

The Paperclip

By Sarah Hoeynck

Why does my hair taste like farts? Didn't I wash it last night? Obviously not. I try to pull the strands from my mouth, but the chilly wind fights against my efforts. Walking to school today was clearly not the best idea. It is March, after all, so I didn't think it would be so cold, and Mary Queen of Peace is only a few blocks away. Plus, I was hoping to run into *them* on the way.

Another gust whips against my bare legs and sends my hair flying. Maybe I should have asked Mom for a ride to school—or at least have worn some tights under my plaid skirt.

Just as I'm about to break into a run, I smell something much skunkier than my unwashed hair. A puff of smoke rises from behind the cluster of bushes next to the church rectory. Faint laughter floats toward me along with a few muffled coughs. My heart thumps in my chest. They're here!

After wiping my nose and tucking my hair behind my ears, I shove my hands in my coat pockets and walk casually toward the quiet voices. Act cool, Nora. Act cool.

As I duck behind the twigs and branches, I make my presence known by calling out, "Hey dorks!" Emerging from the foliage, I come upon Robbie Dickson about to pass a burned down joint to Brian Lewis. I give them a smirk and shake my head in mock disapproval, "You know, everyone can see what you guys are doing back here. It's just disgraceful."

"Hey, Nora! What's up?" Robbie throws an arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. "Want a hit?" He smiles widely and holds the joint in front of my face. A thin wisp of smoke curls from the browned tip. Its earthy sweetness goes up my nose.

Looking at Robbie's goofy grin and Brian's relaxed, lidded eyes, part of me wants to say yes. I've gone to school with them for the past seven years, and they're the nicest guys on earth. Sure, they're the stoners of our sixth-grade class, and lots of the kids judge them for it, but that kind of stuff doesn't really bother me. I love hanging out with them. They make me laugh. Well, they make themselves laugh, which makes me laugh.

But at the same time, I'm not so sure about smoking myself. I've never done it, and some people say it makes you act weird. What might others think of it?

I bite my lip and look over my shoulder.

Sensing my hesitation, Robbie lowers his hand and pats my arm. "It's okay if you don't. I know you like to actually be awake during class."

He hands the joint to Brian, who inhales deeply. The brown end glows orange and crackles as the thin paper recedes like a glass of soda slurped through a straw. He tilts his head and exhales the smoke away from me, but the wind blows the cloud right into my face.

"Shit! Sorry!" Brian waves his hands rapidly in an attempt to clear the smoke. "I promise, that wasn't on purpose," he apologizes. Since it's burned down to his fingers, Brian drops the roach and stubs it out on the dirt next to a well-worn skateboard.

"Don't worry, it's cool. I don't mind the smell, I just . . ." What? What was I so scared of? "I've just never smoked before. And you're right," I give Robbie a little shove with my hip, "I *do* like to be awake during class. I've heard you snoring enough times behind me in history to know what it can do to you."

Brian guffaws and slaps Robbie's shoulder. "It's true. You were totally sawing logs yesterday when Ms. Juniper was talking about the American Revolution."

Robbie slaps him back and defends himself. “Hey, it’s not the pot. If there was anything interesting about old dudes in weird wigs, I’d stay awake.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his mittens. Seeing my hands shaking, he offers them to me. “Here, you look like you could use these more than me.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Yeah. My fingers are already cold anyway. Give them back to me in history class.”

As I pull them on, their fuzzy warmth brings little pinpricks of feeling back to my fingers. What a guy.

Brian checks his swatch and jerks his head toward the school. “It’s almost 8. We’d better go. You know how Mr. Jones is when we come in late.”

“Especially if you smell like you do,” I tease.

Brian laughs and waves before ducking through the bushes.

Robbie picks up the skateboard and moves to leave. But then he pulls the bush to the side and gallantly offers, “After you!”

I give a little curtsy and prepare to walk through. Before I do, Robbie touches my elbow and says, “Just because you’ve never smoked before doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. It’s great.” He drops his hand and points toward the little clearing littered with roach butts. “You always know where to find us.”

With a warm smile, I leave him and head toward school. The clack and roll of wheels on asphalt makes me stop. When I turn around, Robbie is on his skateboard, weaving from left to right around the church parking lot—not at all worried about Mr. Jones and how he’ll react to tardiness.

So cool.

Ms. Juniper is once again talking about the Founding Fathers. The white chalk clicks against the board like a clock tick, tick, ticking away. God, will this class ever end? Turning around, I scan the back of the room. Robbie stares intently at a paper clip in his hand. I guess I'm not the only one bored out of their mind. I try to catch his eye, but something about that paper clip has him mesmerized.

What a funny guy. With that curly red hair and adorable smile, he's always been cute—almost like a leprechaun. But it's not just how he looks. It's the fact that he doesn't give a crap about what other people think. Judgement doesn't matter to him, and he sure doesn't seem to judge himself.

When he shifts in his seat, I whip my head forward. Oh my gosh, I hope he didn't notice that I was staring at him. With a slow glance over my shoulder, I see that he's still focused on that silly paper clip. Good. Nothing to be embarrassed about. Time for history again—no matter how boring Ben Franklin is.

Just as I'm about to pick up my pencil and get to work, Robbie jerks in his seat, drawing my attention again. He's holding the paper clip up high, staring at it like it's a brand-new skate deck. What's going on with his face? His mouth is wide open, and his bugged-out eyes keep darting from the paper clip to the wall. I lean forward to follow his gaze. It keeps landing on the electric socket near the back of the room.

Oh no. This can't be good.

With deft fingers, Robbie pulls the paper clip apart to form it into a tiny sword. He shoots a feverish glance to the front of the room to verify that Ms. Juniper's back is turned. She's drawing something that looks like a kite on the chalkboard.

Oh man, oh man, oh man. Is he really gonna do it?

Time shifts to slow motion as he pushes his chair back and creeps toward the outlet, the straightened paper clip stretched out in front of him. He gets closer and closer.

No, he couldn't. He has to know what would happen if—

The paper clip makes contact with the top socket. Robbie's jaw clenches as his whole body freezes and then jerks to left. He bumps into a filing cabinet, and a loud clang echoes through the room. I jump out of my seat and knock my chair over to make sure he's okay, but it's totally not needed. Even though his eyes are twitching, Robbie wears a huge grin.

Ms. Juniper turns to see me standing over someone on the ground. She rushes to the back of the room and grabs my arm. A piece of chalk is still in her hand, so she accidentally etches a white gash across my navy-blue sweatshirt. Once she glimpses Robbie flopping around on the floor holding some weird piece of metal, she scowls. Robbie being a distraction isn't anything new.

“Okay, can someone please tell me what's going on here? And Robbie, get off the floor. Now!”

Robbie and I remain frozen and mute.

As Ms. Juniper hauls him up by the shoulder, Robbie's knees buckle, and she has to catch him before he crumbles. Her eyes narrow as she studies him closely. Probably looking for bloodshot eyes. Sometimes I forget that teachers actually know things, too. “Are you alright?” she interrogates.

Robbie shakes his head back and forth but still doesn't say anything. The electricity must've affected him more than I thought.

Spinning around, Ms. Jupiter confronts me. "What's going on here? Did something happen? Do you know what's wrong with him?"

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I don't want to be a snitch, even for something as stupid as sticking a paperclip in a light socket. But I am a little worried. What if that shock fried his brain or something? Even more than the drugs? I look at Robbie, whose eyes are still unfocused despite that shit-eating grin. Maybe saying something is best. "Well, you were talking about Ben Franklin's electricity experiments when—"

"When I decided to follow his lead and stick this paperclip in the light socket. It was awesome!" Robbie interjects.

How did he move so fast? One second he's leaning against a desk, the next he's between me and Ms. Juniper.

Giggles flit about the room as Ms. Juniper's hand flies to her forehead. "You did what? Oh my God, are you serious?"

He shows her the paperclip, which has a little blue singe mark on its pointy end. "For sure! I wanted to conduct electricity, too. It was one of the coolest feelings ever. Like getting punched in the chest then having spiders crawling around inside me. That guy was really smart."

"Jesus Christ!" she screams, which makes the entire room erupt into laughter.

Robbie thrusts the paperclip in the air, like it's Ben Franklin's kite and he's the new Renaissance man of the sixth grade.

Without hesitation, Ms. Juniper grabs Robbie's arm. "Class, stay in your seats. Someone will be in to check on you shortly. And for God's sake, Nora, sit down. I can't believe you didn't

tell me what happened. I'll deal with you later. As for you," she pulls Robbie closer, "let's go to the nurse. And call your parents." She puts on that ominous, teacher tone that always accompanies the dreaded mention of calling parents, which would have scared any other student.

But instead of cowering, Robbie waves at us and crows, "Enjoy the rest of class!" Just before Ms. Juniper yanks him out the door, he shoots me a smile and a wink. I'm glad I didn't have to rat him out, but I doubt he would've been mad if I did.

The dead leaves crunch under my brown Oxfords as I wave good-bye to Steph and Lisa. Their parents pick them up from school, so they stop at the parking lot. I, on the other hand, have a journey in front of me. The wind has died down, so the walk home won't be as unbearable. Plus, I've still got Robbie's mittens. I guess I can give them back tomorrow. That is, if he hasn't been suspended for what the whole class is now calling "the paperclip incident."

As I pass the rectory, that familiar, skunky smell stops me dead. No way they're smoking again. They wouldn't have the guts—not after what happened today. But as I sneak through the bushes, lo and behold, there are Brian and Robbie, passing another joint between them. What are they using to hold the roach with? Peering closer, I can tell it's thin, shiny, and silver.

Oh my God! It's the paperclip. Loud laughter bursts from my mouth and gives away my presence.

Robbie swipes his arm into the bush. "Hey!" he shouts.

I cower awkwardly, but my embarrassment melts away when Robbie gives me one of his welcoming smiles.

“You’re back!” he exclaims.

“You’re alive!” I reply. “I thought you’d be suspended. Or killed by your parents.”

Robbie’s smile widens. “Hell no! Ms. Juniper was pissed, but I managed to convince her I did it because of her awesome teaching. Plus, once the nurse said I was okay, she didn’t seem as mad. I think she was more worried that she might get in trouble.”

Brian cracks his knuckles and interjects, “Once again, you manage to get out of it. I don’t know how you do it.”

“I’m adorable, that’s how!” Robbie sang into the air.

I avert my eyes so he can’t see how much I agree with him. “But what about your parents? Weren’t they worried?” I ask casually.

“My mom came up to school, but she could tell I was fine when she saw me. She didn’t think I needed to go home. Plus, I don’t think the principal told her the whole story. It makes the school look just as stupid as me!”

“No one is as stupid as you,” Brian jokes as he pulls out a blue Bic and relights the joint. It had gone out with all our talking. After exhaling, he hands it to Robbie.

“Whatever,” Robbie says, “my heart feels like it’s pumping better than ever. Plus, this is a perfect roach clip.” He swishes it through the air, which makes the smoldering end glow brighter, then inhales.

He really isn’t afraid of anything. “Umm, I know I’m no expert, but do you really think it’s a good idea to be smoking? After what happened today? Can’t it, like, hurt you?”

The slow plume of smoke coming from Robbie’s mouth bursts out in a thick cloud as he laughs. I guess I said something funny. A thick, red blush creeps up my neck.

With a mumble about needing to get home, I rush for the bushes, but Robbie grabs my arm. “Hey, I’m sorry,” he apologizes, “I wasn’t laughing at you, I promise. Really, it was just funny to think that you care more than the teacher did.”

I’m still staring at the ground, but he twists his body lower and catches my gaze. His clear hazel eyes are so earnest, almost hypnotic, even when looking right at me? I crack a smile and nod.

“Truce?” he asks.

I reach into my pocket and produce his mittens. “Truce.”

“Excellent!” he whoops as he wraps me in a fragrant hug of pot smoke and Tide detergent. Once he pulls away, he assures me, “And to answer your question, I’m feeling just fine. No problems at all. I told you, it’s great.” He holds the joint up and raises his eyebrows. “Ready to give it a try? As a thank you for returning my mittens?”

I want to. And if all that’s holding me back is fear and embarrassment, well, Robbie’s proved both of those wrong. If the guy can get shocked and still survive smoking, I’m sure I’ll be fine. Plus, I know there’s no judgment here.

My hand shakes as I reach for the paperclip. It’s smooth between my fingers. I raise it to my lips and mimic what Brian and Robbie usually do. Making sure not to get too much spit on the end, I inhale gently. The sweet smoke fills up my mouth, and a burning sensation coats my throat. They always breathe in for several seconds, but I can’t take more than a couple. I stop inhaling and blow the smoke out as smoothly as possible, trying to look cool the whole time. But as soon as it’s all out, deep, guttural coughs explode from my throat. I sound like a donkey. I’m sure I look like one, too!

Brian hands me a can of Sunkist, which I gulp gratefully. The sweet, orange liquid calms the hacking and my nerves.

Robbie pats me on the back and takes the roach from me. “Don’t worry, that always happens on your first try. It still happens to me now. How do you feel?”

My eyes are a little runny and my heart is racing. Is that from the drugs, or the coughing? “I’m not sure,” I stammer. “How does it feel to be high?”

“It doesn’t always work your first time,” Brian informs me. “But once it does work, most people usually just laugh a lot.”

Something does feel a little looser inside me, like a rubber band has been cut. “Well, when I’m with you guys, pretty much everything makes me laugh, so I’m not sure that’s the best test.” I giggle and turn towards Robbie. “How does it compare with being electrocuted?”

His giggles match mine as he fiddles with the roach. “Well, I think I’ll take pot over pretty much anything. But still, it’s nice to feel alive, no matter what brings it on. Here.” He presses something cool into my hand and takes back his mittens. “This is so you remember what it feels like, too.”

I unclench my tingling fingers to reveal the paperclip nestled in my palm. It runs parallel to my lifeline and points straight toward Robbie’s grinning face.