

## CHRISTMAS WITH THIS AMERICAN LIFE 6

This LWS is build around a David Rakoff's poem he recorded for one of Christmas episodes of the podcast

**David Benjamin Rakoff** (November 27, 1964 – August 9, 2012) was a Canadian-born American writer of prose and poetry based in New York City, who wrote humorous and sometimes autobiographical non-fiction essays. Rakoff was



an essayist, journalist, and actor, and a regular contributor to WBEZ's This American Life. Rakoff described himself as a "New York writer" who also happened to be a "Canadian writer", a "mega Jewish writer", a "gay writer", and an "East Asian Studies major who has forgotten most of his Japanese" writer.



1. A. Pre-listening. Read the words and their meanings. Can you translate them? What do you think the poem is going to be about?

**garbed** – wearing particular clothes; dressed

**gamely** – in a way that shows are willing do something new, difficult, or that involves risks; bravely.

**to impinge on/upon someone or something** – to have an effect on something, often causing problems by limiting it in some way

**twinge** a sudden, sharp localized pain

**to niggle** cause slight but persistent annoyance, discomfort, or anxiety

**to rankle** (of a comment or fact) cause continuing annoyance or resentment

B. Drag and drop the words under the correspondent picture

mackerel

a mimeograph

a dress of blue satin



C. Listen to the clip and match the parts of collocations \_\_\_\_\_

evening in

the mimeograph

she is garbed for

a trek

It is too far  
ignoring the mounting  
as they congregate over  
gamely endures not  
though some  
an unwelcome  
twinge starts to

whispers and jokes  
the mackerel light  
the company party  
niggle and rankle  
twinge  
the kindest of stares  
doubts still impinge

**D. Fill the gaps with prepositions. Listen again and check \_\_\_\_\_**

10:00AM \_\_\_ December \_\_\_ midtown Manhattan, Helen sits \_\_\_ her desk in a dress of blue satin, a vision \_\_\_ evening \_\_\_ the mackerel light, she is garbed \_\_\_ the company party that night. It is too far a trek \_\_\_ to Avenue J just to go home to change \_\_\_ the end of the day. So



she sits doing work, ignoring the mounting whispers and jokes led \_\_\_ Joan \_\_\_ accounting. She's aware that her dress makes the other girls laugh as they congregate \_\_\_ the mimeograph. Helen gamely endures not the kindest of stares with aplomb, for you see, Helen no longer cares. Well, that's mostly the truth, though some doubts still impinge, each year around Thanksgiving an unwelcome twinge starts to niggle and rankle so that \_\_\_ mid-December all that Helen can think is, do they still remember?

**2. A. Listen and complete the chunks \_\_\_\_\_**

since that silly, regrettable \_\_\_\_\_

harbors the \_\_\_\_\_

and the throwing of \_\_\_\_\_ and drunken \_\_\_\_\_

she got \_\_\_\_\_ plastered

The \_\_\_\_\_ are fuzzy

cried on that \_\_\_\_\_



lurched 'round the \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ a blind \_\_\_\_\_ to the smirks and the winks

**B. Try to recall the adjectives to fill the gaps with. Listen again and check:**



Time's gone by since that \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ business when she became known as the girl who ruined Christmas. Helen harbors the hope that the \_\_\_\_\_ five years have made folks forget both the vomit and tears, and the throwing of glassware and \_\_\_\_\_ oration, that half-hour tirade of recrimination where - feeling \_\_\_\_\_ - she got pretty \_\_\_\_\_ and named his name publicly, called him a bastard. The details are \_\_\_\_\_, though others have told her how she insulted this one and cried on that shoulder, how she lurched 'round the

ballroom all pitching and weaving and ended the night in the ladies' lounge, heaving. Helen turns a \_\_\_\_\_ eye to the smirks and the winks. Surely by now they've forgotten, she thinks.

**3. Look at the base forms of verbs, read them out. Try to find the correct place for each one, remember the correspondent grammar form**

go                      look                      forget                      begin                      lean  
smell                      confirm                      pinpoint

How had it \_\_\_\_\_, before things all turned rotten?  
She can \_\_\_\_\_ the day. She has never \_\_\_\_\_  
how he came to her desk and leaned over her chair to  
\_\_\_\_\_ over some papers and then \_\_\_\_\_ her hair.



"Gardenias," he'd said-- his voice sultry and lazy-- then was back to all business. Helen felt she'd \_\_\_\_\_ crazy. She was certainly never an expert at men, but an inkling was twinkling, especially when the next day he all but \_\_\_\_\_ Helen's hunch. He \_\_\_\_\_ out of his office and asked her to lunch.

**4. Drag and drop, listen and check \_\_\_\_\_**

spare midtown rental                      efficient and smart                      all awkward and formal  
among other oblivion-seekers                      guilty parties

Their talk was \_\_\_\_\_ to start. He said that he found her \_\_\_\_\_. She thanked him, then stopped. She was quite at a loss. She'd never before really talked to her boss. They each had martinis, which helped turn things mellow. He asked where she lived and if she had a fellow. He reached for her hand and asked, "Will you allow an old man



to wonder who's kissing you now?"

It was close and convenient, his \_\_\_\_\_. And after, more drinks at a bar near Grand Central where they sat once again in uncomfortable silence, like two \_\_\_\_\_ to some kind of violence. They sipped \_\_\_\_\_ while June Christy sang from the bar's tinny speakers.

5. Listen and put the lines in order \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ the windows lit up, children fresh from the bath.

\_\_\_ Helen touched up her lipstick.

\_\_\_ then was off through the crowd for the next train to Greenwich.

\_\_\_ Helen wondered if *she* might just smell on his skin the copper-y scent of their afternoon sin.

\_\_\_ He patted her cheek and said, "I'm replenished,"

\_\_\_ Helen pictured his house with its broad flagstone path,

\_\_\_ They got to their feet and emerged from the afternoon hush to the street.

6. Listen to the snippet and read the script \_\_\_\_\_. Then match each word and expression in bold and its definition:

are in the habit of doing something; accustomed \_\_\_\_\_

a good quality or way of behaving \_\_\_\_\_

a temporary or second lodging \_\_\_\_\_

there is nothing more to do or say about the matter  
\_\_\_\_\_

caused; brought about \_\_\_\_\_



At her desk the next Monday, it was business as always. There were no words exchanged, not a glance in the hallways. With relief, Helen thought, well **that's that**. Never more. But next Friday found them at his **pied-a-terre** door, and the Friday thereafter, and the one after that, 'til sometime in late June when their actions **begat** what such actions **are wont to**, when caution's ignored. The solution was something she could not afford. They talked in his office behind his closed door. She could tell from his face that he'd been there before. In the envelope Helen found the next day on her desk was \$200 and a downtown address.

She'd never had visions of roses or cupids. From the very beginning, she wasn't that stupid. He was older, that's true. But they'd both played the game of never once speaking the other one's name. And what you don't hope for can't turn round to hurt you. This wasn't the first time she'd given her **virtue**. You have to want something to then feel rejected. This wasn't that different from what she'd expected. Expected, she said, and it sounded absurd. How long had it been since she'd heard that word?

7. Read the script first and try to figure out the appropriate word form. Then listen and check your guess \_\_\_\_\_.



She'd heard stories of girls all (*summary*) \_\_\_\_\_ sacked. She was just glad for a job to which to come back. Which she did one week later. He was surly, a jerk. She should have walked out, but she needed the work. Some (*minimalistic*) \_\_\_\_\_ kindness was not a tall order. Instead, he was rude or he outright ignored her until she decided that this wasn't right and stood in the door of his office one night. He was (*coat*) \_\_\_\_\_ and (*hat*) \_\_\_\_\_ and ready to go when she asked, would it kill you to just say hello? He took a step backwards as if sensing danger and fixed her with eyes of a cold-blooded stranger.

"I don't know what your game is, and (*frankness*) \_\_\_\_\_ don't care, but don't (*threat*) \_\_\_\_\_ me, Helen. I warn you. Beware."

8. Listen to the snippet. What happened? What was 'the salt in the wound'? Listen again and join the parts of collocations

without

he'd had her

didn't just outright

what is known

doing steno

helping with

made sure to



the salt in

the sight that

made herself

was ever

held back

with an effort

till it burst

of her shameful

keep smiling

as a floater

for this one

transferred

demote her

her agreement

filing

steely

display

the wound

her tears

then faced her

the stoic

forth that night

heroic

**9. Read the words and their definitions. Then listen to the snippet and read the transcript.**

**Translate. Retell.**

**patsy** - a person who is easily taken advantage of, especially by being cheated or blamed for something.

**pliant** - easily influenced or directed; yielding

**defiant** - full of or showing a disposition to challenge, resist, or fight

**quaff** - drink (something, especially an alcoholic drink) heartily

**jostling** - making one's way by pushing and shoving



**brio** - vigour or vivacity of style or performance



Perhaps there are those who consider her dumb or a patsy for even agreeing to come, simply showing herself in the very same setting each year cannot help to ensure folks forgetting. But she will not stay home or remain out of sight, for to do so – she thinks – would prove that they're right. That was then. This is now. She needn't be pliant. So she stands there each Christmas, alone and defiant. While others quaff cocktails and gradually lose inhibitions that slowly dissolve with the booze. There's jostling and coupling, embracing with brio, all being scored by the hired jazz trio. Helen just stands, observing it all, sipping her brandy against the far wall.

**10. Read and translate the collocations. Then listen, drag and drop.**

devoid of real worth

chided herself

to explain or appease

with no rank or no bile

of some acid-tinged mirth

cast in bronze or in iron

chiseled from lime



The evening progresses, the room now quite loud. And here's Joan from accounting. She weaves through the crowd, a man on her left arm, a drink in her right, "All alone are we, Helen? No fella tonight?" Joan wears on her face an expression of utter concern, like her mouth couldn't even melt butter. Helen almost begins \_\_\_\_\_, until stopped by this knowledge – and it makes her blood freeze – for here is the truth Helen long had resisted, in all of their eyes she barely existed except as a source \_\_\_\_\_. For them, she's a person \_\_\_\_\_. They don't think of that time. Indeed, they don't care. She has always, to them, barely even been there.

The time when this might have been painful has passed. Nothing hurts Helen now. Her heart has been \_\_\_\_\_, or \_\_\_\_\_, or some other substance as adamantine. Her biggest regret is the wasted five years that she's \_\_\_\_\_ over

shedding those tears. Instead of her wishing for eyes that stayed dry, she should cherish that Helen so able to cry, that Helen who felt things and then wasn't scared to express them in public, that Helen who cared. She takes Joan's hands in hers \_\_\_\_\_ Helen looks in her eyes and breaks into a smile. "You're right," Helen says, "I should probably go home." Helen smiles one



more time then adds, " [BLEEP] off Joan."

**11. Read the transcript of the last snippet and try to fill the gaps with prepositions. Then listen and check \_\_\_\_\_**

Helen takes \_\_\_ her dress and gets ready for bed.

There is peace deep \_\_\_ her where once only dread. She watches the window – \_\_\_ most of the night – turn from black to pale blue in the gathering light. Then she rises, not tired, sets the coffee to perc, for once looking forward to going to work. For now she's immune \_\_\_ the power of them. She repeats what came to her around 3:00AM, that alone isn't dead. Alone's just alone, Helen thinks as she surveys her tidy, small home. A place \_\_\_ each thing and each thing \_\_\_ its place – this order alone puts a smile \_\_\_ her face. There are others out there for whom life is more rough, so if this is my lot, well then, this is enough. She washes her cup, puts it back \_\_\_ the shelf. Merry Christmas \_\_\_ me, Helen says \_\_\_ herself.

