

To the Woman in the Pink Hat



# Conversation Pieces



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## About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, Conversation Pieces, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The Conversation Pieces series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what Conversation Pieces is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)



Conversation Pieces  
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# To the Woman in the Pink Hat

By LaToya Jordan





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*For my daughter*





They gave Jada an ultimatum: do the work or get kicked out. Ayana delivered the news during indie. “You’re here to face what happened, learn from it, and thrive. There’s a long list of young women waiting for the chance to take your spot.”

Ever since the botfishing law passed, requiring AI to be distinguishable from humans, her relationship with Ayana had changed. Although The Center made only the minimum necessary changes to their AI, Ayana no longer looked like a comforting grandma. They made her brown eyes teal and replaced her salt and pepper hair with what looked like a silver helmet, the only skin on her head at her face and ears. They replaced her drawl with a deep voice that made it harder for Jada to concentrate when she spoke. It was white noise now. She droned on while they sat in a therapy room with their armchairs facing each other, a coffee table between them. Sometimes Jada got lost in the psychedelic swirls on the tabletop, but today she stared out of the window behind Ayana’s head. Therapy rooms were some of the only places at The Center where the real outside world was visible instead of the video loop of sunny days on city sidewalks and starry nights Leaders saw from their room windows. In the apartment across the street, a thin blonde woman wearing a tank top and flowy parachute pants was preparing a meal. Her pants billowed behind her as she walked back and forth from the fridge to the kitchen island to the stove. Jada wanted to know what it would be like to live like that, to cook fancy meals for herself. She hadn’t

cooked a meal for herself in a year. One day, she'd love to lounge on a cream-colored couch sipping wine or tea while reading or watching a movie, to invite her friends up to the penthouse for dinner parties and drinks on the terrace to admire the city view.

The day Jada arrived at The Center for Future Leaders, one of the agents escorting her pointed up and said, "You're going to the penthouse. You got lucky, kid." Jada leaned her head back to look up at the building. Above the door's white archway, an angel statue with open arms and missing hands greeted her. She counted the floors, 12. The top four floors had clear windows, while the lower floors had brown metal grates over tinted windows. Whoever lived on those floors had darkened puzzle-piece views of the park across the street. She surveyed the rest of her new neighborhood. It was an old-money block, where the money and homes had been passed down from generation to generation. A doorbot stood guard at the building next door. Before the agents could lead her inside, a woman walking a long-haired dog and talking to the air crossed in front of them. The woman didn't look at them, but her dog stopped and growled at Jada.

"Leader Jada? Jada? Jada!" Ayana said, snapping her out of her trance. "I said I wanted to try something new today. Can you close your eyes and take a couple of deep breaths in and out?"

Jada closed her eyes and pictured herself in the apartment across the street, seated cross-legged on the plush carpet in the same flowy outfit, the smell of jasmine and mellow ocean sounds in the background. She breathed in and out.

"Now open your eyes," Ayana said.

When she opened her eyes, Jada couldn't understand what she was seeing. She blinked fast a few times and shook her head to try to get the image out. It was Sarah's face on Ayana's body. Ayana's face had disappeared. Her forehead had smoothed, her skin lightened to pale sand. She had thicker, perfectly arched eyebrows above blue eyes, and her nose was thinner, with a longer, narrower bridge.

"Leader Jada, it's ok," Ayana said, while her full lips shrank and flattened into a heart shape.

Ayana lifted a long, dark chocolate wig from a cardboard box on the coffee table between them and put it on her shiny bald head. She pulled out a knitted bubble-gum pink hat and put it on top of the wig. The image clicked into place. From the neck up, she was recreating the first photo Jada had ever seen of Sarah at the Women's March. She'd never told Ayana about the photo, so they must've dug up the information from news clips or court records. Jada looked down at Ayana's staff uniform, focusing on the shiny zipper of her navy-blue jacket to ground herself.

"Is there anything you want to say to Sarah?" Even the sound of her voice had changed.

Jada's body screamed *Run! Get out of there fast!* but her butt was stuck to the chair. Her legs were sandbags, her arms anchored to the arm rests. She tried to breathe deeply, but the air came in sips. In her head, she barked orders to her body: *Pick up your arms. Feet get up. Go punch her right in her robot face.* Her body disobeyed. She squeezed her eyes shut, repeating to herself *this isn't real, this isn't real, this isn't real.* High-pitched beeps sounded in the room.

“Try to relax. My sensors are picking up increases in your heart rate and blood pressure,” Ayana said, her voice back to its usual low tone.

Something sharp pricked the skin at her wrist. She opened her eyes to Ayana’s silver fingernail piercing her vein. Jada recoiled at the sight, sending her body and the chair backwards. Her file included a note to staff requiring them to tell her what they were planning to do before any medical procedure, and this was the first time Ayana hadn’t followed the directive. Ayana righted the chair as Jada slumped lower, spineless now, trying to pour herself away.

“Leader Jada, please sit up and look at me. I’ve given you a sedative, and I’ll return my face to normal. It’s clear you’re not ready for this.”

Jada’s body was a tight ball on the floor in front of her armchair. She focused on the cold hard tile under her butt. Sitting at eye level with Ayana was too dangerous. When she first got here, staff had paired her with Ida, one of The Center’s few white-skinned AI therapists. After two weeks of Jada moving her chair to the opposite side of the room and giving Ida only yes or no answers, staff got the hint that she wouldn’t work well with a white therapist and switched her to Ayana’s rotation. Although she figured out early on that The Center’s robots collected data on Leaders, tracked their vitals to see how they responded to certain questions, and doled out programmed psychological treatments, it helped to have a therapist who looked like a family member, who didn’t remind her of what had happened to her.

Jada uncovered one hand from her eye and peeked at Ayana. She was back in her chair, taking off the hat

and wig, when her face began rippling near her ears, like something beneath her skin was trying to escape. The ripples undulated, met in the middle, and were sucked into a slit at the bridge of her nose. She'd never seen that slit before. Ayana's old face was revealed, thick brown skin like it was caked with makeup, plump cheeks, teal eyes, full lips, and a slight double chin. Jada sighed as the liquid warmth of the sedative flowed through her veins. Her entire body involuntarily unclenched. Her fingertips and toes tingled as she pushed herself up to sit back in the chair.

"I'm sorry for scaring you." Ayana said. She explained that a month ago she had been programmed to transform as part of a new confrontational therapy. The Center had breakthroughs with a few other Leaders using the new method, but she said they only used confrontation when other therapy methods failed to produce the desired results. Jada had been doing group and indie therapy since she got to The Center 13 months ago. She didn't talk much about what brought her to The Center, but she participated in everything required of her.

"What about the times I speak up for the other Leaders? I'm always helping them and giving advice," Jada asked.

"You give great feedback and support. That is your strength as an empath. But you're here for you, not to help the other Leaders. You share soundbites we already know about you from the news, but you aren't doing the deep digging we need for you to succeed."

Ayana raised her hand in front of her and shot a hologram into the air between them. She played clip after clip of Jada avoiding questions about Sarah.

"You've been recording me the entire time?"

“Standard procedure for us to track your progress, Leader Jada. If you’re not going to talk to me or Zoe, we need to try new methods.”

They discussed different things she could do to make headway. Holograms, VR, a lighter touch with confrontational therapy. Jada said no. She didn’t want re-enactments, sims, nothing where her worst moments played out before her. Ayana offered old-school methods, more talk sessions, working with the art therapist, or keeping a paper or cloud journal. Jada chose the cloud journal because she figured it would be the least traumatic. She wouldn’t have to sit in front of Ayana (whom she surely couldn’t trust anymore) or Zoe, or any other therapist or Leader. She could record her thoughts alone. She was always more open when only voice was involved, like back when she and the SUs used Yak to share their stories and mission with strangers around the world.

Ayana reached toward her, holding out a silver circular dot about the size of the tip of her pinky in her palm. Jada flinched. She’d probably flinch every time Ayana got close now.

“Pin this to your uniform. Tap once to record, twice to pause or stop. Imagine you’re telling someone the story; it’ll make the process easier.” Whatever Jada recorded would be uploaded to her file. Her homework over the next couple of days was to tell her story, talk about what she’d done and why she was at The Center.

“Another Leader will take your library shift, but you can continue with your groups, classes, indie, and any other therapies. We want you to focus on breakthroughs, and the first step is being able to tell your story. Channel

that SU energy and passion for this. Zoe and I will listen to your recordings to determine your status.”

Ayana pressed a button at the edge of her sleeve, and Zoe strolled through the door a few seconds later. Jada was annoyed at her for casually walking into the room like she was taking an afternoon stroll. Ayana was her AI therapist, and Zoe was her human one, classic good cop, bad cop. Ayana looked older, while Zoe played the girlfriend/older sister role. She didn't trust either of them.

“Hey Jada, come on, I'll walk you back to your room. I saw you had a hard time with the whole Sarah thing.” Zoe reached for Jada's hand and pulled her up. Jada was afraid she'd melt into a puddle when she stood because her joints felt like they were disintegrating.

“What did she give me?” Jada asked.

“Come on,” Zoe said as she hoisted Jada up and looped arms with her. They walked to the right to leave the New wing. The actual name of the wing was NW—the wings were named for intercardinal directions—but the Leaders gave them nicknames. SW was So, NE was Knee, and SE was See. Zoe led Jada toward So, in the opposite direction of the dorm wing.

“Wait, are you taking me to the med center?” Jada asked.

“No, no. We're going the long way around to get you moving a bit. And to get you a snack,” Zoe said.

They walked past the med center and the library entrance. She hoped they weren't going to have Deia cover her shift, she always reorganized the returns the wrong way.

“Listen, I know that was scary. But we needed to jolt you, so you'd realize the seriousness of your situation.

You know what's at stake here." Zoe talked with her hands, jostling Jada's body as she spoke.

"Couldn't you have told me without the show and tell? She had her fucking face! No warning. My mouth feels weird."

They kept to the right of the hallway as people passed them on the left. Jada didn't register their faces, only splotches of purple, black swooshes, blobs of gray and blue, other Leaders and Center staff uniforms mixing against bright white corridors. The world around her moved in fast forward. She looked down at her white sneakers, one foot in front of the other in a bouncy, floating spacewalk. Zoe stopped them at a snack machine near the entrance to the Knee dorms. It surprised Jada to see her grounded reflection in the machine. She watched Zoe press her pointer finger to the screen to open the door, take out a reusable cup, fill it with water, and grab a protein bar. In the outside world, people might've thought they were sisters because of their matching deep brown complexions, short tight curls, and high foreheads, though Zoe tried to camouflage her big forehead with a curly fro bang in the front.

"It'll wear off in 15 minutes. We thought you were going to collapse in there." Zoe handed Jada the protein bar and water.

They'd never given her a sedative before. Probably because she didn't let herself delve too deep, get too dark here. She always backed away from scary memories when they bubbled up. Now, she had no choice.

"There's one more thing you need to know about the next few days."



“What?” Jada groaned as Zoe took her arm and led her to the dorms.

“No memory bank usage.”

“Wait, what? No. That’s not fair.” She stopped abruptly but had to lean on Zoe to steady herself.

“We need you to access the memories you don’t want to remember. Your reliance on the memory bank is a crutch, it’s holding you back.”

Leaders were allowed unlimited playback of three memories. Good memories to play whenever they were homesick, sad, or just because. Most of the Leaders didn’t come from money and couldn’t access such a luxury item outside of The Center’s walls. The memory Jada played most was when her mom entrusted her with the secret family recipe for coconut cake. She loved re-watching how her mother talked about the secret ingredients in a hushed voice, how she gazed like an adoring pastry show competition judge as Jada prepared the cake on her own for the first time, scraping the Mexican vanilla beans, dumping in three teaspoons of the rum her parents had shipped from family in Barbados. Her mom took the teaspoon from Jada, took another spoon out of the drawer, and poured rum into them. She handed one to Jada and told her, “Always pour an extra as a tip to the baker.” They tapped their spoons and drank. It was her first sip of alcohol. The other two memories were of the Christmas she and her sisters put on a variety show for their parents, who applauded for minutes and asked for an encore of their three-act musical, “The Three Wise Women,” and the moment in Brandon’s basement apartment when they first said “I love you” to each other over pizza and beer. Even though they weren’t together

anymore, she loved seeing herself in that first love glow. Jada played one of the memories on the MiTV in her room at least twice a week, sometimes more.

They walked through the doors to the dorms, Jada's room was five doors down from the entrance.

“Ok, here you are. The sedative wears off soon. Go rest and then have that snack. You have a visitor in two hours. Listen, you wouldn't be here if not for your amazing potential. We think, and I'm not exaggerating when I say this, you could help change the world. You already have, but we think you have it in you to do so much more. Just try.”

Jada plopped on her bed facedown. She felt like a seven-year-old sent to her room to think about what she had done. Though Zoe had been upbeat and encouraging, Jada was scared. She would try her best to get this assignment right because she couldn't let herself get kicked out and sent to a traditional prison. She'd disappoint her family and everyone who fought for her to be at The Center. She set a timer for 15 minutes. By the time the buzzer went off, she knew who she'd tell her story to.

*Audio Transcript*

*Leader Morris, Jada*

*10.16.2040*

[Throat clearing.]

Uh, hi, this is Jada Morris, and I'm reporting live... from my room. No, wait, that's ridiculous. Maybe they can cut this out later. Let's try this again. Hello, it's Jada

Morris or Leader Jada as people sometimes call me here. I don't know exactly how to start this but I'm here in my room at The Center. Oh, you probably don't know what The Center is. The official name is The Center for Future Leaders, but we just call it The Center. It's this kind of new place to rehabilitate young, troubled POCx so we can become good citizens and community leaders or something like that. So, there are no white girls here, at least no white Leaders. Just a few white therapists and staff, but that's it. We get to start or finish our college degrees, learn cool things like archery, herbal medicine, human psychology, and martial arts, and we get therapy, a lot of therapy. I've been here 13 months, but The Center has been open for almost two years. A lot of Leaders came in phases staggered throughout the first year, like my roommate Camila got here a few months before me, but we're both considered first cohort.

Anyway, it's 10:32 in the morning, and Camila is doing her shift at the med center, so I could record myself for hours if I wanted to. What else? Let's see. I'm sitting at the end of my bed wrapped in a t-shirt quilt my sisters made so I'd have a piece of them to hold when I'm missing them. There's a window next to my bed. I love sitting here and staring at the tree outside. Right now, the wind is blowing leaves off the branches. There are all these leaves floating in the air, shades of orange, yellow, brown. When I first got here, I thought they put me in this room for the view. Because they knew my mom's ashes were buried at the tree memorial in Prospect Park and I couldn't visit anymore. But then Camila told me the view outside was manufactured, something they put on loop because our actual view on this side of

The Center is of other buildings. They change the view with the seasons; sometimes it's snowing outside, but my Dad will visit and tell me there's no snow. I felt duped at first, but Camila asked if I'd rather stare out at depressing dreary bricks or have a view of the sky and a beautiful tree that makes me think of my mom. She was right. And now whenever I want to talk to my mom, I talk to that fake tree.

[Wrapper crinkling. Chewing.]

Am I stalling? I don't know. You're probably wondering why I chose you to talk to. Shit, I'm wondering why myself. What the fuck, Jada? Maybe it's the shock of Ayana with your face. Maybe it's because I want to stay here, and I know confronting you, well, not confronting, that's not the right word. But, uh, opening up to you to share my side of the story would probably be major progress to Ayana and Zoe. I figure if I'm going to do this, I need to talk to you, the person who's the reason I'm here. I mean, I'm the reason I'm here, I know. That's not me blaming you, I'm sorry. What I did is the reason I'm at The Center. And let me tell you, your family hates that I'm here. Your husband did interview after interview fighting the decision. I'm sure he wants me in a dungeon at the center of the Earth, and I get it. But thankfully I had public sympathy plus the President on my side so, here I am. I'm lucky to be here. I still don't know if I deserve to be here, but I want to stay. Like, I don't even want to think about the alternative if I get kicked out.

Honestly, I try not to think about you. I'll have to fight against my usual ritual when you pop into my head. I squeeze my eyes tight and imagine those thoughts are

weeds in the Peace Atrium. I pluck the weeds, one by one, out of my head. And when that doesn't work, I distract myself with scenes from my memory bank, but I can't do that now.

I've gotten used to hiding you. Old me would find it hard to believe I don't want to think about you because, for a time, you were always on my mind. I wonder if you're a LegaSee now. You know, they're the only AI allowed to look fully human since they're representing dead loved ones. Your family has a lot of money, so I bet you're out there, well, not you you, but a version of you, with your voice, characteristics, and some of your memories so Lily can get to know her mom. Sometimes I wish my mom had been cool with LegaSee, but she preferred her AI to be digital voice assistants or lint-cleaning vacuums, not humanoids. Maybe I wouldn't be here if I had an AI version of Mom to talk to instead of a fucking tree. The truth is, whether robot or tree, neither is the same as having your flesh-and-blood mom with you, but I hope Lily has a version of her mother to hold her, laugh with her, to love her.

I guess a good place for me to start would be when I first saw you on the news. The station hid your identity, your face tiny brown, black, and gray boxes. Your voice staccato, like an old robot. You were already talking when we tuned in. I lost count of how many times I re-watched it, but I memorized every word of your interview. *"I didn't know they were stealing from these young girls. I would've never signed up if I had known. They told us these uterus were donated from women who didn't want children, women who wanted to help families, be part of history."*

We were at our HQ in Brooklyn. It was this place that did self-defense classes and anti-violence workshops for girls, women, and anyone from the LGBTQI community. Crystal worked as the office assistant during the day, and she'd gotten them to give us the space for free after hours. There were 12 of us there. Damn, I really miss my SUs. Some call or visit me, but a lot of them are still angry with me. We'd been having an emergency strategy meeting because two days before, a Black woman stabbed a random white woman on the sidewalk in Queens. She yelled, "This is for the SUs" and then boom, knifed the woman in the pelvis. The woman was going to make a full recovery, but we needed to get on top of the news. Officially, we didn't condone acts of violence. Secretly, some of us wished we could carry out a little vigilante justice of our own. People already called us a gang, but we called ourselves a movement. Someone on social came up with the moniker SU, and we went with it. It stood for stolen uterus and we thought Sue sounded safe and all-American for a group of brown girls out for justice...and maybe a little blood.

So, back in the dojo, we were deep in brainstorming mode. Sitting on the scuffed hardwood floors, shoes off. Crossed legs, scribbling notes, pecking away at our devices. Zhene and I were with our team working on talking points. We wanted to reiterate specific parts of our manifesto. You know, Black and brown women, people have authority over our bodies and have the right to be pregnant and birth children; we demand the return of our uteruses; we demand retribution for POCx subjected to medical experiments and forced sterilization. Zhene said we should share stats from our pilot escort program.

You probably heard about it. We had SU and SU allies go with pregnant POCx to their doctor's appointments, work, even their births as an extra layer of protection.

On the other side of the dojo, my friend Mia led a team working to get people with similar experiences to join forces with us. The group from Texas whose clinic gynecologist gave them abortion pills without their consent. The women from a homeless shelter in Chicago who were given warm beds and medical care for a year after they unknowingly agreed to have their tubes tied. They were all POCx like us, why didn't this shit happen to white women? I knew the world was fucked up, but I guess I never knew how fucked up it could be until after becoming a SU.

Our devices started vibrating and dinging. We got the same message from Shelisa, "Turn to NewsToday live stream now! Woman says she has a uterus from a SU." She couldn't get out of work for the meeting. She'd been bartending at a sports bar when a video teaser played.

We watched your interview, and we watched each other react to your interview. We held our breaths as your voice echoed through the room on a slight delay. The interviewer asked if you knew any of the other women who received a stolen uterus, and you said *I know some of them, yes. But I thought it was because we had money, we waited to have kids, built careers, met our husbands late, and now we were—*

Do you remember what happened next? It's a sound I can't forget. It's the one thing about this I can't block out. I have recurring nightmares with a tinny robotic cry haunting me. In some of the nightmares, the cry comes from my little sister Ameera's doll, the kind that cries

until you check its diaper, rock it, or stick a bottle of fake milk in its mouth. But the cry during the interview wasn't a doll. The station only pixelated your face and shoulders, so we watched as hands passed you a baby with a head of tan and brown boxes.

We moved closer to our screens. We leaned into each other, held onto one another. I swore I heard our breaths and our heartbeats. Mia whispered, "Why the fuck did they disguise the baby's voice?"

The interviewer asked you to introduce the viewers to your baby. *This is BLEEP. She was born six months ago. She's my little miracle. I wish I could thank the young woman who helped make this possible and tell her I'm sorry, tell her I didn't know, help her somehow. I thought I was helping, that I was part of something good, a trade with women who wanted to be childfree who were helping those of us who had tried and failed at all the options to have biological children.*

Fuck, it was like we found out someone died. I get that you probably did the interview to explain another side of the story. But your coming forward didn't make us feel better about what happened to us. We held our breaths so long waiting for justice that when we came up for air, it was cries and screams. You had a baby, and we were probably never going to get the chance to have babies of our own because you and the Eugenia moms and some racist assholes stole our uteruses. I wish you could've been at the dojo that night. We were crying snot tears and cursing, but one thing that sticks out for me was how Tara reacted. She was our stoic. When she saw your baby on the screen, she wailed. We tried to comfort her, but she pushed us away and walked back and



forth in her socks, shaking her fists and punching the air. Through her sobs, she said, “We gotta find that bitch. We have to find all them bitches. This ain’t right.”

Her reaction might seem harsh to you. Maybe you think our anger was misplaced. But, nah, we had a right to be angry. We’d had almost a year of silence on the case from the FBI, and then we found out through the news that while we’ve been organizing, you’d been growing a baby inside one of our uteruses. We hadn’t heard anything from the FBI since those two nurses were caught, but the people at the top, the masterminds of Eugenia? Nowhere to be found. Where the hell were they? Why couldn’t the FBI find them? You were all we had. And your baby meant the possibility of more babies. By then, everyone knew the goal of Eugenia was to pump out more white babies and prevent Black and brown babies from being conceived. Some bullshit about stopping the browning of America. But until that day, we didn’t know there were babies.

I tried to play it level-headed. I told the SUs, yeah, the news was shocking, but if we could find you ourselves, maybe you’d lead us to the rest of the women with our uteruses. Maybe even lead us to the people behind Eugenia. I said we had to find you together, no going rogue. Back in my apartment later, I kept replaying your interview. After the tenth time watching, a thought popped into my head: What if you were the person with my uterus? By the twentieth time, I was convinced. I texted Zhene and told her to find you. She studied IT crimes and could pretty much hack anything. I told her to tell me first if she found something because I didn’t

want a SU going the way of vigilante justice before we got answers.

[Laughs.]

It's funny in a bad way now. But I also promised myself if we found you, I'd tell you the story of how the FBI told me my uterus was stolen. I'd tell you our stories, and you'd lead us—

[Buzzer.]

[*End transcript.*]

A square opened toward the top of the door, displaying Zoe's face. Why was she always smiling?

"Come in," Jada said. "Has it been two hours already?" Zoe stood at the doorway waiting for her to step into her sneakers.

"Yep, how're you feeling?"

"Not weird anymore. So, where are we going? Who's my visitor?" They walked out of the room and down the hall.

"It's a surprise." Zoe playfully bumped shoulders with her. She always made a point to touch Jada with a hand pat, a tap on the knee, a slight bump. "Someone to inspire your work over the next couple of days."

Jada groaned. She didn't have the patience for a motivational speaker right now. The Center always brought in inspirational people who were supposed to serve as role models, examples of the type of work Leaders could do in the future. Usually the speakers were people, never men, who had overcome trauma. The last one they brought

in was a refugee from Florida who lost her family when their city went partially underwater. Now, she headed up climate change work for the President with a focus on supporting POCx and low-income communities. That speaker was great, they always were, but inspiration was not what Jada needed or wanted.

They stopped outside the entrance to the Peace Atrium. It spanned three floors of The Center, and each level had its own access. If a drone flew above the building, photos would show the Atrium as a cylinder carved into The Center of the square building. Inside, the atrium was both forest and urban garden, greenery covering almost every surface, trees reaching to the top of the glass roof, though the stone brick exterior walls of the building were still visible. Leaders managed the care of the Atrium. They were taught by staff how to plant and harvest vegetables for the cafe and herbs for the med center's tinctures and treatments. The first time Jada came to the Atrium she imagined herself a fairy, but soon learned she didn't have the magical touch to work there after she mistakenly killed the kava plant by setting its temperature shield too low. During their first few months at The Center, Leaders rotated jobs until they found the right fit. Working with books ended up being her thing, but she visited the Atrium as often as possible to get lost in the realness of nature, not the simulated kind.

Zoe pointed at the doors. Jada's father sat on a bench inside, next to the walkway. She ran through the doors to him. "Dad! You're not supposed to come until Friday," she said as he drew her into a bear hug. He always held her as if he wouldn't see her the next week. He visited every Friday. Ameera came with him sometimes, though

she preferred to visit on different days than her father for one-on-one sister time. Her other sister Cora was a junior at Beverley College upstate, so they often spoke by video. When she first got to The Center, her friends and family took advantage of the lax visitation schedule, and she had one or two in-person visitors a week, even more through phone and video. But the visits from friends and other family members trickled to almost nothing once the novelty of her being at The Center wore off. Her dad and sisters were her constants.

She whispered into his ear, “They told on me and got me in trouble with my daddy.”

His belly lifted Jada up and down as he laughed.

“You’re not in trouble, Jaybird. Not with me.” He let go of her and said, “Let’s walk and talk.” They headed up the walkway ramp toward the top of the Atrium.

“Now, they did call me to say they’re going to give you a little push.”

The walkway ramp was wide enough for two people. It was smooth though it gave the illusion of being rough and uneven because of the cobblestones beneath the clear surface. The walkway curved slightly as it sloped up. On each side, plant life sprouted, soil with a rainbow of wildflowers, lush and leafy bushes, and the trees bent toward each other at the top. Their favorite spot was at the top of the walkway. Leaders could have one bi-monthly visit in the Peace Atrium, while regular visits were in the standard visiting rooms.

“It’s hard to talk about everything. I wish they could just erase it from my head instead.”

When he turned toward her, she noticed a few new gray hairs in his eyebrows. “You look so much more like

your mother with this haircut,” he said. She had shaved her head a few months ago because she was tired of being the Jada with cornrows everyone knew from paparazzi photos. Her hair had grown into a short coily fro, the way her mother used to wear hers. He rubbed his hand across the back of her head.

“Jaybird, you’re like me. I don’t think you realize how much so. I know I wasn’t the best dad after mom died. I didn’t know how to be myself without her. I was—”

“Dad—”

“No, I was a useless blob in the shape of your dad, and I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself. You girls had already lost your mom, and you kind of lost your dad, too. I think it...damaged you girls.”

Jada had heard multiple versions of this speech before. He was right, he’d checked out completely after her mother died. He went to work and brought in money, but he wasn’t present. She was mostly on her own in raising her sisters. But she knew his pain and didn’t hold it against him. Mom was the star of the family, and they’d all been lost without her.

As they walked, Jada stretched her arm toward the bushes, enjoying the fuzzy dampness of the leaves as they swept her hands, listening to the mingling sounds of her father’s mellow voice, the Atrium birds, and the waterfall feature. Her dad took off his jacket as they got closer to the glass roof. They sat on one of the sandbox benches and took off their shoes and socks and dug their feet into the warm sand. She lifted her face toward the sun. With the heat on her forehead and the sand in her toes, she almost felt free.