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Zoe's Telescope

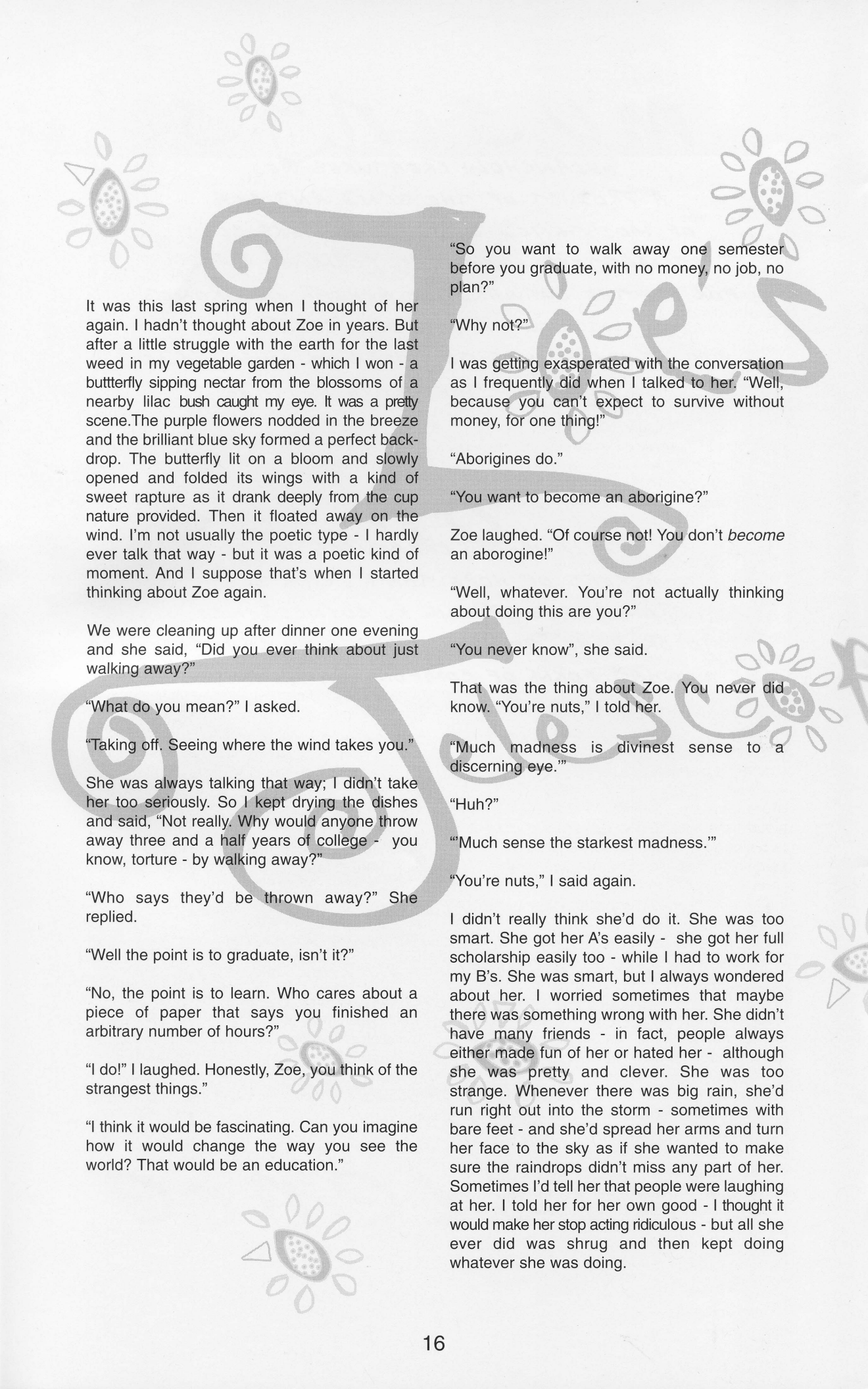
Judy Rucker

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It was this last spring when I thought of her again. I hadn't thought about Zoe in years. But after a little struggle with the earth for the last weed in my vegetable garden - which I won - a butterfly sipping nectar from the blossoms of a nearby lilac bush caught my eye. It was a pretty scene. The purple flowers nodded in the breeze and the brilliant blue sky formed a perfect backdrop. The butterfly lit on a bloom and slowly opened and folded its wings with a kind of sweet rapture as it drank deeply from the cup nature provided. Then it floated away on the wind. I'm not usually the poetic type - I hardly ever talk that way - but it was a poetic kind of moment. And I suppose that's when I started thinking about Zoe again.

We were cleaning up after dinner one evening and she said, "Did you ever think about just walking away?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Taking off. Seeing where the wind takes you."

She was always talking that way; I didn't take her too seriously. So I kept drying the dishes and said, "Not really. Why would anyone throw away three and a half years of college - you know, torture - by walking away?"

"Who says they'd be thrown away?" She replied.

"Well the point is to graduate, isn't it?"

"No, the point is to learn. Who cares about a piece of paper that says you finished an arbitrary number of hours?"

"I do!" I laughed. Honestly, Zoe, you think of the strangest things."

"I think it would be fascinating. Can you imagine how it would change the way you see the world? That would be an education."

"So you want to walk away one semester before you graduate, with no money, no job, no plan?"

"Why not?"

I was getting exasperated with the conversation as I frequently did when I talked to her. "Well, because you can't expect to survive without money, for one thing!"

"Aborigines do."

"You want to become an aborigine?"

Zoe laughed. "Of course not! You don't *become* an aborigine!"

"Well, whatever. You're not actually thinking about doing this are you?"

"You never know", she said.

That was the thing about Zoe. You never did know. "You're nuts," I told her.

"Much madness is divinest sense to a discerning eye."

"Huh?"

"Much sense the starkest madness."

"You're nuts," I said again.

I didn't really think she'd do it. She was too smart. She got her A's easily - she got her full scholarship easily too - while I had to work for my B's. She was smart, but I always wondered about her. I worried sometimes that maybe there was something wrong with her. She didn't have many friends - in fact, people always either made fun of her or hated her - although she was pretty and clever. She was too strange. Whenever there was big rain, she'd run right out into the storm - sometimes with bare feet - and she'd spread her arms and turn her face to the sky as if she wanted to make sure the raindrops didn't miss any part of her. Sometimes I'd tell her that people were laughing at her. I told her for her own good - I thought it would make her stop acting ridiculous - but all she ever did was shrug and then kept doing whatever she was doing.



And there was this one time when I went into her room and found her studying by candlelight. "How can you see?" I asked her.

"You can see by candlelight.", she said. "You just see differently, that's all. Some things you can see better by sunlight, some by lamplight, some by candlelight. And some things you see best with your eyes closed, don't you think?"

I just sighed and shook my head slowly and closed the door. I don't know how she could even read in there. And I know she was studying something hard - something like history or astronomy - because I asked her later and she said she was reading about Galileo's telescope.

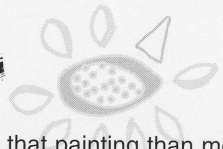
But she was smart, all right. Although she did spend a lot of time thinking about things that aren't very useful like poetry and art. And it was never enough for Zoe to simply read a poem or look at a painting. She'd go for walks with a book and read poetry aloud as she went. I'd go with her sometimes - not often - telling her all the way that people were staring.

"Maybe because they're enjoying it."

"No, they're not enjoying it. They think you're strange." I insisted.

"Poetry means so much more when it's read aloud," she said. "A poet goes to a lot of trouble to create something that's almost music. To say something with sounds, not just words. You can't get that by reading it silently. Listen to this.." and she would continue, oblivious to the rolling eyes and the snickers of the people around her. William Blake was bad enough, but when she went through her Allen Ginsberg phase, it was really embarrassing.

Or she'd drag me to the art museum. I hated that because she made a bigger fool of herself there than anywhere. She was always very quiet and polite, but she'd do things. "Hello Vincent," she would say to Van Gogh's self-portrait as she looked into his eyes. "What were you thinking when you painted this?" She said she could almost see the spark of his soul if she looked close enough. She especially loved Salvador Dali's painting with the droopy clocks. It looked like silliness to me, but she often said



there was more truth in that painting than most people ever experienced. One day she actually got kicked out of the museum for lying down on the floor. She wasn't hurting anything, but they sure didn't like it. The next day she went back and said that she was sorry if she had upset people but that she really needed to see what this painting looked like from down there. It was another Van Gogh. She showed it to me later - I wasn't with her the day she got down on the floor - and it was a picture of a tree and a bunch of stars. She had a thing for Van Gogh, but I didn't see what was so great about this painting. Stars are supposed to be tiny points of light and these were big and swirly. I didn't think it was very realistic.

And eventually, she did it. One day Zoe just left. I was angry for a while. Why did I have to have a roommate - a best friend - who did such bizarre things? I always cared more about important things like security and stability than seeing what it felt like to stand in the rain or talk to pictures. I did the right thing. I graduated, got married and had a family. Sure Edgar drinks a little more beer than I'd like. And sometimes I think I'll scream if I look up and see WWF wrestling on TV one more time. But he is there, And he kept the kids in Pampers when they were little, and now Osh Kosh's. And there's always food in the pantry. But sometimes I wonder if Zoe found what she was looking for. Sometimes I wonder if there are things you can see by candlelight that you can't see by a lamp.

Since that day in the garden, I've thought about Zoe more often. I hope she's OK. I think she is; she is a smart girl. I still think she was a little bit nuts. I can't imagine wandering aimlessly around the city, or the country, or the world - or doing most of the things that Zoe did, for that matter - never having settled down with Edgar and having the kids. We do so much together, and it's the kind of life I always wanted. Just last week we had a little family outing and it was really nice. The kids wanted to go to the Natural History Museum, but I told them I'd rather go to the park since we still had a little summer left. Who wants to see a bunch of insects pinned to the wall?

