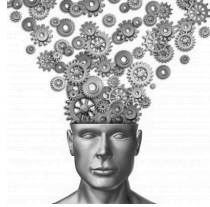


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For Uncle Julian and Aunt Patsy
who lived such storied lives.

And for you, the reader.

Thank you for volunteering to
attempt this feat of magic with me.



THE THETA PROJECT

LAB NOTE #316

PREPARED BY

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I am thrilled to report that, after an exhaustive search, I have found the ideal subject for our first field test, which will commence as soon as Billy G., a twelve-year-old male with a very vivid imagination, arrives on site.

His mother will be busy. His father will be away. He will be bored.

In short, Billy G. will be perfect.

Chapter 1

Billy Gillfoyle's dad shifted gears and gunned the gas.

"Hang on, kiddo," he shouted over the roar of the engine. "Sign says 'Curves Up Ahead.'"

The convertible rocketed up the winding country road like it was The Space Lizard's Galaxy Blaster from Billy's favorite comic books.

"Whoo-hoo!" cried Billy.

The top was down. Wind whipped through Billy's hair. Gravel spewed out from under the tires. Bugs splattered on the windshield.

It was awesome.

His dad was awesome. No, his dad was *fun*!

His mother?

Well, she had to be more serious because she was a math professor, not a writer of cool TV commercials like his dad. But, together, they were kind of perfect.

At least Billy thought so. His parents? Not so much.

That's why Billy would be spending the summer with his mom but not his dad.

In a cabin.

On a lake.

In the middle of nowhere.

His mom was already there. His dad would haul Billy up to the cabin then whip back around to spend the summer down at their apartment in New York City.

Billy wished they could all be together but there was nothing he could do to change his parents' minds. After all, he was just a kid.

He sank a little lower in his seat as his dad piloted the screaming convertible through the road's breakneck curves. Yup. Even the car had more power than Billy.

"Have you been getting enough sleep, hon?" his mother asked while Billy's dad emptied his car.

Billy stood in what he figured was the lake cottage's front yard – a scraggly patch of weeds and dirt.

People always thought Billy needed a nap because he had heavy-lidded eyes and a long, droopy face.

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Okay," his mother said with a smile that looked like it hurt. "Well, welcome to Lake Katrine. I think you'll like it up here. We have a dock out back and a rowboat."

Billy nodded. He wasn't all that big on water sports.

"You can go exploring out on the island," she added.

"Great." Billy played along. He didn't want to make his mom feel sadder than he could tell she already did.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. I saw some other kids in the cottages on either side of ours. Two of the boys look like they're your age. Maybe you guys will become friends this summer."

Billy's dad hauled over Billy's suitcase. "That should do it."

"Thank you, Bill," his mother said politely.

"No problem, Kim." His dad stared off at the sparkling water behind the cabin. "Good old Lake Katrine."

"I'm surprised you remember it."

"Definitely. But I don't remember this cabin. Who'd you rent it from? Davy Crocket?"

He had a point. Billy's home for the next ten weeks looked like it had been built out of jumbo-sized Lincoln Logs. The screened-in porch was filled with furniture made from bent tree branches. Also – and this was sort of weird

– security cameras were mounted all over the place: under the eaves of the gabled roof, up in the nook of a nearby tree, over in the far corner of the porch.

Their little red lights blinked at Billy.

"I rented from Dr. Libris," said Billy's mother.

"Who's he?" asked Billy.

"Dr. Xiang Libris. He also owns the island out in the middle of the lake."

"*Shihahng?*" said Billy.

"It's Chinese and spelled with an 'X.' Dr. Libris is a professor at my college. Since he won't be coming up here this summer, I was able to rent his cabin at a very reasonable price."

She narrowed her eyes a little when she said that last bit.

Because Billy's dad wasn't very good at managing money. Billy had learned this (and wished he hadn't) by listening to his parents argue late at night when they thought he was asleep.

Apparently, his dad spent too much money on "boy toys."

And, according to Billy's dad, his mom needed to "lighten up," "relax," and not "crunch so many numbers."

Maybe I could win the lottery, thought Billy. Then all their money problems would disappear.

In his mind, Billy could see it: Him holding a jumbo-sized cardboard check for fifty million dollars. His parents hugging and kissing and agreeing with the governor that it was okay, just this once, for a twelve-year-old kid to be the Mega Lotto Jackpot winner.

"Well," said Billy's dad, "I better go. We have a client meeting first thing tomorrow." He hopped into the convertible. "See you in a couple weeks, kiddo!"

And, with one last wave, Billy's father sped down the road, his tires spitting gravel the whole way.

Chapter 2

"Did you stop for lunch?" his mom asked as Billy lugged his suitcase up the steps to the porch.

"Yeah."

"No wonder you guys were late. Did your father take you to the Red Barn?"

"No. Burger Maxx."

His mom wrinkled her nose.

"Hey," said Billy, "if he writes the commercials, he has to eat the food. It's the law."

She smiled.

"So, what's the Red Barn?" Billy asked.

"A cozy spot over on Route Seventeen. They bake the best blueberry pie on the planet. Your dad and I used to go there when we were dating. We'd rent a car, drive up to Lake Katrine, and eat pie."

Now his mom had a faraway look in her eye. Billy wondered if she ever shut out the real world and imagined a better one like he did.

But just as quickly as she slipped away, she zipped back.

"If you get hungry before dinner, you can fix yourself a snack." She led Billy into the kitchen and opened a cupboard.

Two whole shelves were lined with bright orange and red cartons of shrink-wrapped peanut butter crackers – just about the only food Billy, who was kind of skinny, actually enjoyed eating.

"Promise me you'll also eat at least two pieces of fruit every day?"

"Deal," said Billy.

"Here. Tuck a couple into your backpack. I don't want you starving when you're out having fun."

"Thanks."

"So why don't you settle in and poke around? I need to go back upstairs and work on my dissertation."

A dissertation, Billy had learned, was a very long, very boring paper that nobody would ever read except the professors who would decide whether his mom was "smart enough to be called *Dr. Gillfoyle*" and earn more money.

The paper was so complicated Billy's mother planned to work on it *all summer*. That meant Billy would need to find lots of things to do on his own.

"Don't worry about me," he said. "I'll be fine."

"I know, Billy. You always are."

Billy hauled his suitcase up to the second floor.

After bumping the rolling bag up each and every one of the very steep steps, he reached his bedroom. The walls were paneled with knotty pine. There was a flannel blanket on the bed. The rug featured fish. Billy felt like he'd just walked into some kind of outdoor clothing catalog.

Except there was another security camera suspended from the ceiling. Billy wondered if Dr. Libris was worried about people stealing his duck decoy lamps.

He rummaged around in his suitcase and found his bathing suit.

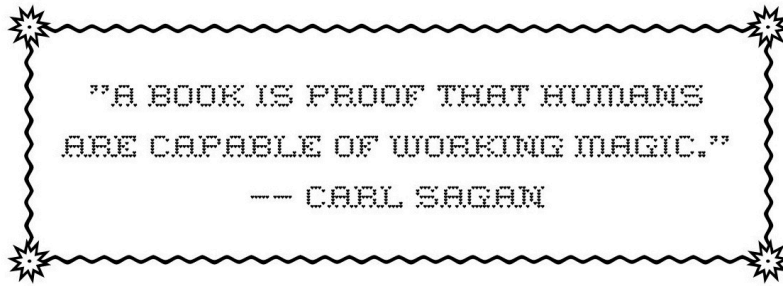
He didn't fold it up and put it in the chest of drawers.

He hung it over the lens of that creepy spy camera and headed back downstairs to check out the living room.

It was pretty much a bust.

No TV, DVD player, or X-Box. No computer, whatsoever.

There was, however, a framed needlework sampler hanging on the wall over the sofa:



"Okay," said Billy, closing his eyes. "I'm saying my magic words: 'X-Box,' 'TV,' 'DVR!'"

He opened his eyes and glanced around the room. Nothing new had magically appeared. The cabin was still boring.

Billy tucked his iPhone into a pocket and headed outside.

Looking left, he saw a glass-and-more-glass modern-looking house. On the right, a rambling two-story home that was kind of thrown together. One part was a castle tower, another a circus tent, and, another, an upside-down boat.

Billy thought the tossed-together place looked cooler than the glass house.

Strolling around to the back of the cabin, Billy noticed something weird: a giant satellite dish.

"Too bad you didn't think to hook it up to a TV," he thought out loud.

So why did Dr. Libris need a satellite dish?

Did he spend his summers trying to communicate with aliens?

Or did the big dish beam up the video feed for the worst cable TV idea in the world: The Home Security Camera Channel. *"Now you can watch empty houses filled with furniture, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week!"*

About a hundred feet downhill from the cabin's back porch, past a picnic table and jumble of lawn furniture, Billy could see a small red rowboat tied off to a floating dock.

Way out in the middle of the lake, sat an island. It was so hazy it seemed to float on the water like a bank of fog spiked with evergreen trees. The

island was maybe three-football-fields wide and had a sheer rocky peak poking up out of the haze at its far northern edge. It looked sort of like a smooth tooth.

Billy might've stared longer (the island was kind of spooky) except he heard someone hollering at him from behind the rambling house next door.

"Hello? New neighbor? I need your help! Hurry!"

Chapter 3

The little girl who'd been shouting had chocolate colored skin, bright brown eyes, and hair knotted into three braids.

She looked like she was maybe five.

"You okay?" asked Billy.

The girl shook her head and pointed up at a tree close to the castle section of the mashed-together lake place. A baby doll in a sparkly pink dress dangled off a branch.

"I wanted to see if Dolly could fly so I tossed her out the window," said the girl. "Can you rescue her?"

"Maybe," said Billy, leaning back to study the situation.

"What's your name?"

"Billy."

"I'm Alyssa. Alyssa Andrews. We live in this house. Me, my brother Walter, and my mom and dad. Not all the time. Just for the summer. It's not really a house. It's a cottage, like the cheese? I can't climb trees. I'm only five so it's against the rules. Walter's allowed to climb trees but he doesn't like to because trees have pollen and pollen makes his asthma worse."

"Well, don't worry. I'm pretty sure I can save Dolly."

"Really?"

"Yup. I'm twelve. I'm allowed to climb trees."

"Oh, good! Hurry!"

Billy was wiry and pretty good on the monkey bars in the playgrounds back home in the city. He figured he could handle climbing a tree. A tree was basically monkey bars made out of branches and leaves.

"Thank you!" Alyssa shouted as Billy scaled the tree.

Billy waved down at her then cranked up a good tree-climbing tune on his iPhone. With his earbuds jammed in deep, he shinnied up higher.

And higher.

Pretty soon, he was maybe twenty feet off the ground, hugging the tree trunk tightly with his knees.

The branch that had snagged the doll wasn't thick enough to support even Billy's weight. So he stretched out his arm.

Couldn't reach the doll.

He tried again.

He stretched out his arm and his neck and his head and was just able to nudge the doll free. It fell to the ground.

So did his iPhone.

The doll landed with a soft thud in a clump of leaves.

The iPhone that had tumbled out of Billy's pocket wasn't so lucky.

It hit a rock.

Glass crackled.

Billy slid down the tree as fast as he could and picked up his phone.

Dead.

No matter how many times he pushed the wake button or the home button or the wake and home buttons at the same time, the splintered glass remained frozen and blank.

"I'm sorry," said Alyssa.

"Is there an Apple Store around here?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

Billy was fixated on the sudden, horrible death of his iPhone. His mom would have to buy him a new one.

Chances of that happening? Impossible.

Because it wasn't Christmas. Or his birthday. And iPhones cost a fortune.

"Dolly wants to give you a hug," said Alyssa.

She jiggled her doll.

"That's okay," said Billy.

Alyssa narrowed her eyes. Telling her "no" didn't seem to be an option.

So Billy took the doll.

"There, there, there," he said, patting it on its plastic head. "Don't cry, Dolly. You're safe now."

And, of course, at that exact same second, three tough-looking guys on bicycles skidded to a halt on the gravel road ten feet away.