Zoe = Life
What about Audre?” Connie asked, looking up from her pencil and paper. “For Audre Lorde?”


Connie consulted the Baby Name Book. “Adrienne means dark one,” she said. We looked at each other dubiously. Did we really want to curse this baby with a name like that? “What about boys’ names?” she asked.

We were both silent for a moment. Boys’ names. I shifted in my chair uneasily. I knew we needed to think of boys’ names. There was always Max, our original choice, but it no longer seemed right to name the baby after a store in the mall. There was Sam, and Gabe, names I’d always liked. But now they sounded like good names for a blues bar, not for a baby. There was Noah, but did we really want to name our baby after one of the most patriarchal guys in the Old Testament? What about Sampson, whose power was stolen by a woman? Would that be any better? I closed my eyes. Deep inside myself, I knew I wanted this baby to be a girl, but I tried to deny it. I even had a name for her—Zoe, the Greek word for life, but it wasn’t a name we had discussed. I’d had it in my mind for days. Zoe, I called her in my mind. My little Zoe. That was when I didn’t call her La Niña, for the warm fall winds that had brought her to my womb. My tiny Niña. I shook my head. It didn’t matter if it was a boy or a girl. What I really wanted was for it to be healthy, right? Besides, we’d read that most insemination babies were boys. Margie and Julie had had a boy. There was something about female sperm living longer but male sperm being faster, or something like that. It sounded about right. I played with the cereal in my bowl. It was mid-February, and as soon as we finished our breakfast, we were heading up to Elmira for the amniocentesis. My appetite was gone. It was snowing out, the air so cold that the wind chill had closed schools all over the Twin Tiers. Amniocentesis could uncover any of hundreds of fetal abnormalities. Surely, the gender of the baby was the least of our concerns. I tried to swallow around the lump that was growing in my throat. I was afraid of the amniocentesis, afraid of the procedure, afraid of the
results, afraid of my reason for doing it in the first place. What if something was wrong? What would we do then? We’d spent long hours discussing the possibilities. Connie had spent years working with the developmentally disabled. We had already resolved not to bring a child into the world with that kind of disability. I shifted in my seat, felt for my belly. It was warm beneath my hand, warm and full of life. I’d thought I knew what I wanted, I’d marched in Pro-Choice rallies, had counseled my students who considered abortions, but I hadn’t counted on how I would feel once this baby was in my womb, contentedly sucking its life from my bones.

Connie drained the last of her coffee and reached for my hand. Her fingers were cold. “It’s time,” she said. My lungs felt as if they couldn’t expand another inch, as if they had frozen in place with just that quantity of air inside and I would never be able to inhale again.

Connie squeezed my hand. “Come on,” she said softly. Her eyes sought mine, a soft warm green in the thin winter light that filtered in through the window above the sink. Her hand held mine as if she would never let it go. Her touch gave me life. We had made love four times in the last four days, a deep, warm, wonderful love, full of soft flesh and warm skin, beating hearts. It was week sixteen, and I was beginning to feel like a human being again, like a woman, oiling my body with cocoa butter after my shower in the morning to combat the stretch marks, stretching out my limbs in the afternoon to my Jane Fonda Pregnancy Workout tape. It had felt so good to make love, to use my body for its pleasure, to remember that I was a woman, and to forget for a time about this baby that I carried inside my body. I could allow myself just to fill with love for Connie, to feel safe inside her touch, protected by her skin. It reminded me that we had come first, before this baby that took up so much time, before it was even fully in our lives.

The snow fell the whole way up to Elmira, piling up along the road as if to keep us on the path and prevent us from turning back. I sat in the passenger seat with my hands on my belly, feeling its swell with my palms, feeling the pulse of my fingers against my skin. The snow swirled and danced, swept up by the wind. Inside my belly a separate heart beat, a separate life took shape. I closed my eyes and imagined my daughter curled up inside me, small and as fully formed as my hand. I could see her there, clear as the snow that danced about the sides of the road, doing her own dance, deep in my womb. Suddenly, she seemed as vulnerable and sus-
ceptible as I was. She even looked like me, fine brown hair and dark eyes. Her look was accusing. How could you have brought me here? To what kind of life have you summoned me? I closed my eyes. Who was I to bring a child into the world? Somehow, it had been so much easier to imagine a son, rough and wild, tumbling from my womb like a wolf cub, already able to outrun me, attend to his own needs, survive in the wild. He would be strong, just because he was a man. The world, after all, was made for him.

I rested my head against the window, felt the cold of the glass against my face. To picture a daughter broke my heart. She would be just like me, alone in her life, stepping through her journey with careful feet. She would suffer and question. This world would not be her birthright. She would ache to express herself. She would shout to be heard. She would ask me why I brought her here. And I would not know the answer.

Connie squeezed my hand. We were almost in Elmira. The snow did a ghostly dance around our tires, pushing us on. We were going to meet our child. I watched her, alone in my womb, full of her own life. I had imagined a boy with strong legs who would throw balls and fix cars and be an alien to me. He would be all right. His body would carry him through his life. I had never imagined a daughter, standing tall and straight and alone, looking at me with that silent accusation in her eyes: You knew what this world was like, yet you brought me here anyway.

I turned my eyes to the window. It almost seemed as if I could see her out there, standing on the side of the road thumbing a ride. I watched her stand there, flagging us down. She looked so much like me it made my throat ache. I knew how much was out there that could destroy her. I knew how many pitfalls lay in wait along her journey. She shook her head as we neared her, tossed back her hair, and turned away from me. I ached to follow her, to grab her hand, to open our doors and usher her in, give her her ride. Yes, I did it anyway. I lay back and opened my legs and summoned you up from your private depths. I called you here against your will. And now I could choose to send you back.

Connie turned to me. “Well,” she said. “This is it.”

I took her hand. Her fingers shook. I looked into her eyes, soft and deep and as frightened as my own. “This is it,” I said. We sat there for a moment surrounded by the snow, watching it churn across the surface of our windshield, skate across the glass. We were doing what we needed to do. I thought of my daughter, still
standing on the side of the road, the wind chill numbing her cheeks, waiting for her ride. “Let’s go,” I said, and together we left the car.

“Well, it’s hard to say for sure about the sex,” the doctor said, pressing the ultrasound deep into the cold gel that covered my stomach. On the screen in front of us, our child wavered, coming in and out of view as the doctor pointed out her body parts, first a head, then an arm, then a part of a foot, all of it a swirl that bore more resemblance to the snow outside than it did to a human form. The doctor moved his probe around my stomach as if he were steering the prow of a ship, a frown of concentration on his face. “I can’t find a penis,” he said, pressing the probe deeper into my stomach. I watched our baby’s image dancing on the screen. So early we are defined by what we lack. The doctor shrugged. “I can’t seem to get between its legs,” he said apologetically, “but I’d say, seventy-thirty, it’s a girl.”

I could feel my heart swell. Connie squeezed my hand, but I hardly felt it. I knew. I knew at that moment, absolutely, that not only was she a daughter but she was my daughter, guarding her privacy, preserving her essence. She was there, she was inside me, and she was coming out one day, full of her own fire.

“Hold on a second,” the doctor said, prodding my belly, “and I’ll get you a picture.” I stared at the image on screen. My heart raced. My daughter was alive. She was already alive. She wasn’t out there on the highway, shuddering with the cold. She was right here with me, going about her life, regardless of what I did. If I didn’t drink enough milk, she would take her calcium from my bones and teeth. Already she was taking what she needed from me, accepting what I had to give. I stared at the ultrasound, at the pulsing throbbing heart. She was there. She would be born despite my fear. She would suffer despite my joys. She would triumph despite my agonizing.

The computer whirred and ejected the photograph like an offering into the doctor’s hand. We all bent forward at the same moment, staring at the image. It looked like an Edvard Munch painting, trapped midscream. Her head was just a skull, her cranium massive, her face gaunt.

“Gee, I’m sorry,” the doctor said, staring at the picture. “That’s not a really good shot. Do you want me to try to get another one?”

I stared at the photograph, stared into my daughter’s eyes. She looked like death in there, like she hadn’t quite made the passage
over, hadn’t quite completed her return. She looked just like the ghost I knew she was. My Niña. My warm and violent autumn wind. My Zoe. My vivid little open mouth, poised to scream her way into the world. “No,” I said. “It’s perfect.”

The rest of the procedure lasted less than two minutes. Connie held my hand. I kept my eyes on hers as the needle entered my abdomen. I felt its pinch as the doctor withdrew the fluid, and then it was over. Connie squeezed my hand. “There it is,” the doctor said, holding up the syringe like a prize. I stared at it in awe. Its contents were startlingly yellow, somehow familiar.

“It looks like urine,” Connie said.

The doctor nodded, his hands already busy tapping off the syringe. “It is urine,” he said. His tone was matter-of-fact. “Amniotic fluid is made from urination.” I surveyed it with wonder. There it was, my first tangible contact with my daughter—her pee.

Connie and I held hands all the way out of the doctor’s office. “We don’t know for sure if she’s a girl,” Connie cautioned. “We can’t let ourselves get too excited.”

“No,” I agreed. We pushed the button at the elevator. Somehow I didn’t even think about abnormalities. It was as if we’d done the whole procedure for the sole purpose of determining her gender. I glanced at Connie. “There’s a name I’ve been thinking of,” I said cautiously. “It’s not on our list.”

Connie looked at me. “Me too,” she said. “There’s a name I’ve been thinking of.”

For a moment neither of us said anything. The elevator doors opened and we stepped in. “It’s Zoe,” I said. “It means life.”

Connie stared at me. “Yes,” she said. “That’s the name I was thinking of.”

We watched the light above our heads tick off the floors. Zoe Sullivan-Blum, I thought. I dug in my pocket for her ultrasound shot and held it up. Connie slipped her arm around my shoulder, and we both stared at it. This was the child I carried in my womb. I could hardly breathe. When we walked back out into the parking lot, the falling snow was gone. The air was clear and cold, the snow on the ground sparkling in the sunlight. “Our Zoe,” I whispered.

“Our Zoe,” Connie said, and we walked out hand in hand, back to our car.

The phone call from the doctor’s office came in less than a week. “Everything’s fine,” the nurse informed me. Her voice was full of warmth. “Do you want to know the sex?”
“Yes,” I said. My heart pounded. My mouth went dry. This was it. This was our moment.

“It’s a girl,” she said. “Congratulations!”

I hung up the phone. The air around me seemed suddenly thinner. I took a deep breath, trying to get it into my lungs. My hands shook. I sat down, my head spinning. It was a girl. Everything was fine, and we were having a girl. I closed my eyes. “Oh, thank you,” I whispered to our goddess, our god, to anyone who might be listening. “Thank you so much.” I pushed my chair back and looked at the ultrasound picture that sat on my desk. “Hello,” I whispered. “Hello, little Zoe.”