

A Story

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It was the summer solstice, June 22, 1984, the longest day of the year.

Patting his hand against the steering wheel, he shifted the car into fourth gear in time with the rock music on the radio. As he shifted gears, the afternoon sun caught the glass face of his Timex watch. He looked to see what time it was—5:15. He still had 45 minutes to get to Michelle's house.

The road was long and straight. Billy forced the gas pedal closer to the floorboard. The engine responded instantly; he watched as the speedometer's thin red needle swept over 70 m.p.h. The legal limit was 40. The music on the radio had stopped and a Pepsi commercial was in its place. Billy looked down to change the station. The sun gleamed off of the mirrored dials of the radio. Billy grabbed the right knob with his right hand and twisted it; like magic a new station came blaring through the car's speakers. For several minutes the loud music paled the roar of the engine as the car traveled along the road. Billy noticed that at this speed the telephone poles resembled picket fences. He slowed the car down quickly when he saw a stoplight off in the distance. He was looking for a street called "Valla Vista."

The stoplight reflected its dull red light into the front chrome of the car's bumper. Billy looked up at the street sign; it said Valla Vista. He was at the corner of Valla Vista and Western. He needed to turn left, so he turned on the left signal. Billy looked up at the stoplight and adjusted his sunglasses with his left hand. The light was still red. In the front yard of a small ranch-style house across the street Billy saw a young boy playing in a lawn sprinkler. Billy watched as the boy squatted over the jets, his skin tanned and cold. The wild water formed a mist around his head. In the bright sun Billy saw a rainbow in the mist. The light was still red. Billy looked at his watch; it was 5:21. The exhaust streamed into the open roof of the MG. Billy decided to count the number of cars that passed by; there were seven. Finally the light turned green. Billy forced the car into first gear and twisted the wheel to the left. The car lurched forward. Gaining speed he shifted the car into second, and then third.

The '78 MG had been his father's toy. He kept it inside in the winter and only drove it in the summertime when it was nice outside. Billy remembered sitting in the convertible when he was young; he pretended to drive the car everywhere. When he finally got his driver's license, Billy was given the keys to the car. He kept the car perfectly clean. Every Friday he took the car to the "Rocket" Car Wash across the street from the high school. He had the red MG cleaned and waxed; it only cost him \$2.75. When the car came out of the wash, Billy would wipe the sun-faded seats and dark interior with gentle care and concern.

Valla Vista Road turned out to be a small old country lane dividing two tall fields of corn. The rows of corn towered high above Billy's head. The tassels glistened white in the light of the sun. Billy remembered that his grandfather had told him that cornfields were really graves. He told Billy that each stalk represented the grave of a dead soldier. Billy looked at these cornfields; they did not look like grave markers. Valla Vista was the world's largest graveyard. Driving through the cornfields also reminded Billy of walking through the hedge maze in New Albany. The hedges were seven feet tall, and all you could see were their furry green branches. Billy reached over and turned on his lights. He leaned back and looked at the sky.

Shouldn't it be getting dark? The sun seemed too high in the sky for the time. What time is it? 5:25. Billy looked at the sun. It looked strange. It was the wrong color. The sun was a burnt orange, like it gets at dusk. He reached over and turned off his lights. He looked at his watch again; it was 5:27.

Michelle had said on the telephone that her house was 12 miles down "Valla Vista." She had also said to pick her up at six, and he still had to stop at a gas station. Billy glanced at his gas gauge. It was on "E." He began to hope that there would be a station on Valla Vista, but from the looks of the cornfields there wasn't much chance.

It had taken them a long time to decide what to do. They finally decided on a movie. Billy was taking her to see a horror movie: *Halloween II*.

Billy remembered their conversation on the phone. She didn't want to go to a horror movie, but finally she had agreed. She gave him directions to her house, but Billy decided not to write them down because he was sure that he could remember them. Now he wished he had written them down. He'd been driving on Valla Vista for a long time. He twisted his arm to see the face of his Timex. He forgot to look

at the time. Frustrated, he looked at his watch again — 5:31.

Billy knew that there was no way Michelle would be ready when he got to her house. He also knew that he would have to talk to Michelle's parents; this is the part he hated most of all about the dating rituals. The parents always asked him strange questions. Where did you meet Michelle? Do you two go to school together? "I wonder if her parents are scared, too."

What would he say when they answered the door? Hello, Mr. Thomas. My name is Billy Tavel. Is Michelle here? Hi, Mrs. Thomas. Is Michelle here? "Is Michelle here," — what a fool I'd be if she decided to leave. "She's not here?" Well, can you tell her that Billy dropped by? This was one of Billy's biggest fears, to go pick up a date that wasn't there. Billy also feared being late; he was never late. He always left early so he would get wherever he was going early.

Billy looked down at his watch — 5:36. Still no sign of a gas station. Billy thought about what time he left home. Only 25 minutes ago he was still at home. time traveled too slowly for Billy; maybe his body moved faster. He looked up. Billy was able to see some stars. The sun was still a huge mass of orange in the western sky, but he could see several stars off to the east. Billy tried to think. "Let's see, I've been on Valla Vista for about ten minutes; speed 40; I've gone about eight miles. Michelle said that her house was 12 miles down the road so I must be about four miles away. Billy noticed a small gas station up ahead and signaled to turn in. He wasn't even sure if it was open, but he stopped.

The station had only one pump: regular. It was a good thing that the MG ran on regular. It was also a good thing that he made it to the station; the tank was empty. Billy started to get out of the car. Just then an old man came stumbling out of what appeared to be a house, with a chicken leg in one hand and a green cloth napkin in the other. "I'll get the gas, Bub," the old man yelled as he crossed the short distance between the house and the pump. Billy looked at the old man for a long time — almost 20 seconds went by before anyone said anything. The man was really old, his face wrinkled and his hair white, but his eyes — his eyes were on fire. Billy saw the old serviceman's eyes and realized they were the same color as the sun; that same burnt-orange. Billy knew the man was alive and young inside.

"F'ller up, bub?" the old man asked.

Billy waited. "Yes. Does that pop machine work?" Billy asked the old man.

The old man looked to the sky. "Red skies at night, sailors delight," he said.

"The machine?" Billy called.

"It works."

Billy walked over to the machine. When he reached into his pockets for the change, he looked at his watch. It was 5:40. "Great," I'm 20 minutes early."

Billy examined his soft drink choices: Coke, Tab, Sprite, Fanta Red Cream Soda. He put 45¢ into the machine and pressed the Fanta button. A sweat-beaded can of soda rumbled out of the bottom of the machine. Billy picked it up and pulled the tab. He brought the drink to his mouth and drank until his throat burned. The cold cream soda cooled and refreshed Billy from the ride in the open air.

Billy looked back to the old man. "How far is it to Allen-Gale Estates," he asked.

"Have you ever seen the sun look that orange this early in the night, bub?" the old man yelled. "Orange skies come across time," the old man said.

"What did you say about sailors and red skies? I think I've heard that before."

The man's eyes lit up even more when he realized that Billy was interested in what he had to say. "That old saying don't apply 'night," the old man said. He smiled. "'nights the summer sols'tis the longest day of the year, maybe time."

Billy gave the old man a puzzled stare. "How much do I owe you?" he asked.

"Be eight dollars and 37 cents, bub," the old man said. Billy handed him a ten and took another drink of his red cream soda.

"Out'a ten." The old man slowly gave Billy his change.

The car purred to life as soon as the key was turned. As Billy pulled out of the station, he heard the old man say, "Allen-Gale's just on the other side of the stream, where the corn turns to beans, and there's a one-lane bridge." Billy got the car going 40 again and reached between his legs for his pop. The can was making wet marks on his jeans. Billy grabbed it and took another drink until it burned his throat. The can was empty. "Aaah."

He reached over and turned on the radio; he turned the music on low. The entire sky was orange; the clouds were dark blue; nothing was right. Billy thought it was going to storm.

Billy drove along the last few miles of Valla Vista. He saw the one-lane bridge the old man was talking about. It was made of stones and

covered a rapid stream. The water in the stream forced some fallen leaves down the creek out of view. Billy slowed the car down, but he wasn't quick enough because the front of the MG hit and bounced up. Billy felt his stomach rise and fall, like he was on some ride at King's Island — the Beast, or the Racer. He shook the cobwebs from his mind. Billy looked around and realized that the old man was again right. In fact, Billy couldn't even see the cornfields any more. He heard the running gurgle of the stream and saw row after row of soybeans. Billy looked at the rows of plants and thought they looked like G.I. Joe's and Barbie's apple orchard. The bean plants looked exactly like mini-apple trees. Billy wondered if soybeans tasted like apples; he didn't think so. He looked at his watch; it was still only 5:50.

He thought he saw the sign for her addition; he wasn't sure. Billy slowed down to 30 and turned the radio down; he wanted to make sure he made a good first impression on Michelle's parents. He knew that his little sports car would worry her parents enough, without them thinking he was a loud, wild teenager too. Billy didn't want anyone to think he was a wild teenager, especially Michelle's parents.

Billy saw the entrance to her complex, signalled, and turned onto Wonderland Drive. "Wonderland." Where do they get the names, he thought. Billy stopped here to think about what Michelle had said. "Fourth house on the left, tri-level, half stone . . . half wood. The wood's painted blue; the address is 11090 Lana Court; and the name is on the mailbox." He was sure he could find it. Billy slowly glided the car along; he pulled up next to her mailbox.

11090 Lana Court — The Thomases. Billy slowly glided the MG into the driveway. He looked down at his watch; it was 5:54. He made it with six minutes to spare. That was good for not knowing how to get there he thought. He parked in the shade of a maple tree, in the driveway turnaround. The turnaround, Billy noticed, was also a basketball court. The lines were painted on the blacktop drive and the basket was mounted off of the side of the mini-barn.

Billy slowly shut the car off, its engine purring to a halt. He took out his keys and opened his door. He swung his feet onto the asphalt. Billy rested for a few seconds and looked at Michelle's home. It was just as she described it, but Billy never realized there were homes this far out into the fields.

As he got out of the car, he took a deep breath and looked at his watch again. It was 5:56. Billy walked to her front door thinking about summer. This summer wouldn't end. He had been ready for school to start for days now. School wasn't scheduled to start for another six

weeks. Billy knew the weeks coming up were going to be boring; there are just so many things a 17-year-old can do with all his time.

Billy stood at the front door of Michelle's house. He used the glass in their stormdoor to fix his hair and clothes. He looked at his watch one last time; it was 6:00. Billy knew that everyone must be watching him. He believed that there were several pairs of eyes staring at him, but he wasn't sure where they were coming from. Billy took one last look at himself in the glass. He looked good.

He straightened his shirt and pulled at his pants. He reached over, and with a shaky hand, pressed the doorbell. A series of gongs exploded somewhere in the house and there was running. Billy waited for someone to answer the door; anyone.

Michelle opened the door. She looked surprised to see Billy. "Here I am, right on time," Billy smiled. Michelle had a puzzled look on her face. Billy looked at her face. Makeup really makes some girls look older; Michelle looked really good, but she didn't look ready to go.

"Is this some joke?" Michelle asked.

Billy looked at her. "Joke? I'm right on time. Friday, June 22nd, 6:00 p.m."

"Billy, I haven't seen you for a year, not since you never showed up for our date," Michelle said.

Billy looked around him. It couldn't be true, but somehow he knew it was. "What did that old man do to me?" Billy yelled.

Michelle opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it without speaking.

"I just stopped for gas on Valla Vista," he said.

"Hell of a long fill-up. By the way, I hate you."

"The old Man."

"Wait, there is no gas station on Valla Vista," Michelle said.

Billy slowly walked back to his car.

"Does this mean you're back in town, Bill? Bill?"

He could barely hear her, over the rumblings of the stream.

Billy got into his car and backed out of the driveway. Michelle stood on the patio and waved goodbye. Billy glided the MG back to Valla Vista and headed for the orange giant in the sky.