## Z is for...

## Tad Williams

Zebras? It is an odd thought. Something else, too. A rainy day? What the hell...? Harold’s chin hits his chest. He bounces back into wakefulness. A reddish light is in his eyes; a dull grumbling sound like a sleeping tiger fills the room.

He is where? He struggles briefly, drags his arms free from some clinging thing—a sheet, a blanket, something—and sits up. Head heavy, yet somehow not well-connected. Harold looks around. A room, a bedroom. Spray of strawflowers in a vase on a dresser, skeletal in the strange light. A red shawl is draped over the lamp, crimsoning the walls, the shadowy framed photographs of someone’s pale-moon-faced friends/lovers/family.

The grumbling breaks up into gasps and grunts. Harold is on the floor, slumped against a bed. The noises are coming from someone on the bed. Some two.

A party. He is at a party. He has been there a long time.

He shakes off the last twining tentacle of the bedcover and crawls across the deep-pile carpet, heading for the crack of brighter light he thinks—hopes—is the door. The odd thought of zebras is still floating in his brain. White and black, shimmering like heat lightning. Shake their heads, then—gone.

The noises from the bed continue. He passes a foot dangling from beneath the sheet, corpselike but for the jiggle, timed to the rising chorus of gutturals. Who’s up there? How did Harold wind up in the room with them? Fell asleep, he thinks. Fell asleep in the dark on the floor. Everyone too drunk and fucked up to notice. Or maybe they liked the idea—an audience.

They are beyond noticing now, anyway. He pushes the door open with his head. Like his old black cat with its pet-door, he thinks. Cat’s name? Can’t remember. Seems like a long time ago. Good cat, though. Scabby but lots of chutzpah. No fur left on his butt, hardly, but the very soul of confidence. Why can’t he remember the damn cat’s name?

The hall is empty and surprisingly long. Loud music and the din of many voices drift up from what looks like a stairwell at the far left end. Harold turns and crawls in that direction. Head feels like a wad of glue—like the white glue from elementary school crafts, drying to a sticky skin on top but still wet underneath. Head feels like that. Too much to drink. Too much of something, anyway. He remembers a guy in a bow tie screaming about Metaxa, some damn Greek liquor, everybody had to slug some down, matter of honor, some ridiculous shit like that. Drink Greek stuff, wake up glue-headed.

Harold likes the sound of this, and repeats it a few times in semi-samba rhythm as he crawls toward the stairs.

Drink Greek stuff, wake up glue-headed.

Drink Greek stuff, wake up glue-headed...

His head is hanging over the abyss of carpeted stairs before he realizes how far he has crawled. He sways briefly as words rise from below like ash flakes heat-fluttering over a campfire.

“...I swear he did! I swear it!”

“You would say that. You told me that the last time he went out of town, too. Wasn’t that what you said the last time he went? Wasn’t it?”

Two dark shapes come slowly up into the hall light, one dark, one light, like some kind of religious painting. Man, black hair, blue clothes. Glasses. Blond woman in white dress, thirtyish, talking like a teenage girl. Harold hates that. He rolls to the side so they can step up into the hallway.

“Take my advice, leave that Greek shit alone,” he mutters. They pass him silently, as if he had asked for money on a street corner.

Harold doesn’t know them. Whose fucking party is this? Why did he come? And what is this zebra thing nudging his memory? Did he puke on somebody’s striped upholstery? Fake-fur coat? He curls up on the topmost step, feet against the baluster, knees before his chin. He has no shoes, but his socks, though inexplicably damp, are clean and without holes. Some relief there.

As he sits, a dim memory surfaces, a brief movie of himself wandering out of the noise, up some stairs into quiet. He looks back down the hallway. Does look a little familiar. Sure is quieter here than it sounds like it is downstairs. He squints. The man and woman have gone, vanished somewhere down the dark hall.

Kayo’s party? Somebody’s party, anyway. Zebras? Somebody whose name starts with a “z,” maybe? Z’s party. Zazu’s party. Zorba’s party. Sounds like it’s been going a long time, anyway.

Harold struggles to his feet. His head feels far too heavy, making his entire rickety body unstable. Still, all things considered, the old headaroo is holding together remarkably well—but then, it’s full of glue, so no surprise there. He has to remain standing, now. There are several more people crouching or sitting at the bottom of the stairwell, and he’ll never get past them to find his date...

His date?

...He’ll never get past them crawling, especially crawling down stairs. He has a faint recollection that he tried crawling down some stairs in the recent past, but remembers only that it was definitely a mistake.

“...Well, you probably missed the part where they announced it,” someone is saying as Harold goes, banister-clutching, stiff-legged among the clot of bodies. A young man’s voice, calmly rational. “I mean, it’s not the same thing, but they have ads now that look just like shows.”

“But it wasn’t,” says what in the semi-dark sounds and sort of looks like a young woman. Her voice says that she is a little upset, but willing to be talked out of it. “I mean, I would have known. It really was the news—you know, that guy from Channel 6.”

“The one with the wig?” someone else asks.

“The worst wig!” There is an explosive laugh. Harold pushes past, putting his new bipedality to an immediate test, forced to half-jump over a salad bowl full of pretzel sticks and other crunchy treats left on the floor. He makes it, grabbing a chair-back for support on landing. Looks around. A smallish room, dining room maybe, big table in the center, bowls of dip and other things. Lights down, music is not from this room, he hears it loudest from the far door as he swivels his head like a radar dish. The room is familiar, though. That’s something. He’s seen that painting before, maybe earlier tonight: some expressionist Mexican temple, Aztec, some damn thing. Seen the painting. Likes it, actually. Nice colors, reddish-gold, black, white.

The chair-back under his hand is remarkably solid. Chair is occupied. Older man, wire-rimmed glasses, sweater, talking to a young couple. Harold has been leaning too close, he realizes. Inappropriate. Must look like a drunk. Thinks he recognizes the man in the sweater, but doesn’t want to admit he isn’t sure. Did they work together once?

“Howdy.” Harold waves cheerily. “Sorry. Just resting.”

Before they are forced to reply he pushes himself off like a boat leaving shore and tacks toward the center of the room. Doing pretty well, actually, one foot casually in front of the other, one, two, one, two. Points himself toward door to music, rest of party...

Helen’s party? Isn’t it Helen’s, from the department? But where did she get such a big house?

Zebras, too, something about zebras. It was important...

...Suddenly veers to the side when he spots telltale pale gleam of porcelain counters through another narrowly open door. Bathroom. Ah, yes, right idea.

Harold stops and knocks politely. Social skills are returning. No answer, so he pushes the door open. A woman’s purse is on the counter, lipsticks lying scattered like spent rifle cartridges, but no woman is attached. Just be a moment, Harold thinks. Remembers to lock the door so purse-owner doesn’t bang it open, scream, accuse Harold of exhibitionism or sniffing her make-up or something. There was some embarrassing incident earlier, he suddenly remembers—or at another party, maybe? Seems like a long time ago. Anyway, some woman slapped him. Not too hard, but not really friendly-like, either. Pissed him off. He was just trying to tell her something. Something about Z, that was it. Something about...zebras? But she slapped him. Sour-faced bitch...

Memories stop for a moment while he deals with own face. Oh God. Not good. Pale, whiskery, eyes bleary as poached eggs. But still, thankyouJesus, recognizably his. Not like most of the other faces floating around here. Yes, Harold’s face. Harold’s shirt, too, top button opened, tie gone, but—thankyouagainJesus—no weird stains on clothing. No puke, no snot, no spit. Alarming to wake up on the floor, but reassuring to know you just look drunk and stupid, not disgusting.

Harold turns to the toilet and unzips. Aims, thinks for a moment, then decides not to push his luck. Turns and sits down. Splashing is louder than the music in here. Kind of rustic and pleasant. Lights are harsh as a motherfucker, though. He claws for the switch and kills it, leaving only a glowing nautilus-shell nightlight, pinkish. Much better.

Finished, he retains his seat for a moment, thinking. Runs a little cold water, scooped awkwardly out of the sink at his side, splashes it on his face, then feels for a towel and dabs. The towel is fluffy, but it smells of someone else’s body.

Time to go home. No question about it. Shouldn’t drive—well, maybe drive real slow. Windows open, get some air. Drive slow. Back streets. Then again, maybe not so slow—need to sober up, after all. Yeah, why not, drive like some beast of the plains, running, wind rushing, running like a gazelle, a zebra...

Zebras again.

Like the imagined wind, a chill travels over him at the thought, and a little more of his drunkenness evaporates. Something’s there, a stone in his mental shoe. Something wrong...

Let’s go. His pants are down around his ankles. He fumbles in his pockets, but there are no keys. Must be in his jacket. Find that, find the keys.

Brilliant deduction, Sherlock. Elementary, my dear fucking Harold. Let’s go find the keys.

It’s remarkably difficult to open the door with the light out, but still easier than trying to find the light switch again. Finally the door pops free, swings inward. Harold stalks out, heads toward the room with the music.

Here’s the party. Here it is. Big room, full of people, lights down but for a flickering television, picture windows showing black sky salted with stars and a different kind of darkness that he somehow remembers is the ocean. Big room, big house. It feels suddenly like he’s been here for years.

Halfway across the room he forgets where he is going. As he wavers, he realizes that he is standing between two people talking. They continue as though he is no more than a cloud crossing a sunny sky above their heads.

“...So just tell me where you live,” the thin, intense-looking man says. “Simple enough question.”

Woman laughs. “Here, of course. I think. I mean here. Here at the house.”

Harold pushes himself on a few steps and slumps onto an empty end of the long couch, feels the leather squish beneath him. He peers sideways at the couple. They are talking more softly, both laughing now, but he feels sad looking at them. Doesn’t know why.

They’re the zebras, he thinks suddenly. They’re dying, and they don’t even know it. A dying species, this couple.

But why? What a stupid fucking thought. Why zebras? Folks got no stripes.

He looks slyly around the room, trying to trick his loopy brain into seeing a room full of people with exotic striping, flashing veldt racing-colors, but no luck. They are boring, boring people, urban-suburban caucasians, mostly. Oh, a couple of asians in the corner, slow-dancing, the girl slender and small. Back of a black guy’s head in the lighted kitchen. But no stripes anywhere. No zebras.

But he saw zebras when he was a child. It comes back like a switch flicked on. Child Harold, long ago. Wet day—rainy, gray, we-said-we-were-going-to-the-zoo-so-we’re-damn-well-going day. The zebras stood huddled in one corner of their enclosure, a carpet of grass and dripping trees atop a great cement island, rising out of a rain-rippled moat. Little Harold threw a peanut, but it splashed well short of concrete zebra-land. Brown, mournful African eyes turned to look at him.

We’re dying, the eyes said.

“So am I,” Harold says quietly now, and the great sadness rises up, climbing over him like creeping night, choking him like the dust of the Serengeti plain. Dying.

He turns his attention to the television. Pictures flicker on the box, seemingly unconnected. Snatches of old movies, bits of news broadcasts, fragments of commercials from all eras. Someone must be playing with the channel-changer. But no, the glowing station indicator remains steady as the nautilus night-light. Some goddamned post-modern bullshit. Video wallpaper. He stares, fascinated. There seems no rhyme or reason. Even beyond post-modern. Somebody has dumped bits of tape together, spliced them at random. Empty pictures, ghosts with no dignity, mindless specters dancing on the photon-tracks. Punk-rock nihilist crap.

Sadness becomes an itch. Gotta find the keys. Gotta get out of here. Need air. Gotta drive, run, bust out. He pushes up off the couch. Control coming back. Something else coming back, memories. A memory. Zebras, he had said, and the woman had slapped him. We’re zebras. No, something else, but almost that. He still didn’t remember what exactly, but still, surely no reason to slap a guy...But he’d meant it. It had been important.

Fuck the keys. Just a little air, first.

Passes three more people, all vaguely familiar. That last one, the guy with the big ears, named something like...Freiberg? Right, Freiberg. Worked at the university. Linguist.

Harold stops. That’s a big chunk, all coming back at once. More than that, there’s something important there. Is it Freiberg’s party? Harold turns to ask—fuck the embarrassment, so he’s drunk, he’ll apologize tomorrow—but Freiberg has disappeared. No, Harold suddenly remembers, it was another party that Freiberg had hosted. Champagne, little sweet things baked by Dorothy What’s-her-name, celebrating...what? Something that Harold was in on, too. At the university, of course. They had been selected for...what? A government grant, an honor...? Something big. Freiberg had said “the greatest opportunity that can be imagined,” or something like that. Meant it, too. Harold remembers that he had thought so himself A great opportunity. But now there is a core of pain to the thought, a cold ache like too much ice cream against the teeth.

As these memories tease him, Harold sees a sliding door to the patio. Someone is out there in the pool of light from the fake wrought-iron lamp. Her hair is full and curly, light brown with a faint greenish tinge from the lampglow. Dorothy. Of course. He feels a tug. Was it Dorothy he came with? Dorothy, who worked at the university with him, office across the hall? As he stares at the back of her head and her slender shoulders, he suddenly knows there is a connection of some kind between them, a thread of relationship slender but sticky as spidersilk. He thinks he has it for a moment, but then it is gone, leaving nothing in its place but the dull static of the party.

What’s wrong with my fucking head?

Harold feels another cold shiver. What did he drink tonight? Just that Greek stuff? Could that be enough to turn him into a goddamn mental patient? Could the liquor be bad somehow, gone rotten during some slow journey out of the Mediterranean on a boat full of singing guys with beards? His laugh at this thought is a gurgle. He lurches outside to the patio and puts a hand onto Dorothy’s shoulder.

Hey.

When she turns and sees him her eyes flash terror, the grazing animal that sees the predator too late. She flinches back as if he might strike her.

“Get away,” she says, taking a step toward the house. “Don’t talk to me.”

He stares for a moment, shocked. What has he done? He has an abrupt vision of her hand arcing around to strike him, and now it is he who flinches—but she has not moved. He has remembered, only.

“You hit me,” he says slowly. She did. He remembers now, remembers Dorothy’s wide brown eyes and the sudden sting. “Why did you hit me?”

She is poised to flee. In the lantern light she is all sharp angles of light and shadow, except for the soft cloud of her hair. “You’re frightening me, Harold. Go away.”

He extends a shaking hand as if to hold her, but knows it will only make her bolt. Suddenly he knows there are critical things here, things he should remember. “Tell me,” he says gently—but even speaking quietly, he hears his voice tremble. “Why did you hit me?”

She stares as if trying to decide. A man leans out of the door, a tall fellow with a beard. Mikkelson. Harold doesn’t like him, although he doesn’t know why.

“Dorothy, come on. Come inside.”

She continues to stare at Harold. Mikkelson makes an impatient gesture. “Please come in, Dorothy. You...you shouldn’t be out there.” He looks around, vaguely uncomfortable. “It’s not good. Come in.”

When she does not reply, Harold feels certain that Mikkelson will come out and get her. Mikkelson is pushy, Harold remembers. A know-it-all. Someone who will always tell you why your idea is wrong, your theory untenable. Usually he’s right, but that doesn’t make him any more tolerable. But he was wrong one time, Harold remembers suddenly. One critical time. Very wrong. The memory is there, somewhere.

But Mikkelson, pushy Mikkelson, does not come out. He stares worriedly around the empty patio like a peasant in a night-time graveyard, swears, then slides back into the murmuring dark of the party.

Dorothy runs a hand through her hair. “I’m sorry, but you frighten me.”

“But why?” He lifts his hand again, leaves it hanging in air. “Tell me. I can’t remember anything. I’m sorry, Dorothy, I’m drunk as shit.” He stares at her. “Did I bring you here? To the party?”

Her gaze loses focus. “No. I don’t remember who I came with—but not you, Harold.” She laughs harshly. “Not with you and your zebras.”

“What about them?” A glimmering of crazy hope. Something will be explained.

“You rant about them. All the time. You scare me.”

“What did I say to you? Why did you hit me?”

She looks around now, as Mikkelson did, as though the suburban plank fence might become a horror-movie sliding wall, edging in to crush her.

“You scare me,” she says. “Leave me alone.” Her face is indeed frightened, but there is something else struggling there, too, struggling to get free. “I’m going to talk to Pete.”

Mikkelson’s first name, Harold remembers. Before he can close the distance between them, she slips away, a swirl of shadowed skirt over a lean haunch, a pale shape vanishing through the doorway. A puff of noise from inside is freed as she billows open the drapes on the sliding door, a clack as the screen slides closed.

Harold, beneath the moon, feels sobriety growing like a brittle skeleton beneath his skin and meat. Stark fear in Dorothy’s face. Fear in Mikkelson’s face, too. And even Freiberg, when he went past, had the nervous, doomed look of a Dachau trusty.

Another noise from the doorway. Harold steps back into the shadows, looks up to see the moon overhead, flat and unreal as a bone poker chip. There is a little scuffle as the screen slides open. A voice, raised in sorrow. The girl he had seen earlier, with two men. She’s crying.

“But I saw it!” she wails. “You saw it, too! They’re coming! It was on the news!”

“C’mon, Hannah,” one of the men says. “Like War of the Worlds, you know? Just a joke.”

“It was on the news!” She is struggling to catch her breath. “I want to go home,” she whimpers, then subsides into hiccoughing sobs.

“C’mon, you can lie down for a while. There’s a bed upstairs.”

“You’re just tired, Hannah,” the other adds. “Come on. We’ll sit with you.

The little huddle of humanity staggers back inside, leaving Harold alone again.

The A Group. It suddenly comes back to him. We were the A Group. The impressive gleam of the title is no more convincing than the metal plate on a bowling trophy. He doesn’t remember much, but he remembers that something went wrong.

Freiberg, me, Dorothy, Pete, others—we were the best. They picked us because we were the best.

Suddenly the yard seems to be closing in on him, just as it did on Dorothy. The gnarled fruit trees seem to reach out with taloned fingers. The murmuring doorway is another trap, innocent and seductive as a quicksand pit. He wants desperately to get away.

Now. Go home. Fuck the keys, fuck the jacket. Walk. That’s good. Breathe air. Think.

He reaches the garden wall in a few steps, pulls himself up, remembers he has no shoes as he catches a splinter in the ball of his foot. The fence, flimsy, made for suburban show and not to resist invasion like more ancient walls, wavers as he reaches the top. A scramble, a popped shirt button, and he tumbles into the dewy grass on the far side. Before him, lit only by the two-dimensional moon, stretches the flat, dark plain of someone else’s lawn, and beyond it, the black blanket of the ocean. Harold scrambles to his feet and begins to walk.

When it happened...

There. What is it? Just out of reach.

When it happened, they went to find linguists. The government wanted the best, and they took us. The A Group. “The A Team,” we called ourselves for a joke—like the TV show. A historic moment, Freiberg said. Something the people in our field have dreamed about for years. Contact with another species.

Harold sucks in a breath and stops. It. The landing.

And we wanted to speak with them. To share our thoughts and dreams, and learn the secrets they would bring us, the songs of the stars.

Abruptly, Harold begins to run, the lawn flying away beneath him, his socks soaking through to his cold feet. His own breath is ragged in his ears.

But how were we to know they didn’t come just as explorers, but as conquerors? The A Group, Harold remembers now, remembers the whole sad joke. I laughed at the end, when those solemn, spidery creatures put us in that white room, and told us what they were doing outside. The “Z” Group, they should have called us, I said. Not the first— the last. I laughed—God, how I laughed , hurting, hurting—and Dorothy slapped me.

Z is for Zebras in the Zoo.

He slips on some small dark thing on the lawn and stumbles, so that for a few staggering steps he windmills his arms for balance. He doesn’t look down. He knows what it is.

The zebras, he remembers, that long-ago rainy day. Did they see the people watching them—me and my folks, the riffraff zoo crowd, fat women and screaming children spilling popcorn—or did they somehow still see the veldt stretching all around them, just out of reach beyond the bounds of their captivity?

Some of them knew, Harold realizes. Their eyes had said so. You killed us, those brown eyes said. Now the few of us you have saved for your pleasure are dying, too. Captivity is another sort of death.

As he sees his other shoe lying on the wet grass beneath him, he strikes the invisible thing, the barrier. A terrific force lifts him and shakes him, filling him with lightning from scalp to toes.

On the ground, as consciousness flutters away like a firefly down a long, dark tunnel, he knows he will awake again, back in the cage with the rest of his milling herd. They know there is something wrong—deep down, all of them know—but it has been artificially suppressed somehow. Or perhaps they themselves have beaten it down.

Is that the best way? Harold is sliding into darkness. Just stop fighting? Like the zebras, he thinks. Maybe the only possible victory is to stand and suffer and shame the conqueror.

Maybe someday he will learn not to run against the fences.