

EXTRACT

The First Day of School

All summer long I helped grandma at the cemetery, I carried water from the pump, watered the lawn, the stonecrops, and also the other flowers that grew on each grave plot. Grandma called them succulents. They drank water like horses. I couldn't tell you how horses drink, but that's what grandma would say. I'd gather the branches that had been broken off by the wind and carry them to a pile by the graveyard fence. I'd also haul wilted flowers over to the same place.

A week before the new school year began, I went with grandma and Ms. Māra through the stores to buy school books, a suit, athletic clothes, and shoes; I'd grown during the summer and my old sneakers were only good for work at the cemetery.

I walked to school by myself. Grandma had strained her back, but Ms. Māra was away in Berlin on a business trip.

Out on the school yard I felt, well, so-so. Nobody knew me here, everybody had broken up into small groups and they were talking loudly and jostling each other. Nobody, thank God, paid any attention to me.

When the bell rang, everyone gathered in the school auditorium. The principal was talking about something for a long time and after that we all went to our classes. I knew I was in the fifth "b" and after wandering around for a moment, I found my classroom. The teacher stopped me at the door.

"Zile?" she studied me through her glasses.

"Yes."

“Daumants?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m your teacher, Vītiņa. Let’s go inside, I’ll introduce you to everybody else.”

We went into the classroom. Everyone quieted down.

“Take a seat!”

Nearly all the seats were full, only the very first one at the front was empty.

“I’m glad to see you all! During the summer you’ve all grown, and that’s OK. But, what I want you all to take to heart,” she thought for a moment, “yes, a lot will have slipped your minds, you’ll need to study hard, because,” the teacher paused here, “fifth grade is not fourth grade.”

Silent for a moment standing next to me, she continued, “And here is your new classmate, Daumants Zīle. I want to ask that you’re sensitive towards him. He’s had some problems.”

You could see that the whole class perked up its ears with interest.

“If Daumants has any questions, help him!”

Someone chuckled in the back.

“Raimonds!” the teacher’s eyes flashed behind her glasses.

“I didn’t...” muttered the chuckler.

“So I’ll say it again – sensitivity, sensitivity, and, again, sensitivity.” And then I guess she also got bored with this and took me by my sleeve to the front seat.

“Sit here! You’ll be able to follow along with everything better from here!”

I sat down.

“And now, children, tell me how you spent your summer holidays!”

One after another, in alphabetical order, the students got up and each told a story about something unwillingly. The girls talked about how they'd helped their parents, had gone on very interesting trips, the boys, all of them, claimed that they'd read books, very thick and interesting ones, but Leons had been in Egypt together with his parents and had ridden a camel.

Raimonds got everyone to laugh by announcing that during the summer he'd gone skiing.

Finally, it was my turn. I didn't know what to say. The teacher's speech about my problems had completely stunned me.

"Well, Daumants! Tell us how you spent your summer!"

Was I supposed to tell everybody that I'd been taken from one doctor and psychologist's appointment to another, that Ms. Māra finally was able to enroll me in a regular school? No, that wasn't meant for strangers!

"I...I helped my grandma!" I finally blurted out.

"Out in the country? Your grandma lives in the country?" the teacher probably wanted to help me.

"In Rīga. At the cemetery."

"At the cemetery?" she didn't understand.

I nodded.

The class was giggling, that was something unheard of.

"He works there as a ghost!" of course, that was the class clown Raimonds. There's one like him in every class.

"A ghost!" everybody was roaring and jeering like crazy.

"Interesting..." the teacher said slowly. "Good! And next, Ingrīda Žagata, tell us your story."

Ingrīda was definitely an honors student, but her story, which she told stuttering lightly, was too long and, in my opinion, boring – how she'd hoed beets in the country, fed lambs, babysat her little brother, and read books recommended by the Children's Book Council. Thick ones! It seemed like only the teacher liked her story, the boys giggled, the girls were enthusiastically chatting away and secretly pressing buttons on their mobile phones.

After the bell, the teacher announced, which was met by happy hollering from everybody, that classes were cancelled for the rest of the day, because renovation work on the school was unfortunately not yet finished. Classes would start again only on Monday.

As soon as I walked out of school, I was surrounded by a throng of boys.

“You've got problems?”

“Talk!”

“Do you work at the cemetery as a ghost?!”

“Do you go and haunt places at night?”

The crowd of boys was jumping around me and howling.

“Are you juvy?”

“A what?” I didn't understand.

“From juvenile hall? From the special school?”

I shook my shoulders.

Suddenly, one of them, who everybody called Tiny, yelled in my ear: “Do you pee your pants?”

I was silent.

“Crazies always pee their pants!” he declared.

“And drool!” somebody else added.

“Do you lose it all the time?” Tiny cautiously extended his hand and tugged at my sleeve.

Then completely unexpectedly one of my new classmates pushed Tiny aside and leaned in close to my ear: “Do you play chess?”

I nodded.

The whole crowd thundered.

“He plays chess! He plays chess! All the crazies play it! All chess players are cuckoo! He’s really nuts!”

The boys were tickled with laughter.

At that moment out of the corner of my eye I noticed that somebody was creeping around me behind my back. And...Tiny was standing across from me like a boxer, jumping around.

“You better brace yourself!”

“Fight!” the others were egging us on.

Instinctively, I shielded myself.

Tiny shoved me, but instead of stepping back, as he’d hoped, I jumped sideways.

Yeah, somebody was crouched down behind my back.

Great! I faked him out and then slugged Tiny in the nose. Grabbing his bleeding nose, Tiny turned away.

“He’s nuts! Finish him! Fight! Fight! Fight!” they all hollered.

I pulled out a handkerchief, not a particularly clean one, to be honest, and handed it to Tiny.

For a moment everybody was quiet. Then they pushed the biggest one of the bunch, who they all called Goliath, out in front of me. Goliath was at least one head taller than me.

Having studied me for a moment, he announced: “A different weight class!”

Then he turned around and ordering the rest of them said: “Let’s go!”

My new classmates, turning around every so often to look back at me, walked away.

I went home.

That was my first day of school.

The Compass

Gradually, I got used to the new school, I tried to keep my cool, and after the fight I was left alone. Only Tiny, he sat behind me, had a problem with me.

He was the one who came up with a nickname for me – Daunis¹ – poking fun at my name, Daumants, in that way. Everybody had a nickname – Goliath, Tiny, Fatso, Skeleton, Mumbler (he blushed and stuttered), Professor (the one who asked me about playing chess).

One day in math class I suddenly felt a pain in my thigh. A flea? No, somebody behind me was sneering. Fleas bite, but don’t sneer! I looked back – Tiny! He was holding a compass in his hand.

Rubbing the spot where I’d been poked, I waited for the end of class. Walking out of the school, I followed Tiny, hiding behind trees along the way.

¹ *Daunis* is a derogatory slang term derived from the Latvian word for Down Syndrome.

Having caught up to him, I grabbed Tiny's bag, tore it open and poured its contents out onto the ground. And there it was, a pencil case with the compass inside. Crack! I threw the broken compass off to the side.

I guess Tiny wasn't expecting something like that from me. He was surprised and stared at me.

"You can go!" I said.

"But...what'll I say when I get home?" Tiny was shaken. He gathered up his carefully covered textbooks and workbooks, and stuffed them back into his bag.

"That's your problem. Tell them you were picking your nose!" sometimes I could really be evil.

"Dad will beat me at home..." it seemed like any second now Tiny would start crying. "with a belt."

"They beat you at home?"

"Sure they do! Dad beats me, mom beats me!" Tiny whimpered. "For every little thing."

Yeah... I started feeling ashamed, nobody had ever beaten me, we didn't live in Dickens' time after all (Charles Dickens is a writer from long ago, who wrote really thick books about students who get beaten). And, could a little poke with a compass really be compared to a beating with a belt?

"Let's go!" I'd decided.

"To where?" Tiny didn't understand.

"To the store! Let's buy you another compass."

"I don't have any money..."

“I do!” I really did, I had a five euro note in my pocket.

Unfortunately, they didn’t sell compasses just by themselves at the store, they had to be bought as part of a set and that cost a whole four euros and ninety cents.

And that’s how the ice cream I’d been hoping for melted away.

Tiny walked with me to my house and as he was saying goodbye announced that in the future he’d only call me Daumants.

“Absolutely!” a little bit of spit splattered out as he spoke his promise. “I’ll talk to the others, maybe you’ll be accepted as part of our group.”

“Group?”

“Well, yeah. We call ourselves the Band of Beasts! Well, we’ll see! But now I have to run, otherwise...” and he ran off.

I remembered that Tiny was actually Ēriks. I decided that in the future I’d call him only by his real name.