

## Christmas Story 2025

### Redirection of Greed

by Robert Ford

December 24, 2024

Charles enjoyed working on a whiteboard. The equations were complicated, and he was often stumped, but it was a wonderful puzzle. This was his theoretical physics hobby work. Usually, he would keep the white board facing inward to his study wall so as not to be distracted.

Tonight, with it feeling quiet, he had an hour to work on his favourite physics problems.

On his turntable was a London Symphony Orchestra's recording of *L'Enfance du Christ* by Hector Berlioz.

A fresh idea came to him. He was going to extend an equation, but a hand touched his shoulder. A familiar voice said, "you probably don't want to complete that."

"Shit!" said Charles, startled, a feeling quickly replaced by confusion. It was like looking into a mirror, but with the mirror showing him older. Behind this sudden intruder was an elliptical shimmer that was fading fast.

"Hi, yeah. No way to avoid the surprise appearance."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Charles. 2028 version."

Charles' pulse started to return toward normal. He weakly gestured to the white board, "So ... this worked?"

"Pretty much. Except I just interrupted you so, now, who knows?" said Charles 2028. He walked over to a clock on the wall. "Hey, your guests are coming soon. This might be the last thing I'm certain of. This may sound strange, but I'm exhausted. I'm going to lie down on this couch of ours while you hang with the guests."

Charles 2028 placed a small backpack he was carrying beside the couch. After moving a few books off the couch onto the floor, he lied down. He looked as if he had significant jetlag and mild nausea.

"Um, OK. What do I tell them?" asked Charles 2024.

"My strong recommendation is nothing. You need time to integrate this into your thinking. Enjoy people for who they are today. I don't know if that's sage advice or just advice from a time traveller."

A couple hours later, Charles 2024 found Charles 2028 asleep on the couch. The Christmas Oratorio by JS Bach was finishing on the turntable.

He woke up promptly and was thrilled that Charles 2024 had brought some favorite snacks. "Good man, you saved some of the sausage rolls."

Charles 2024 said, "Obviously I have questions. Let me know later how many of these are questions you expected. Where's your time machine?"

"Technically you create a portal that disappears once you've used it. No actual machinery."

"So, this is a one-way trip for you."

"Unless I build another portal in which case I can go back in time further. But not forward. In anticipation of the obvious follow-up question, you can't go into the future because it doesn't exist yet."

"But you came from the future."

"True. My recent past, AKA the future, either no longer exists or is inaccessible to us."

"You don't know?"

"The equations are ... unclear."

"Why here why now?"

"There is a woman."

"What woman?"

"You have not met her yet. I was just getting to know her when she died in a senseless accident."

"Wow. Intense. That drove you from theory to practice. What about the law of conservation of mass and energy? For example, lens cells in the eyeballs ... you and I – pardon the pun – should have the same cells."

"The mostly carbon and hydrogen molecules that underlie the proteins swap out for locally available molecules. Same shape for the proteins, different molecules."

"I'm surprised that the transition was not more painful."

"Me too. The fear of arriving as a pile of goop was real. I wonder if there's a name for that in psychiatry. You know, like ailurophobia. Maybe goopaphobia."

"What's in the bag?" asked Charles 2024.

Charles 2028 opened it. There was a lot of cash. Mostly 50s and 100s. In the middle, there were about 100 one-ounce gold bars. At the bottom were paper notebooks. No electronics.

"Going shopping?" Charles 2024 asked, smiling.

"I figured I had to support myself somehow. If I were you, since I am, I would not want a dependant at this stage of life. In the notebooks there are some stock tips. I hope to set up a brokerage account and very carefully and subtly play the market. I'm not here for the money."

"How is ID going to work? The long-lost twin? Although that doesn't work. Genetically I suppose we're similar to IVF twins, but I'm thinking true identical twins – born in different years – is impossible."

"My idea was to live a parallel life," said Charles 2028. He pulled a passport and drivers license from his bag and showed them to Charles 2024."

"Hey. Those are mine."

"When I realized what I wanted to do, I stole my wallet and passport from myself."

"What?"

"I staged a theft, reported them lost, and went through the annoying process of replacing them."

"I guess that means you'll be able to set up cell phone, banking, etc. Neat. But what do we tell family and friends? Especially if we're seen together. Especially Mom and Dad. They're old, but I think they'd remember having two sons rather than one." Charles 2024 laughed at the imagined conversation.

"For now," said Charles 2028, "I would like to avoid the relatives. For acquaintances, I am the estranged older brother. When needed, I thought I'd go by Dennis, our middle name."

"My math was showing how far in the past you could go is limited by the age of the person doing the time travel. Is that correct?"

"Yes," said Charles 2028. "Memory – as unreliable as it is – is the tether in time and space. Everything moves; everything connects."

Charles 2028 stayed through the New Year. He did all the work needed to set up banking, a bachelor apartment, obtain a cellphone, and some tax planning. Extra effort was needed to keep things from looking strange on paper. Neither of them wanted to pay excess tax.

He was reluctant to talk about the future because he didn't want to spoil it more than he already had. Nor did he want things to change too much until he could connect with his unnamed lady friend.

## **April 2, 2025**

It was one of those Vancouver overcast wet days. Every surface and person had a damp sheen. But, somehow, it was not raining enough to make bringing an umbrella worthwhile. At the intersection of West Georgia and Burrard, an impatient pedestrian ran to cross the street. The light was yellow, and the pedestrian countdown was at 3 seconds remaining. His footwear was inadequate to handle the road's low coefficient of friction. He slipped and went down hard with right arm extended, which led to a dislocated shoulder. Worse, to the east, was an impatient driver in a new Lexus TX who was fixated on the signal light. The height of his vehicle obscured the struggling body on the road. Once the light changed to green, the driver hit the gas like a horse bolting out of a starting gate. **Then** he saw the pedestrian. He slammed the brakes and swerved. The same slick conditions that had bedeviled the pedestrian took the SUV sideways onto the sidewalk, where a female pedestrian was struck and crushed by the 4,670-pound vehicle.

Several blocks away, Charles 2028 was having lunch with Cynthia. Officially, she was his Financial Advisor but, practically, they both knew they were friends considering a relationship.

The next day, Charles 2028 took a call from Cynthia. She was in tears, "Did you hear about Cassie?" Cassandra was a Cynthia's co-worker. "An SUV hit her at Georgia and Burrard and she was killed."

Charles simply said, "No." He was planning on checking the news today to see if there had been an accident.

"Uh, when?" he asked.

"While we were having lunch." She sobbed more.

He gasped. "Are you OK? Well, obviously not."

She cut him off. "Sorry Dennis, I have more people calling about this."

"Can I call you later and check in with you?"

"Yes." Then she ended the call.

Charles 2028 moved to his laptop and started looking at the CBC and CTV news sites. The CBC had a picture of the scene with the Lexus being towed. He saved the article to a PDF and printed it. In his apartment he had a safe from which he pulled a printout of another PDF. Same date, but from his personal past. It was the article that indicated that Cynthia had been the victim. Hit by an SUV, at lunch time, on yesterday's date, at West Georgia and Burrard. But the SUV was not the same. Cynthia had been killed by a Ford Expedition. Yesterday's vehicle was a Lexus TX.

Charles 2028 had approached the problem with simple thinking: keep Cynthia away from the accident. In retrospect, he wondered if he should have prevented the crash itself? But, he

had no way to influence the driver. When Cynthia died, it was deemed an accident and no charges were laid. And now he wasn't sure it was the same driver. Until more information was released, he would not know.

Charles 2028 was angry with himself for such limited thinking. He had accepted that Cynthia's death – as he had experienced it in his version of 2025 – was the result of an accident. "Accident" was the wrong word to use for car crashes as they were more often the result of errors in judgement and mechanical problems with the vehicles. A lightening strike would be truly unexpected – unless you were holding a lightening rod. He berated himself for not thinking that someone else would be hurt. Of course, he would not have anticipated some invisible *Final Destination* style Death entity trying to balance the ledger.

What next? Charles 2028 had been so fixated on avoiding Cynthia's death, he had not thought beyond that. Eventually his back story would crumble. He hoped for a relationship, but no relationship counsellor ever recommended basing love on lies.

Charles 2028 let two weeks pass so that the shock of the loss would lessen. Their relationship seemed to still progress. Charles 2028 felt that he truly loved her. He had held the fear that his obsession with her – due to her death in his personal timeline – would not stand up to the normality of dating and developing a relationship.

He phoned Charles 2024. "I need some help."

It had been at least two months since they had last spoken. "Sure," he said. "What's up?"

"I need you to meet Cynthia."

"The lady in question? Did you complete your mission of saving her?"

"Yes. But there are complications. She also needs to know the truth."

"That will be an interesting conversation."

"My thinking is that she won't believe me unless we talk to her together, in person."

"Let me know when and we can meet."

The next evening Charles 2028 said to Cynthia, "I'd like you to meet my younger brother. I've not been particularly open about my family. He's invited us over on Friday."

"Is he nice?" she asked, pleased to be let into Dennis' world a little more.

"He's a lot like me."

## **May 9, 2025**

Cynthia was aware that Dennis was nervous. His "brother" answered the door to the duplex. He was smiling like someone enjoying a prank.

"Come on in! I'm Charles, as you've likely deduced."

They sat in the small living room. Having been warned that Cynthia was a Chardonnay fan, he brought out glasses and poured a generous serving for all of them. "You're going to need this," said Charles 2024.

Cynthia looked like someone watching a tennis match as she looked to and from Charles 2024 and Charles 2028 (a.k.a. Dennis).

"How far apart in age are you guys?" she asked.

"I'm about 4 years older."

"Have you guys been mistaken for identical twins?"

"Biologically," said Charles 2024, "we are identical twins. Our difference is the age gap."

"Buddy, before I became a CFA I did biology in school. And, I have girlfriends who underwent IVF. You can't capture and freeze identical twin embryos."

"Correct," said Dennis. "How's your theoretical physics?"

"I can spell 'Einstein' and 'Hawkins'."

Charles 2024 walked into the study and wheeled out his white board. He turned it around to face Dennis and Cynthia. "This is the first time I've looked at this since he showed up last Christmas."

"What do you mean, 'showed up'?" The equations and notation on the board were gibberish to Cynthia.

From his backpack, Dennis pulled out the printouts of the two accidents from April 2 as well as another folder of printed material. "There's no way to make this easy. I'm from 2028 and I came back to save you. Here's the article where Cassandra died, and here's the one I brought – where you died."

Dennis put this and the other folder on the coffee table. Beside it he placed his ID from the future and the other folder.

Cynthia looked at the printouts. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No," they both said in unison.

She wiped tears from her eyes. She exhaled heavily. "Let's assume – just for a second – that you guys aren't some weird creeps. Did you *deliberately* substitute Cassie for me?"

"God, no. All I did was keep you away from the accident scene."

Cynthia opened the folder and flipped through page after page of market data and trends from 2025 to 2028. She opened Charles 2028's futuristic passport and driver's license. She was silent, which the two Charleses took as a better sign than screaming and running out the door.

"Why is the car different?" she asked.

"The moment I arrived, the future changed," said Charles 2028. "The ripple effects are difficult to anticipate. For example, I'm not even sure if the driver at the scene last month was the same guy that I remember."

"What's with the market data?"

"A gift. But you'll see that there are now small variances, but I figured you could do more with the information than I could."

"Where's your time machine?"

The two Charleses explained as best as possible the process and one-way nature of time travel.

"Am I the only person you've met with?" she asked.

"Yes," they said.

Cynthia chugged her glass of Chardonnay, tossed Dennis his passport from 2028, and picked up the folder and printouts. "I need time to think."

She left.

"That could have gone worse," said Charles 2024.

## May 19, 2025

Charles 2028 answered the phone, "Cynthia. How are you?"

"I'm OK," she replied. "And you?"

"Good. I've been catching up on movies that I didn't get to see."

"I've been thinking," she said.

"Hard to avoid, I bet."

"Ha ha. Seriously," she said, "I have two challenges. One is that I still like you. The other is that I'm angry at you and your 'brother' for thinking small."

"Small?"

"You came back to save me and, as endearing as that sounds, your goals were pretty selfish and limited. You swapped me and Cassandra."

"All my possible responses to that statement are inadequate."

"Possibilities are exactly what I'm talking about. Do you think you and your 'brother' could build another portal?"

"Most likely. Why? What do you have in mind?"

## **December 24, 2025**

At Charles 2024's home, the entire office area was covered in new boards with lots of information.

There was also a lot of Christmas decorations as they were feeling festive. Cynthia was amused that two guys who were basically the same person could disagree so much as to what Christmas music to play.

"What's your deal with LPs, classical music and such? I thought you were physicists."

Charles 2024 answered, "When I was a kid, I wanted to learn to play every instrument in the orchestra."

"Wow. What stopped you?"

"Mom and Dad," said Charles 2028. Mocking his parents' accent, continued, "*Can't make a living being a musician! What rot.*"

Cynthia had suggested a plan to try to improve the lives of many more people. The key issues of climate change and human rights seemed indomitable but, if they could go back to 1992, leverage the momentum of the Rio Earth Summit, she believed they could make a real difference. A one-way trip together would make the voyage less frightening.

The science needed an overhaul because of the increased mass going back. Cynthia had a long shopping list of things to bring. Mostly financial history data to help fund their mission.

She reasoned that it was going to take sustained effort to influence people and start a fossil fuel replacement system. Cynthia's finance background was focused on her concept of redirection of greed.

"Rich bastards don't care how they get rich," she said. "Being rich is the definition of being special. The *how* is not on their minds. People generally suck at empathy. For example, if coal mine owners during the industrial revolution had the ability to truly imagine and feel what it was like being children working in the mines, their brains would have broken."

Charles 2028 had developed his time portal with very little use of public networks. He knew instinctively that there were people who would misuse this. Cynthia's blunt assessment had made him double down on the isolation of their work from the Internet.

The door to the study started to glow. The door frame had been wired with Christmas lights. Charles 2028 realized that was not the light source.

"No way," he said.

Out of the doorway stumbled another Charles.

He seemed injured. Charles 2024 moved forward to help him and prevented him from falling to the floor.

Cynthia was staring at the new arrival's prosthetic, robotic-looking, right arm.  
"Hi guys."  
"Um, who are you? Exactly," asked Charles 2028.  
"I'm what you'd call Charles 2031."  
"Which of us," said Charles 2028, "are you?"  
"Him," Charles 2031 said, pointing at Charles 2024.  
They helped Charles 2031 to the couch. He dropped a heavy backpack to the ground.  
"Where are the rest of us?" asked Charles 2028.

After Charles 2031 requested and consumed some sausage rolls, questions were asked at a furious rate and answers provided. Charles 2028 had developed glioblastoma – brain cancer – and passed away. Cynthia was crushed by the experience and withdrew to deal with her mental health – a double shot of survivor guilt.

"Why didn't Charles 2024 – or you – develop cancer?"

"Hardest to predict and hardest to treat," said Charles 2031. "Screwing around with our molecules through time travel may not have helped. However, I have a Christmas present for all of you."

From his backpack he pulled out three injectors. "Voila, despite all the misinformation bullshit, they developed a cancer vaccine. Not a guarantee but proven to substantially reduce risk. You're all nerds, so here's the patient information sheet. By the way, this stuff is new and not cheap."

They all injected themselves as directed into their thigh muscles.

"Prepare yourselves to feel truly shitty tomorrow."

"What's with the arm?" asked Cynthia.

"That reminds me," said Charles 2031, "I need to take my meds." He pulled out an injector and applied it to himself. "This arm of mine causes a health problem called surgical implant rejection. When I was testing the portal, I made a mistake and my arm got caught. This is what the portal gave me back."

"Where or when is the prosthesis from?"

"No clue. It has some cool tech that I simply don't understand. Anyway, if I remember correctly, you guys are in the thick of the probability math. It's nasty. My personal unscientific view is that we are messing with the universe and we need to stop."

"Is there a plan here, guys?" asked Cynthia?

"We celebrate!" said Charles 2031. "Because I brought what we need to accelerate the creation of a portal to 1992. I hope you don't mind if we become a team of four. Because I assure you that you don't want to see the US president's third term."

## **December 25, 1992 – 1 AM**

The portal opened in the basement recreation room of Charles' childhood home. It was the most solid memory that the three Charleses had that far back. Despite the four of them feeling extremely nauseous from the trip, they stayed silent. They each had a large backpack.

They carefully and silently exited out the back door.

"Everyone OK?" asked Charles 2028.

They had decided to break into teams of two. Cynthia and Charles 2028 were going to set up their new life and start the influencing work.

"And no more time travel. We'll fix the problem here," said Charles 2031, pointing at the house. "See you in March."

Charles 2024 and 2031 booked into a nearby hotel to rest and plan their next move.

When businesses opened, they established bank accounts and a trust account for the 7-year-old Charles. It was part of the last will and testament of Great Aunt Ethel, who – assuming their time travel hadn't altered her fate – was due to pass away in February 1993. The trust covered all expenses for music lessons and education.

The existence of the trust would be a surprise because, as far as Charles' parent knew, Aunt Ethel was as poor as a church mouse. However, the support for the arts would not be a surprise. Aunt Ethel was a regular figure at live music concerts.

Young Charles' parents would be provided a monthly income bump up, but with the provision they let Charles pursue music. The law firm that Charles 2024 retained were to be paid to collect the receipts/proof until Charles was age 21.

"All you have to do is make sure the lawyers do their job. No more time travel," said Charles 2031.

"We didn't bring enough with us to easily restart a portal and I really don't feel the urge to start over," said Charles 2024. "If we can't make a positive change with our team, I don't think we ever had a chance. Of course, trying will be fun."

"Don't get mad, but I have to make a slight change to the plan," said Charles 2031.

"Oh?"

"I'm sicker than I look. The anti-rejection drug cocktail that I take has about a year's supply. I cannot obtain or make, in 1993, more of what I'm taking."

"Wow. That sucks. I can imagine why you didn't tell us. What are you thinking?"

"There's a real estate developer and a financier in New York – they have interests in a private island called Little Saint James that's part of the US Virgin Islands. What do they say in football? Oh yes. *I think I'm going to run some interference.*"