

*Jean McGarry***Dr. Casey's Temporization**

He erased the blackboard, the stray marks, the puffs of chalk, the small calculation slanted in the lower corner, and the first student stood in the doorway clearing her throat, leaning a bag of books against the doorpost. Her feet were just on the threshold and a blue dress, gathered at the waist, hung half in his office, where you could smell the mud in the clay-potted plants; half in the corridor, which had no air at all, except what entered through the first-floor hallway window.

The sunless daylight, his floury hands, the stiff blue dress, the round hem open to the floor, the books tipped on the bookshelves, the open box of cigarettes on his desk. He motioned and she shut the door and sat on a wooden chair, leaning the book bag against her leg. There was an ashtray, big as a plate, on his desk, filled with the butts of brown cigarettes. The paper in her hand, plain white, contained the calculation. He took it and copied the numbers directly onto the blackboard. She sat back in the chair, sighed. The dress was big as a tent, innumerable folds. The morning light through his paneless windows was glass-colored cool. She had a white spot on her fingernail, red marks across the palm from her bag. And my shoulders are as thin as trellising, she thought.

"And that's all there is to it," he said, feeling a little silly, rubbing chalk from his hands, replacing the stick in the groove, looking to see if there were any more. "There is one other possibility, though," he said, squinting out the window, "which I wonder if you thought of." He turned to the blackboard.

Trellising, she thought. "I tried it this way," she said, when he had a single line of figures on the board. He turned round. She reached inside the bag, inside a pad and pulled another white sheet out, lined, with a calculation across the top in ballpoint. She uses ink, he thought; I could never work with all those cross-outs. He took the sheet. She was afraid to look right in his ear. He calculated out loud, and calculated on the board. "No," he said, tipping forward. "There's no way you could use this particular formula for that problem. Look," he said, pointing to the blackboard where he would soon be standing and writing, "think it out this way." He wrote figures, then erased one with the side of his fist, writing in another. The second was in its own circle of chalk. That would be too distracting for me, she thought. Someone walked across the gravel outside, giving the impression it was earlier in the morning than it was. The sky clouded over. She had looked all over the room for what he might have used as a watering can,

"Thank you," she said, lifting the bag, with a yellow sheet in her hand on which everything had been copied out. "Do you understand now about the second possibility?" he said, lighting a cigarette and setting it in the ashtray. The sun spread through the room a yellow gel, the blackboard filmed with swirls of chalk, the papers on the desk shiny with raised letters, the ash.

That dress contains a very light, flexible frame, aluminum-like, he thought, or stakes driven through the foci of a parabola. He wondered if he were right after all; was there logically this other approach, or was it something accessible only if you already possessed some idea of a solution, and then only had to work your way back through the shorter, maverick pathway?

No one need tell me a second possibility, she thought, when the first is already so tenuous. She carried her shoulders like a balance beam. She kept to one side of the corridor and her skirt brushed the tile wall. The corridor length was checkered with light from the open doors: different shapes and intensities on which her round shadow fell. Eyes looked up. He closed the door, crossed out the appointment on his calendar.

In his briefcase was a thermos bottle. He got it. A bird was singing. Another student trod through the gravel. He poured coffee—the milk and sugar were already added—and set the cup next to the ashtray which now contained one white cigarette butt with all the brown ones. He sipped his coffee, drew a square on a clean sheet of graph paper, and two solid axes, X and Y, the broken one, Z, three points, A, B, and C. Then he put his cup on the square and made a round ring.

He sat back, hands clasped around the back of his neck, head in the sun. Someone walked down the corridor, stopped; the door opened and the sun flashed in his face.

"Is it this one you're interested in?" he said, pointing with the cigarette to the blackboard, which was a silky field of powder in the light. The student lay his books on the desk and put his face up close to the streaming equation, using a finger.

"Here, I'll close the shade." There was no one on the gravel path, but a bicycle was propped against a tree, white painted around the trunk. "Can you read alright now?" His own eyes, turning around from the window, tunneled. The things on the desk were disarranged by the wands of light from the window shade, the cube of

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light oscillating over the ashtray, the pen and envelope, the pencil, the matches, the ivory slide rule in its transparent case.

The student turned, felt his way back to the chair, his fingers up and over the books. "I understood in a general way how to do the thing," he said. "I mean, I haven't had trouble with these before. I feel I understand it. Is this a special case?" They both looked at the blackboard.

The mathematician scratched his head, in that hollow between the two cords, where neck met skull. "In a sense, I suppose it is, but not really," he said. (I wonder if it is, he thought.) "However, there are two modes of approach. Had you noticed?" He got up. The student's hand dangled off his desk. His other hand slid the matchbook up and down.

"You understand, I assume," he said, facing the board, "how I got from here," pointing to the first line of figures, "to here," pointing to the bottom line. He drew a line to the right of the calculation and wrote a big B at the top of the clean block of space. "You know, originally, I thought there was no problem here, but you're the second student to come in and ask about it. Now I'm beginning to think . . . You understand the first part, part A?" he said, turning to see the student nod. "Okay, on this side, I'll show you briefly the other possibility for the first part that may, in turn, clear up some of your problems with the routine solution." The chair scraped the floor.

The shade let in light that was narrow and rounded, white to orange. He didn't want to look right at the mathematician while he wrote. There was chalk on his back pocket. There was an address, Milwaukee, on one of the envelopes; the student listened to the strokes of chalk until they stopped. Period. He was hot with his jacket on. The mathematician squeezed past him and helped himself into his chair, sure now more than ever that the small-mindedness of his students was daily revealed in the way frustration resulting from two equally accessible pathways enraged them.

"Well?" the teacher said, seeing him smiling—smiling because the teacher himself was framed in light and glowing at the edges, his skin and the air around him fused by a thick, streaming outline.

The student copied only A. The professor noticed that B was not generally acceptable and he opened the shade, leaching the room of orange and rounded light. The blackboard once more became

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an active field of powder.

"All right now?" he said, adjusting the shade to match exactly with the window sash. The student noticed, and turning quickly, said thanks, and closed the door.

He looked at the blackboard, got up to look closer, and took an eraser to the dividing line, breaking it up, semipermeable membrane. Maybe B was disreputable.

The student unlocked his bike; his wheels crunched the gravel, and with his leg over the bar and the bike rolling down the walkways, where it was forbidden, he reviewed B. They really weren't that different one from the other, so why bother with both. He closed his eyes and felt the tires on the smooth blacktop. He wondered why they would put a full professor in such a small room.

After removing A, then B, he emptied the ashtray, counting the brown butts helplessly. There would be at least one more chance to try this. For that one. Would she get it, though? He could feel the sun on his ears, equivalent, warm.