Winter 1959

Friday Afternoon

Diane Fortier
Western Michigan University

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As she watched the clouds drifting lazily along in their sea of blue, Susan wished to join them. The teacher’s voice droned on and on, reminding her of her father’s snoring on Sunday afternoon. “She’s probably been teaching fourth grade since she was born,” Susan thought.

She jerked restlessly and slouched down to a more comfortable position. Seven months in the same seat had revealed many good positions to her, but this was her favorite. Stiffening one leg and bracing it against the leg of the seat in front, she twisted around so she could not slide.

Cautiously, always keeping her hands out of the teacher’s view, she took first her geography, then her math book out of her desk. The desks had shelves for books and writing materials. Each desk was connected to the seat in front with all the seats and desks nailed to wooden strips on the floor. She put her math book on her geography, which was larger, and pushed them to the protruding edge of the next seat. Opening her science book, she propped it up against the other two and put her eraser in front of it to prevent its sliding forward.

After much groping and fumbling in the inside of her desk, she managed to find the pen she had been using lately. Needing something to occupy her hands, she had formed the habit of boring holes in the edge of the desk where no one noticed them, and in a position where the teacher could not see what she was doing. The hole she was working on was almost one-half inch deep now, and for a moment she thought of moving on to the next, but decided against it. Maybe she would make this her masterpiece. As it was the fourth in an even row, she could make it the middle of seven. Looking at her row more closely, she noticed that each was a little larger than the last. She gave the second and third ones a couple of turns, then leaned back and looked at them. The last hole needed a few more turns to make it the right size.
Inserting her pen, she glanced at the clock, made sure the teacher wasn't watching, and took up her post at the window again. "That cloud looks like a bear with one eye," she thought. "If I were up there I could ride him. What would it be like to ride a cloud bear?"

The boy playing with the cord on the window shade moved it slightly, and a ray of sunlight hit her eye. She leaned sideways a little and glared fiercely at him. Remembering other encounters with her, he moved the shade back.

Now she began to search for some other means of amusement. The hole was big enough and she didn't feel like starting another. She tried to remember how long she had been staring out the window. "It must have been ten minutes at least," she thought, "so it must be at least 2:45, maybe 2:44." She wrote 2:44 on her desk and looked at the clock. "2:39—five minutes off." Only four minutes had passed. She subtracted 2:39 from 3:00. Just then the clock clicked and it was 2:40. "That's twenty minutes. Twenty times sixty is twelve hundred seconds." She started counting slowly but the clock did not click until she got to eighty-seven so she gave that up.

A buzzing sound attracted her attention to the seat beside her where a boy had trapped a fly. She turned to watch and saw him take a pin from his pocket. Taking a quick peek at the teacher, she leaned over and asked what he was going to do.

"I'm going to stick him through the middle and pin him to the desk," he announced gleefully.

"Don't you dare!"

"Try and stop me!" he taunted.

At first she didn't believe him, but seeing him shift the fly to his thumb and forefinger, she knew he was serious. She reached into her desk and felt for her ruler. Many hours of rubbing had brought the metal edge to a razor sharpness. She glanced over at the tormentor and waited until his attention was completely concentrated on the fly. Just as he was about to stab, she brought the sharp edge down on his bare arm. By the time he got his mouth open her ruler was back in its place and she was reading intently. His startled gasp quickly drew the teacher's attention who, looking up, checked him sharply. Waiting a few minutes until the teacher was again absorbed in her book, Susan flashed her enemy a triumphant grin, almost a smirk.

Restless again, she wrote from one to nine hundred on the margin of her book then crossed off ninety-eight, leaving eight hundred and two. The amount of time left seemed so endless that she turned to another game, that of balancing her ruler on her pencil. This was one of her more dangerous games, because if the ruler dropped on the
floor, the teacher would be sure to catch her. She was very successful for a while, and was just beginning to feel proud of herself when the ruler slipped. She caught it in mid-air. It was such a close call that she decided it was time to quit. She could not possibly have that kind of luck twice. Putting her pencil and ruler quickly into her desk, she glanced at the clock and crossed off two hundred and three numbers, then forty more.

It was time now to play her last game. This was the same game she played every afternoon just before the bell rang. Her desk and the wooden strips were islands of safety and the whole floor was a sea of poison. The idea was to see how brave she was by coming close to the floor without actually touching it. She slid further and further. She would have to hold on tight. "Almost touched it—oh—quick, feet, swing over to the railings!" She shifted quickly at the last moment and barely got her foot on the strip. "I'm slipping!" she thought, horror stricken. "It's going to get me!" She clawed frantically at the back of her desk. Just as she was sliding off the railing, the bell rang. She was saved! She stepped firmly into the poison which parted, grew firm, and school was over for two days.