



THE PERFECT CONNECTION

A CHRISTMAS STORY

David James Lynch

The connection was terrible.

Of course, thought Molly as she watched the infuriating wheel spin on her phone screen, searching for a signal. Molly felt as if she were moving in circles as well, turning round and round, getting nowhere fast.

She tossed the phone aside.

She'd arrived at her grandparents' house yesterday, and while she'd been happy to see them - and the other relatives she'd not seen in years - she was beginning to realize that life in this town differed drastically from the life to which she'd grown accustomed. Time seemed to move more slowly here, and she missed the hectic pace of life back home. *That mainland life*, Nan had called it earlier, craning her neck to look out the window as if she could see that far west.

Molly's parents had grown up in this quaint little Newfoundland town - *a fishing village*, her Social Studies teacher in Fort Mac would call it. Jenny and Thomas had been high school sweethearts, building a life together that had eventually seen them pack up everything and move to Alberta some twenty years prior. It was there that Molly and her brother Sam had been born and raised. As young children, there had been occasional trips home - a few during the summer months, twice during the Christmas season - but as Molly and Sam reached their teenage years, they'd become less enthusiastic about leaving their friends and entertainments to cross the country to see their aging grandparents. Not that they didn't *love* them, of course. It was just... *boring*. Molly sighed, and was reaching for her phone once more when the front door burst open.

“-and I said to Frank, *If one crumb of them lemon squares is gone when I gets back, you’ll spend the night in that snowfort the McCarthy youngsters got made up the road!*”

Molly sat up as her great-aunts Rosemary and Genevieve shuffled in, arms laden with baking supplies.

“And what did he say?” Genevieve asked with a chuckle.

“The *shagger...*” Rosemary sputtered as she kicked off her galoshes. “He said, *You needn’t worry, m’love. They looks a bit dry for my liking...*”

“He *never!*”

“That he did! So I told *him* he could stick a square right up h... oh Molly, my love! I didn’t see ya there. How ya doin’ Sweetie?”

Molly stood with a smile, and moved to help her elderly aunts with the various items they juggled.

“I’m good,” she replied.

“That you are,” Genevieve said. With a free hand, she gave Molly’s cheek a little pinch. “Look at the face on her, Rosemary. *Gorgeous*, just like her mudder.”

Molly blushed. She’d quickly realized that compliments were like currency here in Newfoundland, and her family was rich indeed.

“And where’s that handsome young Sam?” Rosemary called out as she moved toward the kitchen. “Face on him like a young Gordon Pinsent.”

“You’ll have to bawl out louder than that,” came Nan’s voice from the kitchen. “Herb got him and Thomas up in the woods lookin’ for a tree. Gone about an hour. And Jenny is gone up to see Connie Smith for a bit. You

remember, they went right through school togeth- *Blessed Redeemer*, maid!” Nan exclaimed as the women entered the kitchen. “I told ya not to bring anything! I got too much here as it is!”

“Just a few odds and ends,” Rosemary replied, entirely unbothered by her gesticulating sister. Undoubtedly, she’d grown accustomed to such reactions in the nearly eighty years they’d spent together, Molly thought. She watched as her grandmother separated the groceries, arranging them based on the recipes she’d laid out for the afternoon.

“Genevieve, tell me you didn’t get them raisins down at Mercer’s!”

As the old ladies berated this Mercer fellow and his nine-dollar raisins, Molly slipped from the room. The women were sweet - charming, even - but they were... *old*. She flopped back on the couch, and picked up her phone.

One bar of service.

Still a terrible connection, but at least there was *some* signal in this out-of-the-way town. She turned her face to the ceiling, whispered a prayer, and attempted to open her social media apps. One bar of service, it seemed, was hardly better than none at all. The app opened, but instead of finding the smiling faces of her friends back home, she found blank spaces where the photos should be loading. More blank spaces, and then...

That infuriating wheel, spinning like the tires on their rental car as they’d made their way up the snow-covered road to arrive at this place. *The edge of the world*, Molly thought. *The middle of nowhere*.

Her eyes fell shut again. She burrowed deeper into the old couch - the *chesterfield*, Nan called it - and let her head rest on its faded fabric. From the kitchen, chuckles began to rise.

“Surprised Herb’d let Thomas near an axe again, even after all these years,” Rosemary was saying.

The other two cackled laughter. Nan’s and Genevieve’s voices were so similar, especially when they laughed, that Molly could hardly tell one from the other.

“Oh, my blessed,” said Nan. “Now, wasn’t that a day! I figured Herb would skin him alive! He was up by Joe Clancy’s and sure I heard him yelling like he was in the back room! And then, he runnin’ down the hill, and Thomas, poor little soul, runnin’ toward the beach like the devil himself was on his tail.”

“I’d say he’d’ve preferred the devil to his fadder that day,” said Genevieve with a snort.

Slowly, Molly extracted herself from the couch. *What were they talking about?* She pulled her phone from the quilt on the couch and made her way to the kitchen. Rosemary was kneading some kind of dense dough in a big silver bowl as her sisters pattered about the room holding various ingredients.

“Ah, there she is! Was wondering where you went.” Nan’s face brightened when she smiled at Molly. “Come over we teaches ya how to make the best molasses raisin bread around.”

“Oh... um, okay.” She smiled as Rosemary jerked her head, indicating for the young girl to come closer. “I... ah, was wondering. What were you talking about just now?” Molly’s voice was quiet. “The... thing with the axe?”

Molly’s grandmother turned toward her, her face quizzical.

“You...never heard that story before?”

Molly shook her head.

“Well now...” Nan said, as if she could scarcely believe it. Wiping her hands in her apron, she looked toward the big kitchen window, then back at her granddaughter. She took Molly’s hand with a smile. “Come here Love.”

The window, perhaps four feet wide, overlooked the back of the property. In its lower left corner was a small, hairline crack. Not unlike the one on her phone screen, Molly thought. Off to the left was a hill that led up to the forest. Directly ahead, a meadow of grass lay between the house and the ocean. To the right was a dilapidated old woodshed. In the distance, Molly could see waves rolling on the shore. The sea was obscured only slightly by three evergreen trees that grew about halfway across the little field.

“What do you see?” Nan asked.

Molly was confused. “I see... the ocean. A bit of snow. Trees.”

Nan smiled. “Lovely trees, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Molly gave her grandmother a half-smile. *They were nice*, Molly thought, *but nothing spectacular. Three trees, about equal height, spaced out along the...* Molly stopped. Between the second and third

there was a bit of a space. Almost room enough for... Then she saw the old remains of a stump. She turned to her grandmother, her eyes wide.

“Dad cut a tree from your *backyard*?”

Genevieve tittered as she spread shredded coconut on a cutting board.

“Dear Lord, I thought that vein in Herb’s temple would *bust*!”

Nan began to laugh outright. “Yes maid. Even the compliments on the tree couldn’t calm him down that week.”

Molly turned. “Compliments? You... you put the tree *up*?”

“Of course,” Rosemary chimed in. “Did you ever know your grandfather to let anything go to waste?”

For just a moment Molly thought she saw a flicker of sadness cross Nan’s eyes. It might have been that her grandmother recognized that perhaps Molly actually didn’t know her grandfather all that well. The look was gone in an instant, and Nan laughed, adjusting the bandana she always wore on her head while baking. “Your grandfather sulked for days. Every time a visitor told him how grand his tree looked, he’d add a little Screech to his tea, muttering all the while.”

The sisters snorted again.

In her pocket, Molly felt her phone buzz.

As inconspicuous as possible, she pulled it out and saw that it now displayed two bars. As the old ladies continued to talk, she drifted off to the side. She reopened the social media app, and was greeted by a photo of three of her best friends, each one striking the common duck lip pose. She smiled, looking from her friends to the women behind her. Rosemary had thrown

back her head in laughter at something Nan had said. Molly had missed the comment. She began quietly moving toward the couch, scrolling through the electronic photos in her hand, as Nan continued to talk.

“But of course, things would’ve turned out much better if Herb actually *had* caught him, I s’pose.”

Rosemary grunted her agreement.

Genevieve tutted. “Poor little bugger had no idea what he was doin’. Lucky we didn’t lose him that day.”

Molly stopped then, her index finger hovering over the screen in mid-scroll. *Lose him?* She listened more intently, but the women were now arguing about how much shredded coconut was too much on the snowball cookies. Before she realized what she was doing, Molly had moved back into the heart of the kitchen.

“What do you mean, ‘*lucky you didn’t lose him?*’” she asked.

Genevieve was wiping her hands on an old dish towel, looking out the window. She shuddered for a moment as she looked at the water. Molly felt her grandmother take her by the elbow.

“It was a *hard* winter that year,” said Nan. “The harbour had a decent layer of ice by the week leadin’ up to Christmas. Thick enough to walk on, it was. Then a mild spell broke it up, and the little harbour was nothing but big ol’ pans of ice.” She smiled, turning to Molly. “Your father figured he’d run out onto those cursed pans to give your grandfather a few minutes to calm himself. I was watching from this very spot.” She gripped the edge of the sink as she continued. “Well, I gave a scream and ran for the door. I got

out in the garden just in time to see Thomas slip. Wearin' *sneakers*, the little bugger. His feet flew out from under him and he went arse up, only to crash back down through the pan into that frigid water."

Molly's hand went to her mouth.

"I don't know who got the bigger fright, him or your grandfather. But by God, poor swimmer that Herb was, he dove into that icy water without a thought. Dragged Thomas out, he did. By then, Joe Clancy and a few others had arrived. We got 'em in by the woodstove - your grandfather had to *carry* poor Thomas up." She gave Molly a little smile. "They thawed out. Eventually."

Molly shook her head. She looked out the window. While the day wasn't particularly windy, it was bitterly cold. She could only imagine how it would feel to plunge into those wintry waters.

"Herb was that shook up by the whole goings-on - got such a fright, I suppose - that he never bothered punishing Thomas. Poor little fella, his heart was in the right place." She smiled more deeply now. "It *was* a beautiful Christmas tree." Molly moved over and sat at the table, her attention on her grandmother fully.

"But of course," Nan continued. "Thomas was bound and determined to make amends. Heart of gold, that one. Even as a youngster. And my goodness, didn't he redeem himself in spades!

In her pocket, Molly's phone buzzed once more. Instinctively, she pulled it out and gave it a quick look. Her eyes widened. *Three* bars. And a notification from her friend Rebekah.

Moll, ur not going to believe what happened! Have I got a story for u!,
the message read.

She sat up, and was about to respond... but didn't. She stopped. Again, she looked at the women. She watched their hands work their magic on the cookies, listened to the soft Newfoundland Christmas music that wafted through the room, felt the warmth of the oven and the woodstove that burned in the adjacent room.

Then, she tossed her phone aside.

"What did Dad do?" she asked eagerly.

Nan smiled as she opened a bottle of cherries. "He shoveled."

"Shoveled? Like, did extra chores?"

Nan shook her head, and gave a sad sigh. "There was a fire at the school."

"A fire?" Molly was confused, but intrigued.

"It didn't burn the building," said Nan. "We had a tiny little school. Electrical fire, they said, so they closed it up early as a precaution. Canceled the youngsters' Christmas play. Broke their hearts. Herb's too. My God, how he *loved* watching them children do a concert."

"Happened during the storm, remember?" Rosemary added over her shoulder.

Nan nodded. "We must've got two feet or more of snow over those days leading up to Christmas... and your father shoveled it."

Molly nodded, still not sure where this was going.

Nan moved to the window and pointed to the little woodshed. “’Twas Tibb’s Eve, and he shoveled a path down to the old woodshed. It was newer then, mind. Not so run down. Anyway, he shoveled the path, and when he was done, he widened it. And then widened it some *more*. I remember watchin’ through this very window, and he started shovelin’ out a big ol’ square of the garden – must’ve been fifteen feet wide - right in front of the woodshed. And when he’s done, he takes off runnin’ without a word. Herb just shook his head - said his brain must still be half froze from that dip in the Atlantic.

Anyway, by and by, the crew from up and down the road comes along to share in the Tibb’s festivities. All hands are havin’ a lovely time, when we hears this *singing* coming from the back garden. So, we moves toward the window, trying to get a look. Before long, we’re movin’ out into the yard, and what do we see only three youngsters in *bathrobes*, trudgin’ through the snowbanks to reach the space Thomas shoveled, holding little trinkets in their hands, singing *We Three Kings*. Off to the side, their teacher Miss Maloney and the church choir director Sister Mary Ellen stood, overseeing it all. It was your *father*, Molly! Miss Maloney told us later that Thomas set the whole thing up. With the school shut, he brought the *Nativity of Jesus* right to our backyard!”

“And a *Cabbage Patch* Baby Jesus, no less!” added Rosemary with a chuckle. “But my God, it was all *so* beautiful.”

“Oh, and that flashlight atop the woodshed,” added Genevieve. “The Star of Bethlehem!”

They all smiled, and Molly watched as Nan wiped a tear from her eye. “When they sang *When A Child Is Born*, Herb cried. He actually *cried*! My heavens, the first time in, what... thirty years, I s’pose? But then, so did most of us. When they finished, well I’m sure you’d hear the applause down by Oldford’s stage.”

Through the frosty panes of glass, now coated in several decades of memory, Nan stared out into the yard where carefree children would forever sing and play.

She wiped away another tear.

Molly approached her grandmother. “Nan, these stories are... they’re *amazing*. I had no idea about all the things that happened through the years.”

“Through the *years*?” Rosemary scoffed. “My love, this was *one week* in ’83. The stories in this town could fill a *book*.”

“Towns are built on stories,” added Genevieve quietly.

Molly smiled, and turned back to Nan. “Did you ever consider writing them down?”

“*Me*? Write them down?” Nan asked, incredulous. She laughed. “Yes now, a fine hand I’d be to write stories. Imagine that!”

“But they should be... *kept*. They need to be shared. And remembered.”

“*Sweetheart*,” Nan said as she gently put a wrinkled hand on Molly’s cheek. “What do you think we’re doing right now?” She smiled. “This is how stories live on. We gather together. We reminisce. We pass our memories down to those we love.”

Molly felt tears well in her own eyes. She reached out and pulled her grandmother into a tight hug, causing the old woman to give a surprised laugh. The other women smiled.

“Thank you,” Molly whispered.

“Alright, alright,” interjected Rosemary in a playfully serious tone. “Enough of this snottin’ and bawlin’ now, there’s cookies to be made. Molly, you know how to make date squares?”

Molly shook her head.

Genevieve tutted.

Nan winked at Molly. “That scribbler over there,” she whispered. “Page six.”

“I suppose,” continued Rosemary, “if we’re gonna be tellin’ stories, I may as well share a couple.” She grinned. “Remember the Christmas of ‘85? The frozen cherry cake and Frank’s black eye?”

Nan closed her eyes and shook her head. “Lord bless us and save us.”

Genevieve sighed, made the sign of the cross, and told Rosemary to leave out the swear words.

Molly laughed. She sat at the table, her chin resting on her cupped hands as she listened to the old ladies spin the tale. She now realized that *here*, in this kitchen, with these women, she’d finally found the perfect connection.

