

The following material is a special excerpt of

Walk with Us:

Triplet Boys, Their Teenage Parents & Two White Women Who Tagged Along

By Elizabeth K. Gordon

Prepared for the November 28, 2007 edition of WACANupdate.

The author (called Kathryn in the book), has recently moved in with her partner Kaki in a poor section of Philadelphia. Each chapter in the book opens with a quote from Tahija, the teenage mother of the triplets. The story is true. Names have been changed to protect privacy.

=====

Walk with Us
Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, Inc, September 2007.
ISBN 10: 1-934390-30-5
ISBN 13: 978-1-934390-30-6
Paperback, 320 pages, Appendix, \$19.95

The book is available at:
www.WalkWithUs.info
www.CDDbooks.com

We are working to get it into the large online stores and expect it to be available at Amazon.com and other online bookstores within two weeks.

--Jeff Hitchcock

Chapter 1

That October I thought I was pregnant. I didn't know what to do so I said I would wait to tell my mom, but before I could find my mom my aunt put me out her house at one o'clock in the morning and I had to go to Renee's house and Lamarr didn't know where I was again. At that time I didn't know what to do. Finally I got in touch with Lamarr and I told him where I was, he was glad to know I was all right but he didn't know what to do. A few days later we had to go to an ultrasound appointment and the doctor said "I see one, no two" then she said "wait I see three." When she said that Lamarr passed out. When we told everyone they thought we were lying to them but we weren't. I got in touch with my unreliable dad yet again. This time he was doing ok. By then it was November 7th. He was suppose to come and get me and finally take care of me but the next day I waited as usual and he never showed up. I was left hanging all over again. It was about two weeks later Renee's mom told me I had to leave so that she wouldn't get in trouble for breaking her lease by having me live there.

*My Life as I Know It**

*Quotations from this in-progress autobiography of Tahija Ellison are used by permission of the author. See Appendix for the full text.

Walk with Us

The marble steps of Dobbins High School ended, with no more buffer than a sidewalk, at Lehigh Avenue — four lanes of traffic that on this cold and drizzly afternoon moved slowly to and from the light at the corner. Had you been driving by you probably wouldn't have noticed her, though she stood at the top of the steps, alone and still within the stream of dismissed students: a short, brown-skinned girl in a black robe and tight black headscarf that gave her the appearance, against the marble wall, of a silhouette.

Her first name was Tahija (pronounced *Ta-bee-juh*), her surname Ellison. Tahija she had chosen herself when she converted to Islam in eighth grade. Her mother had named her Shannon, and some in her family still called her that. Ellison came via her great-grandmother Mary Millicent Ellison from a South Carolina cotton planter.

She offered the traditional Arabic greeting to other Muslim students, "Assalamu alaikum" (peace be to you), and received theirs in turn, "Wa alaikum assalam," (and to you be peace).

Her mind wasn't on her peers, though, and her heart wasn't peaceful. The day before, she had called her father and asked if she could move in with him. Since starting high school a little more than a year before she had lived in five different places. She was staying then with her friend Renee, but Renee's mother was paralyzed and lived in federally subsidized handicapped housing with a strict, strictly enforced lease: no guests longer than a week. If Tahija remained they'd all be put out, and it didn't seem to matter to anyone but her and her boyfriend Lamarr that she was four months pregnant, with triplets.

Triplets. Two boys and a girl the doctor had said. She looked down. The robe hardly showed it. She looked out at the street. It had been almost a year since she'd seen her father, and that time ... she didn't like to think about that time. He'd been junking bad. All she could do was pick out the matted mess his hair had gotten into and braid it up nice. He might lie dead to the world in an alley somewhere but at least folks stepping over him on their way to work would know someone cared about him, loved

Part One: Monitored Hearts

him, quit drill team so she could spend her afternoons searching the streets for him, and her heart racing now, racing, when a man with his profile turned to look at her through a bus window, not smiling a smile not his.

She waited until after all of the students and teachers and staff had gone and the custodian had come to pull shut the big doors one by one, one by one winding a chain through their handles. Then she centered her backpack on her back, walked down the steps, left to the corner, around the puddle and slowly across Lehigh to stand with the others waiting in the rain for the 33 bus — the bus that would take her back to Renee's, where she could stay, she hoped, awhile longer.

It was November 8th, her fifteenth birthday.

When we were living in the same house and I was helping with the triplets, I'd sometimes pick Tahija up after school. Because she had told me about waiting for her father that day and other days, I was anxious to be on time. But I could have been on time a thousand times and early a thousand more and still in some rainy November of her heart Tahija will always be waiting for her father.

Months later she found out what happened to him. In the morning he had gone to help a friend collect scrap from the yard of a house the friend claimed to be living in. But when a police car flew around one corner, that friend (*so-called* friend, Tahija always said when telling the story) tore off around the other, leaving her father with a shopping cart of bent and rusted sheet metal that thanks to the three-strikes law and his stormy youth was going to get him locked up for a very long time.

One in three American black men between the ages of eighteen and thirty in the criminal justice system — an often quoted statistic, but the human reality behind the numbers wouldn't seep toxic waste-like into me until, loving the triplets as I would come to love them, I felt how fiercely they loved and needed their father.

Walk with Us

Should they lose sight of Lamarr behind a tree, say, in the park: “Where’s my daddy” — the pride and proprietorship, the fear, as if they knew, sensed, had breathed in on the polluted air knowledge of the steep drop their young father walked alongside every day of his life. One in three.

“He’s right over there, Baby, see?”

How long Lamarr Stevens had been at the front door I didn’t know. I was up on the third floor painting my new bedroom (white with dark green trim). A guy from the apartment building across the street was washing his car, blasting brassy salsa like it could blast him a lawn and circular drive. During a quiet interval (was he washing the speakers?) I heard the knocking.

I opened the window on a stream of bus exhaust and looked down to see a big head flanked by broad shoulders, arms very dark against a white t-shirt. Though it was cold enough, he wore no coat, no sweater even, and nothing on his head but the silver curve of headphones. He pushed these back and hung away from the handrail, looking up at me.

“You Kathryn?”

“Yeah.”

“I been hearing about you.”

“Yeah?”

“A lot.”

He smiled, and I saw he was a teenager, fifteen or sixteen.

“I’m Lamarr. Kaki said I could use the shower.”

And I said, “What, *now*?”

And he said, “Yeah.”

And the salsa music resumed its pinballing up and down the street.

I went down the stairs to find out about this promised shower. Before me, on the other side of the wrought-iron bars of a security door the house’s previous owners had put in, was a young black male, on the stocky side, wanting in. His white t-shirt reached low over creased jeans so baggy only

Part One: Monitored Hearts

the orange tips of his boots showed. I was being seen through the bars too: middle-aged white woman, medium build, ruddy face, small hazel eyes, short hair, jeans and sweat-shirt marked by green paint. Hesitating.

I'd been living in that neighborhood known as the Badlands long enough to notice how even the small children formed protective associations. The very postures of the stray dogs and edgy cats said it: don't trust anybody. But he had an open, expressive face, eyebrows like strokes of charcoal on a dark brown canvas, and he spoke in a reassuringly even voice.

"I called Kaki last night," he said, "asked could I use the shower, I have this meeting, with a record producer? She said yeah, she'd tell you."

"She must have forgot," I said.

He smiled, his cheekbones two knobs nudging the outer corners of his eyes upward. "That'd be Kaki."

Kathleen Nelsen became Kaki on the way home from Hawaii. Her missionary brother had invited her there, for a vacation, he said. And the hotel *was* four star, but the trip wasn't a vacation, exactly, it was an Intervention. A born-again former lesbian locked her in earnest conversation and did everything short of kissing her to persuade her that lesbianism was a sin. At the airport, she bought a key chain with the Hawaiian spelling of her name on it: Kaki (sounds, she tells people, like cocky, but with the stress on the second syllable). Perhaps to buffer herself from the family that loved her but couldn't seem to love all of her, she adopted the new name. Back at Penn Mutual her co-workers tripped over it — Khaki, Cookie, Keekee. It just didn't seem the sort of name a mid-level insurance executive ought to have. But she wasn't going to stay a mid-level insurance executive much longer, anyway.

Walk with Us

One day a group she'd given a 401(k) presentation to went into the silence: fifty or so middle-aged people sitting, eyes closed, hands in their laps. They were Quakers. Kaki stood before them in her suit set, hose, heels, and gold hoop earrings wondering what to do. What was there to do? She sat down and went into the silence too. Within a year she'd joined a Quaker meeting and begun going with its members into the prisons. She began to facilitate workshops in the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP),* and before long the disparity between her privilege and the extreme poverty so many of the prisoners had survived struck her as unconscionable. How could she share her faith in Transforming Power when she'd never walked the streets they'd walked, never been asked in the face of death to count on grace instead of a gun?

So she left; left the promising career, the house designed in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, the relationship of fifteen years. She was forty-one. She rented awhile then bought a row house in the neighborhood whose young men fed the bellies of the upstate prisons. Now when she talked about nonviolence she drew upon real-life encounters set on real-life corners: Broad and Erie, Second and Diamond, Kensington and Allegheny. She told about confronting a man as he beat a woman in front of a grocery store, how he'd been so shocked by her mild "Do you need help here?" that his outburst stalled and he went into an explanation that ended in tears. The prisoners said she was crazy, said she should move out of the neighborhood or at least learn to mind her own business in it, but they had encounters to talk about too — conflicts, fights, crises that might have gone differently.

So much could go differently with peace as an alternative. Asking people to consider that became her work. She lived simply, and much of what she did she did for free. Because "Kaki" sounded to some of her neighbors like a Spanish slang word, many called her *Aki* instead: in English, *here*.

*The AVP program was developed in 1975 by lifers in a New York State prison working in collaboration with Quakers.

* * *

I met Kaki Nelsen at the twentieth annual Quaker Lesbian Conference. Like many of the women attending, she lived in Philadelphia. Unlike the rest, she made her home in the inner city. I told her how I'd lived on the edge of Philly's inner city in my early twenties, and again in my thirties; how each time, leaving, I had felt a strong pull to stay, for what exactly I hadn't been sure; and how now, near forty, I had this sense that I should go back to Philly, find out what for.

I might have moved to the city Kaki or no Kaki, but maybe I'm fooling myself. Maybe I needed the anchor of a place to live and the carrot of a good relationship. And it did seem that, except for the fact that a significant portion of our fellow citizens thought our love strange, threatening, or downright sinful — all attitudes that affected me more than I could know. Affected but did not prevent. And so there I was, a year after falling in love with her and an hour after meeting Lamarr Stevens, driving down rush-hour I-95 looking for a prison.

She had told me to watch for pink buildings with windows like the handles of disposable razors. Just north of an older prison's crumbling stone turrets I spotted it — a Pepto-Bismol colored complex that but for the razor wire topped fences might have been a community college. I pulled up just as the doors opened on a dark blue stream of corrections officers (COs). Within it drifted a bright buoy — a tall woman in a red pullover with *Build Community Not Conflict* across the front. A white headband held back her long brown hair, leaving short bangs to bounce as she walked. From one arm hung a straw bag, from the other two striped hula hoops.

I knew those hula hoops. I'd tripped over those hula hoops. They were filled with beads that whirred like skateboarders on a plaza. When she opened the door and tossed them into the back seat they seemed to chuckle — contraband laughter. We kissed hello and told how our day had gone. Hers

Walk with Us

had been the last in a week-long workshop attended by inmates and CO's. Mine had featured Lamarr's visit.

"Oh that's right," she said, "I forgot to tell you he was coming over."

"Forgot to *ask* me you mean."

Right there in the white Chevy Cavalier her father had left her we had our first argument over Lamarr and Tahija (or Tamarr and Lahija, as we sometimes trippingly call them). Not very heated, it turned into one of the debriefing, self-assessment sessions that was becoming our habit: processing our experience of life in the 'hood, examining, owning, trying to stretch our perspectives.

"So what did you feel," she asked when she'd finished kibitzing with the guard at the front gate, "having a young black male you'd never met before show up telling you he could use the shower?"

"Come on," I said, "I did desegregation in middle school, in the south."

"South Florida's not *The South*."

"It's more south than Minne-so-ta."

She smiled, just, but it was enough. Her mother had the same smile: paired hills of the upper lip rising and sloping down again to a point that looked penciled on. But she was so serious. As I drove through the bleak white neighborhood that surrounded the prison, I thought back to that morning.

"I guess it did seem a little ... I mean, I didn't want to be doing something where everybody would say later, 'How could she be so stupid?' You know. But I could see he wasn't one of the addicts who come around selling stuff — "

"Boosting," she said, "selling stolen goods."

"Right. So I open the door, and what comes into my head, when he's standing there in the living room, is this black kid from first grade, the only black kid in the class, probably the whole school. He was tall, reddish hair, serious, angry — I thought. The way the nuns treated him I figured he must be angry. Plus it was 1963, riots on TV, the white people around me all 'talking shit,' like people here say, you know."

Part One: Monitored Hearts

“Scared, guilty, projecting their own motives onto a people they hardly knew,” she said.

“I guess,” I agreed, glancing at her to see if she meant me. Here was someone who at sixteen years old left her Methodist church when it refused to invite to services a poor black family the church had been giving charity to, left and never went back.

“So Lamarr’s standing there,” she prodded.

“Right. And this fear from first grade, fear of this kid, hits me, and it sets off a sort of domino chain ... and when the last domino falls, smack, there it is: guilt.”

“Guilt,” she said.

“About feeling the fear.”

“Okay.”

“About reacting mainly, or at all, to his skin color.”

Kaki turned to me, her knees bumping the gearshift (her 5'-10" height is all in her legs).

“Lamarr’s had it hard, I kid you not. Food, clothes, deodorant, a bed, a shower, cash to keep utilities from being cut off — you name it, he’s had to provide it off and on for himself and his younger twin brothers since he was small — I mean like five. Sympathetic white people were the only renewable resource around. Watch him, or he’ll be playing you like a gosh-darned banjo before you can say Jiminy Cricket.”

That’s the best cussing Kaki, raised Minnesotan, can manage.

“So I should have feared him?” I asked.

“No. But neither should you let him manipulate you.”

“I didn’t let him manipulate me.”

“Did you give him any money?” she asked.

“No. Well, two subway tokens.”

“That’s what I mean!” she said.

“You’re the one told him, *without* informing me, that he could use the shower.”

“He had a job interview.”

“He told me it was a meeting with a record producer,” I said.

“For Pete’s sake! So did you let him take a shower?”

“Yes. And he knew right where everything was, Miss Banjo.”

Walk with Us

We were on 95, heading toward the city and not, with the crawling commuters, away from it. Stretching to the right of the elevated highway was Fishtown, the working class white neighborhood separated from ours by the El. I walked there sometimes. The corner bars and football fields felt more familiar to me than the drug corners and basketball courts of my new neighborhood, and I could blend in there, comfortably anonymous for awhile.

To the left, east, flowed the Delaware River. On its New Jersey shore in the shade of the Betsy Ross Bridge hunkered another new prison — rows and rows of the razor-handle window slits.

“At least those prisoners have a river to look out at,” I said.

“Unless the windows were placed above eye level,” Kaki said.

I didn’t want to think about a world in which windows were purposely placed above eye level. Yet here I was in it, as I always had been.