet her.

**MURIEL.** Yes. And no! Wasn't supposed to be here. She's going to be...

**SHAINA.** You're not doing anything wrong.

**MURIEL.** Wanna bet. You should leave. Out the back again.

**SHAINA.** It's okay. I should meet her.

**MURIEL.** Warning you...she can be... *(Rhonda bangs up the steps and enters the house smiling.)*

**RHONDA.** Kids, come down and see Mama! (Beat) Where're my kids?!! Who car that? *(She sees Shaina.)* Who the hell are you? What you doing here?

**SHAINA.** My name is Shaina. I volunteer at the...

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**RHONDA.** Oh...I know who you are. You're the new Jew. Everybody talking about you. Don't belong here. Get out.

**MURIEL.** Rhonda...

**RHONDA.** Don't Rhonda me, I want to see the kids. Don't need no type like her here. Kids...come on down! *(Silence.)*

**MURIEL.** They're not here.

**RHONDA.** What'd you do?!

**MURIEL.** They didn't show.

**RHONDA.** No. You did something! I know it. You gonna pay for this. And you, get out. Go on. Don't want you here.

**SHAINA.** I'm Muriel's guest.

**RHONDA.** She don't get guests. Get out.

**MURIEL.** You better go.

**SHAINA.** You'll be okay?

**MURIEL.** Yeah. Thanks for coming.

**SHAINA.** I'll fill out...you know.

**RHONDA.** What she talking about?

**SHAINA.** No worries. It doesn't concern you.

**RHONDA.** If it's about my mother, I gotta know.

**SHAINA.** I'll be in touch. Take care, Muriel. *(Shaina leaves. Rhonda yells at her back.)*

**RHONDA.** Get lost, and don't come back. *(Shaina looks back but leaves. Rhonda turns to Muriel.)* What you trying to pull? We don't invite strangers, especially her kind.

**MURIEL.** She very nice. Nicer than you.

**RHONDA.** Oh boy, you asking for it. Where're my kids?

**MURIEL.** Not here.

**RHONDA.** Did they call?

**MURIEL.** No. No calls. *(Rhonda stares at Muriel.)*

**RHONDA.** Did you? Call? Tell them not to come. And bring the kids home?

**MURIEL.** They're better off out of here.

**RHONDA.** Damn it. I tole you they were coming home. Now look what you done. Two days in the room. Two days. Go.

**MURIEL.** No.

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**RHONDA.** I said go.

**MURIEL.** No. I not going to be locked up. In my own house.

**RHONDA.** We'll see about that. *(Rhonda grabs Muriel's arm. Muriel pulls away.)*

**MURIEL.** Not going.

**RHONDA.** Buck's gonna have fun when he gets home.

**MURIEL.** Not gonna let you treat me like this no more. You wait and see. *(Blackout)*

### SCENE 4

*Several days later. Rhonda comes downstairs in a tear.*

**RHONDA.** Ma. Ma! *(A door slams. Rhonda goes to the back door.)*

Get in here.

**BUCK.** Doin' my chores.

**RHONDA.** Get in here now. *(Buck pops his head around the door.)*

**BUCK.** What?

**RHONDA.** Where she?

**BUCK.** Who?

**RHONDA.** Listen asshole, where's Ma?

**BUCK.** I seen her walking...by the bus stop.

**RHONDA.** You know she ain't supposed to go out.

**BUCK.** Where were you?.

**RHONDA.** Sleeping. Had a late night.

**BUCK.** She...went. Saw her walking. I be out back.

**RHONDA.** How'd she get outta the room?

**BUCK.** I...donno.

**RHONDA.** You let her out?

**BUCK.** No.

**RHONDA.** Useless as always. She going to see that woman?

**BUCK.** I donno.

**RHONDA.** You "donno" nothing.

**BUCK.** Rhonda, can we...play the game?

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**RHONDA.** No.

**BUCK.** Come on. You like it.

**RHONDA.** No more.

**BUCK.** Why?

**RHONDA.** Got a boyfriend.

**BUCK.** Who?

**RHONDA.** My boss.

**BUCK.** What about me?

**RHONDA.** You're my brother.

**BUCK.** You used to like it.

**RHONDA.** Tole you, got a boyfriend.

**BUCK.** Bet he ain't big like me. You like me cause I big.

**RHONDA.** No more, Buck. Told you.

**BUCK.** I gonna take you. We play the game...*(He reaches for Rhonda.)*

**RHONDA.** No, I said. Get off.

**BUCK.** Come on. *(Rhonda reaches for a knife.)*

**RHONDA.** Get away. No more.

**BUCK.** Where I gonna find a girlfriend?

**RHONDA.** How about that girl at your old work? The one you like?

**BUCK.** She don't like me

**RHONDA.** She's little. You could take her.

**BUCK.** I could. She like it once we do it.

**RHONDA.** Don't be too rough. Most girls don't like it rough.

**BUCK.** You like it rough.

**RHONDA.** No more. Now back off.

**BUCK.** Come on...

**RHONDA.** You ain't gonna to do this at your new place. You get in trouble.

**BUCK.** What new place?

**RHONDA.** She sending you away. Ma didn't tell you? She don't want you here no more!

**BUCK.** Why you say that? Ma...she won't send me away. I...her boy.

**RHONDA.** She tired of both of us. Getting too smart. But I staying. Can't get rid of me so easy.

**BUCK.** Where...I going?

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**RHONDA.** Some home for dummies...can't take care their selves.

**BUCK.** That a lie. I work. Do my chores.

**RHONDA.** You got fired. Again. Can't be trusted. Who gonna hire you now?

**BUCK.** I dunno.

**RHONDA.** No, you dunno nothing. Idiot. Take the truck...go find Ma. Bring her back. Now.

**BUCK.** You be mad if I don't do my chores.

**RHONDA.** I mad Ma got out. Now go. *(Buck goes out, his truck revs up and leaves. Rhonda goes to the table, sorts through some stuff and finds Muriel's writing paperwork.)* Bitch. Who she think she is? *(Rhonda tries to understand what's written, then tears up Muriel's worksheets and throws her book in the trash.)* Three days in the room this time. That'll show her.

## SCENE 5

*A few weeks later. Shaina is peeking in Muriel's door.*

**SHAINA.** Muriel. Are you there? Muriel? *(Rhonda saunters to the door.)*

**RHONDA.** She ain't here.

**SHAINA.** She didn't turn up for her lesson.

**RHONDA.** What lesson that?

**SHAINA.** At the library.

**RHONDA.** She don't need that. She quit.

**SHAINA.** Muriel wouldn't quit. She loves it.

**RHONDA.** Change her mind.

**SHAINA.** If she's not here...

**RHONDA.** I tole you.

**SHAINA.** You're not in charge. Where is she?

**RHONDA.** Mind your business.

**SHAINA.** She's my friend.

**RHONDA.** Ma don't got no friends.

## LATE LEARNING

**SHAINA.** Why, because you isolate her. Keep her here. MURIE!

**RHONDA.** Shut up that yelling.

**SHAINA.** She's here, I know she is. MURIEL! (*Muffled sound from inside the house. Shaina pushes in the door to the house.*) You locked her up. You can't do that. I'll report you.

**RHONDA.** Ha! When the cops come, we'll say you're lying.

**SHAINA.** I've told her you can't do that to her.

**RHONDA.** I can. I a cousin to the cops! Won't listen to you. (*Buck appears at the back door and gawks at Shaina.*)

**BUCK.** What she want?

**RHONDA.** Nothing. Go on out back.

**BUCK.** That your car?

**RHONDA.** I said go on out back.

**BUCK.** Nice car. She let me take her car?

**SHAINA.** NO!

**RHONDA.** Sure. Why not. Good idea.

**SHAINA.** He doesn't have a license.

**BUCK.** Don't need no license. I drive good.

**SHAINA.** No.

**BUCK.** Gimme keys.

**SHAINA.** No!

**RHONDA.** Just take 'em. (*As Buck grabs Shaina's purse, he knocks her off balance and rifles through her purse.*)

**SHAINA.** What do you think you're doing?

**BUCK.** She got money in here too. Yee! Finders keepers!

**SHAINA.** Give it back.

**RHONDA.** Say we didn't want you...you pushed in. Our word against yours.

**BUCK.** Got 'em. This be fun!

**SHAINA.** Give me my bag. (*She chops him on the back of the neck, he staggers forward grabbing his neck and drops the purse and keys.*)

**BUCK.** That hurt...

**SHAINA.** Try anything more...you'll be sorry.

**RHONDA.** What are you? What was that?

**SHAINA.** You want some?

## LATE LEARNING

**BUCK.** She hurt me. *(Buck cowers in a corner, staring at Shaina.)*

**SHAINA.** Yeah, you said that. Now. I'm not leaving until I speak with Muriel.

**RHONDA.** You deaf? Tole you. She ain't here.

**SHAINA.** I heard her. I'm going to check the house. *(Rhonda grabs Shaina's arm and tries to shove her out of the door.)* Don't! Don't you dare touch me. *(Shaina throws Rhonda down.)*

**RHONDA.** The hell...what you doing? You don't belong here. Get out. *(Rhonda scrambles to her feet and Shaina stares her down.)*

**SHAINA.** You want more? MURIEL!

**RHONDA.** Get out!

**SHAINA.** No!

**BUCK.** She be scary.

**SHAINA.** You're damn right. You want more? *(Buck scurries out the back door.)*

**RHONDA.** Nosy Jew. Always sticking your nose in. You better watch out. I know where you live. I got friends. They got matches.

**SHAINA.** You're a bully. But guess what? No more.

**RHONDA.** Wanna get locked up. We can do that. The two of us. No one will ever know where you is. Ever.

**SHAINA.** The two of you? Really? Where's Buck gone? *(Rhonda gawks at the back door.)*

**RHONDA.** We don't want what you got to give. Go away and don't come back.

**SHAINA.** What are you afraid of?

**RHONDA.** What can you do? Teach her to write. Big shit. We don't want your help.

**SHAINA.** Okay, yeah. Big shit. You got me. That's it. I'll give her grant money to someone else.

**RHONDA.** No one give away money. Nice try. Git.

**SHAINA.** I manage a family education fund. Your mother was going to get a grant to add to her support...her education...until she gets a job. But, if she doesn't want it, I'll give it to someone else.

**RHONDA.** Education? My ass. You one of those. A rich bitch coming to help the poor.

## LATE LEARNING

**SHAINA.** Yes, I guess I am. And I don't have to do it. I want to do it. But as I said, if she doesn't want it...

**RHONDA.** How much? How much you gonna give my mother?

**SHAINA.** If she's not here...

**RHONDA.** What's she got to do? To get it?

**SHAINA.** Take the classes.

**RHONDA.** That it? How much?

**SHAINA.** I'll tell her. It's for her. If she doesn't quit.

**RHONDA.** I take some money. Go to your stupid ass classes. How about me?

**SHAINA.** We're full up at the moment. As you would say, nice try.

**RHONDA.** Money, huh...*(Beat)* You know what? I think I did hear her. You wait right there. I'll see if she's here.

**SHAINA.** You do that. *(Shaina shakes herself off, talks to herself.)* "I think I hear her". My ass. *(Muriel enters quickly from the back of the house.)*

**MURIEL.** I thought I heard someone. I...I was busy in the back.

**SHAINA.** No, you weren't, Muriel.

**MURIEL.** I...um...

**SHAINA.** You don't have to do that. I know where you were. *(Rhonda comes back out.)*

**RHONDA.** She didn't hear you. She was in the back doing her chores.

**SHAINA.** Yeah, right. Locked in a closet. You missed your classes for the last two days. If you want to get the grant, you have to attend the classes.

**RHONDA.** How much? When she get it?

**SHAINA.** Muriel, do you understand? We had an agreement.

**RHONDA.** How much? We need money to pay the bills.

**SHAINA.** Who's been paying them prior to this?

**RHONDA.** Me and Buck.

**SHAINA.** Good. That's as it should be. This is Muriel's house and you board here. You need to continue to pay your mother for living here.

**RHONDA.** It our house too.

**SHAINA.** No, I looked it up. It's in Muriel's name. Only. You have no rights to this house.

## LATE LEARNING

**RHONDA.** What the hell...you look it up? What you gonna get out of this? Why you poking around us?

**SHAINA.** There's no "us" here. I'm interested in people who want to help themselves. Like your mother.

**RHONDA.** What about the money coming?

**SHAINA.** In her name, in her account. Only she can touch it. People like you never understand.

**RHONDA.** What you say?

**MURIEL.** Shaina...don't.

**SHAINA.** No, it's about time someone like her hears this. You waste your life. You revel in your ignorance...

**RHONDA.** What you say? I tole you I'd take the class for some money.

**SHAINA.** For the money. Not for the education. Someone like me comes along to try to help...to raise your mother up. But oh no, you'd rather be a porch sitter for the rest of your life. The funny thing is, you're not stupid. Not really. You just choose to behave like an animal.

**RHONDA.** You calling me a animal?

**SHAINA.** Indeed.

**RHONDA.** What's that?

**SHAINA.** You really are...illiterate.

**MURIEL.** Rhonda, no! *(Rhonda flies off the porch at Shaina. Shaina dodges her and Rhonda goes flying to the ground. She struggles to get up.)*

**RHONDA.** I don't care how much money you got. You better watch your back. Warning you.

**SHAINA.** I manage a big grant fund called Helping Hands. Look it up. Oh, that's right. You can't read or write, never mind try to use a computer. So you'll have to stay ignorant.

**MURIEL.** Stop, Shaina.

**RHONDA.** You're trying to steal my mother. It won't work.

**MURIEL.** You'd better go.

**SHAINA.** I'll see you in class. And tell Buck he better not try to take my car again, or he'll get it worse.

**MURIEL.** What?!

## LATE LEARNING

**SHAINA.** Ask your daughter...she told him to take it. (*Muriel turns on Rhonda.*)

**MURIEL.** What is wrong with you? Jesus, I better make the call.

**RHONDA.** Who you gonna call?

**MURIEL.** The people who run the house for men like your brother.

**RHONDA.** He won't like it.

**MURIEL.** He'll have to learn to like it. Shaina. I'll be there. I'll see you tomorrow.

### SCENE 6

*Several months later.*

**BUCK.** Rhonda's a liar.

**MURIEL.** What's new?

**BUCK.** She say you don't want me no more.

**MURIEL.** That's not exactly true.

**BUCK.** Why she say that?

**MURIEL.** I told her I was looking into...getting you into a home. For men.

**BUCK.** This my home.

**MURIEL.** I know, but this place...the place I found, has room for several boys...men. Your age. You'll have company and friends.

**BUCK.** I don't have friends. Nobody like me.

**MURIEL.** This will be a new start...make new friends.

**BUCK.** What about girls?

**MURIEL.** There's no girls.

**BUCK.** Then I stay here.

**MURIEL.** This's my house. And I say no. No more. Buck, you don't treat me right. Not going to be locked up anymore.

**BUCK.** Rhonda say to.

**MURIEL.** Rhonda's not in charge anymore. I'm in charge.

**BUCK.** But Rhonda say she in charge. (*Beat*) That woman tell you this. One with the car?

## LATE LEARNING

**MURIEL.** She help me realize I could do better. Learn. Get a job. Not just stay home. You two are well grown. It's time for you to be on your own.

**BUCK.** What about Rhonda's kids?

**MURIEL.** They're taken care of.

**BUCK.** She say she's bringing them home here.

**MURIEL.** That's not true either.

**BUCK.** Where she going to go?

**MURIEL.** That's up to her. (*Buck doesn't get it and gets emotional.*)

**BUCK.** Why you sending us away? I don't...I don't know this place. I don't want to...

**MURIEL.** You'll learn to like a new place.

**BUCK.** No. I won't. I do my chores. I work...sometimes. Who going to do the chores? Who going to pay the bills?

**MURIEL.** I'll get a job. And not menial work. Take care of myself.

**BUCK.** You could do that now.

**MURIEL.** I mean a real job...make real money. Do it right.

**BUCK.** It that woman. No one in town like her. She push her way everywhere. Why she be here? We don't want no Jewish.

**MURIEL.** She's just like you and me. Well maybe not like you. She treats people nice. She can't help she was born Jewish.

**BUCK.** Everything change when she come along.

**MURIEL.** I know. But this house. Let me tell you about it.

**BUCK.** Not going. Don't want to know.

**MURIEL.** There's a twenty-seven-inch color TV in the house. Cable TV they call it. No commercials. You can watch your football games with friends. Like going to the movies.

**BUCK.** How much it cost?

**MURIEL.** For you, nothing.

**BUCK.** Free for me?!

**MURIEL.** And there are five other guys there. Like you. Who you can do things with. And it's close to town, so you can go in anytime.

**BUCK.** I got my truck.

**MURIEL.** You won't need it. They don't allow trucks there.

**BUCK.** Then I not going.

## LATE LEARNING

**MURIEL.** You know, that truck was bought with my money. Money from my mother. So really it's mine.

**BUCK.** It be my truck. You don't got no money. Rhonda say.

**MURIEL.** Because she took my money. I didn't know better. But now I do.

**BUCK.** You gonna take my truck? I want my truck. It all I got.

**MURIEL.** I know. I know you love that truck. But you have to have a license, and you don't have one.

**BUCK.** How I buy one?

**MURIEL.** You can't. Well, it costs a little but...you have to take a test and...

**BUCK.** I know how to drive. Rhonda show me. Stupid. What I need a test for?

**MURIEL.** It's about rules...what you can do...

**BUCK.** I do what I want.

**MURIEL.** I know. It's a problem. If you had an accident...

**BUCK.** Only knocked that lady down once. Didn't hurt her. Much.

**MURIEL.** It's not legal. You need insurance. That's what Shaina say.

**BUCK.** She come in here and ruin everything.

**MURIEL.** Not for me. (Beat) So what do you think...about the house? With the guys? Twenty-seven-inch TV...

**BUCK.** When I see you?

**MURIEL.** I could come visit.

**BUCK.** No, I come home here..

**MURIEL.** That wouldn't be allowed. They're kind of strict.

**BUCK.** What they do? Lock me?

**MURIEL.** They have rules called...curfew. At night. But don't worry, I'll come and visit.

**BUCK.** Every day?

**MURIEL.** No. But regular.

**BUCK.** I gonna talk to Rhonda about this. What she say go.

**MURIEL.** No. No more. This is my house. I make the rules now. Again.

**BUCK.** I gonna lock you up. When you talk like this, Rhonda say lock her up. (*Muriel stands up to Buck.*)

## LATE LEARNING

**MURIEL.** Shaina knows where I am now...when I don't show. She'll come get me out. You'll get in trouble.

**BUCK.** Cousin Bonner come and tell you to shut up.

**MURIEL.** Cousin Bonner better watch his own ass. He's already in trouble with the state. He's going to be taken out of the cops. No more fixing things that are wrong.

**BUCK.** I don't like all these changes. I like things the way I like them.

**MURIEL.** I know you do. But things are changing and there's nothin you can do about it.

**BUCK.** When Rhonda come home?

**MURIEL.** No idea. She be staying with her boss I think. Riding him like a bronco.

**BUCK.** She won't ride me anymore.

**MURIEL.** No, and good thing. Go clean up your room. It stinks in there.

**BUCK.** I clean it.

**MURIEL.** Yeah, last month. Clean it.

**BUCK.** I telling Rhonda when she get home. I don't like this...new way.  
(*Blackout.*)

## SCENE 7

*Several months later. Muriel holds up her debit card.*

**MURIEL.** I can't believe it. My own account. Now I have two cards...the library and my...um...I know, I know...don't tell me...debit card!

**SHAINA.** You earned it.

**MURIEL.** I worked hard, I did, but this...ah, this is too much.

**SHAINA.** So, every month a small check will go directly into your account.

**MURIEL.** Like magic.

**SHAINA.** A little like magic. Don't share your pin with Rhonda.

**MURIEL.** Pin?

## LATE LEARNING

**SHAINA.** It's kind of like a lock. A code. Only you can get the money. She'll try to get it...your pin. Don't tell her.

**MURIEL.** I'm going to sleep with this card. Thank you so much. For believing in me. For standing by when I thought I couldn't do it...

**SHAINA.** Your teachers were right. Look how fast you learned.

**MURIEL.** Now all I have to do is get a job. Cause now I can...fill out a application. I hope someone'll hire me.

**SHAINA.** I want to talk to you about that. I want you to continue on and get your GED.

**MURIEL.** What's that?

**SHAINA.** You'd have to take four tests. If you pass all four, you'd get a diploma. It's called the general educational development test. Sort of like graduating from high school.

**MURIEL.** I don't know...

**SHAINA.** I do. If you study, you'll whiz through it. What do you think?

**MURIEL.** I think my whole life is going to change...has changed.

**SHAINA.** Until you're on your feet, we're going to sign you up for the SNAP program and others.

**MURIEL.** I never really knew about all this.

**SHAINA.** And when you're all set up with a job and everything, you'll drop off the programs so someone else can have a chance.

**MURIEL.** Do I have to?

**SHAINA.** Don't you think someone else deserves support?

**MURIEL.** Yeah...sorry. Yes. *(Beat)* How come you moved here and did this?

**SHAINA.** Kind of to give back.

**MURIEL.** To who?

**SHAINA.** My high school teachers. My professors. And my Rabbi. I was a real sloucher...

**MURIEL.** What's that?

**SHAINA.** Didn't do my work. Hung with the wrong crowd. Drank. And they really stood by me. Believed in me. I'm still not sure why. So...

**MURIEL.** So...

## LATE LEARNING

**SHAINA.** Finally, three years ago when I got...off the drink, I decided I'd do the same someday. Not teach. I didn't like the idea of being in a classroom all day...but to help people somehow.

**MURIEL.** Are you rich?

**SHAINA.** Not me. My family.

**MURIEL.** They must have been so disappointed in you...back then...

**SHAINA.** Very. But not now.

**MURIEL.** No, not now. I...never asked you...you married?

**SHAINA.** Divorced. I don't think my son has ever forgiven me.

*(Silence.)*

**MURIEL.** You have a son? How come I don't know this?

**SHAINA.** Didn't know this. Not sure. No worries. Divorced...four years now...just the one son...he's in college. First year. I live in Boone.

**MURIEL.** That's far.

**SHAINA.** I listen to books on tape when I drive here.

**MURIEL.** I want to do stuff like that.

**SHAINA.** You will.

**MURIEL.** You got a boyfriend?

**SHAINA.** No time.

**MURIEL.** Maybe you should make time.

**SHAINA.** Look who's bossing me!

**MURIEL.** Well, you're still young.

**SHAINA.** I'll think about it.

**MURIEL.** That's what people say when they've already decided no.

**SHAINA.** I've taught you too well.

**MURIEL.** I guess so...so, can I ask...what happened...with your husband?

**SHAINA.** He thought I should dress up every day...go shopping...go to the club...you know...

**MURIEL.** Club...what kinda club?

**SHAINA.** The country club. I found it so...wasteful. Always the same people talking about the same thing. Where they're going on vacation...who's driving what car. I wanted more.

**MURIEL.** I want a car...going to sell the truck. It's a mess.

**SHAINA.** Someone'll buy it.

## LATE LEARNING

**MURIEL.** Hope so.

**SHAINA.** You'll need to sign up for the driving test. Get a proper license.

**MURIEL.** And insurance.

**SHAINA.** That too. (*Blackout*)

### SCENE 8

*A month later. Shaina is at the front door.*

**SHAINA.** Muriel?

**MURIEL.** Hey. Hi.

**SHAINA.** Can I come in?

**MURIEL.** Yeah, sorry...I mean yes...come in.

**SHAINA.** You were upset in class yesterday. (*Silence.*) There're going to be moments like this...where you feel lost...or overwhelmed.

**MURIEL.** What is...

**SHAINA.** Like it's too much for you.

**MURIEL.** Yeah. Yes. I feel so...stupid. I think I'm going along good...then I try a stupid question...and I have no idea...I'm not ready for this GED test. I'm just not.

**SHAINA.** So, are you giving up?

**MURIEL.** No but...I had to read it out loud...in front of the others...and I was stumbling and felt so dumb...

**SHAINA.** You're not dumb. We've already proved that.

**MURIEL.** Are you sure?

**SHAINA.** Very. Let's go over the questions again.

**MURIEL.** I'll never pass it.

**SHAINA.** Not if you give up.

**MURIEL.** Have you tried it?

**SHAINA.** No.

**MURIEL.** Read this. (*Shaina skims a question, then looks up at Muriel.*)

**SHAINA.** Wow.

**MURIEL.** See. Told you it was hard.

**SHAINA.** I see that.

## LATE LEARNING

**MURIEL.** So how am I ever gonna...

**SHAINA.** You're going to keep practicing. Keep reading. You'll get it.

**MURIEL.** Maybe you should do it too!

**SHAINA.** Very funny. But true. Come on, let's start it again. Open your book. *(They both read silently as the lights fade to black.)*

### SCENE 9

*Two weeks later. The house.*

**MURIEL.** Get in here, Buck. *(Buck answers from outside.)*

**BUCK.** No. Not going.

**MURIEL.** I said get in here...now. *(Buck skulks in.)* I have to turn you in. I told them I'd bring you in.

**BUCK.** Bonner'll fix it.

**MURIEL.** No, this time he and the judge have done what they can. You have to go now. Wait in jail before your trial. That girl was torn up. Ripped apart.

**BUCK.** She wouldn't let me...I was just playing the game...

**MURIEL.** She screamed no. Everyone in the bar heard her. You held her down. God knows what would've happened if the guys from the bar didn't pull you off.

**BUCK.** She would'a liked it, she didn't fight me. I know she wanted to...

**MURIEL.** Doesn't matter. She said no. She's been in the hospital all week.

**BUCK.** Hospital! She not that hurt! Everyone do it.

**MURIEL.** You were too rough. She was a virgin.

**BUCK.** What's a...virgin?

**MURIEL.** You're not paying attention! I'm not about to lose my bail money.

**BUCK.** I keep my truck?

**MURIEL.** No. I'm selling it.

**BUCK.** That mine.

## LATE LEARNING

**MURIEL.** No more. Besides they're using it for evidence right now.

**BUCK.** I can't live without my truck.

**MURIEL.** It's not a choice anymore. You made a big mistake this time. Now you have to pay.

**BUCK.** I say I'm sorry.

**MURIEL.** Won't work. It's bigger than that. Before it was a choice to go into a home. Now it's jail.

**BUCK.** I know! You lock me in the room.

**MURIEL.** What?

**BUCK.** Where we put you. They won't find me.

**MURIEL.** I'll tell them where you are.

**BUCK.** No. You my mother. You not tell.

**MURIEL.** I'd have to. You've done bad. Go get your things. I'll take you in.

**BUCK.** In my truck?

**MURIEL.** No. The bus. Move.

**BUCK.** Don't like the bus.

**MURIEL.** You've never been on a bus.

**BUCK.** Cause I don't like it. *(Beat)* Why you throw me away?

*(Buck starts to get emotional.)* No one like me. I can't go there. *(Muriel begins to lose her patience.)*

**MURIEL.** You don't have a choice...it's jail. And you're not gonna like it...but you...sorry to say...deserve it.

**BUCK.** Why you say that? Okay, okay...I go. I go to the man home.

**MURIEL.** It's too late. You're all packed up. Stop your blubbering and go get your things.

**BUCK.** No. You can't make me!

**MURIEL.** Get your things. Now.

**BUCK.** I gonna go find my truck.

**MURIEL.** You can't. They said no more.

**BUCK.** It be my truck! Gimme keys.

**MURIEL.** The judge said no...no driving.

**BUCK.** I say gimme keys! *(Buck grabs Muriel and rifles through her pockets for the keys.)*

**MURIEL.** Stop Buck.

## LATE LEARNING

**BUCK.** Those my keys. My truck. *(Buck gets keys and storms out. Muriel calls after him.)*

**MURIEL.** Buck! Stop!

**BUCK.** I gonna drive my truck. It all I got.

**MURIEL.** Jesus Christ! Get back in here. Buck! *(Blackout...silence, then the sound of screeching tires and a loud crash.)*

## INTERMISSION

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