

# Zebras & Xylophones

Indigo Falls Press

ISBN 978-0-9806670-3-5

Copyright © 2009 by Meryl McQueen

(<http://merylmcqueen.com>)

Cover art © 2009 by Ann Rinkenberger

([www.flickr.com/photos/picturesbyann](http://www.flickr.com/photos/picturesbyann))

([www.harvestmoonbyhand.etsy.com](http://www.harvestmoonbyhand.etsy.com))

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted by any means—whether auditory, graphic, mechanical, or electronic—without written permission of both publisher and author, except in the case of brief excerpts used in critical articles and reviews. Unauthorized reproduction of any part of this work is illegal and is punishable by law.

## **Chapter One                      Thunderbolt**

The day Aura's invisible zebra Harold disappeared, her new best-friend-to-be arrived on a thunderbolt. Aura didn't know it when she got home from school that afternoon: the coming storm would change her life.

Aura Corinne Speltzman's house perched on the top of Merryweather Hill like a nervous parrot. Four floors high and half as wide, the tan wooden structure teetered in the vicious wind. The shutters grumbled and the shingles sang. The house looked across Marshall's Pond, almost frozen into a mirror of ice-skating bliss. A storm crept over the neighborhood, closing in like a

restless lion.

Aura slumped off the bus and dragged her bag across the gravel driveway. Her mom waved from the front door and hugged her hello.

“He’s gone.” Aura tried to hug her mom back, but her arms felt like sacks of wet boulders. Heavy, loose.

“There’s more than one way to train a zebra,” said Aura’s mother, folding the laundry into color-coded stacks. “Harold will be back.”

Shading her face from the sharp fall sun, Aura Speltzman scrunched her seaweed-green eyes. She tugged her spring-loaded, mud-brown curls across her scalp, taming them with a chipped yellow headband. “Mom, that’s just it! Harold made me really mad last week, when Gennifer and

Kiara laughed at my book report on squid, and he laughed right along with them.”

She cradled her head on the dented oak table. “I told him I never wanted to see him again, and now he’s gone.” Aura’s mouth twisted like a pretzel. Chubby tears wiggled down her face like jitterbugs.

Aura’s mother slid into the chair next to her daughter. “Maybe he took a vacation, hon. Went to see his friends in the Serengeti.”

“You mean his cousin Speedo and his uncle Deuce?” Harold had relatives all over the world, even in Antarctica. Aura sniffled. “How long will he be gone?”

“He’ll be back when he’s rested. You’ll see, he’ll be a whole new zebra.”

“But we’ve been best friends since I was five. Since—since forever,” said Aura. “He’s never taken a vacation before.”

“Let’s talk to Frank when he gets home,” said her mom. “He might have some ideas about Harold.”

Aura rocked on her chair, kicking her icicle-blue sneakers against one another. “Maybe Harold’s hanging out with Daddy. Keeping him company, you know?”

Mrs. Speltzman leaned across the table and squeezed Aura’s hand. “Enough of that now, young lady. Will it be strawberry or chocolate milk with these oatmeal raisin cookies just out of the oven?”

Stirring her drink in the orange Goofy

glass—her favorite since she was seven—Aura stared at the pink crystals as they dissolved into the milk. She closed her left eye and turned her head sideways, squinting at the sugar. “Where does it go?”

Ironing a shirt in the kitchen nook, her mother paused and looked over. “Where does what go?”

“The pink powder. In the milk, the strawberry dust.”

“They mix together.”

“Why?”

Liz Speltzman had lots of practice with Aura’s questions. She put down her iron and leaned one hand on her hip. “So that you can enjoy flavored milk, without having to chew strawberry

sand. Eat your snack, and then I'll help you with your homework.”

“But—”

“Butter is for sandwiches and corn on the cob. Do you want to start with reading or math?”

As Aura and her mom practiced fractions, the air outside thumped with a late fall thunderstorm.

“If there's hail, can we freeze it?” asked Aura, tapping her pencil against her freckled nose.

“Focus,” her mom said, straightening the worksheet and pointing to the next example.

“Mom, look!” Aura jumped up from the table and ran to the window. “Did you see that lightning bolt? It looked like it was coming straight for us!”

“Better have the radio on, to listen for tornado warnings.” Her mom switched on the news.

Murmuring with static electricity, the reporter’s voice carried them to the edge of the thunder. “We are getting reports of a localized weather cell in the Merryweather Hill area—”

“That’s us,” Aura said, doodling over her answer to  $1/3 + 5/8 = .$  The numbers danced around like crickets in her head, fuzzy and fast. Aura hated fractions.

“—and this is truly bizarre. It appears that the lightning is focused only on a few houses in that area. We advise all residents to stay tuned for further information, and be prepared to seek shelter in the event of more severe weather.”

“That’s odd,” said Aura’s mother, twisting the volume knob and nudging her daughter back to math. “I never heard of a single suburb thunderstorm before.”

“Where are my girls,” Frank said from the hallway, arms out like a mummy, trailing his briefcase. “I’m coming to get you!”

Frank had to stoop to get in the front door, hinging his knees and scooping his neck. He looked like a cheerful daddy long legs—tall and clumsy, with a grin that swallowed everything in sight.

Frank’s voice reminded Aura of the thud of Fourth of July fireworks in the distance, marching in rhythm and rolling in her ears. He moved in with them when Aura was six and three

quarters, and he took her trick-or-treating in his billowy green clown suit every year.

Aura slid down the banister and landed at the front door. She hugged Frank hello and pointed to the kitchen. “Mom’s making veggie lasagna—your favorite.”

Frank tapped her on the nose and followed her into the living room. “You’re my favorite, Aura. And don’t you forget it.”

The family ate dinner with the rain knocking on the doors and windows of the old house. Aura jumped in with her topic of the day.

Frank nodded and chewed his upper lip. “So you’re saying Harold’s skedaddled, and you wonder when he might be coming back?”

“He’s my best friend. Actually—he’s my

Want to know what happens next? Buy *Zebras & Xylophones*:

KINDLE: <http://tiny.cc/Zebras>  
PAPERBACK: <http://tiny.cc/ZebrasPPB>  
DOWNLOAD .pdf: <http://tiny.cc/Zebraspdf>

Check out my other novels, short stories, poetry, plays, and film scripts:

<http://merylmcqueen.com>

Thanks!