

The Jelly and the Stars

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After Norman left me I moved home, somewhere nearish Great Yarmouth. I liked the idea of returning to my childhood to sort through things like an army falling back to their fortress, but in the fifteen years since they died someone had callously bought it.

I rented somewhere a few miles away, closer to the water, told myself it would do.

I hadn't known until he left that Norman had the power to rewrite so many years of my life. He had made London pointless and I found, all of a sudden, that the lighting in all my photos was subtly worse. So I hired a skip and decided Norfolk would mean something, my new coat would mean something, my new mugs in my new kitchen would mean something instead. The air was so cold when I drove up and I thought I hope this is what emotional progress smells like, I hope it smells cold.

My new house was a bungalow. It had a low centre of gravity and slate alligator scales. It didn't take long to unpack because I hated all my stuff. The only pictures I put up were pictures of me, except I didn't have many of just me. My school dance photos were a little mildewed and bendy but still good. I also had some postcards from the National Gallery, which was the only thing in London I missed.

What I would do with myself was anyone's guess. I passed two A levels in French and music which I was very proud of but I didn't think it mattered much. I was also very good at getting coffee out of ties. So if anyone needed any of those things, I was all set.

I made a shepherd's pie and found there was more of the day left than I was hoping.

Someone knocked on the door and I was grateful because I had almost been reduced to watching Countdown. My neighbour, Bradley Whitford, let me know he was not the Bradley Whitford who had starred in *The West Wing*. It was the first thing he said after hello. I hadn't known anything about *The West Wing* until that time, but now I knew there was a Bradley Whitford, and this was not him.

"Now you won't get mixed up!" he finished. I imagined him walking into an office Christmas party with his opening line all ready.

"Well that's a great relief." I said. "Please take this shepherd's pie."

See Norman? I'm having new and valuable experiences without you.

Bradley took the pie. It was average and under-seasoned, but it symbolised my immense desire for things to go well here. I had never made a pie before, never anything with mince, potato, worcestershire sauce, substantial ingredients that take up space in the world. They would make me take up space in the world too. I had always subsisted on black coffee and diet coke, hollow

foods that helped me stay hollow too. I was about to embark on a life where I chewed things. I offered up my pie like worship, in the windy place where I had had memories once.

He said thank you. I don't think he appreciated the significance, and I don't think he ate it either, but I could forgive him for that. He lived just down the road, he said. He said I could see his porch from my kitchen and I could see it, the one with shells tacked around the door. It was a nice little house in bright pale grey. *Invite me over Bradley*, I prayed.

The road we lived on was long. It hung together loosely, and the houses and their thick yellowish grass barely related to each other. The houses, like the sky, were low and wide, painted pale and smelling of salt. I imagined long-legged birds commuting through here before dawn, off to their fenland business. I imagined eels on secret missions in the night, and the billion billion stars hunkered down above the clouds, just out of sight.

One night I invited Bradley over and learned more about who he wasn't. He was not born in 1959 in Madison, Wisconsin. He was not nominated for Golden Globe awards in three consecutive years. He had no connection to the TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*. We sat in my rented lounge on my rented furniture, breathed all my landlord's air. He was sinking low into the sofa and I perched high on a wooden stool.

It was winter - winter when scents travel fastest through freezing air. A bad time to move to a fen. I was happy and empty. I woke up every day grateful for my blank wall and my lack of phone signal.

Every smell pulled me in the direction of a different memory - hot sausage rolls, mulled wine, mud, birdshit and my raincoat childhood. Inviting Bradley over for a neighbourly drink and nibbles, putting the food in the oven and taking it out, meant wading through a dark sea of past Christmasses.

It was not Christmas yet, of course, but I was not optimistic about it. Norman had decided, himself, without me, that I would spend Christmas alone. Or maybe I had decided it when I had chosen not to have a baby, or when I didn't make enough friends, or when I married him.

Oh well. The sausage rolls were greasy and hot, and there was plenty of wine, and a man who had never won a primetime Emmy to share it with. He asked me what I did for a living. Failed housewife? Divorce settlement bitch? Sleep with your secretary and pay me, Norman, you ruined my life.

"What do you do?" I asked as I counted spring rolls onto a side plate for him. "What does this Bradley Whitford do?"

"Oh, nobody cares about that."

"I do, I do." I crunched greasily. I was a hunched over hungry creature with a shiny chin. I was trying to form a pack. I wanted to ask him if he had a family but didn't know how to ask. He looked so much like a dad, not my dad, but the platonic ideal of a dad.

"I used to write books, I suppose." His voice was breathy and wistful. I supposed he must have done alright out of them if he was able to live here on the money.

"Oh my, that's interesting," I fumbled my tiny plate so I could lean forward and show him how engaged I was. "What sort of thing?"

"I suppose you could call it... nature writing, though no one really used that name at the time." He paused again and seemed to be grappling with something difficult. "Do you know much about jellyfish?"

"I don't know. How much do most people know about jellyfish?" I laughed and Bradley looked out the window into the sky, melancholy, and I wondered if we were having two different conversations. I looked down deep into my sausage roll. This was my first attempt to host an event on this new continent and I had created an awkward situation about jellyfish, which I knew absolutely nothing about.

I cast my mind back. "Well I know they have tentacles, and I know they sting, um, sometimes. Probably only if you annoy them though. Turtles eat them?"

He nodded. I wondered if I should have taken the shepherd's pie to my neighbours on the other side, with their running children, their unfeasible number of bicycles. He pressed his lips together in a sort of smile and shook his head slightly, like banishing an idea from his mind.

"Well then." He said, "What's your plan for Christmas darling?"

"I am far, far too old to be a darling Bradley." I laughed and waved my wine glass dreamily. "I don't know. Things have changed quite a lot for me. I don't have a lot of plans."

"Would you say you're *worried* about not having plans?" I had flashbacks to teachers asking me what I wanted to do with my life. Bradley, poor dear, had probably not had to make conversation in a while.

"Not worried, I suppose. But I'd like to have some one day."

"Wouldn't we all, eh? Eh?"

"You're not wrong there." It was quiet. I thought living here I would have to learn to let it be quiet. Bradley breathed in deep, readied himself to try a different topic, and I wished very hard for it to be a good one.

"A lovely lady like you shouldn't be alone on Christmas. Anyone coming up to visit you?"

"Nope. Not at Christmas and not at any other times." I had hoped that sentence might be funny, but when I actually said it, I don't know what about it I had intended to be funny. I was cavernously alone. "My parents aren't around anymore and I was an only child so..."

“Just you... I’m sorry, darling. We’ll find something to entertain you, me and Mrs Crane over the way.” Bradley was sweet in his itchy jumper and his itchy beard. He looked like he would help me put up bookcases and drink real ale, the kind that tastes of twigs and marmite. I felt comfortable with him in a way I couldn’t describe. I was not happy yet, but I thought if I felt around here I would find something. Happiness was in one of these cupboards or across one of these fields.

In the window behind him, the east of England gaped deep like a problem, wide like a wound. I felt safe here.

“This is an excellent sausage roll. Really excellent.” He nodded with bits of pastry in his beard. I nodded too. “I haven’t had a new neighbour invite me round in twenty years. I will think of something I can do for you to say thank you.”

“Please don’t bother with that. I want the company.”

After that evening I knew which neighbours to talk to and which to avoid. I resolved to buy ingredients for three or four more shepherd’s pies and stage a more extended campaign. I knew that Bradley, who had never been in *The Post* or *The Mentalist*, would be nearby. The next morning I looked towards his house and thought I had managed one root in the fen. I heard a noise that might have been an owl. I treasured it vaguely, my maybe owl.

Coffee tight by my chest, blanket around my shoulders, I stood in the garden in the mornings. I thought about how close the sky felt, yellow-tinged, and the fact that my parents weren’t here. Mum, Dad, my marriage failed and I wanted to ask your advice but I couldn’t, so I moved to a wetland.

The bicycle family were off down the road and the sounds of their bells broke through the air like light. The parents of the bicycle family didn’t seem to work at all. They were always gardening, or off to the countryside in wellington boots with packed lunches. I waved sometimes.

It was so clear here, so fresh, that I thought there might be nothing in the air at all, oxygen was a myth and all there was was cold. The chill reminded me my blood was warm. I wanted to bathe in the air, scrape away London and regrow my childhood skin.

I always stood there for a long time, because I didn’t have a job and there wasn’t any washing up. Sometimes a bird appeared, which might have been a cormorant, but I had no idea what a cormorant looked like.

“It’s nearly Christmas!” said Mrs Crane. She shouted over the fence. She must have rung the doorbell and I’d been too far away, so she had skirted the side of the house to find me. I was in the garden. I was so far away.

“It is! It is nearly Christmas!” I returned the call, and then I opened the gate to let us both in the kitchen.

“Divine pie, sweetheart.” Norman, I’m a sweetheart now. “Can I smoke in the house if I stay by this window?”

“I don’t mind a bit. Coffee? Tea? Something stronger?”

“Ah, stronger. You can drink in the morning when it’s this cold. It’s the rules.”

“You know, I think you can too.” So we drank red wine. There was still mist out in the distance, the sun was barely up. I said if we were going to drink wine this early we should be responsible and eat some cake with it.

“I’ve brought you a book. You must take it. It’s one of Bradley’s and we’d both love for you to read it.” She pressed it into my hands. It was a very small paperback, quite thick, with thin, gauzy school bible paper. I thought it had been printed by a small press somewhere for an audience of maybe ten hardcore enthusiasts.

Mrs Crane was looking at me expectantly so I opened it and flipped through a couple of pages. The type was single spaced and inky, so almost the whole page was black. There were a few gaps for pen and ink drawings where jellyfish swam through the blank space.

“Thank you so much, Mrs Crane, I will definitely read it.”

“You could do it it today! It’s a perfect day for reading. When I’m out of your hair you sit down and have a read.”

“I will,” I said, smiling, but she was still looking at me like she was waiting for something, so I repeated, more forcefully “I *absolutely* will.”

Mrs Crane laughed and I laughed too.

“You’ve never told me what you do for a living, Mrs Crane?”

She paused, took a bite of cake, and I wondered if she was eating so she could avoid having to answer. “Ah sweetheart, that’s a hard one. I helped in the high school a couple of days a week when Jerry was alive, when the kids lived with us. I helped in the office. I don’t know if it was a real job though, I just wanted to be near the boys.”

“Of course, of course.” I murmured. I supposed Jerry must have had a very generous pension.

“And since then, well...” she looked like she might want to say something. I raised my eyebrows curiously, yet companionably, and waited to see if she would. She wouldn’t.

“I’m not too sure what to do with myself, really.” I said “I suppose I’ll make it to new year and then come up with some sort of plan.”

“Would you like to stay around here?”

"I would. Lots of stuff to be worked out, obviously, but I'd love to stay."

"Ah," she always said that, and I liked it, it made me feel a little surprising. "Well. You should come over to Bradley's on Christmas Day. If you don't mind being with the oldies. No one should be on their own, this time of year."

"I'd love to! I don't want to intrude though."

"Ah, you won't be. You'll fit right in." I said maybe, I said I'd wait for Bradley to invite me himself, and then later that day he did invite me. I was on the porch with my new book, bent down close to read the tiny type. Jellies, I learned, could be found in shallow water by beaches or in the blackest depths of the ocean. They had no brain, heart, or eyes. See, Norman? Just like you.

"You must come." He said cheerily. "Come early in the morning and I'll keep you entertained all day. I see Mrs Crane has given you my little book?"

"Yes," I said. "It's fascinating."

"I always hoped it would reach more people, of course, but there isn't much market for it. People think they're just bags of goo that sting and nobody sees how... beautiful, or how profound, a jelly can be. Oldest animal in the universe, and most people just... Sorry, I'm rambling. I wanted you to read it. I thought you might understand."

My new friends did say some odd things. After the year I had had, I was ready to have empathy for any form of life at all.

"Thank you, Bradley. I don't know much about them, but I really would like to understand."

There are worse things to be in life than a bit intense when discussing jellyfish. He left after a few minutes, and I sat back down to read.

Christmas crawled closer. No one had my new address. I received no cards. Every day was colder. The wind rumbled in from the sea, rattled over the land to find me. I loved the cold like a pet, the way it crawled up under my jumpers to find the warmth of my chest. I loved to do nothing now, walk around my garden like I used to walk up Regent Street, saying good morning to the plants I couldn't name. I liked the squelch of my feet sinking in the ground, and the gravity that tied me to the earth's core and pulled the air down snug around me.

On Christmas Eve I went to sleep with the curtains open and woke up with the lazy winter dawn. I opened the present I had bought myself and found no one from my old life had contacted me at all - me, the woman who took Norman to the cleaners and ran away. I smiled, I made my coffee. When Mrs Crane knocked on the door I went out to meet her, stamping my feet till they warmed up.

"Sweetheart, you look wonderful. You have the skin of a teenager. The air here is so good for you!"

“Happy Christmas Mrs Crane!” We hugged. She smelled of air, hair just a little bit damp from the shower. I had no idea what my mother had smelled like anymore.

“Happy Christmas.” She smelled just a little bit of rum, too, and why shouldn’t she? I had sympathy now for people who woke up alone on major holidays.

Together we trudged up the road, which was trying its hardest to become a bog after days of frost and slushy rain. Bradley threw the door open so wildly it banged on the wall beside him, held me close to his itchy, itchy jumper.

“Where should I put my wet shoes?” I asked.

“Ah, don’t bother.” said Mrs Crane “We’re going straight through to the garden.”

In the garden I was offered tea, then whisky, then we sat in silence. The whisky was made with peat, it filled me with smoke. Bradley offered me a blanket but didn’t tell me why we had to sit outside. I tapped my feet, and they both sat still. Our breathing slowed. I looked down and tried to imagine what they were thinking, and then I realised they were both looking up.

In the sky, which had been clear and blank when I’d woken up, clouds were settling into rings and spirals around a few pale stars. I had one of those dizzy, sudden moments that I had used to have as a teenager, drunk in a garden, where I realised how much deeper the sky was than anything I understood. I thought the clouds I could see had nothing to do with the earth’s atmosphere at all, they were light years away. The pink dawnish colour changed, not to blue but lilac - lilac that was also grey, grey that was also orange. My eyes became dreamy and unfocused. I was trying to focus on something so vast and far away. All of our breaths all faded and rippled in time when a new colour appeared.

Some of the clouds seemed to have something dark in their hearts. The dark thing grew, and we waited for it to be born.

A jellyfish is only one phase of life of a larger lifeform, which begins as a polyp in the sea. Many jellies have forms we have not found. Some sting, some don’t, some can age backwards, and some live in the sky in the clouds between stars.

When it emerged from the clouds around the new sun, the first jelly swam deep towards us with its tentacles wide.

“I think he likes you,” said Mrs Crane. I stared and stared. The bioluminescence burned my eyes, just gently. “Why don’t you try standing up?”

I fumbled my drink onto the table and got to my feet. In the house next door someone was washing up at the window, and I saw them glance out and see nothing strange. They looked back down at the sink.

There were ten or so creatures now. I felt warmth, like the whisky finding my heart, but it came from somewhere else. The first jelly, the one that was nearest, turned its body to me. I lifted my

chest and waited to see what the many-coloured light would burn away. I asked the jelly what it wanted me to know and what it wanted me to forget.

Behind me I heard Bradley laugh, loud and wide, the clink of glasses. I felt that my life was about to become very different. I was being told I should stay here, and everything would be alright.

“Here, have a bit of turkey, darling.” Bradley’s voice was by my shoulder and I turned around to see a full plate of food being offered to me.

“What?” I said. “Is it lunchtime?”

He laughed again. “It’s like that the first time. They’ll wait for you to eat, darling, you can have a sit down.”

“It’s too...”

“It’s not just Christmas, you know. They’re always here. But I thought, you know, why not meet them on a special occasion, give you something to remember. That’s what I did for Mrs Crane too, actually.”

As we ate, at the garden table where we forgot the cold, more and more jellies were born above us. I processed the shock, a little bit, and it became easier to talk.

“Will you stay here, darling? We’re a little strange, I know...”

“His Easter roast though. You can throw them a potato and I don’t know that they *eat* it but it definitely doesn’t come back down...”

“I never want to leave, I never ever want to leave.”

I learned that I could really stay, if I wanted, and the rent wouldn’t matter as much as I imagined, because the people the jellies liked never had to worry about much. We lived in their world and no one would see us, or remember we were here, unless we wanted. The creatures carried on their movement, bathing in the sky, and when I closed my eyes I saw the colours, the celestial bodies, the sound of gravy and taste of wind and fenland.

I saw myself in a decade’s time, living my marsh life on this patio on Christmas morning, ready to see someone new in town who looked lonely and ask them what they knew about jellyfish. I felt very happy, just then, all of a sudden. I felt like the oldest animal in an old universe, part of a small herd in an infinite sea.