

PERIL



"They say these evenings open up like parachutes
and each night someone is saved: by string,
white silk filling with air, snagging on the sky."

-- from the poem "Parachute"

-- OCTOBER --

"Please excuse my daughter from school. She does not feel well. She may never feel well again."



JADA

1. I COME UNARMED

My name is Jada Upshaw.

I started out as a girl without dreams and grew up to be a woman without a future.

Mind you, it's not a story I'm especially proud to tell, but if I'm at a party and someone asks me what my story is, that's what I tell them. It's a conversation stopper all right, but whatcha gonna do?

In my teenage years, I was diagnosed with a rare condition called *desina sperara* which means I was "born without the breath of hope." (If you say *desina sperara* quickly, you can see where the word *desperate* comes from.) My condition has something to do with a breakdown in the brain's reward system. My shrink says I have to work harder to process and

pursue rewarding experiences, but basically, it means my pleasure center is totally shot and the act of hoping is just not in my bag of tricks.

Despite my impairment, I managed to get a degree in graphic design (I liked the idea of making the world look more beautiful than it really is) and for a decade I held a job at a bank doing mind-numbing print ads about IRAs and ATMs. I'd still be there if it wasn't for my catastrophic hope breakdown which led experts to say, "Put this woman on disability! Pronto!"

For those of you still listening, my name is pronounced JAY-duh -- as in jaded, as in been there /done that/won't be doing it again anytime soon. Today is the kind of dreary fall morning that Chicago can be so famous for -- dark and foreboding with 78% chance of rain. I'm sitting near the windows at Rendezvous Cafe nursing my Plain Jane latte, spending money I don't have. Though I'm surrounded by an army of laptops, I come unarmed and in peace, unless you count the two precious children, Angie and Willis, by my side as weapons as I sometimes do. They're my sister's kids and she conned me into taking them out in public by paying me three times my normal babysitting fee. I think she got the better end of the deal.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the kids have decided to sit down at a table with a complete stranger. Lovely. I feel the need to save the man. I walk over to his table. "Uh, guys, seriously. You can't

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just plop yourselves down at this nice man's table without asking."

The man seems more amused than annoyed. "I don't mind. Cute kids," he says and proceeds to type on his Mac.

"Yeah, they're not mine," I say and smile. I yank them gently back to my table and order mocha iced lattes to keep them occupied.

From time to time the man steals a glance at me. I guess I look all right for a forty-something woman. I have long straightened hair (thanks to a Spoil Me Salon gift certificate) and pleasant enough features. Picture Mary Tyler Moore if she were African-American and you're getting warm, though I'm not likely to throw my hat up into the air no matter how, uh, you know, uh, what's the word, *exuberant* I may feel. (If you're too young to remember Mary Tyler Moore, google her. She's an important part of our collective TV history.) I don't think I've ever been accused of being exuberant, but I can flash a smile on the outside even when I'm feeling nothing on the inside. Still, at a party, I'd be easy to overlook. You might look at me and say, "Now here's a woman with no story to tell," but you'd be wrong. My deep brown eyes see everything. There's no hiding from eyes like these.

My goal today is to enjoy my coffee on this cool fall day, write two pages in my journal, and keep the kids from trashing the place. I open my spiral notebook and pull out a pen. I stare at the blank

white page but nothing comes. Suddenly, I feel I'm being watched.

"You know what your problem is, Aunt Jada?" says Angie. "You don't have any self steam. My teacher is teaching us to build up our self steam." Willis nods supportively.

I smile at them. "Self steam, huh? Maybe I need to go back to school and get some of that myself." I know she meant to say self-esteem but why correct her? Every person needs a healthy dose of self steam to get their engine running.

Eventually the kids start to slow down. Willis and Angie are quietly drawing pictures on their paper placemats and that's just fine with me. My eyes wander over to a huge poster that fascinates me. It is of the Sutro Baths in San Francisco, a huge steel and glass structure from the turn of the century that was considered quite ground-breaking for its day. Large steel and glass structures, especially of this size, had not been built before. They called the structure a naturarium and the water source was actually the Pacific Ocean. Somehow the indoor water pool was connected to the ocean so folks were swimming in real saltwater.

I study the bathers, men and women, in their modest bathing suits. I wonder if I would have been happier in that era. At the Sutro Baths, if a person no longer wanted to swim, no longer wanted to be a part of this world -- all they had to do was stop paddling, stop fighting, and just let the water take them. They would sink like a stone to the bottom

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and never be heard from again. Their bodies would pass through a membrane and float out to sea.

Last night when I was getting ready for bed I saw a story on CNN that caught my attention. There's a scientist -- an Asian guy, some mad scientist type with a pocket protector -- working on a new technique for increasing the amount of hope in hopeless people. To him, I say *Good luck with that, sir. But don't expect me to hold my breath for a miracle.* It takes a while for a new procedure to get the FDA seal of approval.

By then, I'll be dead. I plan to have checked out of the Hotel of Life. If things go according to plan, I should be history before the start of the new year...just three months away. One-third the time it takes to make a baby. Three small pages torn from a wall calendar, and then it's adios.

“Those who start life hopeless rarely acquire it later on. Those who are hopeful in their early years can sometimes lose hope. Can hopefulness be acquired? Can it be conjured or created? Some scientists think so.”

-- AlternaScience Magazine



LUKE

2. BOOMERANG

My name is Luke Nagano.

I came into this world as a boy with a big heart but no idea where to put it.

In kindergarten during nap time we spread our blankets on the cold linoleum floor. Donna, a blond girl with short bangs, kept staring at me as we napped. Finally, she smiled at me and said, "Aren't you gonna talk? You got to talk sometime." I pretended to be sleeping, but I heard her loud and clear. In order for me to speak, however, I had to have the corresponding hope that I had something interesting to say.

I didn't know it then but I was in for a life of mild hope impairment that would limit me in ways I couldn't predict. I did, in fact, start talking. I dove deep down into myself and metamorphosed into a

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respectable ambivert... almost through sheer brute force. It took years for me to learn how to throw my voice out into the world and wait for it to come boomeranging back to me.