

*The Summer of '78* Plot Synopsis  
Screenplay by Devon Rae Sheehan

The film opens as Charlene Labelle, a headstrong, often stubborn 17 year old girl, has an explosive argument with her parents. She grabs all of the belongings she can and storms out of her house. In the downtown of her home, Pacifica, California, she runs into an old friend from high school who encourages her to spread her wings. They allude to a weird incident between the two of them that led her father to be so furious with her. Charlene impulsively buys a Greyhound bus ticket for “as far from here as possible”, which ends up being New York, and climbs aboard.

Jeremy Rafford, a naive and innocently charming 17 year old boy, sits next to her and tries to strike up a conversation. He reveals he is on the way to meet his girlfriend Crystal for the first time. Charlene and Jeremy have absolutely nothing in common except for their age, yet he believes he’s made a travel buddy. In the middle of the Nevada desert, the Greyhound breaks down. The bus driver reveals that help will not be available for at least 12 hours, and they will have to sit and wait in the scorching dry heat. Charlene decides to keep moving on her own, and Jeremy follows.

An easy-going, eccentrically dressed woman named Angela drives by in an electric blue Dodge Dart. She offers them a ride as she is headed east too. They climb aboard and make it to a gas station in Colorado. Angela knows the employees of the gas station, and goes in the back room to “catch up”. When a suspicious length of time has passed, Charlene checks on her to see she is on the floor, unconscious, overdosed on heroin. The men around her, also shooting up heroin, don’t seem to be too concerned. Charlene and Jeremy decide to stage a distraction so they can take Angela to a hospital. Charlene distracts the employees by making a mess of the merchandise, and Jeremy drags Angela’s body into the Dart. They get to a hospital and drop her off out front, taking her Dart for themselves to continue their journey.

The two talk more, and Jeremy forces Charlene to play road trip games. After driving for a long time, it is dark, and Charlene drifts to sleep behind the wheel. The car crashes and is destroyed, and they wait until morning to continue their journey. A pick up truck driver, perverted redneck named Gator, offers a ride, but after he makes one too many creepy comments towards Charlene, she erupts in his face and he leaves them behind. Charlene and Jeremy walk on foot and reach a nearby town in Nebraska, where they meet a cordial man who offers a ride with his brother in law, who is on the way to Missouri. The brother in law is none other than Gator, and the two reluctantly climb aboard his truck. After a painfully awkward ride, in which Charlene chose to stay completely silent, they reach a hotel in Missouri.

The next morning, they wake to a news alert: Charlene and Jeremy are wanted for kidnapping Angela, destroying the gas station, and grand theft auto. They stop by a diner and find a nice-seeming couple who offers them a ride in their motorhome. The drive is pleasant for a while, but the couple robs a convenience store, and they reveal that they are the “Bonnie and Clyde of Motorhomes”. A police chase ensues, and after a struggle Charlene and Jeremy bolt into the West Virginian woods.

In the woods, they meet a band of hippies in a Volkswagen bus who are a chosen family. They agree to give them a ride the rest of the way to New York. Most significantly, Charlene meets Dawn, a 17 year old beauty. The two bond over their short time together, and even kiss. Charlene feels a deep connection to Dawn, one Jeremy is oblivious to.

In New York, Charlene discovers that Jeremy’s girlfriend Crystal is, in fact, a phone sex operator that he has convinced himself has fallen in love with him. Charlene accidentally lets it slip that she has romantic feelings for women, and the two argue until she storms out. Charlene encounters the danger of New York streets at night and stumbles her way into a putrid motel. Jeremy spends all day waiting at a Coney Island bench for Crystal, but she never shows up. Charlene experiences a disappointing, and ultimately dangerous, 24 hours in New York, and she arrives at Coney Island to reunite with him.

They reconcile, and realize they have about 9 hours to kill before a bus arrives to take them home. They spend the day at Coney Island, and when the time comes to leave, Charlene pools all their money together to buy a single bus ticket. She gives it to Jeremy. The bus arrives and she encourages him to take it. She gives him a New York brochure she had been reading throughout the journey. They share a tearful goodbye, and he climbs aboard. As his bus pulls away, the Volkswagen bus is waiting for Charlene. The family of hippies pop out, and she giddily hops on. On the bus, Jeremy opens the brochure to find a bunch of sweet notes and Polaroid pictures Charlene had snapped along the journey. Charlene and Dawn hang out the window of the Volkswagen, enjoying the air and freedom of the open road.