

Tales of a Just Transition: Nia & Lifelong Learning

Decades ago, the American people woke up to the reality of the climate crisis and decided to build a future worth living. Soon enough, we reached net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by restructuring our economy to work for people: we established access to clean, safe housing and quality healthcare as human rights; we guaranteed good-paying, low-carbon jobs to all who wanted them; we secured lifelong access to education for all people who wanted it, and so much more. Today, life after the Just Transition looks different, but similar too. This holds true in Zion, a community in a familiar American city, and Zion's New University, or "the New" as Zion's residents call it. Let's take a closer look at Zion and the New in 2054.

Nia

For as long as Nia Greene's 19-year old memory informed her, she had always loved learning. The excitement of it. The intrigue. Perhaps that's why she wanted to be a past-bearer. You can learn a lot by hearing the stories of Zion, which is where she lived, then bearing them for the generations around you. Plus, Nia loved listening to people tell stories. So, Nia aspired to be a past-bearer. This made her mom proud. "*Lifelong Learning*," mom would beam to Nia at the breakfast table. Mom said that a lot. Nia didn't know precisely what "*Lifelong Learning*" meant. If a stranger asked her to explain "*Lifelong Learning*" to them, she would mention the social movement from the 2030s in which her neighbor, Mr. Mitchell,

participated. Mom said that was super important. Nia would also say something like “*Lifelong Learning* means you’re a student of life, whether that’s in school or outside of it,” but she would need a moment to find those words. “*Lifelong Learning*” was just learning to Nia. Explaining lifelong learning was like a fish explaining water.

Nia understood that her views on education were different from her parents. They told her as much all the time. “It was a different world before your time,” they would say. Nia understood this. Well, Nia understood that a difference existed; Nia did not fully understand the difference. But she wanted to. This was why, at 19 years old, after she had enrolled in the Institute for Bearers of the Past at New University and received her first course’s syllabus explaining their central project — to bear a history in their community — Nia knew exactly what her project would be. Nia would create a documentary on Lifelong Learning in Zion. For weeks, she mulled over her project.

Then, Hurricane Pilar swept through Zion.

Then came Nia’s first day of class.

Monday, September 14th, 2054

Morning

9:14 AM

Nia was awake. She’d been awake for a few minutes but remained lying in her bed, giddily imagining which patches she’d pin to her bough bag and the day to come. Today, Nia

would share her vision. Today, she'd grow resilience. After a few moments, she opened her eyes and jumped out of bed, her shoulder-length braids jumping with her.

A yawn blossomed from Nia's chest as she grabbed her plants' watering can on the other side of her autumn-colored bedroom, passing her hanging bough bag on the way. The faucet ran fast. The block's rooftop water collection system must have been full from Hurricane Pilar, the last drops of which had settled while Nia and her parents dreamt. A drizzle for Jeanine. A splash for Haneef. A dousing for Iris. She borrowed a pair of clothes from her room's drying rack and scurried downstairs with a smile.

Mr. Greene was cooking bacon over the electric stovetop and Mrs. Greene sat at the living room table. They only got bacon on special occasions because Nia's dad got it from an old friend's family farm outside the city. Today was a special occasion. They ate their bacon with kale from the block's rooftop garden and fried eggplant from Zion's daily farmers' market.

Mrs. Greene soon left for the hospital, where she worked as a doctor, but not before planting a kiss on Nia's forehead. She never left without kissing Nia goodbye. Mr. Greene remained at the table, though, stroking the dark wood in front of him. He had first found the wood in the form of a hurricane-felled tree marked for decomposition at Zion's compost center, where he worked. Even all those years ago, Mr. Greene recognized pristine wood. He quickly pulled the tree aside and passed it along to their neighbor Steve, who loved woodworking, as everyone knew. The tree was just as much a gift to Steve as the table he crafted from it was a gift to the Greens. And both the Greens and Steve's reuse was a gift to the tree for extending its life. Nia saw her dad smile as his fingers ran along Steve's rowhome carvings of Zion at the edges of the table. Nia remembered a time, long ago, when her dad rushed so busily to work.

No more. His shift at the compost center had been scaled down since the federal government moved the social work week from 23 to 22 hours. The change had been sparked by the annual Social Budget of Labor Report, which determined that recent technological advancements allowed workers to be more productive in less time. Her dad usually spent the extra hour—which had not come at the cost of reduced pay or benefits—enjoying the sunlight on the rooftop garden. Today, though, he just ran his fingers along the table. Nia left him to it with a hug and a goodbye.

Returning to her tawny bedroom, Nia unhooked her bough bag from its wall-hanger. She was proud of her bough bag. Its hardy, brown hemp fabric had endured hundreds of journeys now with hardly any scars to show for it. Nia made sure of it. She carried her bough bag alertly during the day and checked for scars at night. Not a scratch yet. The same went for her bag's single sewed patch: a camera filming a cage, meant to memorialize her highschool documentary on the punitive, so-called 'justice' practices in Zion before the Crisis Response Team. Her next would be another memorial patch, this time from the Response Team for the year she spent working with them. But they were still sewing it. The rest of her bough bag's hemp skin was covered in patches Nia pinned herself. Today, excitement ran through her. Her bag beamed that excitement back. She pinned on a seashell, a hyacinth, and a lily. After packing the bag, Nia revisited the morning glint along the green of Haneef and Iris one last time, and headed out.

The block was full of broken maple twigs and leaves shaken from their stems by Pilar. Her neighbor, Ms. Martina, and the labor office's sanitation workers were outside sweeping off

the stoops and shoveling the debris, the usual response following severe storms. The Mitchells' house was spotless, per usual; Mr. Mitchell always made sure of it.

Nia strode along the swept areas of the road, walking through the Blockson street mural that Zion's Labor Office¹ had commissioned years ago. After phase 3 of the city's transit plan ended in 2036, most cars became obsolete except for travel outside of the city. By that point, Zion's residents were all a 3-minute walk from a free bus or subway ride. Street traffic slowed, to the point that streets weren't really streets anymore. Folks on Blockson Street figured they might as well get creative with what the streets had become. The street mural, an only slightly larger than life portrait of Zion Ellis himself standing at that now infamous podium, filled the whole of Blockson Street, the sunrise at his back. Nia made sure not to step on his face. Everyone from Zion did the same when they strolled down Blockson Street.

The bus ride to New University was lightning quick, but Nia liked walking. Plus, it was a relatively short walk. Just 13 minutes on a good day, and it was a good day. Nia figured she'd stroll by Ashton Street to visit Rochelle, who would be on the street finishing a mural anyways. Nia adjusted her bough bag around her shoulder and turned onto Ashton.

She stopped in her tracks.

A willow tree lay in the street, no doubt downed by Hurricane Pilar, but it wasn't just any tree. It was Zion Ellis's Willow Tree. People from all over Zion had come to pay their respects to

¹ The Labor Office employs and trains any residents of Zion in search of a good-paying job, regardless of prior experience. Residents simply visit the Office to inquire about public job openings and are put to work in Zion or in nearby communities. Community members convene with labor officials annually to plan and design local projects, meeting regularly to check in on progress. Through the Office, recent high school graduates tend to the trees of the neighborhood and pluck the ripened tomatoes and other produce of the various community gardens. In the event of a crisis, namely natural tragedies, the Labor Office in Zion mobilizes all of its workers, from the building's maintenance workers to the local gardeners on payroll, for clean-up after such tragedies. It's all hands on deck when a storm rolls through.

the downed Willow. Several of them solemnly shook their heads. Some cried. As she walked by the tree, Nia heard many people laughing as they recalled memories of that wide-eyed little Zion Ellis kid, planting his trees, and that viral video of him, playing with his seedling Willow. That was before the world knew his name, they reminisced. Such joy. A few little kids ran around stomping the twigs of the street, to the subtle frustration of the sanitation workers attempting to clean them. Nia found Rochelle at the edge of the scene, consumed in a painting project. Only, it wasn't their mural.

“Rochelle?”

They turned their head, “Oh what's up, Nia?”

“Just headed off to the New, you know. Didn't realize Pilar knocked over Zion's Willow,”

Nia said with downcast eyes.

“Really?” Rochelle said as they pulled a purple paint from their silk bough bag. “It was all over my feed when I got up. That's all my parents were talking about this morning.”

“You know the Greenes,” Nia said with a shrug and a witty smile. “Breakfasts are no feed zones. Is that new?” Nia said as she gestured to the painting.

“What? This?”

“No, the other wall you're painting.”

“Well, there is actually another wall I'm painting, you know.”

“Yeah, and that's the Daniels and Ritners house so...”

Nia waited another moment. Rochelle gave her nothing, but Nia didn't need much. The half-finished painting had already consumed her. She could see why Rochelle was so drawn to it.

Flowing waves of light blue, looping through one another, and spinning around the unfilled sketch of a femme figure. It looked familiar.

“Is that a hurricane?”

“Yup.”

Nia took another moment to analyze the artwork.

“Huh, that’s Time again, too, isn’t it?”

Rochelle replied with a grin, “you know me too well.”

Rochelle had frequented the topic lately, ever since their father, or Mr. Mitchell as Zion’s youth knew him, had let slip just a month ago that his future had changed when Rochelle was born. Since then, Rochelle had toyed around the concept of time without rest. Rochelle was both parts fascinated and frustrated by some of the older folks’ views on it, on time as such a busy, linear thing. Rochelle saw it as more of a circle. A hurricane. Nia had sat in on enough of the 18-year-old’s existential rambles to know that much, but not enough to fully understand it. Rochelle’s words always fell short of their paintings, according to Rochelle. Besides, Rochelle’s fingers spasmed on a day without brushing their paints.

“That’s dope,” said Nia, the painting had taken on a new, even more mesmerizing tone. The two looked at it for a moment; Rochelle, running brush strokes over it; Nia, leaning on her hip and mentally picking it apart. Then Nia turned to Rochelle.

“Were you able to talk to your dad last night?” Nia asked.

Rochelle kept painting.

“Ummm, I didn’t get the chance to tell him,” Rochelle said.

“You didn’t get the chance?” Nia asked.

“Yeah... he was pretty busy with everything last night,” Rochelle said.

Another brush stroke.

“Oh like with the storm and all?”

“Yeah, yeah, with the storm and all...”

Rochelle’s brush stroke wavered.

“... and with the Network’s meeting this afternoon, too. That was just where his mind was at. I could tell. It just wasn’t the right time, you know.”

Right. Nia remembered that the Network, well, technically “the Crisis Response Network” (CRN)² but everyone just called it *The Network*, would have another emergency meeting this afternoon to coordinate tragedy response from Pilar. Mr. Mitchell was always a steady presence at those kinds of meetings.

“That makes sense,” Nia said, smiling another one of her smiles, but this time gentler. She gazed past Rochelle’s shoulder and to the cracked Willow trunk that filled the street, watching the dimpled cheeks of a child rise in glee as he swung on one of its branches; the mist, rising from the wet street under the sun.

“I’ve been there before... I get it,” Nia said. “When do you think you’ll tell him?”

“I’m not sure.”

“But you do still want to go to New Orleans, right?” Nia asked.

² The CRN is a citywide network of community-based institutions (community gardens, health clinics, recreation centers, libraries, schools, co-ops, universities, labor offices, and more) all collaborating with each other to prepare for and respond to tragedies and crises. The power of the Network’s strength, though, comes from the City’s residents. Built from mutual aid networks established in the darker days of the transition when our governments still cowered at the sight of the fossil fuel industry, the Network steadily grew as more people took to the streets. As the City government’s policy makers built out their resilience networks, they turned to the structures already in place and attempted to institutionalize them. Resources provided through the Network today, include shelter, heat/cooling, electricity, food, water, medicine, and communication services.

“Yup.”

“The enrollment deadline’s next week, Rochelle.”

“The enrollment deadline’s next week!?” Rochelle said. “Oh goodness! I had no idea!

Glad to know you’ve got my back, Nia.”

Nia laughed. “Don’t play me like that. You know I’m just looking out for you.”

“Yeah, I know,” Rochelle replied.

“So you’ll talk to him soon then?”

“Yep.”

Nia smiled.

“Art school doesn’t stand a chance,” said Nia.

Rochelle continued painting. Nothing more. They didn’t enjoy dwelling on disappointing their father to leave Zion and go to art school. To be fair, they didn’t enjoy dwelling on most things outside of their comfort zone, or thinking or talking about such things at all, really, except sparingly. Nia was just the opposite. She reveled in talking through things that made her uncomfortable.

“You’re still good to come over tonight, right?” Nia asked, changing the subject, knowing full well Rochelle would.

“Pfft! Is that even a question?”

“8 still works?”

“Most definitely.”

“Alright then, I gotta get to class, but see you later.”

“See ya.”

The two hugged shoulders and Nia was off. Beyond the fallen Willow. Past Zion's state-of-the-art health clinic³. Past the Hella Fresh grocery co-op that Nia's neighbor, Maya Winston, worked at and onto the New University campus. She'd enjoyed going to the New's campus for years. As a toddler, she played on the monkey bars of the university's government-funded daycare center. She scurried along the walkways filled with native trees and plant life as a pre-teen. For a time, she figured she'd always see the New through the eyes of her childhood self. But things were changing. Soon, she'd have two patches on her bough bag, and another patch from her Lifelong Learning project if all went according to plan.

Moving along those same walkways, Nia approached the steps of New University's Ivy Hall. The building was a remnant of a bygone era, retrofitted to survive the new era and grow resilience. Wild arteries of ivy sprawled along the building's concrete walls. Chiseled lines of concrete ivy carved by students filled the remainder of the once-brutalist walls. Nia entered the ivy Hall and, to her pleasant surprise, was greeted by Mr. Mitchell, Rochelle's father and a worker at the New.

"Hi Nia! How are you?"

The two exchanged niceties, but Nia had to be on her way. She still had to contribute to — and vote on — her class's honor code⁴ before her first course began. Soon, Nia and her hemp bough bag were waiting on the bench outside of her classroom, reviewing debates on her

³ Zion Ellis, and in fact every community, has a well-resourced, culturally appropriate health clinic. Residents regularly visit the clinic to receive vaccines, preliminary check-ups, preventative health programs and more, all free of charge and insured through the National Health System. The clinic includes well-trained, locally-employed civilian crisis-response teams that can de-escalate tense situations, provide rides to other social service locations, mediate conflicts, and help people through mental health and substance use emergencies.

⁴ Each new class of students at New University develops their own honor code to be voted on by all students after learning of the student-curated history of New University.

digital feed around different students' proposals for the code. This could take a while. Nia had heard stories of honor codes taking several months to reach critical consensus, and even more revisions. Most took shorter than that but, either way, so be it. Finishing her feedback did take a while. She submitted her contribution just as the previous class let out and right before noon. Nia entered the freshly emptied classroom with lifelong learning on her mind, along with several other students, as the clock struck noon.

Afternoon

12:00 PM

Some of Nia's new classmates were from Zion, like Nico, a high school student from around the corner. Some of them were visitors to Zion who introduced themselves to her. The volume of the room rose as old friends reconvened and new friends met, and was slowly joined by a steady snapping of fingers.

**snap*... *snap*... *snap*...*

Nia turned to the person next to her. She assumed this was the class's facilitator, as they were rather quietly snapping their fingers. They motioned to Nia to join, which she did. Then another student joined. And another. The facilitator gradually increased the speed as the class synchronized around the rhythm.

SNAP* *SNAP* *SNAP

Soon enough, the snapping had swept the classroom over, increasing and increasing, until the speed reached a fever pitch. Then, the snapping gradually slowed and quieted, until the facilitator stopped it altogether. The room was silent. The facilitator spoke.

“Hello. It’s a pleasure to see so many wonderful faces here. My name is Lobo Ortiz. I use they/them pronouns. I have been designated as facilitator for this space: Introduction to Bearers of the Past. Is anyone in the wrong place?” Students looked around the circle at each other. No one was out of place.

Upon Lobo’s request, the students granted Lobo permission to facilitate the class, who then led the group through background welcomings. Lobo explained the agenda, that they would first introduce themselves, then discuss the practice of past-bearing, set community agreements and conflict expectations, and, if time permitted, they would begin co-designing the class syllabus.

To Nia’s surprise, several students came to class out of sheer curiosity. Many came to be bearers of the past and grow resilience. Others came to pass the time. One student came to document their childhood friends’ returns to the neighborhood after the City’s decarceration program. Another wanted to break down their Irish ancestors’ process of “becoming white” in the 20th century. Even after everyone introduced themselves, the discussion continued. They connected over their shared experiences. They laughed. They even argued, all while Lobo listened attentively. Nia took note.

A few years ago, Nia had begun noticing students in her high school classes getting more comfortable conversing in classrooms, and her teachers growing more and more comfortable letting that be the case. She surmised that Lifelong Learning was at play, but was unsure how.

Once discussion died down, Lobo moved on to provide the group an overview of bearing as a practice:

“What we refer to as ‘bearing’ or ‘past-bearing’ today grew from the National [Community Arts Program](#) of the Green New Deal. The program more or less paid local artists to talk to their neighbors and craft visions for what a Just Transition could look like in their communities, but it quickly grew into something more. To understand why, we need to better understand the context of the era. The establishment of the arts program was accompanied by a series of other government programs meant to slow the climate crisis. Medicare for All, for instance, had just been passed and local health clinics established to start remedying environmental injustices and building a more healthy, resilient society, or ‘grow resilience,’ as we would say today. The jobs guarantee would soon be established to green the country’s infrastructure, although most labor offices were not yet locally-controlled.

“How does this relate to past-bearing? Power shifts as profound and unfamiliar as a Just Transition required mass public support. Many artists and community organizers, labels which often overlapped, understood this and so used art to inspire their communities to get organized or, in other words, to chart their own futures. However, charting futures requires us to have a comprehensive understanding of our past. Who are we? What has been done before? What can

we learn from it? Artists began asking these questions and using their answers to guide their art. Through this, the practice of past-bearing emerged to help communities chart their futures.

“Because of past-bearing’s roots in the National Community Arts Program, past-bearing often infuses creative expression with historical knowledge. Such expression changes by culture and person. Some cultures and persons embrace musical expression, others oral expression, others digital expression, others written expression, and more. No one bearing method is superior to another. As you all know, today many neighborhoods, towns, and cities across the country have bearers of the past, and many embrace different methods, often using mixed-methods.”

Nia had already embraced film. She knew it had advantages; She knew it had disadvantages, but she just loved making movies. She was pretty good at it too. In the discussion that followed, students shared their preferred bearing methods, discussed the first times they met with their communities’ bearers of the past, summarized the bearing that had been done in their neighborhoods, got into generative conflict over whose place it was to bear the past, and shared helpful accountability practices their communities used for their past-bearers. Nia was fascinated. Lobo made sure to ground the conversation in the understanding that histories live on within us—whether we realize them or not—despite the best efforts of White Supremacy and Capitalism to erase them.

The class then set community agreements as each person, including Lobo, shared what they needed from the group to feel safe, productive, and trusting. Nia made her usual contribution to the agreements — *“No one is disposable”* — and heard out other students’

proposed agreements. They finished their agreements earlier than Nia had expected. Lifelong Learning again, she thought. Still, they had to wrap up before they could co-design the syllabus. As the class let out, Nia approached Lobo.

“Excuse me, Lobo. It’s Nia again. I had a question about the central project. Is that alright?”

“Oh yes,” said Lobo. “It would have been nice to start co-designing today, but we’re in no rush. What’s your question?”

“Well, it’s not a question, really. It’s more like an idea. I read the course goals a few weeks back, and have been thinking about my central project. I want to make a documentary on lifelong learning in Zion. I’ve heard a lot about lifelong learning since I was a kid. I mean, it’s been hammered into all of us, you know. So I get it. Still, my parents always talk about how different the world was before lifelong learning, but I don’t really get why that’s the case. I know a lot of young people feel that way, too. Like, I feel like we don’t fully appreciate what we have now because we don’t know what came before. So I wanna learn more about it.”

Lobo rubbed their chin.

“Well, to be fair, we rarely give anything the appreciation that it’s fully due, although we’re coming around,” Lobo said as they scrunched their brow in contemplation. “This sounds like an intriguing project. And you plan to bear it through a documentary?”

“Yes,” said Nia.

“I see, I see. How familiar are you with the Lifelong Learning Movement in Zion?”

“Oh, well, I guess familiar enough? But not an expert, you know.”

“Excellent,” said Lobo. “And will this be the first history that you are bearing?”

“Yeah. I made some documentaries back in high school, and kept at it while I was working as a crisis responder after I graduated from high school, but I’ve never beared a history before.”

“Okay. As I’m sure you know, lifelong learning and the Lifelong Learning Movement are two deeply connected topics, although each deserves their own documenting, in truth. It’s also worth keeping in mind that the Lifelong Learning Movement was massive, particularly in Zion—well, it was technically called “Clarkesville” back then—and the New. Assuredly, this is a history worth bearing. And, a project of such scope would likely extend beyond our time together, which is alright. But I’m excited to see what you make of it,” Lobo said with a smile.

“Do you have a particular aspect of the Movement that you’d like to start with?”

“Ummm, I hadn’t thought about that yet,” said Nia.

“That’s okay. That’s what we are sharing time together to do. I have another question that may help you narrow your focus. Did you have anyone in mind to interview?”

“No, not yet. I haven’t put much thought to it.”

“That’s alright.”

“Well,” said Nia, “I guess it would be cool talking to young people and their parents about their views on education.”

“Interviewing different generations is an excellent idea! That’s how most bearers of the past collect histories.”

Nia’s eyes lit up. “Come to think of it, my mom always said one of my neighbors was pretty involved in the Movement. I could probably interview him, too,” Nia said, recalling the Mitchells’ spotless stoop.

“That’s wonderful! Much of movement history gets embedded into memories instead of digital archives. In fact, I was going to connect you with another worker here. He was instrumental in launching Lifelong Learning at New University. As a matter of fact, he was extremely influential on the Movement at large, particularly in its early stages.”

“Oh, amazing!” said Nia. “I’d love to speak with him too.”

“Excellent. I actually just saw him this morning, funny enough. He is a custodial worker here and facilitates courses on social movements as well. He’s still very involved in the union and the council of cooperators.” Wait, Nia thought. Were they thinking of the same person? “I also know he does community organizing work in Zion. Oh, wait, perhaps you know him.

Brendan Mitchell?”

The name rang in Nia’s ears.

“Oh, Mr. Mitchell? Like, the Mr. Mitchell that lives on Blockson Street?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” said Lobo.

“Mr. Mitchell? We literally live on the same street, I’ve known him my whole life. My mom always said he was involved, but I didn’t know he was so important to the Movement,” said Nia.

“Yes, that’s Brendan alright,” Lobo said with a nod. “If you already know each other, I’d ask him about his experience in the Movement sometime. He has stories upon stories to tell.”

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12:58 PM

Nia's first steps out of the class tingled, like an electric current excited her body, and a solar microgrid's worth of that energy came from wanting to speak with Mr. Mitchell. Nia made her way to the labor office for the Crisis Response Network's meeting like an electrical pulse, zapping by the student murals of the New. A culmination of numerous students' brilliant paints and visions, the student murals had slowly increased in number and scope since the days of the Green New Deal. Today, they radiated along the building walls of the New, the sidewalks, the streets, and more. No matter the location, Nia excited over the murals for their beauty as much as the history behind them, that urge to remake the world. They sheathed Nia like myellin; a daily reminder that life was worth living.

Nia arrived at the community garden next to the labor office just as the meeting was getting started. She set her bough bag over her lap. The office, a former police station rehabilitated during the Years of Upheaval by the residents of Zion—well, "Clarksville," as it was called back then—collaborated with the garden to use their space for outdoor meetings outside of winter. The garden-facing walls of the office had been carved during the retrofits of the 2040s, when local artists had circumvented the shortage of toxic-free paints with carvings. The smiling, sweating, joy-filled, resilient faces of Zion's children, adults, and elders looked down on the garden, surrounding three words that effectively formed the garden's backdrop:

LIFE LEADS LABOR

Nia took a seat. She counted nearly 80 other people filled into the garden, and spotted Mr. Mitchell on the far side of the space, but resolved to wait until the meeting's end to approach him. Maya Winston, Nia's duplex neighbor and a worker-cooperator at the Hella Fresh grocery co-op, led the meeting. After reading Zion's land and accountability acknowledgement, Maya led the community's regrounding ritual that always followed climate tragedy. The agenda was tight. Pilar had been one of the stronger hurricanes of the last five years.

Maya moved the meeting along. A fair number of families required emergency housing while their homes were repaired from water and wind damage. Over 20 families chose to move into the tempies, or temporary housing units, co-organized by the health clinic and the land trusts of Zion. But Zion only had 15 tempies. A handful of residents, mostly the excited children of families, chose to briefly move in with friends, neighbors, and family who had offered extra living space. Nia offered hers too. She remembered offering her room to Rochelle back in elementary school, too, like one big sleepover, while Mr. and Ms. Mitchell stayed in the tempies. She smiled thinking back to it. In the meantime, Maya and the land trusts requested additional housing aid from the state and federal government. Most of Pilar's damage, Maya said, would be repaired by the end of next week. Nia noted that it was longer than usual, but tolerable. Most else was in good shape. The storm guidance systems, from the rooftop water collection systems to Zion's dispersed garden beds, had held back any would-be major flooding. The food storage at the health clinic was stocked enough to weather any of Pilar's future disruptions in the food supply chain. Zion was bruised, but safe.

Maya turned the group's attention to a digital screen that began streaming a man. He was a representative from Francisville, a suburban community outside the City's jurisdiction,

formally requesting aid from Zion. Representing the newly formed Climate Resilience Office of Francisville, the representative explained that Pilar had been the straw that broke Francisville's back. The community's electricity generators, privatized during the Years of Upheaval, had suffered irreparable damage in the storm. A great deal of families were displaced and many thousands more needed assistance. Their electrical networks, removed from the Smart Grid in the 2030s amidst the then-government's push to disconnect wealthy communities from poor ones, were not equipped to receive aid. As a result, they were asking neighboring towns and the Network, which they had finally applied to join that morning, to house their needy; a long overdue attempt to grow resilience. This surprised Nia. They still needed extra housing? Did their neighbors not offer their homes, too? Maybe the stories she'd heard about Francisville actually were true.

In any case, Zion had no room in the tempies, but a few neighbors offered extra rooms in the interim. The office offered to send a team of electricians to rehabilitate the grid, but the representative politely refused. "Too many cooks in the kitchen," he said. The federal government had already sent a replacement team. Maya formally invited the representative and his neighbors to *Zion's Celebration of Life* this week, which always followed climate tragedies, where they would replant the fallen trees. The representative accepted with watering eyes. Maya reminded him to bring his neighbors. All were welcome. The meeting soon adjourned, but not until everyone joined in a closing song.

3:34 PM

After the meeting ended, Nia took her bough bag and searched the carved, naturally lit rooms of the labor office, but could not find Mr. Mitchell. She searched the arbors of the garden, but could not find him. Along the painted streets of Zion, no Mr. Mitchell could be found. Then, as Nia turned the corner onto Ashton Street, she found him.

Mr. Mitchell stood in his work uniform, among several other neighbors, by the fallen limbs of Zion Ellis's Willow Tree. Nia watched as he stretched out his hand to touch the bark through the tree's whining, draping leaves. He remained there for a long moment. Then, he returned his arm to his side. Maybe this wasn't the right time, Nia thought. Should she leave? Should she approach him? Before she could decide, Mr. Mitchell turned around.

"Nia?"

His face coalesced into a smile, gentler than usual.

"Hi Mr. Mitchell," said Nia.

His eyes were moist.

"You were in Lobo's class today, weren't you? How was your first day?"

"It went well. Actually, it was great. Did Lobo talk to you?"

"Yes, they called me afterwards. Something about a spectacular student, and a project on Lifelong Learning?" he said, his grin widening.

"Lobo already told you?"

"Surely. Me and Lobo go back. Funny enough, we organized together in the New near the tail end of the Learning Movement. Oh yeah," he said at the sight of Nia's surprised eyes, "don't let Lobo undersell themselves. We were in it together."

“Huh,” Nia said. “I wonder why they didn’t mention that.”

“Not really the type to talk themself up. Me neither, really. That wasn’t why we did it,” Mr. Mitchell said as he looked back to the Willow. “Did it for a lot of reasons, but that wasn’t one of them.” He looked back at Nia. “One reason we did it, though, and still do it, is so past-bearers can bear the history so consider me at your service.”

Nia nodded in surprise and reverence. “Oh, Mr. Mitchell, thank you. I really appreciate that, that’s so helpful.”

“Of course.”

The two stood there for a moment.

“So... what questions do you have?” asked Mr. Mitchell.

“Oh, is now a good time to talk about my project?”

“Well, the New’s still helping with relief work across Zion, but we’re mostly done with emergency response now that everyone’s in tempies, so I have a few minutes. You just tell me what I can do for you and I’ll make it happen.”

“Oh, yeah, okay,” Nia said. Somehow, she hadn’t expected to talk to Mr. Mitchell just yet. “Right, well, I probably need some more time to prepare, and definitely more time to get the recording materials.” Nia looked at the Willow tree pensively, then back to Mr. Mitchell. “In the meantime, I guess, what questions do you think I should be asking? If I want to better understand the history of the Lifelong Learning Movement in Zion?”

“Hmmm...”

Nia had opened a can of worms. Mr. Mitchell’s first question—“perhaps, you should ask folks what was their stake in joining the Movement?”—turned into an answer: he had spent a

few years away from Zion—well, “Clarkesville,” as it was called back then—after Zion Ellis had been assassinated in 2030. Too many memories. When he moved back in with his parents, he enrolled at the New, but couldn’t stand the extractive, unenjoyable, narrow-minded approach to education there. He knew he’d always have a job and a roof over his head through the Job and Home Guarantees. Life was getting less stressful. So why not make education more enjoyable?

That turned into Mr. Mitchell’s second question—“you can ask what peoples’ theories of change were in the Movement, cause we had a LOT, from people power to political power and everything in between”—and then his third question—“How did your philosophy of education change as you engaged with the Movement? I know mine shifted radically...—and several more, each with answers of their own.

Nia scribbled notes on her bough bag’s notebooks, trying to keep up. From what Nia could remember, Mr. Mitchell and a few other students started demanding lifelong access to at-least-free, high quality education in the 2030s. The group he formed grew steadily, then exploded. They advocated for the restructuring of academic departments towards cross-disciplinary institutes at the New. They helped restructure the Board of Trustees into the Council of Cooperators to represent students, faculty, and the community. They started blurring the lines between students, teachers, and staff—everyone was a student of life, he said, and a teacher too. Everyone had something to contribute. Then other students across the country took it and made it their own, adding to it, nuancing it, strengthening it, *growing resilience*. And that was pivotal. Things changed once folks started recognizing education as a crucial aspect of *growing resilience*. Education became one of *the* nodes for society-wide networks of justice and

care. Expanding beyond democratized classrooms and administrations, Lifelong Learning organizers began calling for community control of schools. Teachers and students collaborated with labor officials to design healthier landscapes. Parents collaborated to train youth in the generational wisdoms of transformative justice. A new generation of leaders emerged, armed with the tools and knowledge to steward a climate that worked for everyone, intent on ending the extractive systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy that had created the climate crisis, ready to make lives of learning, unlearning, and relearning as they grew resilience. The Lifelong Learning Movement had taken full form. Nia was familiar with many of these changes, but didn't realize just how different it had been.

She had heard that grades used to be a thing. That much she knew. And, of course, the horror stories of student debt. But not being able to take time off school without losing financial aid? Classes not beginning with students' setting their community agreements? This was shocking. How could they ever feel invested in a space that they hadn't helped shape? Teachers never asking their students to help create their learnings? Why would students ever care about what they learned? Probably most shocking of all, though, was that students didn't get paid to go to school and went into debt for such a non-fulfilling experience. Nia could hardly believe it.

As she walked back home, having thanked Mr. Mitchell profusely for his knowledge once he was called back to work, Nia's thoughts churned. Her documentary lived vividly in her mind. A panning shot here. A still shot there. The morning sun striking the skyline of New University... This would be powerful. Yes, she thought. This was powerful. She meant to ride the energy of her feet another few blocks to her home, diving deep into her documentary on her return. But when she walked by the Labor Office again, she felt an unknown urge to pause. She paused.

Staring at the Office's front doors, memories of the building's sewing room suddenly rushed into her mind. She remembered the week that passed, sewing her bough bag together there. She remembered the resilient hemp fibers she'd chosen, the afternoon she spent journaling to decide. She remembered the threads she stitched into that tough hemp canvas, the advice she sought from Rochelle and Ms. Martina. She remembered the intimacy of that final stitch she'd hand sewed, the embrace of her parents once she finished. The bag was as much hers as it was Rochelle's, and Ms. Martina's, and her parents; the fabric and thread, of Zion. *Lifelong learning*, Nia thought as she raced back home, somehow even more excited than when she'd paused.

Nia rushed into her apartment and dove into a visioning fervor for her documentary. She found herself atop her duplex's 'second street,' or the rooftop pathways that connected rowhomes and gardens. The hours passed like minutes and Nia was surprised to see a darkening ground. The sunlight was fading. She traveled to her bough bag, which she'd sat down far from arm's reach, to check her phone. It was much later than expected.

Night

8:30 PM

Goodness! Nia had not been so immersed in a project since her Junior year film fest documentary. As she looked at the time, Nia remembered that Rochelle was supposed to have come over by then. Yet, Rochelle had not texted her.

Nia walked to the second streets' railing to gaze towards the Mitchell's house on the other side of Blockson Street. The living room lights were on. Weird, since Monday nights were

becoming low-lit nights in the City to reduce light pollution, a result of recent work by youth organizers in the area. Rochelle knew that. All of Zion knew that.

Nia's gaze shifted to Zion Ellis's mural on Blockson Street. From her second street, Nia could see the dozens of other street murals and sculptures throughout Zion, but the Zion Ellis mural on Blockson secured her attention. Dusk dimmed his figure, but his amber eyes shone under the last glimmers of sunlight. Galvanizing. Nia recalled Mr. Mitchell running his hands along the bark of Zion's Willow Tree, the tears in his eyes... and then it hit her. Zion had *hurt* so she could be here tonight, geeking over Lifelong Learning. People had killed him. She'd heard that her whole life. Mom had reminded her of it a million times. Mr. Mitchell said it less, but enough. Yet, tonight it resonated with Nia in a way it hadn't before. Zion Ellis had a mom, too, and some kind, maybe annoying, neighbors, and artsy, sometimes late, friends, and projects that excited him, plants he tended to, people he loved, people that loved him back, reasons for staying in bed past his alarm, dreams of a Just Transition... and he was killed. Lifelong learning? What's lifelong learning when your life is cut short?

squeak!!

The distinct squeak of the Mitchells' door interrupted Nia. She turned to see Rochelle close the door behind herself and make their way to Nia's duplex, their home now dim in the low-lit night. Normally, Nia would yell Rochelle's name, but for some reason, as Rochelle moseyed over to Nia's front door, no words came. Then, Rochelle knocked on the duplex door and looked up to the second street.

“Nia? Is that you?”

“Yeah, um, sorry, I— well, just come on up here, it’s open.”

Rochelle squinted their eyes.

“You good?”

“Yeah, I just—well, not exactly. Just come on up.”

Rochelle nodded their head and disappeared into the door as Nia looked up to the night sky, the globs of the Milky Way leaking through it. How much more of the night sky might her children see? And their children? What might lifelong learning mean to them?

“Yo.”

Nia returned to Earth. Rochelle stood at the roof door.

“Hey.”

Rochelle ambled to the railing.

“What’s up?” asked Rochelle.

“Just thinking, you know, about Zion Ellis and everything.”

“You would be,” said Rochelle with a small smile.

“Do you not?” said Nia, surprising herself with a chuckle.

Rochelle glanced at their dimly-lit home, then up to the dilating stars.

“No. I do, but it’s different from how I imagine it is for you.”

“What do you mean it’s different?”

“It just is,” Rochelle said.

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s close enough,” said Rochelle.

Nia looked at Rochelle, who kept their gaze towards the sky, and then returned to Zion Ellis.

“Sometimes,” Rochelle circled back, “it sounds like there’s a voice out there whispering to me, calling me away from here to go somewhere. I’ve never known where. I’ve never known why. But it’s been there forever and still, for some reason, listening to it’s been hard. Like there’s all this noise around me muffling it all this time.”

Nia turned to Rochelle again. She hadn’t heard her friend talk like that in a while. “Did you talk to your dad or something?”

Rochelle nodded their head.

“How’d it go?”

“Better than I expected. Told him about New Orleans and the deadline. He was pretty accepting, I guess.”

“Nice,” said Nia.

“Why are you smiling?”

“You know why I’m smiling.”

Rochelle rolled their eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, okay. You told me so.”

“Your words, not mine,” said Nia.

The two laughed; Nia, like she’d been holding it in a while; Rochelle, like they’d remembered an old friend.

“It wasn’t like he was raving about it, though,” said Rochelle. “He was surprised when I told him. He tried hiding it, but I saw the surprise.”

“He loves you, Rochelle, you know that.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Rochelle. “He just always wanted me to stay. He never said it out loud, you know. It was the asking what I’d want to learn at the New, or the talking about Zion all the time. Little things, you know. Maybe that’s why listening to that voice was hard. I mean, he definitely didn’t mean to make me feel like that, but I just...” Rochelle trailed off into the night sky. “Yeah, he definitely didn’t mean to make me feel like that, but that’s just how the snowglobe settles, you know.”

“Just how the snowglobe settles,” agreed Nia.

The two shared another silence.

“Oh it gets settled, alright,” said Rochelle.

“All snug up in there,” Nia said with a grin.

The two shared another laugh, then slowly settled into their view of the darkening city, the skyline now approaching a cosmic haze that daytime would never know. Far off shadows of neighbors on second streets commingled with the night. The occasional outbursts of distant glee filled the warm air. To think that Pilar had swept through this land the night before, Nia thought.

“I wonder what our kids’ll make of this world,” said Nia. “Our parents made off well-enough, the *Great* Generation. Seems like we’re doing well enough so far. But our kids... reminds me of something my grandma would always say. One day, she’d say, I’d speak truths in Creole that her generation had to piece together in Pidgin. I wonder what our kids’ Creole will be, and what Pidgin pieces we’re puzzling over today.”

“Yeah,” said Rochelle, “my dad says that sometimes, too.”

“Really?” asked Nia.

“Yep.”

“Huh. I wonder where that comes from.”

“Yeah,” agreed Rochelle. “What you were saying about those puzzle pieces, I think about that sometimes, but not too much. The way I see it, alls we can do is breathe; breathe as ourselves and let others breathe as themselves. But that’s just how I see it.”

“Yeah,” said Nia. “I still wonder, though.”

The two shared another silence, then Rochelle turned to Nia.

“What was on your mind earlier?”

“Oh, I was thinking about Zion Ellis and all the other folks who put their bodies on the line for, you know, this.” Nia said, motioning to the community around her.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It was just... it was a lot. I talked to your dad today for my project on learning, and just hearing all those stories, I don’t think I appreciated them. In a weird way, that almost makes me happy? Like, the world they envisioned was one where we wouldn’t have to worry over everything they worried about. And we don’t, really. So, I guess that I’m grateful. Grateful for the work they put in, the sacrifices they made, you know. So, I’m happy, but not exactly. They played their part and they played it well. We’ll play our part, too, and the thread continues. Whether that’s lifelong learning movements or whatever. We owe it to the people that came before us, and ourselves, and everyone after us to play our part. So, yeah. It was a lot.”

Silence followed Nia. The chirping of crickets filled the air alongside the occasional burst of distant laughter.

“Mmm,” said Rochelle. “That is a lot.”

“Yeah.”

Rochelle checked on Nia out of the corner of their eye, smiled, then returned to the sky.

“Definitely sounds like something worth *never* leaving Zion for,” said Rochelle.

“Shut up,” laughed Nia.

“Yeah, alright, maybe not that. But really, I feel that.”

Lifelong learning, Nia thought to herself under the burgeoning shine of the cosmos.

“Yeah?” asked Nia.

“Yeah,” replied Rochelle.

Lifelong learning.

~

Nia remained on the second street for a while reflecting on the days to come, even after Rochelle left. Eventually, she made her way back to the duplex, down the hallway, and into her room. She went to hang her bough bag, but her tired hands missed the hanger. Her bag fell to the ground. She tried catching the bag, but only made matters worse. Onto her floor spilled three pencils, two notebooks, a fork, a phone, a mason jar, a tupperware box, and a journal with a loud thud and some clangs.

The error woke Nia’s eyes. She hoped it hadn’t woken her parents’. As she leaned down to collect her items, though, she caught herself smiling. The scattered items sprawled out of the mouth of the bag, forming what resembled an outgrowth of branches from the trunk of her

bough bag. Her hand met the bag's fabric and Zion's mural on Blockson street flashed before her eyes. *Lifelong learning*, she thought to herself one last time.

The glow of moonlight crept through Nia's window as she wrapped herself in a blanket hand-knitted by Ms. Martina. Her eyelids wavered as her dreams took hold. Nia Greene fell asleep with a smile on her face, imagining the stories she would tell other bearers of the past one day.