

WEST OF WAWA

Billy Stoddart sat on the couch and stared at the telephone. She won't call me, he thought. What's the point? She's gone. Gone for good. And she didn't exactly move around the corner either. She's 3,000 kilometres away! I won't even get to visit her.

He hung his head for a moment, then tried to concentrate on his algebra homework. Variables and binomials. Integers and factors. Did any of this really matter? If he went on to university, he was definitely going to avoid math like the plague.

The telephone remained quiet. Billy was tempted to go over and make sure it was plugged in properly. Kelly had been in Fort Saskatchewan, near Edmonton for at least three days now and she still hadn't called. She said she would call as soon as she got there.

Billy's mother walked in the room and saw him gazing at the telephone.

"Why don't you call her?"

Billy hated when his mother read his mind and told him what to do. "Who?" he said.

His mother smiled indulgently. "If you miss Kelly, give her a call. I'm sure she'll be glad to hear from you. You told me she left you the number."

"Yeah, but she also said she would call me when she got

there."

Mrs. Stoddart shrugged and left the room. She knew she shouldn't push him any further. It had to be his decision to pick up the phone.

Billy turned again to the math problems in front of him. $3x^2 + x^3 = 45$. What is x ? Who the hell cares?!

He threw down the pencil and looked at his watch. After 6:00 PM. Discount rates. From his back pocket, Billy fished out a piece of paper with the phone number Kelly had given to him. It simply said 'Kelly' with the number and a happy face drawn underneath it.

He stared at the paper with apprehension. He was afraid to call. Why? He knew Kelly very well and felt relaxed with her. He didn't feel that way about any other girl. Besides, they had been dating for five months. And they often spent an hour talking on the telephone. So why was he reluctant to call her now?

Maybe he felt he had lost her already. After all, what future could their relationship have, separated by two provinces and two time zones? Still, he knew he had to call her. Right now he couldn't concentrate on anything else.

He picked up the phone and dialled, feeling the same anxious rush he had the first time he called Kelly. She was surprised to hear from him then, since they saw each other every day in school.

Why would he wait and call from home when he could easily talk to her in person? The truth was that Billy was too shy and nervous

to ask her out face to face. He imagined himself shaking, twitching uncontrollably, smiling awkwardly and scratching himself nervously. His lips might go dry and his palms would be sweaty. There might even be heavy perspiration stains near his armpits. If he asked her to the school dance over the phone she wouldn't see any of that, and she'd be more likely to go with him. Since she agreed to go, and other girls he had asked in person had refused, he felt his theory had been vindicated. He was more confident speaking when he could not be seen ...except now.

On the other end of the line, someone answered. "Hello?" It was Kelly's mother.

"Hello. It's Billy. From Wawa. Is Kelly there?"

"Certainly." Then he heard her call out, "Kelly! It's your friend Billy."

That irritated him. Just because he and Kelly were not lovers did not mean they were just friends. Kelly meant a lot more than that to him. The comment also made it sound like they were both children, not adolescents who were boyfriend and girlfriend.

"Hi Billy." It was Kelly. She seemed pleased that he had called.

"Hi. You sound so far away."

"I am. I still can't believe I'm here."

"Me neither. How are you?"

"Okay, I guess. Tired. There's still a lot of unpacking to

do."

"What's your new place like?"

"Uncle Gerry found us an apartment for now, till Dad get's settled. It's old, but it's okay. At least my room's big. The only thing is we're close to a big psycho hospital. Nice, eh?"

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah! And I hear they let them loose at the mall once a week. I feel really safe."

"Well, you wanted something more exciting than Wawa."

"The jail's here, too. The big provincial jail."

"Your Dad sure picked a great place to raise kids."

"Joey's only eleven. He thinks it's cool."

"So, ...you think you'll be staying there?"

"In Fort Saskatchewan?"

"Uh-huh."

"Uncle Gerry seems to think Dad's pretty secure at the nickel mine here, but it wouldn't bother me if we moved again."

"So you don't like it, apart from the crooks and psychos?"

"I never thought I'd say this but I miss Wawa, already."

Do you miss me, Billy wondered. He wanted to ask, but instead opted for the indirect approach. "Why would you miss Wawa?"

"I miss Jackie and Chris and Vicki." Kelly lowered her voice and added, "And I miss you. My Mum's listening."

Billy smiled. He felt a tear coming on but he didn't know if

it was from the joy of hearing those words or from the sorrow of possibly never seeing Kelly again. All he knew was that she had said exactly what he needed to hear.

"I really miss you, too."

Saying those words reminded Billy of the time early in the summer when he and his family went on vacation for two weeks, shortly after Kelly became his "girlfriend". She was his first real girlfriend and he didn't like leaving her for two whole weeks. When he returned, Billy rushed to Kelly's house and both cried how they missed each other. Kelly wrapped herself around him in a big bear hug and they kissed, for the second time. After the hug was over, they stood and peered into each other's eyes, then hugged and kissed again. It had been a marvellous reunion.

Now Kelly was crying. Apparently those words had the same effect on her. "I hate it here," she whimpered. "It's all flat and boring. I don't know anybody except my cousins, and they're in Edmonton. That's thirty kilometres away so I won't see them much. And it's even colder here than Wawa! Why couldn't we move somewhere warmer, at least."

Billy felt obliged to cheer her up, even though if he were the one uprooted with no friends, far from someone he loved, he knew he would feel the same way.

"It'll get better," he said. "At least you're close to a big city. Not like Wawa, way up in Northern Ontario where the nearest city is two and a half hours away. I bet there's lots to do in

Edmonton. I bet they even have movie theatres and a McDonald's."

This was a standing joke in Wawa. Whenever someone asked how small the town was, you could always say it's so small it doesn't even have a McDonald's. That usually creates a feeling of awe and dread in the eyes of southerners, like living without that restaurant is the ultimate sacrifice and commands respect. There used to be a movie theatre in town but it closed down years ago, around the time Billy was born.

Now Kelly was laughing, and sniffing. "Guess what? I saw Ronald McDonald yesterday. Well, for two seconds. We were driving by and he was doing some benefit thing at a mall."

"See," said Billy. "You even have malls close by. And there's that really big one - West Edmonton Mall."

"Yeah. But I'm not even in Edmonton and I haven't got my driver's license yet. I'm stuck in Fort Saskatchewan. It's not much bigger than Wawa, and all everybody listens to is shitty country music."

"Come on," Billy teased. "I know deep down inside you really like country music."

Kelly made a gagging sound. "Barf."

Billy remembered going to Jackie's birthday party with Kelly. It was fun until Jackie's mother put on a Dwight Yoakum tape. Billy and Kelly turned to each other with identical expressions then, in unison, got up and walked out, claiming a sudden need for fresh air.

Into the phone, Billy started singing, "'Guitars, cadillacs, hillbilly music'."

"Oh please!" Kelly cried.

"Do you remember Jackie's party?"

"Jackie's Mum thought she was so cool playing 'new country'."

"It was a good time till then."

"Yeah. I know it's only been a week, but I really wish I was back there with you and everybody else. We had a lot of fun together - going on picnics and swimming. There's absolutely no decent place to swim around here. You have to drive forever to find a beach."

An image of Kelly in her bathing suit came to Billy's mind. She had a bright yellow one-piece suit with polka dots, and she looked beautiful in it. He was never more proud of having Kelly for a girlfriend than when they went swimming with others. If other boys were there, they often flirted with Kelly or teased Billy about how lucky he was. Sometimes they made jokes about Billy making love to Kelly. Whenever they did, Billy never said anything. Let them believe whatever they want, he thought. But usually what they believed was far from accurate.

Billy remembered taking Kelly to Blueberry Point with some friends. He told her they were going swimming, but he didn't tell her that first they were jumping off the high rock into the water.

At first she refused, but since everyone else was doing it she gave in. Billy promised to jump with her and hold her hand all

the way. Once in the water, all her anxiety drained away and she felt exhilarated and alive. Billy felt the same way, but with additional feelings. Seeing Kelly in her bathing suit, holding her hand and sharing an exciting moment with her piqued his passion for her. As they swam away from the rock together, he could think of nothing but wanting her. He pulled her close and held her. Under the water, she could tell that he was ready for sex. She pulled away and swam toward her friends on shore. He stayed in the water for a while. For the rest of the day, she was distant and guarded. Billy understood she was not ready for anything more physical.

He knew he had to wait for clues from Kelly, signals that she was ready for the relationship to go further. When would she be ready? When would she let him make love to her? He waited and waited, agonizing over the future possibilities. But no hints were forthcoming.

Billy was ready when they left Jackie's party together, and when he was reunited with her after his summer vacation. He was ready the first time they went out together. He was ready before he went out with her. He was always ready.

And he was ready now, as he listened to her voice on the telephone ...3,000 kilometres away. It was as if God was teasing him or playing a trick on him. Here's an attractive girl for you Billy, but just before you have sex with her I'll take her away from you. He felt sure that if Kelly had stayed in Wawa they

would have become closer. But now she was in Fort Saskatchewan, for good. Now he knew he would never make love to her.

"Why did Dad have to get laid off?" Kelly complained. "Why couldn't they take him back part-time or something?"

"The mine laid a lot of people off. Things are just slowing down. It might've been years before they took him back."

"But why didn't they just let me stay in Wawa?" Kelly was saying. "I'm sixteen. I could've got a part-time job and got my own place. Why did I have to go with them? I'm old enough to live on my own. They didn't ask me if I wanted to move to out there. Sometimes I think I have the worst parents." She paused.

"I guess you figured out Mum's not listening anymore."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry I'm talking like this. You didn't call me to hear me bitch."

"It's okay. I think I know how you feel. I know how I'd feel if it was me."

"You're so understanding. Why did we have to get split up?"

"I don't know. I really like you, Kelly." He wanted to say love, but the word refused to come. "I always hoped we'd stay together and ...be closer."

"Me too. Remember when we went for a hike up the mountain, just the two of us? Dad almost wouldn't let me go because I'd be all alone with you. They were really worried. Thought you'd take advantage of me and all that. I convinced them I had really

strong lungs and I could yell for help if I had to. But I knew you'd never do anything I didn't want you to do."

"I never even thought you might be scared of me."

"I wasn't. I trusted you."

"Didn't you ever have times when you wanted to, you know."

She giggled. "I thought about it. I mean, you've got a nice body."

"You never told me that before."

"Well, you do." Suddenly, her voice became serious. "I thought a lot about you know what just before we left."

"You did?"

"Uh-huh." She sighed. "Do you think maybe we should've done it?"

Billy's mouth dropped open. What was the correct answer? If he said yes, would that make her feel guilty for denying him? But if he said no, he might leave her the impression that he didn't want to or that he was indifferent. "Uhm, well," he began. "I know it would've been nice."

"You really wanted to?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Maybe we should have."

Billy's head was spinning. This kind of talk would do neither of them any good. Kelly was there and he was here. Sex was no longer an issue. There was no more physical relationship of any kind. All that remained was phone calls and letters. Both

of them would have to let go and stop dwelling on what might have happened or what should have happened. He would be the first.

"No," he said. "I think it's better this way. There wasn't any point starting something when we might be separated forever."

"Forever? We'll still see each other. We can visit. Maybe when we graduate, we can go to the same school."

"That's almost two whole years from now!"

"I know," Kelly sighed. "I don't know. Maybe Dad'll get fired and we'll move back."

"I doubt it. Kelly, look. When you were here, you were dying to get out of Wawa. So was I. We talked about leaving together someday. I mean, let's face it. There's no future here unless you work in the mine. And we both know the town is boring as hell. You got out! You're close to a big city where there's lots to do, lots of night life. There's universities there and lots of jobs. More than here, anyway. It meant us breaking up and you losing your friends, but you made it."

"But I'm totally alone. I miss everybody. Especially you."

"I miss you, too. But I think you should try to be happy. I mean, I want you to be happy - wherever you are."

"You're so sweet."

"I mean it. Maybe we won't see each other again."

"You're going to write, aren't you?" She sounded frantic, as if he was giving up on the relationship. "You're going to send pictures and call all the time, aren't you?"

"Yeah, sure!"

"I want to know everything you're doing and how much you miss me."

"I miss you more than you can believe."

"I think I have to go. Mum's telling me this is costing you too much money."

"It's worth it."

"It's great to hear your voice again. Let's do this every week. We can alternate. I'll call next time."

"That sounds nice. And I'll write and tell you all about school and Jackie and the others."

"Great! So ...I'll call you next weekend."

"Alright. Bye." Billy hesitated, wondering whether to add the sentence in his head. "Kelly?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too." She made a kissing sound into the phone, then said goodbye.

So there it was. They loved each other. Or at least they said they loved each other. But Billy's image of her was already fading. He couldn't love someone who would become more and more distant in his memory. He had to put her behind him. At least in a physical sense. He would continue to call and write letters, but he had to give up hoping that anything else would come of it. Like it or not, Kelly was now nothing more than a pen pal.