

Joanne Leedom-Ackerman: The Tutor

Baltimore, 1968

The girl did not belong. It was obvious to those watching her walk up Franklin Street. Under her arm she carried a notebook and a shopping bag. She moved slowly down the street, her eyes darting from side to side--large, curious eyes peering out from under bangs--observing the squat brick houses, the people on their stoops. Those watching thought perhaps she was a welfare worker making her rounds. Every few steps she glanced into her notebook, then again scanned the porches. She smiled, a shy, tentative smile, which bid these strangers to smile back at her. It was her smile, her peculiar bidding, which hinted to the neighbors she was not from welfare.

Others watching guessed she was a walker, out soliciting business. Tight jeans. Loose shirt. "Hot tonight, baby, right hot." One of the locals sidled up beside her, rubbed close. She glanced at the pavement and walked faster. Hips set high, a little wide, legs long and slim, breasts small under the cotton shirt. She dodged these men like the hockey player she'd been in college, not like a jane on the make. "Hey, green jeans, where you going?" the men called. She flashed a cautious, not-to-be-rude smile then hurried down the block without looking back. On the porches the women, on the street the men watched this white girl passing.

At No. 14 Franklin Street, the girl stopped. She shut her notebook and climbed the broken steps to the porch. She ran her hand around the waist of her slacks, tucking in her shirt; then she brushed fingers through her short brown hair. She started towards the front door but stopped. The house looked empty. The shades were drawn, the windows patched with the Afro-American. The window frames, swollen past their shape, had been stuffed with rags, and she could see

no light inside. On the rotted post which propped up the porch she read a message scrawled in red--"Fuck Them Zorro Lives!"--message scrawled anonymously then covered over with paint by whoever lived there, painted over and over again. She finally moved to the door and knocked.

Silence.

She knocked again.

From between a chain lock, a face peered out. "Who you?"

"I'm...I'm the tutor." She disliked that word. "I'm Shannon Douglas--is your mother home?"

"Ma-a-a!" the voice shouted down the hall. "That tutor lady's here."

The door shut then opened. She had begun.

Inside, the house fell into shadow. A bare bulb lighted the kitchen at the far end of the hallway. From the living room a TV glowed in one corner, and huddled in front of it two children cast secret glances at the stranger. Furniture jammed close on all sides of them--so much furniture it looked as though the family had gathered everything they could find: lamps, coffee tables, a couch faded brown with stuffing popping through, another couch bright turquoise laminated in plastic, chairs, stools, the shell of a faceless TV--all crowded in this one small room like manna stored up for tomorrow. On top of the television grinned the school pictures of the children--two boys stiff and formal in coats and ties, a girl laughing from behind the frills of a freshly pressed white blouse. On the empty TV shell an orange swan filled with plastic daisies coasted among memorabilia, weaving its way among a cowgirl ashtray, an Atlantic City mug, a letter framed in gold. From the wall Jesus smiled down on this family. Next to him Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, and Bobby Kennedy

gazed out from an eternally blue sky stamped in gold: We Shall Overcome.

Slowly Shannon made her way into the hall. The boy who had let her in now stood watching as she came to terms with his home. He towered over her. He stood with his weight shifted to his back foot, his head cocked, his arms folded in front of him. Standing in the shadows he could have been seventeen, eighteen, yet in the light his face showed cheeks still childishly round and a forehead spotted with tiny bumps of teenage acne. His eyes, uncertain, jumped from object to object, not yet sure of how to hold the world with his gaze.

As Shannon passed a cabinet in the hallway, he blocked her path. "That's mine," he said, wedging her between him and the big maple case. The cabinet's front glass was broken, and on the empty shelves stood a single silver loving cup.

"Oh," she said.

"I won it."

"Oh, well, good..."

"I'm going to fill the whole thing with trophies." His eyes scanned the case, then her. "That's what I took it for."

She tried to smile, but instead an anxious, tentative look flitted across her eyes. The boy backed away. He began pulling his hair with a large Afro comb. He pointed for her to go to the end of the hallway.

Shannon moved quickly past him; she moved past two bedrooms with mattresses on the floor, past a bathroom, past a closet with a desk in it. While she moved, she studied the objects in these rooms, and she tried to memorize the pieces of this family's life. As she probed the rooms with her eyes, a woman watched her, an enormous, brooding woman. She sat under a bare light bulb as it swung back and forth over a kitchen table. She sipped water from a jelly jar, and she studied this girl who pried into her home. When

Shannon saw the woman, she started, then broke into an embarrassed smile and moved quickly towards her.

"Hello," she said.

The woman didn't answer. She lifted her large body and straightened it in the chair. Her face was dark and her features, soft and pliant, looked as though they had been pressed into shape with the palm of a hand in moist clay. Only her eyes stood out distinctly sculpted. She nodded to Shannon. Enveloped in a print housecoat which closed around her like a tent, she watched over her home. Shannon shifted uncomfortably under her gaze.

"Are you Corene Luvurn Robbers?" Shannon read the name from her notebook.

The woman nodded, then demanded, "You the tutor?"

"Yes, Shannon Douglas," Shannon extended her hand.

Corene nodded for her to sit down. "You get here awright?"

"Fine...yes." Shannon settled uneasily into a chair at the table.

"Some trouble finding the street sign, that's all."

"That's the boys round here; they twist up them signs for a game." She looked over at her own three children clustered around the TV. "Not mine. They good childrens. That's Tabor, the big one what let you in," she pointed. "Then there's Coretta and Theodore--only folks call them Corry and Bumper. They shy tonight."

The girl in the living room uncurled from the floor. "I ain't shy," she said. "I'm just giving you time to talk to the tutor." She moved into the kitchen. She was all arms and legs, but she carried herself like a dancer. Her skin was smooth and dark and her eyes sparkled. "You going to teach Ma?" she asked.

"If she wants me to," Shannon said.

"She wants you to all right. You teach me too," she said. "I'm good at reading, but I can't do maths. I'd of made honor roll if I could do math."

Tabor pushed into the kitchen. His eyes darted for an instant to Shannon, then he turned to his sister. "What you mean you'd of made honor roll? You just dumb that's all." He strutted over to the refrigerator. As he passed Shannon, he kicked over her bag with his foot. "Ain't nobody teach that girl," he said.

Shannon bent down and picked up the books in the bag.

"That's so?" Corry said. "Least I don't go failing whole grades like some people I know. You see, some people in this family just not too smart."

"Awright you two, go sit and quiet yourselves," Corene said. "They the sassy ones," she apologized.

"I ain't sassy; Tabor is." Corry stuck out her mouth in a pout then turned back to Shannon. "What you going teach Ma anyway? She going to finish high school?"

"If she can pass the test," Shannon said.

"Oh, she can pass a test, can't you, Ma?" Corry turned to her mother.

Corene didn't answer. She sipped water from the jelly jar and stared at the books Shannon was setting on the table. She reached into a box of cornstarch beside her and began sucking the chalky white powder.

"Ma almost finished high school in Georgia, you know, but then she had to get off the land," Corry said. "That was before I was born. She can get a good job with high school done, can't she?"

Shannon nodded, but Corene's eyes narrowed. Her lips drew tight together sucking the starch. She poured out another handful.

"I'm going to college myself," Corry said. "I'm only twelve now, but I'm going to be a teacher when I grow up or maybe an actress."

"You ain't going to no college, girl." Tabor was up. "Only one make it to college round here is me. I'm the one going to college while you work to support me."

"I ain't supporting you, boy! No girl got sense would support you, except maybe some empty-headed girl like Marcy Johnson. Tabor love Marcy..." Corry taunted. Tabor lunged at her, but she jumped away, and Tabor went crashing into the table.

"Tabor Roberts! You go sit down before I hit you!" Corene grabbed his arm.

"But Ma, it was Corry's fault..."

"I don't want to hear no fault. I got eyes, don't I? You boths go sit."

"Ma, can't I listen?" Tabor sat across the table from Shannon. "I want to know how long she thinks it be before you pass that test?" He stared at Shannon, serious now. He began fingering her notebook in the middle of the table.

"I don't know, Tabor," she said. "It depends on how much she needs to study."

"Ma's smart, you know. She is. She's finished eleventh grade. I expect she should pass that test this year." His tone was suddenly businesslike. He pulled Shannon's notebook to him and started studying the writing inside; he checked it over as though it were the ledger for his family. "Yes, she's very smart. I expect she'll pass this year."

"Ma's going to do computers," Corry interjected. "We're going to get a car maybe...or were you going to be a secretary? I forgot." Corry glanced at her mother. "When we get enough, we'll get a car, maybe even a house outside the city."

"She'll pass this year," Tabor said again.

"Yes, well, it's possible," Shannon said. "I mean I don't know why not. A keypunch operator maybe. She could do that, begin there

really and move on up." Tabor and Corry grinned at each other.

Shannon took out a pencil and scribbled something down. "Or she could be an executive secretary. If she's good in English and spelling and can type, she could begin there and work into business. Jobs are opening..."

All at once Corene shoved up from the table, her body swaying as her chair went crashing to the floor. "Don't say what you don't know!" she ordered. She glared at Shannon. Her face was so angry that Shannon thought for an instant she was going to hit her. "Don't make them promises. You don't know that." Suddenly the mood shriveled like a balloon released before tied.

"But if you've finished eleventh grade..." Shannon said. She glanced at the children, who implored her with their eyes. "I know it was a long time ago, but..." Shannon shifted in the chair. A torn piece of vinyl from the seat dug into her leg. Tabor began pulling at his hair with his comb; Corry fingered a burned piece of Formica peeling off the table. "I mean I don't *really* know," she said. "I don't *know*."

"That's right," Corene said. She retrieved the chair and sat back down.

Shannon pulled the remaining books out of her shopping bag. "Which ones of these do you think you might like to read?" She spread **The Tale of Two Cities**, **Huckleberry Finn**, **Great Expectations**, **Charlotte's Web** on the table, along with workbooks whose grade levels had been blocked out. But Corene wasn't looking at the books; she was watching her children.

"Git," she ordered Tabor and Corry.

"But Ma..." Corry protested.

"Git!"

"Ma..." Corene would not relent. Tabor and Corry reluctantly rose from the table and moved towards the living room. From an overstuffed armchair in the corner, Bumper uncurled. He'd been

sitting there the whole time. When Shannon saw him, she smiled at him, but he ignored her and watched his mother instead. Corene nodded for him to leave, and he rolled out of the chair and went to join his brother and sister in the living room in front of the TV.

Corene poured out another palmful of starch. She licked the dusty white powder as she began to look through the books on the table. She picked up **The Tale of Two Cities** and turned it over in her hand. She fingered the worn corners. "A lot of people've read this book." Shannon nodded. She'd brought these books from the library where she'd just started working. They were give-aways, beyond repair for the library shelves. Corene opened the cover slowly and studied the first page. She turned to the back of the book and studied the last page, then she flipped to the middle. Finally she pulled out a pair of wire glasses from the folds of her housecoat and put them on and studied the book some more. She looked up at Shannon, her face studious, her eyes narrowed. Shannon smiled encouragingly, but Corene shut the book and shook her head.

She began searching through the other books. She picked up **Great Expectations**, stared at the title, then put it down without even opening the cover. She looked at the pictures on each of the books--a boy with a fishing pole, a lady knitting at the guillotine, a spider weaving its web. Finally she opened a workbook--level 9--and started turning pages. Her mouth began to form sounds, random words: "*think*"... "*spring*"...barely whispering... "*before*"... "*today*"....The words fell out slowly as she continued turning pages. Shannon watched, hopeful, but Corene closed the book. She didn't look at Shannon this time but picked up another book, then another.

From the living room, her children peered out at her. When Shannon glanced at them, they began whispering like guilty conspirators. Tabor loudly cleared his throat, and Corry and Bumper darted around and pretended to watch TV. Corene didn't see the

children, however. She was sipping water from the jelly jar and staring hard into another book

"Do you want a friend, Wilbur?" Her words again came slow, but steady this time. *"But I can't see you," said Wilbur jumping to his feet. "Go to sleep. You'll see me in the morning..."* Corene glanced up smiling for an instant; then she grew serious again. "I'll take this one," she said.

Shannon looked at the book and tried to smile. **Charlotte's Web**. Third grade, maybe fourth. Corene was reading below Corry even. "Good...well, that's good. That's one of my favorite books," Shannon said. "You read well."

Corene looked at the book then at Shannon. "Don't lie."

"I'm not. I.."

"I don't read good so why say different?"

"You'll get better of course."

"I'm not finishing high school this year," she said flatly.

"Well, probably it will take longer." Shannon glanced again at Corry and Tabor, their faces intent on the television now. Only Bumper still watched his mother.

"I can't tell the childrens that." Shannon nodded. "I'm going to be frank with you," Corene said. "I told the childrens I finished eleventh grade so they finish themselves. Kids do what their folks do. I quit eighth." She looked into the jelly jar as she talked. "I don't want them to think their ma's stupid. Corry asks help for her homework and I can't help, and she say, 'Mamma, you supposed to know how to do this. Why don't you learn?' Now I have to learn so I can teach it to them."

Shannon nodded. "We'll work hard."

Corene picked back up **Charlotte's Web** and began to read, "*My name,*" said the spider, "*is Charlotte.*" "*Charlotte what?*", asked Wilbur eagerly.

"You come back next week," Tabor ordered.

Shannon and Tabor were outside in the shadows of Franklin Street. "I will."

"You call me first. I let you know when to come." Tabor leaned against Shannon's red Volkswagen bug so she couldn't open the door.

"I'll come about the same time, I think."

"You call me first, hear? I let you know if it's awright to come then. You can't come here less I meet you. Mamma say that too." He pulled his hair with his comb and stared hard at her. "You not safe here by yourself and don't start thinking you are. You come because we say you can."

"Well, Tabor..." Shannon started to protest.

"Same time be all right though, I think." He opened the car door. "About this same time, I'd say. I watch for you, hear?"