

The Messenger

Volume 2009
Issue 1 *The Messenger*, 2009

Article 6

2009

Late December

Elizabeth Robinson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Robinson, Elizabeth (2009) "Late December," *The Messenger*: Vol. 2009: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2009/iss1/6>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Messenger by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Late December

ELIZABETH ROBINSON

I.

Mackenzie often sits alone in her room watching recorded tapes of a family she has never met. She bought a box of fabric at a garage sale two summers ago and found them at the bottom. She cries for them; their youngest child has autism and cannot walk straight but rides on his father's shoulders to first base at his tee-ball game, but she does not cry for us. She tells me that feeling something is better than feeling nothing at all.

My mother spends hours alone in the family room hanging strands of cranberry beads on the limbs of her Christmas tree. She often hums the pious Christmas hymns that the famous carolers don't sing on their albums. Mackenzie likes the big colored bulbs, the kind that are always the last left on the shelves in the holiday aisle at Prown's, so my mother weaves the lights in and out of the branches to glow blue, green, and orange between the cranberry strands.

On Christmas Eve the four of us stand in front of the fireplace that turns on and off with the twist of a knob, and we each hang our stocking on the mantle with a thumbtack. My father sighs and hangs his last, at the right end of the mantle and furthest from my mother's. Then my mother says something festive, asking God to bless the joy of the season upon us. Every year and it is always the same.

We get an invitation to spend Christmas Day with our cousins who live in Florida and who are counting on the fact that we never accept. My mother says that Aunt Kate is just being cordial and that if she really wanted us to visit, she wouldn't have moved to Florida.

My father simply sifts through the mail like a card shuffler, throwing the Christmas cards from our doctors and local politicians and distant relatives into a pile for my mother and keeping the bills to open later at the kitchen table. Sometimes I sit with him to do my homework, and I watch him while he punches numbers into his pocket calculator and stops every so often to adjust his glasses.

In January, after the Christmas shopping bills have arrived, he will insert a few grumbles into his routine while he calculates the balances he owes for my mother's purchases. Mackenzie will sit on the couch sipping eggnog that she has spiked with rum and watch my mother take down the lights and the cranberry beads. My mother will cluck at the holes left by the thumbtacks in the mantle, but there are only four as she makes sure we use the same holes ever year.

This year, in late December, I have decided that I will run away.

My mother leaves her magazines in the recycling bin with the page corners folded down, all of them depicting sprawling gardens and spacious kitchens with lavish molding and tile backsplash. I have ripped out some of these pages and saved them in a shoe box under my bed to try and be a part of her fantasy world. This is where they can look for me when they realize I've run away.

I'm not going to tell Mackenzie because she will not cry. She will probably offer me her rain poncho and some quarters, but she won't say that she will miss me when I'm gone.

My Christmas presents will sit unopened under the tree while Mackenzie opens her new sewing machine and a few sweaters. My mother will smile diplomatically at my father when she opens the necklace that she has been eyeing in the window of Zeigman's and purchased and wrapped for herself.



II.

I had underestimated the weight of my action figures that I crammed into my backpack along with a granola bar before leaving the house. I pass people in jogging suits and women with baby carriages protecting heavily swaddled lumps with eyes. They stare at me momentarily probably because I have snot running from my nose and I am carrying twenty pounds of action figures on my back. The wind has begun to pick up and I have finished my granola bar. Perhaps this year will be different. Perhaps I should go back to watch my mother open a Christmas present that my father has thoughtfully picked out for her. They will kiss each other and Mackenzie will take a part of her blanket and throw it over my legs to keep me warm.

I begin to retrace my steps down the sidewalk, shifting my backpack from one shoulder to the other. As my house appears in the distance I break into a run and the Christmas lights twinkle in a blur of festivity on the front lawns of the neighborhood.

III.

I had hoped that it would snow. My mother has made ham for dinner this year, with crescent rolls and candied yams and the green-bean casserole my father likes. Mackenzie sits across from me and extracts the onion crisps from her casserole before plunging in with her fork.

My father pats his lips with his linen napkin. His black hair looks like it has been combed back with the mashed potato gravy. My mother takes his silence to mean that he is satisfied with the meal she has prepared.

We line ourselves in front of the fireplace. My mother goes first, tacking her stocking methodically onto the mantle. It will be empty on Christmas morning; it is always empty, but she hangs it just the same. She looks back at me as I step forward clinging to my stocking, as if to indicate the void that would have existed in the assembly line had I not come back after wandering the streets with my backpack for a while.

Mackenzie follows after taking a sip of her eggnog. She did not offer me her rain poncho; she did not even open her door, yelling over the Rolling Stones that she was re-piercing her ears.

My father shifts in his place before clearing his throat and shuffling towards the fireplace. The embers slowly inhale and exhale the gasoline from the valve, glowing blue at the base of the flames that rise up the stone backdrop. He stands there with his back to us, fingering the loop on the top of his stocking. He lifts his stocking towards the fireplace and up, up towards the mantle but then his left fist opens dropping the thumbtack to the ground and in one soft motion he tosses the stocking onto the quiet flames of the fire. My mother's eyes glow red as she watches the stocking melt into the fake coals attached to the bottom of the grate. She slowly brings her hands up to her mouth and takes in her breath as if it will stop her from feeling. Mackenzie looks straight ahead at the fireplace and then up to the mantle bearing the three stockings that we have hung. The four of us do not move from our respective positions, my father in front of us facing the fire with his hands in his pockets and his chin to his chest. And then with a sigh he steps backwards into his place by Mackenzie and my mother whispers for God to bring the joy of the season upon us.