

## EXTRACT

### Nine

There were days when Mētra had done her homework, and then there were those other, completely different days. It peeved her no end that there were so few people from who she could crib off quality homework; it just went to show you couldn't trust anyone these days.

„Is it really so hard to check out the correct answers at the back of the book and compare them against yours? What's the use of spending fifteen minutes on three problems only to get the whole thing wrong anyway?” Mētra complained to her desk mate Jana.

On those rare occasions when the girl took the trouble to do her own homework, it was always perfect. *She* would never let anyone copy from her – with the exception of Andris V. who was sitting behind her. As far as anyone else was concerned, Mētra's excuse was that she wasn't sure the problem had been solved correctly – probably not. The reason why Mētra lent her homework to Andris was that he was a nice enough bloke hopeless at maths; definitely no rival to her. The teacher would never believe the guy had done the homework himself – that's how bad he was. As soon as Mētra heard the teacher ask for a volunteer to write out the homework on the blackboard, her hand shot up first. She avoided meeting classmates' eyes then, fixing her gaze steadily on the copybook.

When the teacher called Mētra to the blackboard, the girl had a moment of respite, however brief – she was quick at maths. There was no need to consult her notes: clusters of numerals, brackets and dots literally poured from her hand to arrange themselves obediently in orderly rows. Not everyone in the classroom could match Mētra's speed. Before the problem was

solved, Andris V., the boy sitting right behind Mētra, pushed his copybook aside, his head propped up on his hands, and followed the movements of her right hand.

„Wish I had one of these clever hands,” he mused and, busy closely observing Mētra’s hand from which numbers were rolling out like cars from a tunnel, almost slid off the desk into his desk mate Guntis’s lap.

„Oi, you poof, let me work in peace!” Guntis grumbled theatrically.

On the right side of the blackboard, the solution line flicked its tail up so high that Mētra had to stand on tippy toes while keeping her skirt in place with her left hand.

„Mētra’s got her skirt smudged with chalk,” Laura commented loudly, „in case someone has missed it.”

„Mētra should carry a stool with her,” said Andris, mighty brave as long as Mētra was not looking.

„Dork,” Mētra mentally commented. Both of them knew: she will be helping Andris again with the first test work that comes their way. They had this weird kind of cooperation going on. As a rule, Mētra was never mean-spirited in her dealings with the boys – particularly when they had to recite poems in front of the class. Mētra hated poems; as far as she was concerned, they had more to do with sports than with knowledge. Besides, no-one in their right mind ever used the kind of language one saw in poems – not even in movies. Not even in the black-and-white ones. Her desk was ideally placed for prompting recitalists: „I’m only too happy to do the dirty on poets.”

Mētra helped boys and Jana. Never the other girls. When it was Mētra’s turn to recite, the only prompter who didn’t make her burst into hysteric laughter was Andris. Mētra had

trained herself to read Andris' lips. Incidentally, he had even taken to learning poems by heart so as to be able to look into Mētra's eyes as he was prompting.

The teacher parked her bottom on the windowsill, took off her thick specs and, after some time spent polishing and cleaning them, finally popped them back on.

„So, who did your parents vote for then?” she inquired.

Valdis came up with the local dentist's name; Dacīte kept the joke going, offering a seventeen-year old pop singer's stage name. The maths teacher let out a heavy sigh and accused the youngsters of their lack of awareness of the significant role of elections in a democratic state.

The students giggled; the teacher still went on with her political sermon.

Mētra was irritated by this palaver: she wanted her brilliant maths to take the spotlight.

The thing is, Mētra often felt a bit superior to her schoolmates – or at least different. That's because she knew a secret: teachers are people like everyone else.

As for her father, Mētra never thought of him as a teacher. He had, after all, been the Headmaster – who, had he not died, would have eventually also taught physics to his own daughter. Teachers did generally belong to a whole separate class of people, as Mētra's mum used to say behind their backs. The couple of years Mētra had spent being the Headmaster's daughter had not seemed a particular nuisance. As far as she was concerned, it had actually been something of a bonus – with the exception of the awkward moments when the Headmaster had asked his daughter to pick up the wrappers and papers littering the school's lawn. Knowing how much the school meant to her dad, she just couldn't say no. There were

times when he spent day and night at work. Unlike her mum, Mētra didn't mind Dad's being constantly busy and delayed. Dad had often been late; Mum, on the other hand, was always in favour of leaving some twenty minutes early. And that's the way it had gone: inside, Mum and Dad making a fuss and working things out; outside, Mētra standing by the porch and making a mark in an apple-tree's bark for every ten minutes. The result had been a funny little stripy tree. An Antonovka.

The Headmaster had never discussed teachers with Mētra. However, he had been in the habit of doing so with his wife. While Mētra had been only too happy to eavesdrop, she would have never spread or used information obtained in such a dubious manner. Every now and then, Mētra's dad had invited a teacher for a cup of coffee at home. Which had meant that the teacher in question had had some sort of trouble at work. A little unpleasantness, as Headmaster Pīlādzis would have had it. On such occasions, Vija Pīlādze, the Headmaster's wife, would lay the little table in the living room. Cucumber or salami sandwiches, a bowlful of biscuits, china cups with the golden rim and the blue flower pattern. Mētra would have loved to stay and listen; Dad, however, had always ushered his daughter discreetly out, suggesting that she go and check on the rabbits: „We have some work talk to do, bunny. Mrs A. may shed a tear or two. You know. You can join us later. Agreed?”

Mētra would sulk a little; she thought it just wasn't fair that Mum was allowed to stay and listen. In an hour's time, she would join the coffee party and notice that the teacher's eyes were indeed a bit red from crying. She would never get to know why, as no-one ever mentioned school again. Dad, the teacher and Mētra's mum were having a friendly chat, sharing jokes about the local people and events – as if they had nothing to do with teaching

anymore. No, it actually went even further than that: now they were making plans for the grand teachers' party.

Boy, did Mētra love teachers' parties! While the grownups were having fun in the assembly hall, she and another three teachers' kids were allowed in the basement, the little Novuss-game room adjacent to the school kitchen.

„And what if I start to miss you two?” Mētra whined and wrapped her arms closely around Dad's neck. He was all spruced up and fragrant.

„Dad! You've got two grey hair! How terrible!”

„Take this. And this one, too.” And with the key to the gym-hall Mētra got hold of another one – the most important key of all.

„This is the key to the projection cabin. Be careful and make sure no-one notices you up there. Don't switch the light on! You will see that your parents are fine.””

Even now, thinking back to those times, Mētra couldn't figure out why Dad had given her the key to the projection cabin. It oversaw the whole assembly hall, revealing all sorts of shocking goings-on! When the teachers, slightly inebriated, were partying, they behaved in a very different way. Who knew they also loved fooling around? They had their own relay-races, charades, raffle and dances! The music, however, was awful and they were incredibly lame dancers. Luckily, the projection cabin was pretty sound-proof. This spying business was so exciting that all of the teachers' kids were fighting for a place in front of the tiny window and took turns, doubling up with suppressed laughter in the corner of the cabin. The party came to an end with Mētra's form tutor collapsing on a stack of assembly hall chairs. Now it

was obvious who were responsible for the chair breaking thing: not the students at their school dance when the chaperoning teacher was literally following their every move – it was the teachers themselves when no-one was watching.

„That’s what they think,” Mētra giggled to herself. „Of course we are watching!”

The whole scene reminded her of silent movies. Except, she thought, the teachers were better actors in the classroom, when they were actually teaching. For instance, when they had to play the ultimate bastards.

„Mrs teacher, I’m ready!”

The problem on the blackboard was solved, the result – twice underlined.

Mētra was collecting straight A’s; other grades were of no use to her. If laziness had got the better over her ability, the girl would have possibly felt ashamed: she knew she had the head for great grades. She couldn’t afford lower ones now. Mum would start lecturing her, then proceed to delve into her hard life and ultimately everything would end with yet another bout of sobbing.

„I’d rather she get interested in politics or something. Or sports, or crosswords – anything,”

Mētra sighed.

There were times when these letters – school grades – provided the only insight into her daughter’s life. After her husband’s demise, Vija Pīlādze was consumed by infinite sadness.

„Like a fish out of water,” she kept repeating monotonously, whether there was anyone listening or not. Despair, uncertainty and a feeling of insecurity about the future were slowly digging a deep trench in the relationship between the daughter and the mother. One of them should have jumped over before it was too late. Mother often thought of her daughter as a

mere child. They would talk – eventually; after all, a child does see things differently, she felt. Mētra was likewise staving off the conversation like she would chase off a dark bogey, because she had no idea: how did one do it? Mētra didn't know how to help Mum – what to say when Mum was crying. Her best effort was bracing herself to sit down next to Mum, plonking the ginger tomcat on her lap and offering a hanky. The latter was refused – Mum always had one of her own.

Mētra wanted to be strong. Apart from the cat, she had no-one to talk to about the big stuff. Her young person's grief for Dad had been hidden and locked up, the key thrown away. Mētra couldn't afford a luxury like that: she was sure she had to look after her mum. When Mum's sister called from Riga, asking all sorts of questions about the way they were feeling, Mētra always answered:

„We're doing quite alright. Just fine.”

Mētra knew exactly the way she had to behave when she hadn't done her homework: turn up at the classroom early, offer to wet the sponge and exchange a polite word or two with the teacher, looking her in the eye.

Reasons for her laziness could be different. Since Mētra never took notes of the next day's assignments, much depended on whether anyone was hanging around on Skype or not. If push came to shove, she logged on to Facebook although that was something she actually didn't like: everyone did that. If Mētra had not done her homework, she knew the drill: stay quiet during the lesson, look the teacher straight in the eye and keep nodding understandingly. That worked – she was not called to the blackboard and was not picked on.

Mētra was actually really bright – it’s just that she was also lazy. With steely consistency, she followed her own computations of which matters deserved a bigger part of her sunny childhood and which – a smaller one. Most of the new school material seemed vaguely familiar and Mētra had even started to believe in reincarnation: formulas and texts just were already there, inside her head. She made herself do less larking about during the classes than during the breaks; this was another way of saving time: she rarely opened a textbook outside the classroom. Well, maybe sometimes, when she had to memorise a grammar rule – she hated them. A perfect A-student, Mētra was already in Form 7 and yet hadn’t learned a single poem by heart. Except for lyrics to some choral songs which had rolled off her tongue so often that she knew the first two verses of at least five songs.

Tongues were wagging about all these years of good grades being due to Mētra’s family ties; Mētra didn’t give a damn. She was the Headmaster’s daughter, and there was nothing she could do about it. In any case, her guardian angel the Headmaster was now dead and buried, and yet Mētra stuck to her usual style of studies – now as an ex-daddy’s little daughter.

Mētra knew that the school year would come to an end with yet another spring, and teachers would smilingly approach her with the flattering invitation to take part in a contest or an erudite quiz. The whole contest system was smoothly perfected: in the spring, when everyone else was struggling with the simple current material, Mētra was allowed to solve problems from difficult fat books during the lessons. Sometimes she just sat there watching her classmates, pulling faces and doing nothing. At the end of the lesson the teacher said sympathetically that it had been a really tough problem. The situation was more complicated



if another classmate – Laura or Sanda – was taking part in the contest. Whenever that happened, Mētra had to keep up with them and couldn't spend as much time dawdling – but that was also fun. Laura and Sanda were clever girls and Mētra was secretly envious of their diligence in studies. Diligence was one thing Mētra was lacking, and she had no idea where one could learn it or acquire in any other way. Mētra was also not clear on where lay the line between healthy inquisitiveness and sick ambition, and that was why she once in a while made a point of declaring aloud her own indifference towards studies. Both girls were also the only ones she could copy off from, or call late at night to check what was the assignment for the next day – should it suddenly come into Mum's head to ask to see some beautifully written homework. A misfortune like that hit her about twice a year. Which was when Mētra called Sanda and asked: „What's for tomorrow?” It wasn't actually that hard at all.

Until one day when Sanda had had enough and started writing down assignments in Mētra's planner. Mētra felt ashamed, and yet she never showed it – and didn't thank her either. Sanda should blame herself for having such a thin skin.

Mētra would have loved to sit next to Sanda or Laura during the tests to avoid the strain and sustained thinking even on these occasions; however, it was not allowed to change seats for the test only, and it would be so depressing to be sitting next to either of these swats throughout the school year: they were actually studying at classes. Which went against Mētra's principles. So eventually, when they did get slapped with a test, Mētra got her act together and did quite well – often even better than Sanda or Laura.

Mum used to fry an egg for her on the morning of the maths contest; sometimes she even made the royal potato and onion fry-up; the latter was a special gesture from Mum who

abhorred the smell of onion so much that she even had problems with peeling one – never mind chopping. And then Sanda’s dad picked Mētra up and drove them to the neighbouring school. Sanda was obviously nervous, and Mētra tried and soothed her. Before that, they stopped by for a second breakfast at the maths teacher’s. She usually made lean pancakes with freshly crushed strawberries which Mētra just couldn’t refuse. Mētra had never liked Mum’s pancakes, though – she didn’t think it even was proper food. She was a meat-and-potato lover, just like Dad. Afterwards, both Mētra and Sanda were given a small chocolate bar by the teacher.

„I’m saving it for Mum,” Mētra thought.

Mētra did well at maths contests – possibly thanks to her reserved approach. While the cleverest brains of the district were sweating away, poring over the worksheets, Mētra’s thoughts wandered far away, going back, for instance, to her memories of the summer. Eventually she recollected herself and started to figure out how to get off the hook with her pride intact. Then she pulled herself together and solved the problems, correctly most of the time.

She had a little crib with her at the maths contest. The nine times table. Mētra couldn’t explain why. She just couldn’t do it, and that’s that. She couldn’t multiply by nine to save her life.

A couple more days, and the whole school would – presumably – hear about her great results at the maths contest; Mētra would be able to sigh a relief, having ensured herself against unpleasant and unexpected calls to the blackboard. For taking part in the maths contest, the

girls were rewarded with A's. The maths teacher felt so elated that she even asked the whole class to solve one of the maths contest problems – the fatal one, the one she couldn't solve without the nine times table. And so she just sat there, marvelling at her own obtuseness. Why was it that everything else found its way into her head and stayed right there: titles, names, dates and years, gossips – everything but the nine times table? She was a clever girl. And even the F students among her classmates had somehow managed to learn it by now. Even Andris had! What was it with her?

In the hopes that the teacher would soon get over this crazy idea, Mētra handed in her test work half-finished. Except that didn't happen.

As the next lesson started, the first thing that the teacher did was look at Mētra. The girl had even done her homework and, prodded by her conscience, offered it to half of the class for copying. After that, however, the teacher seemed to avoid meeting Mētra's eye and went on to hand out worksheets again. There was a lot of catcalling and protesting that they hadn't even started with the new material yet.

„Don't you worry. Today all of you have the opportunity to improve your grades. I am giving real marks for this. It is the multiples of nine. You have two minutes,” said the teacher and took a place in the back of the classroom, folding her hands on the fluffy jumper.

Mētra was shocked. This – after all those hypocritical pancakes and friendly hours after the classes, spent cordially preparing for maths competitions? Now that'll be the day! She would be loathe to get an F for rubbish of this sort. How on earth was she to explain it to Mum? Or classmates, for that matter? She would be left with egg on her face. By the time Mētra had

pulled herself together and started adding the nines, the short time allowed for the test was already over. Mētra's sheet was half-empty: she had only got as far as nine times three.

She scrawled the author's name on the top of the sheet: Andris Virsenieks. Andris had quite possibly earned yet another F today, even if he was unaware of the fact himself. What did it matter to him, anyway – one bad grade more or less, same difference. Mētra felt at the moment that, if she were to say it out loud, everyone would surely agree.

Mētra anticipated the next maths lesson about as keenly as a visit to the dentist. On the night before, she had been unable to fall asleep and, at some point, even burst into tears. She had had to put a stop to the tears, however, as Mum had noticed and started asking questions. To get rid of her and carry on sobbing over her disgrace in her pillow undisturbed, Mētra had made up a story of crying for her Dad. Later, Mētra dreamt of some live and very distorted nines. Some of them started harassing her in the shape of lean pancakes, and, for some reason, Mētra had to eat them all. Her mouth was a smear of strawberry jam, as red as blood. Suddenly Mētra caught sight of a headless nine, dressed up in Andris Virsenieks' clothes. She had bitten off her classmate's head complete with the hair, and her own head was under attack from giant lice.

When Mētra woke up, the sky outside was red with dawn. She told Mum that she was sick, yet changed her mind immediately and insisted on going to school.

The maths teacher was all dressed up; she told everyone to remain on their feet after the usual exchange of greetings. That sort of thing was only done when it was someone's birthday, so there was a lot of whispering and wondering who could possibly be the birthday boy or girl.

The teacher, however, proceeded to hand out the test works, and those who had been given theirs were allowed to sit down. Mētra realised what was coming but was powerless to do anything about it. Her classmates were busy cheering the results of the bizarre test and calculating its possible impact on the final grade in their school-report. When only Andris and Mētra remained standing, the teacher asked for silence in the classroom. Then she spoke: „I am holding two test works in my hand. One of them is absolutely perfect, the other one looks like this: it is half-empty.”

The classmates watched Mētra and Andris.

„So what’s the big deal? Andris is a loser,” said Valdis.

„And now for the funny part,” the teacher went on. „Both test works have been written by Andris alone. How come, Andris?”

Mētra was shaking, her cheeks were burning up. She could stand it no longer and dashed for the door clumsily, bumping her thigh painfully against the edge of a desk.

At critical moments, it was good to hide away in the loo. Tears were streaming down Mētra’s face and she didn’t even notice Sanda walking in.

„Stop it, Mētra. Don’t be silly. It’s ok.”

The last person Mētra was expecting any sympathy from was her rival Sanda, and it only made her tears even worse. Sanda offered a clean handkerchief which Mētra pushed away. She sobbed:

„I want to switch schools, I just want to switch schools, I’m fed up with everything here.”

Sanda took Mētra by her wet hand.

„You need some fresh air. Come with me.”

They sat down on the tyres by the sports ground. The break had not started yet.

„It’s such a trifle! Everyone forgets things. You can always retake the test, Mētra. You can do it all!”

„No, I can’t! Never could. I mean the multiples of nine. You think I haven’t tried learning the moronic nine times table! You really think I haven’t tried? I just can’t do it. I am a moron. I’m an idiot!”

„Stop it, Mētra.”

„Why is it that she seems to get such a kick out of humiliating me? I am never setting foot inside her classroom again, ever.” Mētra burst into tears again. However Sanda just wouldn’t let it go.

„Look, I am going to show you something.”

Snivelling, Mētra gave in.

„Lay your hands on your lap, both of them. Keep them next to each other, so you can see all the fingers. Now give your fingers numbers, left to right – from the leftest pinkie of your left hand to the rightest pinkie of your right hand, one to ten. What’s the number of this one?” Sanda made sure that Mētra had got it right. Mētra kept staring at her fingers. She had been biting her nails again.

„Aha, yes. Right. So you have got ten fingers and ten numbers. Left to right. One to ten. Only keep it in mind that the trick only works with the nine times table, no other numbers! Now name a number you would like to multiply by nine!”

Mētra recalled her half-empty sheet of paper on which she had got stuck at four times nine:

„Four. Nine times four.”

„Now bend your fourth finger. That’s right, the index finger of the left hand. Now don’t move.”

Mētra looked at her hands; the brief pause was enough time for her to question Sanda’s learning method. What kind of monkey-business was that?

„Your fourth finger is bent; look at both hands at once: you can easily read the result of four times nine.”

Suddenly Mētra saw it. That was quite funny, actually.

„I see it! Thirty six! To the left from the bent finger, there are three straight ones; to the right there are six! Is it really going to work for multiplying by other numbers?!”

„Check it. Try multiplying by any number you want!” Sanda was smiling.

„Nine times nine!” incredulous, Mētra bent her ring-finger, finger number nine. She burst out laughing.

„You’re crazy! I see it! I see it! Eighty-one! Eight fingers to the left from the bent finger, only one finger to the right! Eighty-one!”

There was no stopping Mētra now; she kept playing at multiply-by-nine on her fingers, on and on. Sanda was nodding contentedly and reminded her once again that this sort of **luck** was only possible when dealing with nine. By now, Mētra had already tried multiplying nine by all the other numbers several times over, using the sixth finger, the seventh – and even the first! And the result was spot on: there had remained exactly nine fingers to the right of the bent first digit! One by nine is nine!

„I’m ready to retake the test immediately!” Mētra announced; Sanda, however, suggested waiting a few more days. She knew that by night Mētra would have learned the multiplication table by heart without even noticing.

The teacher was approaching the sports ground.

„Mrs teacher! Mētra can do it now!”

„It’s alright. We have to get back to the class,” urged the maths teacher. „Today we have a good cause for celebrating.”

„Right, an excellent one,” Mētra agreed softly, still busy contemplating her fingers.

„I have no idea how you did it, Mētra – you will have to explain it to me sometime; nevertheless, you have shown some really impressive results at the maths competition! Sanda has also been very successful; congratulations, girls! We have a cake in the classroom.”

The teacher stood in front of them.

„Andris went downstairs to the canteen to fetch some soda. You could lend him a hand, Mētra.”

Mētra didn’t feel like sweets. Actually, she didn’t feel like anything much. Andris will be sitting right behind her every day. And, sooner or later, they will have to talk to each other.