I CAN HEAR MYSELF BREATHING

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This novel has been written in order to encourage, motivate and entertain you.

If you do not feel like reading it today, save it for some sunnier days.

Even if the days are not exactly sunny, just remember that you can always talk to somebody.

The sorrow lessens through talking, while happiness doubles in size.

Sanja

Not everything is as it seems. Mostly.

Although I had a rather average wish for learning, it was said that my intelligence was not an average one. I've been winning commendation certificates and getting straight As in the class register since forever. This was my very own accomplishment, though I often heard that my ability to do the calculations so quickly was also due to: the genetics, a good school system and the support of friends. Heavy bullshit.

My parents, apart from boasting around that their child has straight As and keeps winning awards, have absolutely no clue how I manage to do it. My teachers do not chat about what it's like when you have to go to a competition while suffering from a fever, because they vouched for you, chose you, prepared you and sent you there.

As for male and female friends...

Let's not joke around, they don't give a fig about my awards. It's not as if I were a basketball player or a footballer.

I attended school regularly but refused to go to competitions as long as I possibly could. Nevertheless, since I found dealing with the disappointed teachers and the sullen parents much harder than any equation, even if it were to have a hundred variables, I drew a line there and decided to start preparing for the stupid competition.

And I was preparing myself for it, it's not like I wasn't. I also knew what type of questions to expect. I was not worried about any of that. What did worry me was what was to come afterwards.

The municipal competition.

District.

Republic.

International.

Terror was creeping up starting from my toes, going through my muscles, all the way to my tummy, and then even to my "superior" brain.

The mere thought of a change, travelling, many new people and horrid buses, paralysed me. I knew that that was a no go...

I experienced that first weird energy crash and the appearance of the freezing cold sweat at my school, on my own floor, outside my very own classroom. I had a kilo of books which I did not need in my backpack and a fever of 38,2C which made it even harder to carry them.

Workbooks are usually not taken to competitions, as they serve no purpose there, while refreshing and doing exercises just before the actual test is not very smart, at least not in my case.

The teacher insisted that I should be there as it was only a school level competition, I would pass it even with my hands tied behind my back. I used my right hand to write and I passed, though prior to the test itself, I thought I was going to faint or fall into a trance of some sort, deliriously mumbling random numbers, formulas or, worse still, mentioning names. All of it made my backpack extra heavy. I lowered it into a corner and ran to the toilet like some lunatic.

I wanted to simply walk out of the school, throw away the backpack into some hellhole, go home to bed and hug Fyodor, who would definitely sense that something was off.

Instead, I washed my face in the toilet, fearing that the teacher would get angry with me for not being there and for chosing this very moment to get sick, so I went back to the classroom.

My t-shirt was completely wet though not like when you play basketball but rather as if somebody spilt a bucket of freezing cold water down your neck. I sat down and went on answering questions, while convincing myself that it was all most likely due to the fever.

When I found out that I passed through, I was neither happy, nor sad. I felt nothing.

I only knew that I did not wish to go onto the municipal competition. I did not want to go to somebody else's school, somebody else's corridor and somebody else's toilet. However, nobody bothered to ask me about that. My success was theirs as well. And I had the obligation to go – there was no question about it.

The fact that I can solve problems easily has nothing to do with whether I want to fill up my draws with diplomas that mean very little to me, especially when each and every one invariably includes nausea, panic and fear.

"Your only obligation is to study", I heard my dad's voice in my head. I shuddered and went to the loo.

Even just the thought of going into another school made my stomach churn.

I did prepare, I studied, practiced, sat on my bed with the light on and a notebook, and I enjoyed solving mathematical problems more and more, especially when I managed to get the right answer the first time round but as soon as I would think of the competition, I would get the diarrhoea.

Literally.

You know that expression “to shit one’s pants with fear”? Well, that is what used to happen to me, literally, I would get so scared I would shit myself. That is when I realised that something was, actually, wrong there.

It was not a virus every time.

I already knew the procedure:

Getting up as early as possible,

Breathing,

First visit to the loo,

Lots of water.

A shower,

Brushing teeth,

Getting dressed,

Second visit to the loo.

Packing the backpack,

Packing some water and having one sip

While putting the shoes on.

And once again to the loo, so that I wouldn't have to use the smelly one at school. Though, most likely, I will have to go there as well, just in case. I used to do many things just in case.

It was pouring that day.

I sat on the bus in the seat that was facing backwards, called my dad on the phone and told him how I managed to do all the problems except for one, that I checked with the other students and that, if everything's ok, I would pass the municipal competition, as well. He was questioning me as to why I did not complete all of it, what type of a problem it was and had I failed to learn that lesson.

I had not failed to learn it, I just did not have enough time to do it, it was the very last one – I lied, then got off the bus and threw up.

My t-shirt dried off a bit, the lump in my throat disappeared and my hands stopped shaking. I was content that it was over. The municipal competition and the nausea, both.

I knew I would have to proceed to the district level and I did not care anymore about when the results would be out.

Naturally, mum and dad were over the moon when the list was posted.

The neighbours used to say: “You will get far in life”.

While dad nodded his head with satisfaction.

My sister was the only one to say: “This calls for a celebration”, and she brought me a present.

Actually, my half-sister.

My sister hated it when somebody would say that we were half-siblings.

She used to say that they were just being jerks; that we were brother and sister like any other siblings, you cannot half-love somebody, hence we were not half-siblings.

She was not at all like my dad and one was more likely to think that she was mum's daughter, rather than his.

She never wanted to study at university but she did it anyway, because dad insisted. However, she dropped out after the first semester. That's when the war broke out between the two of them, and my sister's relocation had already started to "brew".

I found it really weird listening to dad howling her name around our house. Mila[1] should not sound like that but dad managed to destroy even that, the name his chose for her himself.

And thus, their, not so silent war, dragged on until she "got back on her feet", as she likes to say, eventually managing to "take matters into her own hands" and leave.

Sometimes I regretted she had not taken me with her.

[1] Mila is a name in Serbian but also an adjective meaning *darling* (translator's note).

Mila ran her own beauty salon, had a really good income, drove a car, smoked, though she also knew how to listen, to treat one to an ice-cream and to give Fyodor as a gift.

She told me that cats know when we are nervous, or uptight, sad… And that now I have somebody to love me unconditionally, even though he is quite wilful.

It was then that I understood she was talking about herself and that she wanted me to have somebody I could pester, since she had moved out. She was dumbfounded when I called the cat Fyodor, as in Dostoevsky, and said that she had been expecting some mathematician's name. in fact, she thought I would name it Miles or Zack or something similar. I didn't want neither a mathematician, nor a physicist in the house, I told her, dad and I are "more than enough".

She just nodded because she was the only one who understood it all.

The spray of the shower was very pleasant that morning.

The grey cells were doing their part and all sorts of ideas came to mind while I was having a shower. This was the place where I was finally alone with my own goals and with no pressure.

I considered learning to play the guitar and draw cartoons. To learn to drive before I was eighteen or to buy a PlayStation. However, since I was not at all musical and could not even draw the stickman, I quit making further plans. Furthermore, the car and the PlayStation both cost a fair bit, hence… Still, it was rather nice letting my imagination run amuck. As my dad used to say, you'd do anything to avoid studying or preparing for the competition. Honestly, doing math exercises and studying was never a problem for me, but renewed lingering and waiting, new corridors, toilets and classrooms were. New phone conversations with my dad.

Anything other than an A was considered a defeat, and whenever I ended up getting a B or, God forbid, a C, there would only be silence at home. I was being punished by the silence in the living room and dad's disappointed mug.

Mila was the first to notice that something was off. Because she actually talked to me.

At times she would talk too much but at least I had the impression that I had a conversation partner for all sorts of topics, not just about the school. She asked me how I was doing, while we were slowly sipping juice from the cans and walking around the Temple.

“I have no idea”, I mumbled. But I did have an idea, everything was being crystal clear to me ever since the day I enrolled in high school with the maximum score. Even though I ended up avoiding going to the district level, other competitions, plus my “good kid” reputation helped me to graduate with all As.

“Aren’t you happy that you got into high school amongst the top five students, like a proper nerd?”, she asked me and I just shrugged my shoulders.

Even back then she sensed that something was not as it should be but I managed to convince her that it was just a small tizzy due to the change.

“Right, that’s completely ok”, she said, “but…”

More and more often she would be asking questions and uttering that famous BUT. And more and more often, I avoided to answer her.

I avoided going to the district competition by breaking the index finger on my right hand.

The drought threatened to break down the door of the room. And since it did slam with all its might the previous day and my dad was quite bothered by the noise in the house, I endured a two-hour grumbling session with short breaks.

In short, I extended my arm and the door slammed onto my fingers with all its force.

I thought my eyes would pop out from the pain.

I ended up having a fracture due to which I was unable to write for the next month, so I only had to do oral tests at school. Had it been anyone else, I believe that the teachers would have been rolling their eyes but since it was me, everybody was saying how sorry they were and that they were hoping that I would recover as soon as possible. Once I figured that out, I started to think that I was indeed a “nerd”. I did not want to do any more competitions, even though dad kept repeating that he would find somebody to write and draw as per my instructions. I told him that, even if he manages to accomplish that, I would remain silent because I did not want to embarrass myself. We did not talk for a whole month.

All Mila said was: “Bah, that competition… you did not want to do it anyway, school is not the only thing that is important in life”.

SCHOOL IS NOT

THE ONLY THING IMPORTANT IN LIFE!