The following material is a special excerpt of

Walk with Us:

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

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The triplets have arrived and Tahija has joined the household of Kaki and Kathryn. But all is not yet safe. The state still lurks in the background, threatening to remove the children because their parents do not have a stable home with relatives.

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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 20

> Now don't get me wrong I was loved by many, but I don't think that anyone understood me the way that my mother did and at this hard time in my life I couldn't count on her the way I needed and wanted to. I know it sounds selfish and I put myself in the situation I was in however I still believe that I needed her more than ever before at that point and time in my life. I know that at that time in my mother's life she probably needed me too, but I didn't know how to help her. You see for so long I was able to count on her and only her because she was the only one that was constant in my life besides my little sister. Neither of us knew how to help her this was something bigger than us this was about her. It was hard to deal with but we had no other choice but to deal with it because this was our life too.
>
> *My Life as I Know It*

One day when the boys are five and Tahija and Lamarr have a house of their own, I call to say hello and see what's new. What's new is the boys' bedroom has just been painted.

"My mom brought us two gallons. I tried to get her to stay awhile, but she flew in and flew out. You know how she is." Tahija laughs at her mom's ways. It's an easy laugh, a secure laugh, a laugh with a future in it.

In February of 1997, soon after her daughter entered Temple University Hospital for her six weeks of bed rest, Laura Ellison admitted herself into an ODAT (One Day at a Time) drug rehabilitation program. For the first ninety days she was on blackout. Blackout meant no going outdoors, no visitors, and no phone calls — the aim being to prevent relapse. If new residents must leave, for a doctor's appointment for example, they are accompanied by a resident who's been clean (sober) for some time, or by staff (often former residents with years of sobriety). Breaking blackout rules means expulsion, and given the dearth of drug rehabilitation programs, expulsion usually meant the street, and the street's colder, harder rules.

During her blackout Laura managed to get two phone calls through to Tahija in the hospital, but visits were impossible. The program was her lifeline, and she dared not let go. Later, when she was able to renew regular contact with her oldest daughter, she had no home to offer her. One thing she did have, however, was legal custody, and the power to give it up.

Although Mahad was doing all right and Tahija was cooperating, for the most part, with required services, DHS had not closed its case. In order for the case to be closed Tahija had to be residing with a parent or legal guardian. Since her mother didn't have a place for her and the boys to live, Tahija asked her to give up legal custody to us. Laura agreed because it was what her daughter wanted. And besides, as she told me later when I asked her about it, we were already acting as guardians. Why not make it official?

Making it official meant family court.

Laura Ellison was not what I had expected. What had I expected? Serious, scary, withdrawn, angry, haggard. She was none of these. What you noticed first was a girlish face and eyes so green they actually sparkled. From the corner of one a small tear-like scar hung. At thirty-four, she was lighter and thinner than Tahija — same facial features in a narrower face. She talked

in a fast, funny, mocking way that was saved from cynicism by something soft, a soft depth that she seemed to have decided to let a little closer to the surface. She didn't talk about her time on the street or the program she was still in. She made her daughter laugh, good deep laughter that sloughed off months of stress. For this and for her spirit, I liked her. She'd dug herself a hole and now she was climbing out, one day at a time.

Laura had converted to Islam soon after Tahija. On our day in family court she arrived in a silken beige outergarment and kemar, and brown leather boots. We'd met at the DHS offices, and today she treated us like old friends. Tahija's face shone when she looked at her mother, and soon they were teasing each other, Lamarr nearby basking in reflected light.

Family Court was like Penn Station at rush hour, except without the rush: no trains arriving, none departing. You just sat; sat and waited in the crowded, cavernous room, and now and then from one of the many doors evenly spaced in the four surrounding walls — pale wood walls with ornate molding — a bailiff emerged and boomed out a name.

We'd been told to come at 9:00 AM, and we had. Now it was near noon and we were hungry, but we dared not leave, because if the bailiff called your name and you missed it, they just passed you by, we'd seen it happen, and who knew when your name would come around again?

"We should have packed a lunch," I said.

"Right?" said Laura, in that affirming way I'd gotten used to Tahija saying it. "Why do they tell you come at nine when they can't handle but a few families at a time?"

"Don't make no sense," I agreed.

Tahija leaned forward and looked past Lamarr to our end of the line. "Can ya'll two stop complaining, please?"

"All I'm *saying,*" I said, "is don't they see we have three babies here?"

"And we arrived well after some of the people they've already called," Kaki said.

"Thank you," said Laura.

"They not worrying about us."

We sat in attached plastic chairs facing a long row of people in attached plastic chairs. It was me, Kaki, Laura with little Lamarr in her lap, big Lamarr with Damear, and Tahija with Mahad. And not a sneaker or pair of jeans among the eight of us. We were going before a judge, *some* time today. Tahija wore a suit-blue outergarment and kemar, new pants showing beneath, and square-heeled shoes. She had gained a good deal more weight but carried it well. It made her look older, though. Not much past sixteen, she could have passed for twenty-five.

Kaki had on a dark gray suit set with a lacy, light-gray blouse, from her Penn Mutual incarnation. She had gathered her hair in the back with a wooden barrette. Only her Birkenstock sandals distinguished her from the lawyers in the room, and the fact that she stayed in one place. Lamarr had on telemarketing-job clothes: dark pants and shoes, dress white shirt, striped tie. He wore his hair natural, about a half inch all around. I had on a dress, a blue flower-print thing with a wide velvet waist and actual darts.

The boys were dressed identically in green corduroy overalls, thin-stripe turtlenecks, and white oxfords. They had a handful of syllables, da-da and ma-ma leading among them. The asymmetry in Damear's face was nearly gone, Mahad had stopped snuffling, and all their noses were developing a little character, a firmness that served to distinguish them more, one from another.

"Hey," a girl walking past skidded to a stop on the wooden floor, "are they twins?"

That's one question, I thought, and not a very good one.

"Now do you see two," Tahija said, "or three?"

"Triplets! Ew, Yvonne, come look. Triplets."

A younger girl came and stared. "All girls?" she asked.

"Boys," said big Lamarr, mercifully.

"Can I hold one?" pleaded the younger girl.

"I don't allow them to be held by strangers," Tahija said.

The two girls gazed awhile longer, and left.

"These people acting retarded," Tahija said in her headache-coming-on voice. She was getting them more and more, a symptom of her continuing high blood pressure.

One of the three doors in the wall to our left swung open, and a bailiff emerged. "Cabbot," he boomed out, "Cabbot."

"I sure as heck hope they're not going in alphabetical order," Kaki said.

They weren't, but what order they were going in wasn't clear. We waited through lunch time and into the afternoon. Everyone had the opportunity to change a diaper. Kaki got to hold Mahad and teach him some Minnesotan. At some point I was handed little Lamarr.

"What do you think of all this, Mr. Stevens?"

He gave me his thoughts in a few wet syllables. I hoped I'd be able to talk to him about it when he was at liberty to say more.

The big doors swung open and the bailiff with the South Philly accent boomed out, "Jefferson and Berrisford."

"Now I'm really getting irritated," Kaki said.

Lamarr, still with Damear on his lap, said evenly, "Might as well not. They'll call us when they ready to call us."

"If I'd known, I would have brought something to read, crying out loud."

"Now stop that cussing," I told her. "You know whenever we go someplace with Tahija we wait."

"It's the truth," Tahija said.

Kaki yawned and got up to stretch her legs.

"That's not a lawyer," I heard someone say. "She's with those triplets."

It was in question because all of those waiting were African American or Latino, while most of the legal-aid people, and all of the guards and bailiffs, were white.

At the other end of our group, to Tahija's left, sat a woman in her early thirties. A lawyer came to speak with her, and we could not help overhearing the conversation. He told her nothing could be done. Today it would be made official. She was losing custody of her son. She broke down. Such grief as I have never

seen except at a funeral. But twelve-year-old boys need chastising, she sobbed. She was grateful to her boyfriend for being the man of the house. Didn't a boy need a man in the house? The lawyer nodded, checked his watch, and left.

The woman sat crying, waiting for her name to be called. No one sat with her, unless you counted the eight of us, caught by accident under the bell jar of her misery. Whatever mistakes she might have made in the past, her anguish now was terrible. We suffered with her, even the boys, gazing as one as she hid her face in her hands and shook with sobs; maybe especially the boys, for they saw without preconception, as adults cannot.

In a poem written on the eve of World War II and quoted widely after the September 11 attacks, W.H. Auden wrote, "Those to whom evil is done, do evil in return." Of course a parent who abuses a child is personally responsible, but isn't it disingenuous to pretend racist violence stops with the victim? The violence of four and a half centuries of enslavement, and the near-century of Jim Crow that followed, reverberates still. The African American parent hauled into court for administering the whippings her parents and grandparents administered to her is like the last person in a bucket brigade, except what's passed down the line is not a bucket of water but a punch in the face. When the second-to-last in line punches the last, the weakest, the child, she alone is singled out for public censure.

Where is the court system to try the enslavers who bull-whipped the ancestors, who then whipped *their* children, who whipped their children, and on down to the lone mother in the lobby of family court waiting for her name to be called?

And where did that name originate? With a landowner the U.S. government had given the legal right to own, kill, breed and rape her ancestors. But neither that man nor his descendents nor the government whose capital buildings were built with stolen labor stood up when her name was called. She stood up alone, and alone went to face the judge.

* * *

A thirty-something white man with brown hair in a short boyish cut, the judge smiled broadly when he saw us arrayed before him, me on one end and big Lamarr at the other (nearest the exit).

"Why, are they triplets?" he asked.

That's one question, I thought, hoping Tahija would refrain from responding. To my relief he didn't try for a second but went on to the business at hand.

Did Tahija — Shannon Ellison — desire to be remanded into our custody? She said yes, she did. Had the child advocate assigned to Tahija ascertained this to be in the girl's best interest? The child advocate said yes. Did the child advocate assigned to the babies believe it was in their best interest? Yes. Did Laura Ellison agree to relinquish legal custody of said Shannon Ellison? Laura said yes. Did Kaki Nelsen agree to take on the responsibilities of serving as Shannon Ellison's legal guardian until she reached the age of eighteen? Yes she did. Did I? I did.

No questions for Lamarr, though it had been his question to Kaki, if Tahija could move in, that had started us all on our way to this garland of Yes's.

Tourist brochures call it "a medallion in the parkway's necklace of gems." People who grew up in Philly remember playing in it as children. Within sight of City Hall, the Free Library, the Franklin Institute and the Academy of Natural Sciences, Swann Fountain was a flower-lined circle of dancing water.

After leaving the boys with their dad, we women had gone out to eat, stopping at the fountain on the way home.

Laura joked about the fountain's reclining nudes being big bone-ded.

"I'm big bone-ded," Tahija said, "they fat."

Laura found a golf ball in the grass. Someone had the idea that we write our names on it. After we squeezed our names into the bumpy surface with a pen Tahija dug from her purse,

someone had the idea that we should get up onto the lip of marble surrounding the fountain.

"One time around for each of us," Tahija suggested.

"Laura in the lead," Kaki said, "because if not for Laura, there would have been no Tahija."

"Ya'll are crazy," Laura said, but hopped up nevertheless onto the wall and waited like an engine for the rest of us to form a line behind her.

Passing drivers must have thought we *were* crazy: two black women in long Muslim robes, one thin, one big bone-ded, leading two white women in office clothes, one tall, one short, around the fountain, squealing like schoolgirls when the wind dashed spray across their path.

For a long time after, that golf ball sat on the piano behind a framed photo of the boys at six months. It was a small thing, but it reminded us of the circles we had made together around the fountain's rising-falling water on the day when we waited all day to stand before a judge and say yes.