

Zeb. by Gideon Samson

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1. Imara

We've got someone new in our class. A zebra. She's called Ariane and she's been here a week now.

When Ariane came she was pretty far behind in maths, but she's almost caught up now.

Zebras are really good at maths. That's what Ariane says.

'So, boys and girls,' Miss Cato said on Ariane's very first day. 'Let's have a big hello for Zeb.'

'Ariane,' said Ariane. She was standing next to Miss Cato, in front of our new interactive whiteboard.

'What?' asked Miss Cato.

'My name's Ariane.'

Miss Cato nodded. But she was not entirely convinced. 'It says Zeb. on the label,' she said.

'Zed-ee-bee. With a dot at the end.'

'That's wrong.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes,' said Ariane. 'Very sure.'

Miss Cato nodded again. 'Fine,' she said. 'Then we'll make it Ariane. Do you hear that, kids?'

We said yes Miss Cato.

'It's Ariane.'

'We said yes Miss Cato again, and in the meantime Miss Cato was peering round the classroom. 'There,' she told Ariane, pointing at an empty spot she'd found. 'You can sit next to Imara.'

Ariane looked in my direction with one eye. She had to hold her head a bit to the side to see me properly.

I looked back. At that one eye, her stripes, her black forelock. And at those long fluffy ears.

Ariane walked up to me. Her hooves made a lot of noise and halfway she accidentally knocked Pelle's pencil case off his desk. With her bottom.

'Hey!' cried Pelle.

Ariane turned her head. 'Sorry,' she said. 'I didn't do it on purpose.'

She walked back a couple of steps, but in the process she bumped into Katinka's desk. And Ravi's chair.

'Sorry,' Ariane said again. She bent down to pick up the pencil case, but with hooves that's really difficult, of course.

'Leave it,' Pelle said. He picked up his own pencil case.

Ariane walked on (this time without knocking anything over) until she'd reached my desk. She sat down next to me.

'Hi,' I said.

'Hi,' said Ariane.

I looked at her ears. Close-up they looked hairier and a bit softer. And they moved. Ariane held the rest of her head still, while turning those two pointy fuzz shells towards me. Maybe she could hear me better like that.

'I'm Imara.'

Ariane nodded. 'Pretty name,' she said.

'Yes,' I said because it is a pretty name.

'Shall we play together during break?' Ariane asked.

'OK,' I said.

Then the lesson started.

'What are we going to play?' I asked.

We were outside in the yard. Ariane snorted really loud. A real zebra snort, I thought, but I didn't say so, because maybe Ariane wouldn't like to hear something like that.

'Horsey,' said Ariane.

'Horsey?'

Ariane nodded. 'When one of us is the horse and the other one's the trainer. You know that, don't you?'

'Oh, sure,' I said. 'I know that.'

'Shall we play that then?' Ariane asked.

'OK.'

Maybe it would have been more logical to play zebras instead of horsey. But Ariane didn't think so. She didn't want to be the horse either. She'd much rather be the trainer.

'OK,' I said again. 'That makes me the horse.'

The game was lots of fun at first. I whinnied and Ariane called out 'Giddy up!' and 'Gallop!' and then I started running and whinnying even more. Ariane snorted her zebra snort the whole time and louder and louder too. And then I started galloping even faster.

'Now trot!' Ariane shouted.

'How do you do that?' I asked.

'Shhh!' said Ariane. 'Horses can't talk!'

I nodded, like a real horse, and didn't say another word. I tried to trot, but Ariane didn't approve.

'That's no good,' she said. 'Not like that.'

I tried even harder. But my trotting didn't get any better.

Ariane shouted, 'No, no!' And also, 'Give her the whip!'

'No way,' I said.

'What?'

'No whips.'

'We're only pretending,' Ariane said.

'Yes, but you still shouldn't say it.'

Ariane snorted. 'It's part of the game,' she said. 'And anyway...' Her fluff-tipped ears were turning again. 'You weren't allowed to talk.'

I didn't want to play horsey anymore. Ariane was way too strict. And I'd had enough of all that galloping too.

'Shall we play it then?' Ariane asks.

'OK.'

Ariane made a kind of whinnying sound. It sounded a bit like a horse, but a bit like a donkey too. I understood why she preferred being the trainer.

'You're it!' shouted Ariane, running off. At a trot, or maybe a gallop. In a few seconds she was gone.

'What are you doing here all by yourself, Imara?'

That was Miss Cato. I said we were playing it and I was it, but Ariane was too fast for me.

'Hm,' said Miss Cato. She asked where Zeb. was now.

'Ariane,' I said.

Miss Cato nodded. 'But where is she?'

'I don't know.'

'Hm,' said Miss Cato again.

We looked around the yard. Our schoolyard isn't very big at all, but we couldn't see any zebras anywhere.

'She'll be back in a minute,' Miss Cato said.

'Yes,' I said.

I searched for Ariane a little bit longer. Then Katinka asked if I wanted to join in with elastics.

Ariane didn't come back until break was over. Everyone was already sitting at their desks.

'Why are you so late, Zeb.?' Miss Cato asked.

'Ariane,' said Ariane. And then she answered. 'We were playing it.'

'But break ended quite a while ago,' Miss Cato said.

Ariane nodded. She was chewing something. I could see that and Miss Cato could see it too.

'What have you got in your mouth?' she asked.

'Nothing,' said Ariane.

'No chewing gum in the classroom,' Miss Cato said.

'It's not chewing gum.'

'So you do have something in your mouth.'

Ariane wiggled her head slightly. She lifted her left front hoof to scratch her right front leg.

'Spit it out,' Miss Cato said, holding her hand under Ariane's mouth.

Ariane spat out so much she filled Miss Cato's hand. It was something green. Something wet.

'Ariane?' Miss Cato asked. 'What is this?'

'Leaves,' said Ariane.

'Hm.' Miss Cato sniffed her hand for a moment. Then she walked over to the rubbish bin, shook the mushy ball off into it, and wiped her hand off on her jeans. 'Sit down quickly now,' she told Ariane. 'We're doing maths.'

2. Ozzie

'Are you just looking?' the shopkeeper asks. 'Or can I help you with something?' He looks at me expectantly, but I don't really know what to say.

I didn't know jokes were so expensive. Maybe that's why my dad's are so few and far between. We're not very rich, you see, even though he bought a new car last week. He was very serious about it. That's typical Dad. When he showed it to me and my sister, we weren't allowed to touch anything and he proudly insisted that he was going to wash it twice a week.

'Hey, Dad,' Mila said, pointing to something just above the back wheel. 'I think it's scratched.'

She'd given Dad the fright of his life. He pressed his nose up against the paintjob. 'Where?' he shouted. 'I can't see it.'

'Joke!' said Mila, but Dad couldn't see the funny side either. He'd sunk all his money into the car, of course. There wasn't any left for a joke in return.

I've got fourteen euros and thirty cents in my pocket. It was all I had.

And almost everything here costs twice that.

Finally I think of something to ask. 'Do you have any cheaper jokes anywhere?'

The shopkeeper gives me a troubled look. 'We don't like cheap jokes,' he answers. 'But what exactly are you looking for?'

Now I have to explain what I've come for. I tell him what's going on and what I've come up with.

During my story he nods slowly. 'And what's this girl's name?' he asks when I've finished.

'Ziva.'

'And can you tell me what Ziva likes?' he continues. 'I mean, does she have any hobbies? Is she learning the recorder? Can she dance? Does she go horse-riding? Has she got a beautiful singing voice?'

I have to admit that I don't know any of those things. 'We haven't actually talked that much.'

'Hm.' He frowns. 'That's a tricky one.' He asks how much money I'd be willing to spend on

Ziva.

'All the money in the world.'

'And how much do you have on you?'

'Fourteen thirty.'

'Tricky,' he says again. 'But not impossible.' He takes me over to a corner of the shop and asks if I have any objections to second-hand.

'If I have what?'

'Can it be second-hand?' he explains. 'This is the *used jokes* section and they're more economical.'

I say I'd prefer a new one.

'Are you sure?' he asks. 'You see at the moment we have a number of very old, but terribly good jokes on special. Jokes that have been a guaranteed success going back years.'

'I'd still like a new one.'

'Hm.' He says I should have come a month ago during their big sale.

'A month ago it wasn't like this with Ziva,' I say.

He understands. We walk on.

'Here are the *corny jokes*.' He points out a gigantic case. 'Generally quite cheap, but I assume you don't want them either.'

Before I can answer we've moved on.

'Look.' He opens a drawer. 'These are the *puzzlers*. Perhaps one of these?'

I look at a few, but I don't get them.

'Fifteen euros a piece,' the shopkeeper says. 'But if you see one you really love, I'll let you have it.'

I shake my head.

'Not these either?'

'No. Sorry.'

The shopkeeper looks around thoughtfully. 'Tricky, very tricky,' he mumbles. 'But it should be possible.'

I look around too. 'What's behind there?' I ask, pointing between two cases at a narrow hallway that leads to a red velvet curtain.

'That's where we keep the *jokes for eighteen plus*,' he explains. A small smile plays over his lips. 'I have to admit there are some real killers among them...' He sniggers quietly for a moment. 'But I'm sorry, I can't sell them to you.'

I'm starting to suspect that it's hopeless and I should try to solve 'the Ziva problem' some other way.

'Yes,' the shopkeeper says. 'We've got plenty here, of course, but the standard in our shop is very high, and that's reflected in the price. And with your budget...'

'What about a riddle?' I ask. 'Do you have any riddles?'

'A riddle?' The shopkeeper says it like a dirty word. 'Riddles aren't our line of business,' he says. 'For things like that you need to go to a riddle shop.' He shakes his head. 'If that's what you're looking for...'

'Well, I'm not sure, but—'

'It would be much cheaper, of course,' he interrupts me. 'With what you've got to spend you could probably get five or six. Or even a whole set.'

'Really?'

He nods. 'But then you can't go back afterwards complaining they didn't work. Places like that don't offer money-back guarantees. Let alone free exchange.'

'And here?' I ask.

'Here?' The shopkeeper puts on a serious face. 'We provide service,' he answers in solemn tones. 'No matter how light the customer's purse.'

All my money is loose in my pocket, but I get the idea he means me.

'We could have a look at the *puns*,' he says, thinking out loud. 'Though I fear most of them are quite dear.'

'Too bad.'

He nods and thinks some more. 'Another possibility...'

'Yes?'

'And it is more or less the last thing I can think of,' he says, 'but you could pick through the *other jokes* just by yourself. Regardless of quality, everything in that box costs ten euros a piece. Sometimes there's something nice in there.'

Together we walk back to the checkout. The *other jokes* box is on the counter.

'Go ahead,' he says. 'Then I can help another customer in the meantime.'

He walks off. I rummage through the box. Most of the jokes I find aren't worth a single euro, but then I see one that's hidden under the others. I pull it out and start to chuckle. I chuckle even more. The chuckling changes to chortling and then I'm roaring with laughter. I'm cracking up.

'Found something?' It's the shopkeeper again.

'Yes!' I shout. 'I'll take this one!'

The shopkeeper looks at the joke. He has to laugh too.

'Excellent choice,' he says when we've both caught our breath. 'Shall I wrap it for you?'

'No, that's OK.'

I pay for the joke. The shopkeeper puts it in a bag. He slips in a tiny free joke too. 'On the house,' he says. 'And good luck with it.'

'Thanks.'

'Will you let us know if it works?'

I promise. Then I run out of the shop.