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Three Bends and Two Loops

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Ben's sophomore year at Moraine View South is winding down, but he has yet to decide if he will spend the summer working at the dime store or taking chemistry. Or both. He is anxious about A Capella Choir auditions and whether he will be in shape for JV soccer. He knows he should have spent last week getting through the stack of college catalogues on his desk and studying for SATs, but he was too worried whether the Apollo 13 astronauts would return safely from space. This week, the third week in April 1970, he is anxious about the environment.

The very first Earth Day is here. While Senator Gaylord Nelson rallies citizens and policymakers to enact profound environmental, economic, and social change, biologists Paul Erlich and Kenneth Watt are predicting the imminent death of all sea life and mass human starvation. The deteriorating planet offers Ben one more thing about which to worry.

Fifteen hundred colleges and 10,000 schools have scheduled Earth Day "teach-ins" for April 22; Ben's school is holding an assembly and will plant a tree. College students march for environmental action and demand their cafeterias include tea and brown rice "hunger diets." Recycling advocates pile glass bottles and aluminum cans on city hall steps and outside factories. Activists bury an internal combustion engine in Connecticut and picket General Motors in Detroit. Roaring jets, smoke spewing factories, and gas-guzzling cars—which, until now, represented American ingenuity at its best—are signs of the apocalypse.

Ben knows better than to ask his mom if he can go downtown to a rally, but he tries to do his part by wearing a "Save Your Earth" pin, begging his parents to recycle, turning off lights, and conserving water. At the same time, his fifteen-year-old brain has difficulty sharing space regarding the faltering planet with visions of a certain cheerleader who doesn't seem to know his name.

Mr. Peterson, Ben's English teacher, taps into the national mood for the next assignment. The morning after Earth Day, the class finds this message on the far-right panel of the chalkboard:

Due Friday, May 15, at 3:00 PM. No exceptions! Explore a significant, impactful societal issue. Outline a novel solution and convince the reader of both the need for change and the merits of your approach. 1000 - 1500 words. Double-spaced. 1" margins. Regular bond paper. Diagrams and figures are permitted. No staples or White-Out.

Mr. Peterson is rotund, pale, and sober. His precise age is a source of speculation. He hums opera and reads every issue of *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The American*

Scholar, and *The New Yorker* cover-to-cover. As far as anyone knows, he owns three ties and does not have a life outside of school.

As is his custom, Mr. Peterson does not call attention to the assignment; students are expected to read the board. Requesting clarification evokes “the sigh,” an interminable wheeze accompanied by a slack-jawed head shake. Ben copies the assignment word-for-word into his calendar. The project is due in three weeks.

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The Sunday before the deadline, Ben is flailing. He wants to find an environmental topic but, as he pages through random volumes of his family’s World Book Encyclopedia, he realizes he will settle for any crisis he can describe in three paragraphs and for which he can conjure an inventive solution.

He discards “Urban Blight” and “Hunger” before landing on “Glaciers.” Ahh, he thinks. This might work! The article is brief and has nice maps and diagrams. Subheadings describe glacier movement, the “water cycle,” changing arctic sea levels, and the Ice Ages. Photos document glacial thinning and contraction over decades. Ben learns that the melting glaciers are a big problem. Unfortunately, he has no idea how he would suggest solving it.

Still, “Glaciers” is his best option, so he reaches into the desk and fishes out a paperclip. The first one is rusty, so he tosses it in the wastebasket. He rummages under stacks of paper and retrieves another bent, rusty clip. Finally, he locates one that looks okay. He slips it onto the margin of the page adjacent to the article.

Ben stares at the clip. He fishes out another rusted one. And another. *Wait*, he thinks. *Are rusted clips a problem?* He sets aside the G volume of the World Book and pulls out the P, riffling through the pages in search of “Paperclip.” The entries jump from “Paper Birch” to “Paper Doll.” “Paperclip” does not merit an entry. *How has no one noticed?*

Time is running out. He jots down a tentative title for his project and grabs a stack of blank 3” x 5” cards. *This will be perfect*, he thinks. He wonders if Rachel Carson was this nervous when she decided to write *Silent Spring*. Ben hops on his bike and speeds to the library.

* * *

Over the next four days, he searches the periodical indices, masters the microfiche reader, plows through magazines and catalogues, skims technical papers on smelting and the repurposing of steel scrap, and explores old newspapers. His pile of 3” x 5” cards grows.

The report writes itself. His argument hinges on the assumption no rusted or bent paperclip ever again finds meaningful utility if a fresh, well-formed, and untangled clip is available. In addition, based on manufacturing data, unserviceable clips will eventually overwhelm suitable ones. For society to prevent waste and to function properly, he will argue that spent and damaged

paperclips must be actively collected, sorted, and recycled. Everything he reads reinforces his hypothesis. His lists of key words and topic sentences grows.

To create the background section, he explores history. North American archeologists excavating pre-Civil War settlements and battleground sites have documented coins, buttons, personal items, weapons, implements, and other artifacts, but no one has ever identified bent wire fasteners specifically designed to clasp pieces of paper. Ben runs across an 1870s British newspaper advertisement for Gem-style triple-bend double-loop wire paperclips but can find no other recognizable precursors of today's clips for the next two decades. Then, in April 1899—exactly 71 years ago—William Middlebrook of Waterbury, Connecticut, patented a machine to mass produce paperclips from steel wire stock. That changed everything. Paperclips went from being a curiosity to a ubiquitous household item. A paperclip worn in the lapel even became a symbol of resistance in Nazi-occupied Norway.

Since steel wire's torsion and elasticity remain essentially intact over time, clips have maintained their shape and function even as they rusted onto the upper left corners of land deeds, photographs, bills of sale, family documents, and love letters. Narrow-gauge steel wire routinely survives landfills, is not compostable, and doesn't melt unless heated to approximately 2500°F.

Ben concludes paperclips never, ever die.

Adding a practical exercise to his project, Ben invites readers to excavate to the bottom of any random desk drawer where, he predicts, there will be an assortment of "partially-rusted, misshapen, tangled, and abused clips lurking under dividers, in corners, and between trays. These loners are difficult to retrieve and scatter when disturbed. Paperclips," Ben writes without irony, "are the desk drawer equivalent of cockroaches."

In the tradition of doomsday prognosticators Erlich and Watt, Ben envisions a future where spent paperclips lie scattered across the lunar and Martian surfaces. Institutions and governments grind to a halt when the ratio of useless to pristine paperclips reaches a tipping point. Critical documents and images are forever marred with rusted, curvilinear indentations.

Ben models his solution on the Keep America Beautiful campaign where Lady Bird Johnson, Lassie, and the Crying Indian (who, Ben learns, is Italian) rally citizens to "Pitch In." He recommends commissioning Jimi Hendrix and The Carpenters to write popular songs. He drafts plans for brightly colored "Retired Paperclip Recycling Centers" in Sears Roebuck, Ben Franklin, Montgomery Ward, and SS Kresge. Deformed but non-rusted clips will be straightened, re-bent, and recycled. Rusted ones will be melted down. He creates diagrams with bins of old paperclips going in one end and boxes of new paperclips and stacks of steel ingots emerging from the other.

Ben sees his report landing on desks of decision makers everywhere. He wonders what he will wear when he is interviewed by Dick Cavett and David Frost.

The night before deadline, Ben uses his dad's Smith Corona to retype one page of the final report. He attaches the images with a bottle of mucilage, then flattens everything with volumes of the World Book.

Finally, Friday arrives. He fastens the report together with a shiny new paperclip.

Ben experiences a twinge of anxiety as his classmates share their projects' titles. Scott wrote about "Cleaning up Our Rivers." Joan—whose older brother was drafted last year—has addressed "Ending the War in Vietnam." That certain cheerleader turns in "NOW and the ERA: Women Deserve Equality." Cheryl explored a headline from May 4 with "Will Kent State be a Turning Point?" Simon, the quietest student in class, has written about "Bringing Justice to Our Cities." Others have addressed the housing shortage, cancer, and poverty. Ben's project joins the stack on Mr. Peterson's desk as the period ends.

The following Friday, Mr. Peterson is effusive. "I am returning your papers today," he announces. "Most of them, I must say, are outstanding. Well written and thought provoking. Nice work."

Mr. Peterson walks the aisles, returning the projects while sharing a few comments. As his own report lands upside down on his desk, Ben detects a sigh. He cautiously flips the assignment over, revealing the grade.

"C-minus?" Ben mumbles a bit too loud.

Someone, maybe the cheerleader, stifles a snicker. Ben returns the assignment to its face down position after learning his report has "addressed a problem that is not a problem. Frankly, this treatise is a waste of both paper and paperclip."

* * *

Decades later, Ben acknowledges he misjudged the extent of the problem. No paperclip calamity ever materialized. In fairness, "expert" forecasts from 1970—that overpopulation and famine would destroy civilization by 1990, everyone would be wearing gas masks by 2000, and life expectancy would drop back into the forties by 2010—were also overblown.

Still, Mr. Peterson might have been a bit more sympathetic. No one knows the future. Senator Nelson likely employed paperclips to hold together his Earth Day speeches three weeks before Ben trusted a paperclip to securely fasten together the seven pages of "The Coming Devastating Paperclip Nightmare." Over the decades, Ben's clip oxidized and rusted, permanently staining his report. Without a means to recycle it, that clip never found another life.

Old paperclips go to landfills as new ones appear. Even as society fumbles through multigenerational, global-scale environmental challenges, there are 11 billion new paperclips manufactured each year from about 12,000 US metric tons of steel—enough to supply 15,000 new cars.

Healthy, reflective societies benefit when they take stock of the discarded items lying dormant in their deepest recesses. Ben realizes paperclips will never awaken the world from environmental complacency unless they become the “canaries in the coal mine” or, more on-point, “cockroaches in the desk drawer.” Those dark places, concealed from view, might offer an insight or two into the fragility of the world. Ben still hopes this is true.

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