



LOST IN DECEMBER
a short story

benjamin vrbicek

Lost in December: A Short Story by Benjamin Vrbicek

Benjamin Vrbicek blogs regularly at FANANDEFLAME.com.

Copyright © Benjamin Vrbicek.

Cover and interior design: Benjamin Vrbicek

Cover images: Pexels.com; Creative Commons (Ben Hosking)

Author photo: Marti Aiken Photography

Acknowledgements: Thank you to all those who helped polish this story: Kelby Adams, Carolyn Aiken, Eunice and Keith Davis, Marc DeSantis, Scott and Stacey Ervin, Mike Grenier, Ally Hall, Meghan Jenkins, Brian Neese, Remington Moll, Tom Reidy, Stephen Smith, Megan Spinney, Linda Vargo, Molly Vrbicek, Robb and Diane Vrbicek, Amanda Waddell, Andy Walker, and Mary Wells. And, of course, thank you to the one for whom this story isn't just a story; I love you.

December 1, 2015

LOST IN DECEMBER

I looked at the clock on the oven and deliberated whether it was worth making a fuss about being late. It probably wasn't, but it came out anyway.

"If you wanted me to take her to school," I said to my wife, "you should've told me last night."

"I did," Allison said.

"I don't think I would have forgotten."

"Joshua, I told you after dinner when you were standing in the garage fiddling with the air conditioner and I was folding laundry."

"All right," I said. "I'm going to be late for work. You seen my keys? I just had them."

"No. Where did you last put them?" Allison asked.

LOST IN DECEMBER

“Thanks, *Mother*,” I said to her. Then muttered to myself, “I need to put up one of those key things by the door.”

I dug around on the kitchen counter and finally found the keys under my daughter’s backpack. Then looking at my daughter, Campbell, who was finishing her cereal, I said, “Let’s go.”

As I turned to walk away, I remembered my meeting. “Oh yeah, Allison, we talked about this last night real quick, but remember I have a late meeting tonight.”

Allison stopped cleaning the counter but didn’t look up. “I remember.”

“Campbell, we’ve got to go. We’re going to be late for school.”

“You mean *I*’ll be late,” Campbell said.

“I’ll be late to work, too. Please just brush your school bag and grab your toothbrush. We’ve got to go.”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean, ‘Huh?’”

Campbell looked up from tying her shoes. Our eyes met, and we lingered in a momentary stare down.

“You knew what I meant; I’ll be in the car.”

LOST IN DECEMBER

“Is that it, Joshua?” Allison asked.

“What do you mean, ‘Is that it?’”

She went back to cleaning the counter. “I don’t know,” she said.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but we’ve got to go. You gonna say goodbye, give me a kiss, or what?”

“I’m right here.” She looked up and stared at me.

“Okay. Let’s go, Campbell. You can brush your teeth later.”

We walked out the door. Campbell yelled, “Bye, Mom.”

The school parking lot was busy. It always was at the beginning of the year. Campbell walked away from my car without looking back. She seemed taller than last year. Of course that’s true; she’s not getting shorter.

I looked at my phone and then out the window again at Campbell, unsure of whether to call home now or just sort it out tonight when the kids were down.

How did it happen? How did we get to the place where we just carried out work and life and errands

LOST IN DECEMBER

and duties? Allison and I were colleagues, not spouses—subsisting from chore to chore, sharing the house, sharing the bed, alternating rides to school. What happened to our promise *to have and to hold*?

My phone began to vibrate. It wasn't her.

I came down the stairs from the kids' room later that night and realized why most houses in Tucson, like our last house, are single-story: temperature. We had bought the house only a few months ago, but it wasn't summer then. It wasn't 85° in the bedrooms upstairs. As I walked down to the main level, the temperature seemed to drop a degree with every step. I should have put ceiling fans in the upstairs rooms. *Dangit*. Add another thing to the list. I guess living in the rental house last year wasn't all that bad.

When I rounded the corner at the bottom of the tile stairs, I could see my wife on the living room couch looking at a book. I continued through the living room, through the door, and around the corner to our kitchen in hopes of finding some ice cream. It wasn't there. I slammed the freezer shut. It bounced open again.

LOST IN DECEMBER

“What’s going on?” Allison said.

I slammed the freezer again, though a little more gently, came back to the doorway, and stared at her across the room. “What’re you reading?” I asked.

“I’m not,” she said.

“Then what’re you looking at?”

“Just pictures,” she said.

“Pictures of what?”

“Different things.”

“I thought we had some ice cream left,” I said. Allison mumbled something, but I couldn’t really make it out.

“Hang on,” I said with a few additional decibels. I went back to look.

Apparently my son, Robbie, took the noise as an invitation to come down from bed to see what was going on, because when I returned to the living room he was snuggled next to his mother. Robbie was five, and just the right size for snuggling.

“What are *you* doing?” I asked.

My son, sensing that the sharply spoken “you” was directed at him, answered that he wasn’t sleepy or ready for bed, and he wanted to look at pictures with Mom, and he never closes his eyes anyway.

LOST IN DECEMBER

“It’s not time for pictures. It’s time for bed,” I told him.

Allison looked up at me slowly. “You remember what today is?”

“Friday,” Robbie said.

“Not you—*you*,” she said.

“Today?” I asked.

“Yeah, today.”

There I stood, with no answer, no response, but very aware that I should have remembered something now forgotten.

“Not so much,” I said.

“It’s August 4th.”

“I know,” I said, “*Friday*, August 4th.” Robbie smiled.

“You don’t remember,” she said.

Slowly, deliberately, leaving her elbow by her side, Allison took her right hand off Robbie and moved it a few inches away from her belly. Her hand was open, fingers extended, like she was palming a basketball that wasn’t there.

She mouthed the words, “Due date.”

Dammit.

LOST IN DECEMBER

I had long forgotten, but of course, Allison had not. It was *her* baby that died. Oh, it was mine too, there was no question about that, but it was different for her. The baby had been inside her. And without warning, it had happened: for two whole weeks, she was a walking mausoleum.

“All day... you didn’t say anything?” I said.

“*You* didn’t say anything,” Allison said, raising her voice.

Yet she didn’t seem mad so much as disappointed—like all day she was rooting for me to figure it out, but I didn’t. It was like her delay, her patience, was an invitation. An opportunity really—a chance to come through, to succeed. A chance to win her heart, a chance to remember, a chance to better the first Adam.

“Daddy, look at pictures,” Robbie said.

I leaned against the doorframe, buried my hands in my pockets, and stared at the floor. The grout in the tile floor was dirty. One more thing to put on the list.

From the other room, my phone began to ring.

“Is that work again? That thing is always bossing you around,” she said.

LOST IN DECEMBER

“Be nice to have some ice cream,” I said. “I mean, have some together.”

“I’d like some ice cream,” Robbie said.

“You’re going to bed, buddy. Should I run to the store? Let me look in the kitchen again.”

When I came back, I stood near the couch. Still no ice cream. Now Campbell had come down too.

I was standing closer to them now and could see what pictures they were looking at—birthday pictures, zoo pictures, Christmas pictures, grandkids and grandparent pictures. Each kid had their own scrapbook. They were looking at Robbie’s now.

“We’re not doing this, guys,” I said. “I put you to bed.”

“You remember *that* ultrasound?” Allison asked.

“What’s an ultra-pound?” Robbie asked.

“It’s *sound*, not *pound*. And it’s this fancy thing that takes fancy pictures,” I said. “Look, Allison, is this the best time for this? Let me put them back down first.”

“Just a few more pictures, Daddy?” Robbie asked.

“I’d like that too, buddy,” Allison said. “Josh, just let me sit with them a little longer.”

“Fine. Five minutes,” I said.

LOST IN DECEMBER

I sat down. Allison took my hand and added, “You remember the woman taking the fancy picture, looking and looking?”

Robbie spoke up to ask what she was looking for.

“Yeah,” I said. “She got up real quick and said she was going to see if someone could help take the picture.” Her empty chair was spinning slowly as she walked away. I held Allison’s hand when they did the blood work.

The ultrasound was on a Monday last December. Yet, if things had been normal, the ultrasound was at least a month before we needed one. But things were not normal. Allison had been bleeding. Just a little at first, but then enough to know we had to see the doctor.

I suppose a late miscarriage has its unique difficulties, but I know an early one has its own hell. That Monday of the ultrasound in December we were only at six or seven weeks, so the doctors couldn’t know for sure what was happening. If the pregnancy had been further along and our baby had been older, we could have heard the heartbeat. A nurse can measure it; the feedback is instantaneous. You hear this rapid, watery sound—*SWOOSH-*

LOST IN DECEMBER

swoosh...SWOOSH-swoosh...SWOOSH-swoosh. But early in a pregnancy, silence. Only a fancy picture and bloodwork for feedback.

So after Monday morning, we had lived in a purgatory—waiting for the blood work results, waiting to see if Allison’s hCG levels were growing, as they do in a healthy pregnancy, waiting to see if her levels were dying. My wife had felt hers dying.

Robbie flipped the page of his scrapbook and said, “Was this at Grandma’s house?”

“Yeah, it was.” Allison said.

“I remember going to the hospital,” I said, “the day after the lady tried to take the pictures because the... the stuff... got worse.” With the kids’ eyes on the pictures, I mouthed “the bleeding” to Allison.

“Are you sick, Mommy?” Robbie said.

“No...well...I was,” she replied. Then she looked at me. “You remember when Sarah came?”

Campbell piped up, “Sarah wasn’t at Grandma’s house.”

“Not at Grandma’s house,” I said. “Sarah came to the hospital when Mommy was sick.”

Looking back to my wife, I said, “Yeah, I remember. Sarah brought us hot chocolates from

LOST IN DECEMBER

Starbucks. She apologized because she couldn't get whipped cream on mine. Good friend."

"Can we have hot chocolate?" Campbell said.

"No. It's summer time," I said.

"Didn't we miss *Biggest Loser* on TV?" Allison said.

"Yeah. Guess it was a Tuesday that it happened, or at least when the results were back, and that guy said they were officially not going to need to take a fancy picture."

In the emergency room that Tuesday night, after several hours and a second round of blood work, a clinician with professionalized empathy told us he was sorry for our loss, but we still had more waiting to do because in a week or so the baby would pass, hopefully on its own, and if not a procedure would be done to remove it, but for now, he told us, he was moving on to visit other patients, and we could go home, and again, he was sorry for our loss.

So we had gone home, I to my work and Allison to her living kids and to her waiting.

Robbie continued to flip pages. He stopped at the Christmas ones. "There's the bike you gave me. Dad,

LOST IN DECEMBER

can we take the training wheels off? Campbell doesn't use them."

"Christmas...last year's Christmas party..." Allison trailed off as she looked away. There she remained, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to do anything but wipe her cheeks.

I knew.

I knew.

I knew.

"Kids," I said, "we're done; time for bed. Let's go."

* * *

It had been a cold day in December, and not just for Tucson. It was made worse by the way it forced itself on us. No one had the right coats with them; it had been warm when we woke up.

Allison and I hadn't talked all day, and we had driven to the Christmas party separately. She had errands, and I had work to finish. But now we made the brief walk from our separate cars to the restaurant together. "I'm glad you could come, sweetie. Did the babysitter show up?" I asked Allison.

LOST IN DECEMBER

“It’s cold. Let’s just get inside.”

That day, even the foothills, which never have snow, were white. My wife had goose bumps.

As I held the door open for her, I commented that I didn’t remember coming to this restaurant before. She said they were all the same.

The entryway was smart looking, sort of a modern and retro combo. All the servers wore black shirts, pants, and shoes. The seating area décor was refined as well, although we soon learned that we belonged upstairs in the meeting hall, which did not seem as elegant and required us to go back outside to walk up the concrete stairs to the second floor.

While people were finding their seats, I talked too much with friends, so we ended up at a table near an exterior door. Servers scampered in and out continuously. The breeze didn’t help the goose bumps.

After the expected period of preliminary table talk concluded, my boss stood up, cleared his throat, and approached the microphone. It took a moment, but thirty or forty conversations brought themselves to premature closings. When the room was quiet enough, my boss commenced the formal welcome: “I

LOST IN DECEMBER

just want to say how much I appreciate all of you. There are so many people that work so hard around here. And every year there are new obstacles and hurdles—challenges that must be overcome—but through long hours and teamwork and loyalty, somehow we find our way...”

Then in the middle of the toast, unable to fake it any longer, my wife leaned close to me. “It happened today.”

“What—what happened?” I asked.

She leaned in closer still. “*It.*”

It?

“...Friends, I know I point this out every year, but it was true again this year...”

In a hushed voice, with every word measured, she told me that today, while taking a shower, it just sort of happened: she felt a little twinge and looked down just in time to see some pink tissue land on the white floor, catch a current of water, and flow down the drain.

Before she could have reacted, it was over. Her baby—our baby—was gone.

Allison’s syntax called for volume; it called for fire. Her words begged to be filled with their

LOST IN DECEMBER

appropriate ache, yet the acoustics of the room, the presence of an ongoing toast, the pleasantries of an office Christmas party, forced them to be awkwardly muted, like a trumpet with one of those goofy caps on the end.

“...Again, thank you for your dedication. If you could all raise your glasses...”

With counterfeit smiles, we obeyed.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

“Joshua, I don’t know if I can stay. I’m gonna lose it,” she said.

“Of course.”

* * *

After I put Robbie and Campbell back to bed, I came down the stairs and sat on the couch, this time closer to Allison.

“The Christmas party...” Allison mumbled.

Minutes passed without eye contact; silence punctuated only by her breathing. “I don’t miss that shower,” she finally said.

LOST IN DECEMBER

“Sweetie,” I reached for her hand. “I’m glad it was a rental home, and we’ll never be back. This is our home now.”

Between breaths and sniffles, and through a half smile, “Me too.”

Together, we flipped again through pages and pages of smiling toddlers, until it hit me: there were pictures, whole scrapbooks really, that were missing. Trips to the zoo to feed giraffes, swords or dolls to be picked up off the floor, bedtime songs to be sung, reminders to do homework, a son to escort into manhood or a daughter’s hand to give away, and grandkids that would someday be five years old and just right for snuggling. Whole branches of the tree were missing, missing because they fell down the drain.

But tonight, Allison was mine, and I held her.

Over her shoulder, I looked at the tile floor. The grout wasn’t so dirty.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin and his wife Brooke have five children (Noah, Hudson, Eden, Israel, and Judah). Benjamin enjoys reading, wrestling with his children, dating his wife, eating at Chipotle, and riding his bicycle in the early hours of the morning. He earned a degree in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Missouri and a Masters in Divinity from Covenant Theological Seminary. He is a teaching pastor at Community Evangelical Free Church in Harrisburg, PA. He has also written for *The Gospel Coalition* and *Desiring God*.

If you would like to read more from Benjamin Vrbicek, please subscribe to his blog, [FAN AND FLAME](#), or email him at Benjamin@fanandflame.com.



FAN AND FLAME