

# Phone Calls

Alice Major

The following poem by Canadian poet Alice Major explores the question of how immigrating to a new land can affect a family's connection with the past and with relatives overseas.

## I

The phone calls came at Christmas, rarer  
than the pomegranates the children had to share;  
more costly, more improbable than strawberries  
in December. They were often prearranged  
by letters on thin blue paper with a Scottish stamp.  
Our mother always neatly headed off the dash  
to answer.

fruit eaten at Christmas

\* family lives in Canada + Scotland

"Oh George, so good to hear your voice. How's Kath?  
And Iain—still doing well in school? And Alasdair?"

All of us cupped <sup>(telephone)</sup> around the receiver, close  
as a stocking round the apple in the toe. \*

\* gathered  
Christmas sock with fruit

"Och no, May, you know Alasdair. He'll work  
no harder than he has to. Here he is."

"Happy Christmas, Auntie May.

How's Uncle Willie?"

"Hi, Aunt Kath, I got a dress for Christmas."

"And don't you lassies sound like real wee Canadians  
now."

"No we don't."

Then the operator's voice, like the taste  
of an orange pip. "Your three minutes are up." \*

In the past,  
Long distance  
phone calls were  
costly, not free!

"George, George, we'll have to go. All this money."

"Aye, May, aye. Lovely to hear you all."

Goodbye, goodbye, a chorus of goodbyes. The hiss  
of the Atlantic cut as cleanly as a cherry in a slice  
of Christmas cake. Our mother would laugh and cry  
together, and pick up tangerine peel  
from the coffee table

The Atlantic Ocean  
\* separates Canada  
and Scotland.

## II

quiet

The phone calls came in the sombre hours  
of the night, the heavy black receiver (Telephones were black)  
lifted reluctantly.

"It's Dad, May. He went to the cottage hospital  
this afternoon, insisted  
on walking by himself. He just sat down  
in the waiting room and passed away."

"Jean's gone, May. She went quickly → (died)  
at the end. No, there's no point  
in coming for the funeral. It's so expensive  
and you've the bairns to think of."

The children wait at the end of the room,  
can't imagine fathers, sisters dying,  
can't comprehend mothers  
crying this way.

FINAL STANZA.

Biography

Alice Major immigrated to Toronto from Scotland at eight years old. She later attended the University of Toronto and after receiving her degree, went on to work for a newspaper association. This took her to Edmonton in 1981, where she lives today. Her first novel for young adults, *The Chinese Mirror* (1988), won the Alberta Writing for Youth Competition. She continues to write short stories and award-winning poetry books, including *Tales for an Urban Sky* (1999).

## Connecting

1. How does this poem convey the emotional tension of feeling a connection with the past on one hand, and having to let go on the other? Quote specific lines and refer to specific images to support your response.
2. Discuss the significance of the final stanza in the poem.
3. ~~We do not think of the telephone as this poem.~~ How do the emotions and experiences expressed in the poem relate to ~~the poet's~~ your family's experiences ~~and the~~?

\* "having to let go" - means to  
accept change