

An Artificial Life

by

Leith C MacArthur

The End

Sept. 17, 2012 - age 66

I've been thinking about cutting off my legs.

I can't stand it anymore. The vibrating and the buzzing. The electric shocks. Every nerve on fire, screaming.

I'm seventeen days into the worst withdrawal of my life. Worse than Methadone, OxyContin, alcohol, benzos. They were Venus. This is Jupiter.

I could make the horror stop. All I have to do is take a little piece of film and pop it under my tongue. Forty minutes later, the drug will start doing its thing, and Creep, the ungrateful little primate inside my head, will have what he wants. Then he and I can go back to business-as-usual; our stand-off; our truce.

But right now I say, *Fuck him*. I'm not going to take the film. I'm going to grit my teeth and dig in. I'm going to stay with *Death by a Thousand Cuts*, *The Chinese Water Torture*, *The Rack*.

I'd rather die than let Creep have his way.

2

Life is a Picnic

The good years

My father loved picnics. We had lots of them. I have a vivid memory of Trap Falls, our favorite picnic spot. It was a hollow in the woods, a small, gentle canyon etched into a forest. Whenever it rained, the stream above the falls would muscle and swell and the water would roar over the falls and crash onto the rocks, spraying the air with a mist that sparkled like silver. Everything smelled good. The deep green of pine trees, the refreshing blue of water, the juicy brown of hamburgers sizzling on Dad's grille.

Nanny was with us that day. She always gave special attention to Lauren and me. I had the feeling Mum was mad at Nanny, because they weren't talking. But it was always hard to know what Mum was feeling.

Mum was even madder at Dad. (*She's mad and she's going to stay mad*, Dad would say.) Years later, Mum would divulge to Lauren and me that she had indeed been angry with Dad and Nanny. She'd been angry with them for a very long time. What she was angry about was hard for me to accept, though. After all, I loved my father. In my eyes, he could do no wrong. The confusing thing was, he really *did* do something wrong. Something bad.

The bad thing caused Mum to change. She became cold, even toward me. Her coldness was one of the reasons I became self-destructive. I'm certain of it. But wait; I'm getting ahead of myself.

We ate our hamburgers and hot dogs. They were the best I ever had! After lunch, while Lauren was playing near a tunnel in the rocks by the falling water, I climbed up beyond the falls and walked along the stream, a good way back into the woods. At a bend

in the stream, out of sight from everyone, I gathered stones, fallen logs, and broken branches. When I felt I had enough materials, I started building my dam.

The dam turned out to be bigger than I'd intended, spreading from one bank to the other. To my surprise and wonder, it held back the stream for a few moments. Then the accumulating force of the water tore it apart and washed it away.

When I went back to the picnic area, I learned that my little dam had stopped the flow of water over the falls for a few seconds. I remember thinking to myself, *Wow, I did that*. That was the first time I felt I had *power*. It was a good day to be a kid.

* * *

Two years later, at the age of nine, my life got better. Sabra was born. I'll never forget the first time I saw her. Home from the hospital, Mum walked into the kitchen holding my baby sister, swaddled in blankets. I was so excited!

Up to this point, my position had been defined as second-born to Lauren, who's three years older than me. As the boy in the family, Mum treated me like a little prince. Things usually went my way, but still, something was missing. Lauren loved me (anyone who tried to hurt me—watch out!) yet she treated me as if I was barely worth considering. Now that I had a kid sister, I was about to get more attention.

Nine years old. Summer. No school. We'd moved out of an apartment and into a house. I finally had my own room. Dad made things even more amazing. Now that we had a yard, we could have a dog!

While Mum was in the hospital, Dad spent several days refinishing the hardwood floors in the house. I helped. Dad said he wanted to surprise Mum when she came home. (My father was the master of surprises.) When Mum walked into the house holding Sabra, she looked around at the gleaming floors and, in a voice hard and cutting, said something that made no sense. "Don't you think for one second that this is going to change *anything!*"

But my confusion over Mum's anger evaporated when I looked into Sabra's big blue eyes. Her hair was reddish gold, so soft and so fine. Her skin was perfect. She was beautiful!

Before Sabra was born, I spent most of my time doing the things I loved; reading, playing games, fishing, riding my bike, and playing with my friends. After Sabra was born,

my attention shifted. I ran home from school each day to play with her. She loved it when I tossed her into the air, then bounced her up and down on Mum's bed. Sometimes she'd laugh so hard she'd get sick.

It was during that period in our lives—for a few years before Sabra was born, and a few years after—that Dad's music store got big. I remember Mum and Dad having a conversation in the kitchen while I was out on the sun porch reading. He told her he'd made a lot of money that year so they wouldn't have to worry anymore. I could hear the lightened pride in his voice when he said, "Laurie, this year I made twelve thousand dollars!"

We took epic summer driving trips, Dad's homemade box tied to the roof of the car and jammed full of our stuff. We'd be gone for weeks, driving north through New England, then up to Nova Scotia, then westward through Canada. Nights, we were lulled to sleep by a quiet we'd never experienced before—the silence of lodges and old cabins deep in the Canadian woods. Days spent staring in wonder, mesmerized by the huge pine trees and the majestic mountains. Crossing streams rumbling through covered bridges in our car. An exhilarating ride on a ferry down the vast St. Lawrence River. We continued westward to places so far away the inhabitants spoke only French. I remember sitting in a restaurant looking up at Mum as she translated the waitress's gibberish for Lauren and I, fluently, gracefully. I was so proud. She was *my* mother and she spoke *multiple languages!*

Thanks to my father's success, our family got not one, but two brand new Chrysler Imperials; a sedan, and a cobalt blue convertible. My friends were awed by the sight of those behemoths parked side-by-side in our driveway, their massive rear fins spread like mythic shoulders. I can still smell the new leather.

Our first Christmas during Dad's successful years was like nothing I've ever known, before or since. Running down the stairs that morning and finding a mountain of presents that almost dwarfed our beautiful tree. Our house was overflowing with love.

There was no longer any doubt. It was official. I lived in the best house with the best family in the best country in the world. Vacations, gifts, surprises, big beautiful cars, a new baby sister! Everything was perfect!

Life would have gone on being incredible, if not for the "thing" growing inside my head.

3

Animal

Summer? – Age three?

I was there, at my grandmother's house, the day it happened. When my mother got locked inside the bathroom with the animal. I was only three and it was hard to understand.

No. It was impossible.

Some years later—when I was seven or eight—I asked my mother about that day. About the animal. Ignoring my question, she calmly explained that our little family (Mum, Dad, Lauren, and I) had moved into Nanny and Grampa's house so Dad could work his way through some financial stuff. Not understanding why she'd avoided my question, I told her about what I'd seen, and the animal sounds I'd heard. I asked again. An unfamiliar look came over her face as she silently mouthed the words, *That never happened*, and walked away.

My mother wasn't being honest and I knew it. It didn't matter that I'd only been three; my recollection of the thing was vivid. I can still hear those sounds.

This is what I remember:

I was sitting in the middle of the Oriental rug in Nanny's front hall, playing with my fire truck. Mum, who was *always* calm, came rushing out of the kitchen, screaming at the top of her lungs, not using words. She ran past me and shot up the stairs.

I heard the bathroom door slam shut.

I heard the lock turn.

I sat on the rug, confused. It was the first time I'd seen my mother afraid. Silence settled back down over the musty old house. I didn't move. Then I heard something that scared me worse than my mother's screaming. The sound of the animal. *It was in the bathroom with her.*

Don't say it. Don't say I was only three. I know what I heard.

Dad went outside, got a ladder and climbed to the second floor. He had to break the bathroom window to get in.

It was the first time the “thing” happened. It was as if a black hole opened inside me and everything was sucked into it: sights, sounds, fears, feelings; *everything* went away and there was nothing left.

Now, more than sixty years later, I realize, this was the moment when the course of my life shifted, when I began to be “not normal”.

4

Broken

Childhood

I had my first accident at the age of four when we were living at Nanny’s, a swan dive across my tricycle’s handlebars—tender skin rent by rough concrete. At the hospital, sutures were laced under my chin by a maniacal doctor with a toothy grin. It was 1949. Was there no Novocain?

The following summer, six of us were playing a game of war in a field behind an abandoned factory. We split forces; three good guys (GI Joes); three bad guys (Nazi Stormtroopers). Under intense fire from a German machine gun, I jumped feet first into a small sinkhole (bomb crater). My left foot landed on a wood plank with a long, rusty nail sticking up (shrapnel). The nail entered the bottom of my shoe and exited the top, skewering my foot. (Imagine a toothpick piercing a turkey club sandwich).

At the hospital I had my first encounter with green soap, forced through the hole in my foot by a surgical tool that looked like a thin bottle-washer. The pain was spectacular, but what bothered me more was watching that brush being pushed all the way through my foot. In and out, in and out.

One day the following summer, while Nanny was off on an errand, I climbed a nearby tree. Showing off for my friends, I shinnied way out on a branch, high above the sidewalk, and hung upside down like a monkey. The branch broke.

When my grandmother returned, she found me on her living room couch, unconscious, my little friends (fast becoming my little EMT's) huddled around me

A month later, while pedaling my bicycle down a hill as fast as I could, a fender brace came loose and jammed into the whirling spokes of the front wheel. The bike came to a dead stop. I, however, continued on for some distance. When I hit the pavement, hands outstretched, both thumbs dislocated.

If that were the end of it, such mishaps might not be considered out of the ordinary. Boys suffer scrapes and bruises, cuts and broken bones. But I kept having accidents with such regularity that it wasn't long before my parents began using the phrase "accident prone" in the same sentence with "that boy".

When I was four, our family moved out of Nanny's house and into an apartment, a three-story tenement in an area known as Bank's Square. On a Saturday afternoon, after watching a documentary about the invasion of Normandy, I concluded that the most courageous soldiers were the paratroopers. In honor of those brave men, I went to the back of our building. Using Mum's umbrella in lieu of a parachute, I jumped off the second-floor landing and crashed through a giant rhododendron bush. Ankles sprained. Various cuts and bruises.

A few years later, I managed to put my right foot under the tire of Mum's car as she backed out of the driveway. My toenail had to be surgically removed. It was the 1950's. Still no Novocain?

I was developing an unhealthy relationship with pain, as well as a symbiosis. Whenever I had an accident, whenever I was in pain, *I got lots of attention*. I got it from family and friends. I even got it from strangers. I didn't just welcome attention, I devoured it.

I was adhering to a faulty equation; one that would prove itself to be exceedingly dangerous: *accident + pain = attention*