



The Timer in the Middle of the Table



Nussbaum Mind

Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18





Chapter 1: Ten Minutes Each

Odelia ends up with the timer because she is the only one who looks at the clock.

The four of them have the small library room until five. After that, another group has it for a science review, and they are already standing outside the glass door, pretending not to watch.

"Ten minutes each," Odelia says. "You teach one section from the unit. No notes read out loud. When the timer rings, you stop where you are, even in the middle of a sentence."

Nobody argues. They agreed to this on Monday, over a plate of crackers, when it sounded like the most sensible rule in the world.

She sets the white plastic timer in the middle of the table and turns the dial. It ticks louder than she expects.

Her friend from math class goes first. She has the proof section, the one that everyone has been avoiding. She draws a triangle on the board and starts.

Odelia likes this part. It is the closest the group comes to feeling like a real class, and nobody has to pretend they understand more than they do.

At minute six, the proof is going well.

At minute eight, it goes slower.





Chapter 2: Mid-Step

The timer rings while her friend has one line of the proof still in her hand.

She has written "Because the two angles are" and stopped to look for the next piece of chalk. The ring makes everyone look up.

Odelia says, "Time."

Her friend turns around. "I need one more minute."

"The rule is stop when it rings."

"I'm in the middle of the step."

"You've had ten."

It sounds harsher out loud than it did on Monday. The girl beside Odelia studies her own folder. The fourth girl glances at the glass door, where the science group has just stopped pretending.

Her friend puts the chalk down.

"Fine."

The proof stays on the board with the sentence cut open. Nobody can finish it for her. Nobody remembers the step well enough to try.

The argument at the board has taken two minutes. Odelia resets the timer for the second turn, and it will have to end at 4:42.

She feels correct. She also feels like she has stepped on something.





Chapter 3: The Easy Way Out

During the second turn, Odelia hardly hears the explanation. She has noticed two things. Her friend is not looking at her. And the room is booked from 4:20 to 5:00, which is forty minutes, which is four turns of ten. There is no slack anywhere in that.

It would be easy to give her friend another minute.

Odelia does the arithmetic on the corner of her folder. One extra minute for the proof has to come out of somebody's ten. A minute more for everyone, so it stays fair, makes four turns of eleven. That is forty-four minutes in a room that has forty. It does not fit.

She could also say that she is the timekeeper, so she decides. Nobody voted that she gets to change the rule alone. That idea sits badly.

The girl beside her stops on the ring at 4:42, mid-word, and laughs at herself. She does not look hurt.

Odelia takes the third turn, and the girl who just finished holds the timer. Odelia teaches the ratios section and reaches her last example before the ring at 4:52. She knows that is partly luck.

She notices the difference. It is not that the girl beside her is happier. It is that her sentence was close to finished when the timer rang.

Her friend's was not.





Chapter 4: Eight Minutes

The fourth girl begins at 4:52, because the argument at the board cost two minutes. Odelia sets the timer to eight. Nobody voted on that loss either.

She has the shortest section and takes all eight minutes anyway. She says it is because Odelia's timer made her afraid to stop. Then she says she is joking. Nobody can tell.

At five, Odelia carries the timer back to the shelf. The science group comes in before the door has quite closed behind them.

In the hallway, her friend zips her bag.

"You didn't have to be that exact."





"The room ended at five."

"I know when it ended."

"I wasn't trying to cut you off. I was trying to keep it the same for everybody."

"It didn't feel the same. It felt like you had a stopwatch and I had a hole in my proof."

Odelia opens her mouth to point out that she gave her all ten minutes. The sentence comes out smaller.

"You did lose the end of the step."

Her friend shrugs, which is not forgiveness. It is just a shrug. They walk to the corner and separate without saying anything about Thursday.





Chapter 5: What She Did Choose

At home, Odelia puts the folder on the kitchen table and does not open it.

Mama is peeling carrots by the sink.

"Bad day?"

"Not bad. The timer went off in the wrong place."

She explains it, including the arithmetic. Mama listens to the whole thing before she asks anything.

"Did you break the rule?"

"No."

"Did you tell your friend the rule was wrong?"





"No. It isn't wrong. It's what we all agreed to."

"So what bothers you?"

Odelia thinks about it. She does not want to turn it into a speech.

"I knew the timer would ring. I could see the minutes. She couldn't. I just said 'time.'"

Mama puts a carrot down.

"Who decided there would be no warning?"

"Nobody. We never talked about it."

The question stays on the table beside the folder, next to the salt. It is not about whether she should have given extra time. It is about the part she had skipped without noticing.

She opens the folder and finds a clean page.





Chapter 6: The Folded Card

On Thursday, Odelia brings an index card folded in half.

"I have a different idea for the timer," she says.

Her friend, to her credit, sits down anyway. The others lean in.

"The ring stays. Ten minutes stays. But two minutes before the end, I'll hold up this card. It doesn't mean stop. It means you have two minutes to land where you are."

"Land where I am," her friend repeats.

"Wherever you are in the step. Pick a stopping place you can leave and come back to."

The girl beside her frowns. "What if somebody ignores the card?"





"Then the timer rings and they stop anyway."

"That's not much of a change."

"It isn't," Odelia says. "I'm not giving extra time. We still have one room and one slot. But you'd know the end is coming before it lands on you."

Her friend picks at a corner of the card.

"I'd rather have the extra minute."

"I know. I can't give it to you without taking it from somebody else."

They decide to try the card at the next session. Nobody promises to like it. Odelia writes a second line on the back of it, in small letters, so she will remember what it is for: Two minutes. Not an extra minute.





Chapter 7: Two Minutes to Land

This time the fourth girl goes first.

Her turn is clean. She sees the card at minute eight and slows down, almost surprised, and finishes her last example before the ring.

Then Odelia's friend gets up for the proof.

She starts it again from the top, because the old board is gone. She draws the triangle faster than last week. At minute eight, Odelia lifts the card.

Her friend sees it. Her shoulders tighten.

She writes the next line, then the next. At minute nine, she says, "Okay, I know where I am," and writes a short mark under the unfinished sentence.





The timer rings at the end of the tenth minute.
She is not finished. The proof is still missing its last step.

"Time," Odelia says.

Her friend puts the chalk down, slowly this time.

"That one's still open."

"Yes."

"I hate that."

"I know."

Her friend looks at the half-written line, then at the others.

"I'll start there next week. Same triangle."

Odelia writes it on the schedule in her folder, in pencil: Proof, last
step first.





Chapter 8: Her Own Ten

When it is Odelia's turn, the girl beside her takes over the timer.

Odelia teaches the section on ratios. She has practiced it at home, and the first six minutes go well. At minute eight, the card appears.

She nods, which is not the same as slowing down.

At minute ten, the ring catches her halfway through an example.

"Time," says the girl with the timer. She says it quietly. Nobody laughs.

Odelia puts the marker down in the middle of the sentence. It does not feel good. She cannot make it feel like anything else.

Her friend, still sitting in her chair, says, "That one's open too."

"Yes."

"Do you want to start there next week?"

Odelia looks at the board. The sentence has a clear shape from here. She could finish it in under a minute, if there were a minute.

"Yes," she says. "I'll write it down."

The science group appears at the glass door at five to five. This time nobody pretends not to see them.

The four of them pack up in the usual order. Odelia takes the timer back to the shelf, and her friend holds the door.

