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### **Zoe for Prez**

“Okay... which piece, do *you* want to be, Zoe?” Rose Beverly Wilson had been thinking about this moment all day and was thrilled to see her hero emerge from studying. The timing couldn’t have been better as Rose was just finishing up her meticulous arrangement of each piece in the game of “LIFE.” Her budding smile slowly contained itself as Rose realized that her big sister had forgotten her early morning promise. “She said it was okay and offered me a second chance,” Zoe said. “It destroyed me, I didn’t deserve a second chance.”

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Zoe Wilson is not like other girls. She could easily be seen walking across the stage in a pageant gown, but that isn’t Zoe. Zoe is not defined by the way she looks. She is a seeker, an individualist, an intellectual, a social rights activist, a Jane Austen fan, and above all else, a compassionate and nurturing human being. Those fortunate enough to have crossed paths with her, walk away with a feeling of being seen, understood, and appreciated.

Zoe is the girl you hope your daughters get to meet. She is kind, witty, intelligent and has only begun to spread her wings. Her warm smile and conscientious approach is the signature to her approach with people. Thankfully, my daughters got that opportunity one day while Zoe and I were talking. Emma wanted to show Zoe her latest LEGO creation, an elaborate Ferris wheel-a-ma-jigger devised as a vehicle for her favorite LEGO mini-figures. As Emma was explaining her creation to Zoe, the contraption was flying through the air and Emma was talking 100 MPH. She spun the linear Ferris wheel with acute force, all in a fail swoop.

“Oh, that’s so clever!” Zoe said. Zoe’s words immediately resonated with Emma. Emma looked down with bashful pride at her invention, seeing it differently. The chaos of the scene immediately dissolved into tiny particles of something new. And at that moment, Emma’s 7-year-old world was made anew by Zoe’s words. She had sparked the spirit of invention, and the confidence to follow through. In the days following this interaction, Emma’s LEGO inventions grew in form and life. Zoe’s conscious but short response had planted a seed of endurance. Just. Like. That.

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Tyler Anderson has known Zoe longer than I have, his words affirmed the potential I see in her. “Whatever the world needs to know about her, she’ll let the world know. Nobody is going to be able to silence her voice or stop her from spreading the message she wants to send. Her resolve is going to see her accomplish a lot. I guess I’d say... the world needs to know that she’s coming to take it on.”

Zoe and Tyler met at a cramped dorm party during their freshman year of college at SU. Zoe has been unflinchingly supportive of Tyler during some very dark times. It might surprise one to hear that they weren't immediately 100% keen on one another's personas. Tyler said, "I thought she was a vapid poser and she thought I was a bullish idiot. We spent the first part of knowing each other at odds. It took a lot of growing in a very short amount of time to not only disprove the ideas of each other we'd come up within our heads but start to recognize traits of one another as things to strive for in ourselves."

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When COVID-19 stopped time, Zoe found herself back home. "Home," for Zoe, was Southwestern University and the unexpected move brought her closer to her loving family, but it also gave her a chance to step back and look at how her past has shaped her. A 13 Hour drive from Central Texas to Highlands Ranch, Colorado, represented a drive home, but it also represented going back to a place that was once new, unfamiliar and unforgiving at a formative time in her life. The first time she made the journey, she was just 5 years old. Zoe went from chasing her kitty cats in the warm Austin Sun, to being chased by bullies who saw her love for reading as an invitation to make her feel small. "I was actually bullied for reading..." her eyes look down for meaning as she swirls her mug of peach tea. "I had to hide my books on my desk."

Things began to turn back around for Zoe in Colorado. "I began to realize that these people were going to be in my past," she said. Her acceptance letter from Southwestern University was, in a way, her golden ticket. To her, SU represented the place that her parents met and fell in love. It was a symbol of hope that allowed her to detach from the confines of the Colorado scene that she never asked for.

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"I had to stop. The other girls were very sweet, but I just couldn't finish. They stepped in and were able to finish for me..." Zoe's sisters elected her "Social Chair" an uncomfortable seat for her to adjust to. When her Mom found out about the new role Zoe had been slated for, she agreed that it was a "strange choice." In a way, being appointed Social Chair can be seen as a beneficial happenstance. It pushed her to confront her fear of sharing her voice in that setting.

Zoe's sorority selection was not at random. She chose ZTA because she found their value aligned with her core beliefs. She was in the company of like minded women, something that she'd hoped to have. They placed an emphasis on social action, environmental stewardship, and overall wanted to make the world a better place. "We tend to have the highest GPA, and the president is highly active in Latinx rights."

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"I had this little mannequin in my room when I was a kid, because my mom had a sewing company. I would dress it up and have a name tag and it would be like 'Zoe, The Lawyer.'" She coveted a pearl necklace from her mother's collection and placed it on the mannequin. "I

thought, ‘That’s what important people look like’. I was frustrated that I couldn’t put pants and a shirt on the stand. I wanted to wear a Hillary Clinton suit. That was my picture of important people. I cut up a sticky note, I think it said ‘Lawyer and first female president.’” Freshman year of high school was a time for growth. And growth can be frightening at times. She found her judicial dreams coming to fruition in a Mock Trial competition... only to have those dreams swept aside by her worst enemy, herself. “I only had two things to focus on that I prepared for, and I cried for days before it because I was so nervous. I barely had to do anything. It was a made-up competition. I knew what my lines were but I told myself: ‘I cannot go up there in front of everyone.. I can’t ask for a straw at a restaurant, what am I doing here?’”

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I could tell by the way she had framed the story, that she is not one to brag. The COVID-19 pandemic Zoe, was not the only one working from home. Her parents own a software development firm, and her Mom is running for local office—all from home—which makes things difficult at times. Zoe loves her family dearly. The quiet manner in which her family members “tiptoed” over the wooden floors while she was on FaceTime with me paints a photo of a family that places a large emphasis on respect for one another. But that doesn’t mean that they are always there for each other, as Zoe knows all too well from it happening with her and her sister..

“I was really excited. I had been smiling all day. When my classmates said ‘*this needs to be published!*’ it made me feel really good.” She waited for her Dad to come home and went to his office to share her excitement. She was met with a workaholic doing what they do best...working. Her father was buried in his work. Unable to support his daughter. Zoe was forced to hold on to her excitement herself. “I told my Mom at dinner.. and she was really excited for me.”

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Disappointing a child induces a gut wrenching sadness. Neither Zoe, nor her family could have anticipated their current circumstances, but they are making it work. The look of a child heart broke even harder as I listened to her telling of this scenario with Rose and the forgotten game of LIFE. The connection between Zoe and Rose is sacred and beautiful. “I cut the cord when she was born and I changed her diapers,” she said. While It became evident that Zoe’s deep connection to the wellbeing of her sister is a value she carries with great regard, the load of guilt she places on herself bears light to the harsh internal monologue lurking in the shadows of Zoe’s brilliance.

Rose is Zoe’s guiding light. Outside of shadows cast unto Zoe, as the world screams at her “BE LIKE THIS!”, there is Rose. She desires nothing more than to pour every ounce of her energy into ensuring that the wellbeing of Rose is copasetic in nature and it tears her apart to do otherwise. Zoe’s love of her family, her friends, the planet, and curiosity as a whole shine through in such beautiful ways. For Zoe the answer is simple, love more...not less.

**Author’s Note**

Zoe's deep desire to change the world for the better, despite all of her struggles is inspiring. As an individualist, she presents herself in a way that is all her own, but not showy or forced. Her writing will be published, the shy little girl has grown into this multifaceted intellectual and I know her family is super proud of the person that she is. She is somewhat reserved but not without logic. I look forward to reading her articles in the New York Times. finding that incredibly powerful voice, and doubt serves as a guiding light for others who are trying to find their way out of the darkness. My goal was to reflect the part of Zoe's identity that inspired me. As I was trying to make sense of the things Zoe had experienced, I found insight into mine as well. I'm proud of her for sharing her story and know that it will resonate with generations to come.

*I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.*

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