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Rachel Nori
Gettysburg College

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Author Bio

Rachel Nori is currently a sophomore at Gettysburg College. She is a Psychology and English double major, who in particular enjoys writing pieces of fiction.

A Dollar Bill, Two Paperclips, and a Question

RACHEL NORI

On June 1st, on first Monday of the summer, there came a knock on the door of the elderly Harold Menkin (Mr. Menkin to acquaintances, Harry to his loved ones.) It was an unprecedented knock, for on this day and on any other day really, Harold was not expecting any visitors. No one had called Harold “Harry” in some time, and it had even been a while since he heard the words “Mr. Menkin” traverse the lips of a real, living person. No, it was fair to say that Harold was not expecting the knock. This may, in fact, be the reason that, the first time he heard it, he did not deign to lift himself from the armchair which had over time become an extension of his own body. He assumed, as any such man in his position might, that it was a mistake, or simply an overenthusiastic mail boy delivering his weekly subscriptions. It was only when a second, slightly timid knock echoed through the dusty, thin walls of Harold’s living room that he reasoned that, yes, somebody was at his door.

This seems like a very straightforward conclusion to draw in a very ordinary situation. Surely, you yourself have heard a knock on your door, and opened it. This week, in all probability, and maybe even this very day. But, for Harold, this knock being so out of the ordinary, the conclusion that he drew from it upset his system in a way we could not imagine. He could not help the burgeoning sense of hope fighting to make its way through the hard, ancient layers of solitude that filled his fragile form with weight. The breaking up of this, as Harold heard the second knock on his door, flooded him with excitement that he was in no more control of than the deep lines which sunk into his exceedingly kind face. Lines of laughter, lines of years of warmth and smiles, crinkling now again like they used to, just because of two soft knocks at the door.

His hands shaking with what might be excitement, he reached for the softly shining silver handle that seemed to whisper to him words of encouragement, legs having moved him forward with more fervor than they had had even in youth. He twisted the knob, and the door creaked open.

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A small child, hand hovering nervously over the splintering, cobwebbed door of the house where it was said that a very scary old grinch resided. A singular muffin sat squashed in his palm. Bobby Lee, as his wide eyes scanned the door — which looked to him like the entrance to a very spooky haunted house where not only a Grinch, but a ghost lived probably — was gripped with the same fear that other children his age might have of the dark. That is, paralyzing, all-consuming fear, the type one can only truly experience when they are young and still honestly believe that a monster with great big jaws and scales is waiting to harm them in the shadows.

But Bobby Lee was no wimp. At least, that is what he told himself as he knocked the first time on the door. Exhaling quickly, Bobby paused, as if waiting for someone to come out of a nearby bush and knock him over. When that did not happen, his still-chalky face settled into something very much like resolution, and he knocked once again. He thought at this moment of his mama, who sent him, and of how proud she would be of what a big boy he was being. Unfortunately for his confidence, it was that moment that the door opened.

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And so there they stood. An old man and a young boy. Harold Menkin and Bobby Lee. Surveying each other as though across a film, as if attempting to decide if the other was real.

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Harold Menkin was not always old. It is easy to think of the elderly that way; it almost seems sometimes as though they must have sprung forth from their mother's wombs with gray hair and a cranky disposition. Certainly, for the youngest of us, this is true because they have always been old in our recent recollection. Bobby Lee, for instance, would be completely unable to fathom the idea that Harold Menkin, the wrinkly man with the Grinch reputation and the bald spot, had ever been his age. That he had ever played outside and pretended he was a superhero and been read to as he fell asleep. But of course, he had.

It was in these years that Harry often found himself sitting beneath an exceptionally large, twisty oak in his backyard. Harry would do drawings, which sat before him, unassuming in the trim, well-kept grass of their backyard. Harry was proud of his drawings, which were more or less the same each time, having several little figures; Mom,

Dad, Sissy and Gramps. He never thought to include himself in the illustrations, but that mattered little. This was the kind of family whose bonds were not contingent on things such as pictures. Still, it was sweet, and Harry knew just what to do with them.

He would gingerly lift his drawings as though they were pieces of fine art, which I suppose to him they were. Harry walked slowly, but with a pronounced spring in his step to where an old man with twinkling eyes always sat watching him.

This was not just any old man, however. This was the one and only Gramps himself. This was an exalted position in Harry's little mind. Harry loved the old man and the way he looked at him as if he was the most important person in the world, and the way he would fall asleep while playing cards and insist the next morning that he had been awake the whole time, and the way that when he watched Harry alone, he snuck the spooky type of movies Mom and Dad said he wasn't allowed to watch. Gramps and Harry. Harry and Gramps. An unbeatable duo, to be sure.

Harry collapsed unto the old man's lap, giggling, as Gramps let out an exaggerated "oof" but would always fail to keep the smile out of his eyes. He would take the picture in his hands and the smile would spread to reach his mouth as he exclaimed that, wow! This really was very good, and Harry, feigning modesty, uttered a thank you of the kind that a prince would use when accepting his crown.

It was at this point that Gramps often pulled a dollar bill from his pocket, and Harry, upon seeing it, lit up with excited fervor, knowing what was coming.

"Do you want to see a magic trick?"

Harry nodded reverently. And Gramps would show Harry a trick he had seen a thousand times. He would pull the dollar bill out of his pocket. It would seem to just be folded up, with paper clips holding it together. But, as Gramps pulled it together, the two clips linked somehow! Harry was always amazed, until he got old enough and Gramps finally taught him how to do it. You just folded it like an accordion, and had the clips linked from the very beginning, but the paper was folded so you couldn't see. Harry was amazed he had never guessed such a simple trick. He smiled at Gramps. It would be their secret.

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Bobby Lee, on that very morning of June 1st, found himself, as so many other children do at this point, exceedingly bored. He had played with his action figures by himself, counted all his fingers and

toes by himself, and watched his favorite cartoon for a whole twenty minutes, you guessed it-by himself. As much as he wracked his little brain for other things to do, there was nothing. It was the first morning of the first day of the summer, and Bobby Lee had already exhausted all his favorite activities.

Though, he cannot be to blame for this. Maybe, just maybe, had Bobby Lee's mom and dad spent more time with their little boy, they would have noticed that underneath that youthful face, a rather intelligent brain was at work. Maybe they would have noticed his curious affinity for the stars. If they were different parents, maybe they would have spent their time sat together by the computer or under the sky itself and talked about constellations and planets and stars. Maybe, if they had spent any time with their son at all, they would have seen and nursed this passion. Maybe Bobby Lee would have flourished under any interest and attention at all to him. Maybe he would have grown up and gone to space, and touched the cratered, tough surface of the moon for himself. But, as it was, Bobby Lee's parents remained unaware, and after multiple attempts to tell them about his exciting discoveries and they did not respond, he assumed it was stupid after all. Bobby Lee would not, in fact, become an astronaut or an astrophysicist or anything of the sort. Instead, he was bored.

It was then that he decided to see what Mom was up to. He found her, dressed all fancy, in the living room, hands at work creating a knot on the top of her head. When she saw him, she gave a start. It is true, to be fair, that she and her husband loved their little boy very much. They just forgot about him sometimes. This was one of those times.

As soon as Bobby Lee saw her, he knew that Mom and Dad were going to a Very Important Event™. When he asked Mom what he should do when they were gone, she pursed her lips for a moment, thinking. It was then that the idea came to her. She had, on her morning power walk a few days ago, observed an old man several houses down braving the outdoors to get his mail. The rush of selfrighteous pity that filled her caused her to ask her neighbors about the man, who all said he was kindly enough, and never had any visitors, the poor old sod. This was why, she suggested to Bobby Lee, why don't you go bring over the muffins I made last night? And see if Mr. Menkin down the street needed any help today?

Bobby Lee, already fighting the rising feeling of panic in his throat, nodded. He then realized; Mom thought he could handle the Grinch. His chest swelled with pride as he resolved that he would not let Mom down.

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She watched his small form grow smaller as she left in the car with Dad that day and felt an odd pang in her chest. She asked Dad if he thought she was a good mom, and he nodded, but he had not really been listening.

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An old man and a small boy, staring at each other, both suddenly frozen, across a doorway that seemed more a chasm. An old man and a small boy, with cores of emptiness, radiating with loneliness that desperately yearned to reach out across that chasm and unite, but were also held back by some nebulous, divisive force. An old man, after several minute-long seconds, endeavoring to reach across, pushing back against the resistance and asking a young boy as kindly as he could, what it was that he needed. A young boy saying that his mom sent him, and that he was wondering if the old man needed help with anything, while shoving forth a too-far-gone muffin in a small fist. Silence.

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When Harold was old enough to get married and have a family of his own, he did so with boundless excitement, eager to create the kind of bonds that he himself had grown up with. The issue was that Harold was an especially important man. And as an especially important man, Harold had an especially important job. One does not need to be bored with the details, but just know that he supervised a lot of people and held the strings of a lot of fates in his hands. He was a compassionate and empathetic man, even in his ruthless industry, but as a compassionate and empathetic man in such an industry, had to work more than double everyone else to prove his worth. And so, he did. As his dear wife, Molly Menkin, witnessed their son's first steps, and their daughter's first words, Harold slaved away behind his desk, every so often glimpsing the portrait resting strategically at eyelevel. Yes, of course he did it for them. By the time Harold got home, his children and wife were asleep, but he would walk into each room and hug each one, risking waking them for that one moment of connection.

Looking back, this was Harold's greatest regret. Maybe, if he had worked a little less, his children would visit him. Maybe, if he had worked a little less, he would have noticed Molly's symptoms of fatigue and nausea before it was too late. And maybe, just maybe, he and

Molly would be sitting there right now, showing their grandchildren a cool trick that he had once learned from another old man many long years ago.

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It ended, or rather began, when Harold said thank you and that he did not need anything done. Bobby continued to look at him, and it was Harold's eyes that did it. There was an ancient kindness there, one that could dissolve even the most scared little boy's fears. It was a look that felt like home. It was then that Bobby realized that maybe this was no Grinch after all. Harold asked, pulling forth a dollar bill from his pocket. It was already folded, waiting.

"Do you want to see a magic trick?"

Bobby had in fact forgot about his fear altogether at these words, and nodded in an excited way, eyes widening, never having been asked to play any game with anyone before who had looked at him with such kindness and warmth.

It was like that. A dollar bill. Two paperclips. The mending of two souls that had been prior defined by abandonment and shattering isolation, piecing themselves together in each other's company. One deck of cards. One question. That day, that was all it took.

Harold stepped across the doorway.