

1995

December Storm

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Recommended Citation

Lott, Erin (1995) "December Storm," *Exile*: Vol. 42 : No. 1 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol42/iss1/29>

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December Storm

Underneath my bulky coat I twist my shoulders, struggling against the itch of the wool sweater. It bothers me almost as much as the wind, which slaps against my face, like the back side of my mother's hand when I had mouthed off to her from the back seat of the car when I was little. This isn't a pain I can choose to ignore—to push back into the recesses of my mind—it lingers long.

After ringing out a hollow rendition of "Silent Night", the bells from a distant church chime five, just as the sun begins to slip into the river. The sun reaches up with fingers of pink and orange over the river. I walk toward the sun, not wanting to help it because its death is so beautiful. But along with the sun's beauty, the river pulls down a world of darkness. In the north, dark, low clouds are slithering in. It is a race to see who can devour the sun first; the river or the clouds. I stand on the sidelines as a spectator. The river wins and pulls the sun over the edge. It spreads those fingers into the water. It gets darker so much faster now.

With darkness comes snow, simple, soundless crystals that fall into my world. The wind whips them back and forth into a tumble that accosts my face. In a few short months the snow will melt away and be forgotten. People will rejoice in the mortality of each flake because once the drifts of snow become puddles of water, spring will dawn. Then men and women will be able to shed their coats and sweaters. But not me; I want—no I need!—to huddle in the wool of my sweater, to hide behind the bulk of my coat. It is safe here. I welcome the irritation of the sweater. The incessant scratch means that winter is still here.

Last winter my father and I took a walk like this one that I am taking tonight. He put my hand in his while we were tramping through knee deep snow in the field in the back of his house. It wasn't my house anymore. I had moved out when I was 14 to go to boarding school after my parents' divorce. Any place would be quieter than home while they went through the proceedings. But while walking in my father's field, I could remember back when I was 8 and I used to pretend I was the snow princess. I used to take the clothesline that held the two rusting poles together that stood in the center of the backyard right before the field. My father used to hang his clean underwear and t-shirts on that wire to dry during the summer after my mother left. But when I was eight, I would hold the wire between my mittened hands and run and run and run as fast I could, chanting my own secret language of songs and rhymes that transformed me into the snow princess. Then I would dance and play out in the fields, ignoring the cold for hours because I was pretending that I had a prince; one who was tall and strong and took my hand in his, like my father did. And I believed back then, that if anyone would have looked out the back window and searched for me in the field they wouldn't have been able to see me.

Last year I remembered all this with my father's hand in mine crunching snow beneath our boots. We had just finished having dinner with my aunt who had flown in to see us. She had taken a book from my father's shelf and shooed me and my father out of the house claiming she needed quiet time to read. She knew we were the ones who needed the quiet time to talk. So I had put on my warm

coat—the one I am wearing right now—and asked my father to take a walk with me in the field.

“It’s been a long time, Holly.” He squeezed my hand.

“I know, Daddy. How’s work?” I asked, not really caring, but wanting him to think that I did. I sniffled from the cold.

“Oh, the same old same old.” But I didn’t know what the same old same old was anymore, so I just smiled and nodded. “How has school been?” he asked.

“Oh, the same old same old.” I said, and he nodded looking out into the dark field. I studied him from the side; His large frame was covered in layers of wool and cotton. He was almost a foot taller than me; I had always wished I had gotten my height from him.

“So how is your mother?” I had driven from Florida up to Illinois from my mother’s house and had gotten in that day. He pushed his hat further back on his head and looked up at some of the clouds that covered the stars.

“She likes the sun. She’s happy with Jack.” I brushed back a piece of hair that was blowing across my face.

“Is she ever going to marry him?” He squinted to try to see Orion.

“She has, Daddy. Last summer, don’t you remember?”

“Oh yeah.” He nodded again. He didn’t remember. He never remembered. Of course, since the divorce, it was hard to keep track of whom my mother was married to. But I always remembered. It had only been seven years and five different husbands; I remember all their names.

“Did you have a nice time with your mother this past week?”

“She’s still mad that I am living with Aric.” I blew into the mitten of my free hand to warm up my numb fingers.

“Why is she so mad?” Daddy stopped looking at the sky and looked at me.

“She thinks that her daughter should hold a higher moral standing in the neighborhood. When I tell her that no one really cares about that much anymore, and the people live together all the time, she scowls and says—I screwed up my face into my mother’s pious all-knowing look—“I didn’t raise you to go along with the flow. Would you jump off a bridge if all your friends did?” I laughed a laugh that carried over the field. My mother always asked me that question. And I never answered her.

“Did you let it bother you?” He stopped walking.

“Yes, you know I did. That’s why I left a day early.” I stuffed my free hand in my coat pocket. It was too cold to leave it out in the air.

“You shouldn’t let her bother you.”

“Easier said than done.” And I pulled his arm to start walking again. We finished the rest of the walk in a comfortable silence.

Tonight it’s still silent, except the Christmas decorated streetlight that begins to whirl and hum as the bulb inside flickers. A shadowy circle materializes on the pavement below me. The now steady snowflakes stream through the ray of light from the bulb. The flakes look like moths headed in the wrong direction. But enough light filters through the snow to illuminate the cracks in the sidewalk. The light reveals the dead, brown grass creeping through.

I wander on the cement path, oblivious to where it's taking me and what I will discover along the way. I am still thinking about my father and my mother. Their relationship lasted for 15 years. They had one trophy from the whole ordeal—me. It kept them bound together after all these years even after they have severed every other bond but this one. This year, instead of listening to my mother bitch about Aric and whine about how dumb my father was, and instead of trying to explain the same thing over and over to my father, I decided not to come and visit either of them. I took my Aunt Glenda up on the offer to watch her house while she went to Illinois. Besides, I wanted the company of Klein, her cat. All he did was meow. It was simple. Besides I didn't want to tell them the news about Aric.

I notice on my walk that everywhere I look, there are no people. I am alone—alone with the blades of grass. I guess they are all inside eating a warm Christmas Eve dinner with their families. Besides this is a residential section of town. Not many people would be out anyway. A small feeling of loneliness settles into me, but I let it. I accept this feeling because I know that I cannot command people to join me on the sidewalk, and if I could, would I really want them here? I question if they could have anything to offer me.

When I return from my aunt's back to my own apartment, I am going to pack and leave again. This time for good. I am setting out on my own. And I will leave so many people behind. But these people—my mother, my father, my aunt, Aric, even the cat, Klein—have given me all that they can. Or at least all that I can take. They have served their purposes. It is time to move on. But I have to question. Then are relationships and people meaningless because there comes a point when they can no longer show me the infinite? Is there a point after which I can no longer grow? Have I reached this? Do I care? Do I even want to continue to try to grow, to try to share, to try to live with these people with whom I have reached this limit? Are all relationships finite? And if they are, will I want to ever even start a new one?

My mother has a tendency to start new relationships—all the time. The last time I saw my mother, she had started yet another one. I knew though that this one wouldn't result in marriage. He was too old for her. Hell, he couldn't even remember my name. He kept calling me Heather.

"How old is Hank, Mom?" We were standing in her air conditioned kitchen in Florida cutting vegetables for a salad. Hank was coming over that night to meet me and have dinner with us.

"I don't think that this is an appropriate question. That was plain rude, Holly." She chopped her green peppers harder.

"Mom, I was just asking. Does he have a son my age is all I wanted to know?" I turned to the sink to scrub my tomato.

"I thought you were with that Adam boy." She moved her pile of green peppers to the end of the cutting board and took the tomato from my hand to scrub it harder. I guess I wasn't doing a good enough job.

"Aric, Mom. I was just asking though. Aric and I are free to date others." This was last summer, before Aric and I had gotten serious.

"I will not have my daughter dating freely. You should stick to one man. People will think you are a slut." She handed me the scrubbed tomato, and picked up a peeled onion for herself in her left hand.

I stood there in silence for a full 30 seconds. I wondered if I had the guts to say the next sentence. Somewhere inside of me, I did; "Mom *you* date a lot."

"Are you calling me a slut?" My mother slammed her knife through the onion. "My own daughter calling me a slut? To my face? I cannot believe you." She whacked the edge of the onion so hard I was afraid that she would have sliced off her finger had it been in the way. "What do they teach you in college? I never would have dared to say something like that to the most promiscuous lady I knew in college, let alone my *mother*."

"No, Mom, I'm not calling you a slut." I muttered, and I wished I could have taken the earlier statement back. But she didn't even hear me try to apologize. She cut her onion into perfect squares, deposited them in her Waterford salad serving dish, and turned to glare at me.

"When you have spent 15 years with someone as amazingly stupid and trying as your father and produce one daughter and manage to make something out of yourself like I have, then, young lady, you can make judgements about me. But I don't see that happening with you. So don't you get all high and mighty on me and try to tell me now to live my life. I am still your mother." She took my tomato from me and began to slice it. "Now will you please set the table. Hank will be here any minute and I will *not* have this dinner ruined."

I don't think I want to start many new relationships. Not if they will leave me bitter and ultimately alone like my mother. If relationships do have a limit, then I have used people. I have used others for my own personal gain—for my own growth—and once they have served their purposes, they have been cast aside, used and drained. I alienate them from me. They no longer connect with me. And it's my fault because I think like this.

But all the while I was using them, they were using me. I am then cast aside, too. It becomes a race to see who can reach the limit of a relationship first because *no one* wants to be used. Everyone would rather do the using. And this cycle continues and it always will.

Stop it! I have to push these thoughts to the back of my mind. I can feel the top of my stomach itch as I try to stop my thoughts. I don't want these thoughts to be real. I don't like them. Maybe I shouldn't leave. If I hide these thoughts, then maybe they will never resurface. I hope no one else has had these thoughts. Because what if. . . what if everyone thinks like this. . . ? What if. . . What then?

NO! I must concentrate on something else. My surroundings. Where am I? I look around. I have drifted off the sidewalk and onto the frozen ground. It is littered with decaying leaves from the now barren sycamores. It is hard to discern where the trees end and the river bank begins. There are no definite edges set anymore; everything has become fuzzy. I have moved past the streetlights. I wonder where they all went. I don't really know how long ago it was that the first streetlight lit up. It's been a long time. I think. There is nothing but blackness and cold—a cold that chokes me, hurting me to breathe. I sniffle a little and move on, taking shallower breaths. The snow continues to pour down around me.

Aric and I haven't been getting along for some time now. I don't really

remember when it started that he stopped taking my hand in his, and I stopped listening to him tell me how his day was. But somewhere it stopped. I have to leave our apartment. I am done with school, but I haven't left the town. Hell, I graduated six months ago, but it doesn't look like it from the outside. I haven't found a "real" job yet. I haven't decided what I want to do with my life. I haven't thought about graduate school. I am just living in a silent apartment going to work as the front desk attendant at the inn three blocks from home.

The past few months, I don't remember how long, Aric and I have passed each other in the kitchen without a word, rolled over after sex without a smile, and left the apartment without a sentence concerning when we were to return.

Before I left to drive to Aunt Glenda's last night, I asked Aric to come into the living room.

"I won't be here for Christmas," I told him as I looked up from my book.

"Oh, neither will I." He sat down in the armchair across from me and picked up the *People* from the coffee table.

"I see." I looked back down at my book wondering where he was going this year, but I had forgotten how to ask.

"So, when are you leaving?" He has his eye glued on a current picture of Cindy Crawford and Richard Gere.

"Tomorrow." I flipped a page, not really reading the words written on it.

"Hmm. Be careful." He put the magazine back on the table and left the room to brush his teeth and get in bed.

I think about this past conversation as I kick pebbles from the riverbank into the water. Darkness and the snow hug me in coldness even when I try to wrap my own arms around myself. I can't make out the opposite banks of the river. I crave to know that the proverbial other side is greener, but I can't see it. Maybe there is no other side.

I don't want to leave him. Aric looks like my father—tall and protective. And he isn't anything like my mother—he doesn't bitch about morality and conformity. I want to stay behind with him where it is warm and safe.

I am cold; I shiver, I am tired – no exhausted. The cold is sapping all of my energy. I cannot keep my arms curled around myself any longer. I reach down with a mittened hand and pick up some of the sharp rocks on the ground that are poking into my thinly soled shoes. I let the stones plunk into the water. But I can't make out the sound very well because the wind is still whipping tonight. I can't even see the ripples in the water, and I can't distinguish the bottom.

Is it because there is no end to the depths of the water? Or is it only too dark to see? Or am I looking too hard? There must be a bottom to the river. There must be a riverbank on the other side. There is an end to everything—even riverbanks. Because everything is finite, isn't it? Right? Because if it is, then so are relationships.

I have to leave him. It will be hard to leave him. But I can't stay—just as I couldn't visit either of my parents this year. I didn't want to tell them that I had been considering for weeks the possibility of moving out of my apartment with Aric. I didn't want to tell them that they didn't offer me anything else anymore

either. I didn't want them to know that I knew that I had kept them together for the last couple of years. And that I knew I had ultimately failed in keeping them there.

I stop throwing rocks in the river and I turn around and move back through the cold and the snow back to Aunt Glenda's apartment. I unlock the front door and feel the whoosh of warm air slam against my body. It welcomes me into the foyer. I shut the door quickly to make sure the heat and Klein don't escape. He meows at me telling me that he needs to be fed. I pick him up, but he struggles against the cold of my coat, which is littered with snowflakes.

Throwing Klein on the floor, I peel my coat off and rub my sleeves. Although the house is warm, my clothes are still so cold. I guess I have forgotten how to be the snow princess and ignore the cold for hours. I look at the clock to find I have been gone 45 minutes. It seems so much longer.

There is only one message on the machine, my father, to wish me a Merry Christmas. He's a day early, but he probably forgot which day it was. I forgive him. Tonight his early Christmas cheer warms me a little more than the heat of the house. He always does know how to make me feel good.

After I had graduated from school, he walked with me from the academic quad, where they held the ceremony, down the hill to my apartment. My mother drove ahead so as not to have to talk to my father. Her current boyfriend, Lance I think, sat beside her blankly wondering how many years his junior I was (not very many). But my father walked with me. We saw my mother speed by in her new BMW, and she honked and waved at me.

"You're not happy." He, of course, had my sweaty hand in his soft dry one.

"I am happy, Daddy. I am just sad that it's all over. I don't know what I am going to do with the rest of my life." I notice all of the other parents and siblings streaming by with their recent graduates. Everyone looks so happy—so ready to face the future.

"Take your time."

"That's not what Mom says to do."

"She says that because she knows I am going to say the opposite." He nodded to himself, watching a elfish girl carrying her cap and gown race by us.

"Well, you are." Sometimes Daddy doesn't see the obvious.

"Because I mean for you to be happy. She means for you to be productive and look good in front of everyone else."

"I know, but isn't that important?"

"Only if that's important to you." He squeezed my hand.

"But Daddy, I want her to love me as much as I love her, and the only way is to be productive." I didn't mean to start whining but I could never please her. She wasn't happy that I had graduated *cum laude*. She wanted more. She still wasn't happy with Aric and didn't want to meet him, even though his family was there for his graduation, too. She wasn't happy with my apartment, she said it wasn't decorated tastefully. People would think that I had bad taste.

"Honey, when are you going to love you as much as I do?"

"Boy Daddy, I don't know," I said. "I really wish I knew. Maybe when Mom

stops pressuring me to make enough money to drive a car like hers and capture a man like hers and go to a graduate school like hers and . . .”

“Maybe it’s time that you wanted to do something that you wanted to do. Maybe it’s time you did something on your own,” Daddy paused beneath a sycamore tree beside the sidewalk. “Maybe it’s time to make your own decisions.” He squeezed my hand. “It sure was a nice ceremony. Too bad your mother had to sit in the aisle two rows ahead of me. She was much too close. I could smell her awful perfume. What is that? Channel No. 5?” He continued to walk and gave my arm a little tug.

I think about what he said as I undress and step into a steaming shower. The warm water runs down my back. It’s safe and warm here. But I know that I have to step back out into the chilly bathroom where the mirrors are fogged up and the air is heavy. I know this. I know this.

Is now the time to move on? Yes. Yes. I know this, too. I have to leave Aric. I have to leave my mother. I have to find out what makes me happy. I smile as I soap up a wash cloth with Irish Spring. And I am going to take my time, I think to myself. My own sweet time.

– Erin Lott '96