

Sara Oliver Gordus

Why Have the Jellyfish Lived So Long?

Mimi poured orange juice, noting the sun's glint against the iridescent rim of the glass. She carried her plate and juice over to the table, set, as always, for one. She cut into the egg, softly poached, so that the yolk ran down over the plate. The paper lay untouched, perfectly creased, next to her left hand. I've gotten fussy over the years, she thought. When she and Richard had been together, the idea of quiet, weekly routines held no appeal. Now it was a comfort to her to know that the paper would be there when she walked outside at 6:45 and that setting 7 on the toaster would turn the bread the right shade of golden brown. She was ready to be married now, but no longer was.

Their marriage had been so long ago. The idea of "Mimi and Richard" was distant, as if those were the names of two mutual friends that had once been together. They had only been in their mid-twenties when they separated and for most of the last twenty years, their contact had been sparse at best. But, they had grown up in a small town and their own parents were friends. Mimi read with interest the family updates on the Christmas cards from Richard's mother. She knew he'd remarried and had a son shortly after their divorce. He'd moved to New York. She read his name in the Boston Globe when his architectural firm played a major role in the redevelopment of the Boston waterfront. In time, as their own failed relationship gained roots in the past, she began to send her own cards – brief notes with dashed off listings of the past year. Not that she ever had much to report. He eventually responded in kind and their relationship became cordially rooted in once-annual sum-ups. But this year, she didn't get a card. She heard from her mother, through his, that he was getting divorced and moving back to Boston.

Two weeks ago, she had called him on his birthday. She was bored, feeling pluckish, and felt bad to know that he was alone again, since she had long since accepted the blame for the breakup of their marriage. Mimi knew it was him as soon as he picked up. His voice sounded slighter, a little raspier than she remembered. "It's good to hear from you," he'd said. "It's been a long time. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"It's your birthday."

"Yes."

"You know what the best thing about getting older is?" She asked, her voice rising in an attempt to sound glib. This was a difficult call.

"What's that?"

"You stop caring as much."

"So that makes you start calling?" Richard laughed.

"Well, you care less about making a fool of yourself. Would you like to get together sometime?" It had been an impulsive question, but lately she had begun to reconsider her past, regret her mistakes, and wish that, in her youth, she'd not been so young. Maybe it was the grating sameness of her life over the past few years – the same students to teach, the shrinking pool of flawed men to date, the peeling paint on the bathroom ceiling of her condo. Maybe it was watching her older sister become a grandmother and celebrate her thirtieth wedding anniversary, and having to stand at the party and answer questions about her own life while holding a paper plate.

She'd chosen to meet Richard at the New England Aquarium, because in case she wasn't able to keep up the levity, at least they would have something to point at. When she was a child, the aquarium had been one of her favorite places. Now, of course, her worldview had expanded. Nostalgia or ironic detachment had led her to choose it and she would be fine with either. She met him at the docks, choosing an outfit that she hoped conveyed casual elegance, a periwinkle rayon dress with white flowers that buttoned up the front and came down to mid calf. She undid the buttons of the dress up to her knees, because he used to tell her that she had great legs.

As the earth rolled towards ten o'clock and the breeze from the ocean began to feel less like cold fingers on her neck and more like a firm hand pushing back the humid summer air, she saw him coming out of the

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three-story brick parking structure next to the Marriot. His khaki pants hung loosely over his thin frame and broke at his feet shod in loafers with no socks. He wore a navy polo shirt and a white cardigan. He's so slim, she thought, holding her purse up against her fleshy middle as she smiled and waved.

When Richard came closer, she saw that age had simply brought his features into relief. His high cheekbones with the horseshoe-shaped scar below his left eye and his mouth – thin upper lip, full lower lip that tilted slightly downward on the right – were still the same. Unkempt eyebrows flecked with grey set above deep set eyes with laugh lines; though whenever she thought of him, she never pictured him laughing. They stared at each other a moment, standing in front of the aquarium. Behind them, a vendor opened up his hot dog stand.

"Hello, you," she said, searching for a sign of the appropriate way to greet – a hug or a handshake. A nod? He seemed to be wondering the same thing. He bobbed his head to the side as if to kiss her cheek, and she crashed against him in a boisterous hug. "You look wonderful."

He did not kiss her cheek, but returned the hug graciously. "I'm older. So are you."

"Still the charmer," Mimi laughed, but reached down to button her dress over her knees.

"Yes, it's the secret to my excellent track record with women." His eyes twinkled.

"Ha, ha, very funny," she said in a way she hoped sounded nonchalant. They stood staring at each other for a few moments, wondering how to bridge the gap created by love, pain, desertion, and time. Finally, Mimi couldn't take it anymore and threw up her hands, "Come on. Let's go look at the fish."

"You were serious about that? Really? Wouldn't you rather go to brunch?"

"Later, later. I'm not sure if I'm ready for the full heart-to-heart."

"Is that where you think this is leading?"

"No, I – look let's just have some fun. Be kids, be happy."

He sighed, "Sounds good to me."

Bad for fish, good for jellies

When they walked inside they heard the deafening sound of screaming children and the squeak of strollers, slurp of juice boxes.

Richard set his shoulders more squarely. "Scenes like this make me happy that Milo is now an adult, or one in name at least."

"How is Milo?" Mimi asked. She and Richard had once talked about having two children together, but in that fanciful, abstract way people do when it's not a near reality.

"Brilliant. Frustrating. Nineteen. He wants to change his major to comparative world literatures or something like that. He didn't come home this summer, which kind of upset his mom. It's a pretty empty nest around there," Richard coughed authoritatively. "Of course, he does have an internship at the Village Voice. It'll be good for him to learn some independence. Why is this line moving so slowly?"

There was a stoppage at the front of the line near the entrance to the featured exhibit, "The Amazing Live Jellies." The line extended now to the outside door and a group of teenagers held it open, the hot air from outside a comfort against the dank chill of the air-conditioned interior.

"Maybe they've got a Portuguese Man of War stunning patrons senseless upon arrival," Mimi suggested.

"Yes, turning them into shark bait, no doubt," he said.

Mimi had always liked Richard's smile. It was the smile of someone

trying not to.

“See?” she laughed. “No sympathy for others. No wonder we didn’t last.”

Richard held up his hands questioningly and looked stonily ahead. He was no longer trying not to smile. What did I do wrong, Mimi wondered? After twenty years, can’t we mine our failed love affair for comedic material?

“Ay, there’s the rub,” said Richard, nodding.

“What?” He could be so pretentious. They hadn’t even gotten inside and she was starting to feel like this outing was a mistake. She’d lived her life impulsively, but looking back she had trouble seeing what that impulsiveness had brought her. She’d married impulsively, strayed impulsively, began a second career, then returned to the first one.

“The camera,” he said, gesturing ahead.

They’d reached the front of the line. A girl of college age wearing a blue New England Aquarium T-shirt stood behind a camera mounted on a tripod. Her flippy brown ponytail moved as she did. She motioned them toward a grey background.

“Sir, Ma’am, can I just get you to stand over here?”

“Oh, how fun. It’s like a cruise,” Mimi exclaimed. She wished she could stop herself from sounding so chirpy, but she didn’t want to let go of the protective buffer against Richard’s characteristic moroseness.

Several months ago, she’d found a photo of them from long ago – probably from the first or second year of their marriage. It was the early eighties and her hair was teased out and her eyeshadow overshadowed her eyes. His hair was too long. He had his arm around her – she was in a full-mouth laugh, her head leaning down on his shoulders. He was glancing toward her with a bemused expression on his face. She didn’t remember why she was laughing – all she remembered was that they

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were at the party given by a friend from her teaching program. They'd had a big row beforehand about whether to go, because Richard said he was feeling antisocial. But you wouldn't know that from the picture – the fight was long over and they just looked happy. It was what had made her want to see him again. She wondered whether she could ever recover the feeling of ease she showed in that picture, probably not, but perhaps she could at least remember what it was like.

Now, they centered themselves behind the masking tape on the floor. She turned her body toward him but looked straight at the camera. She'd been told that this was the most flattering way to pose.

"Yes, we could've traveled the world together in our golden years, amassing an album full of silly pictures," Richard said wryly. The mine was set.

"Smile," The girl snapped the picture. "You can look at it on your way out. They're available for purchase to commemorate your day."

Animal Examinations

Richard had proposed to her during finals week of their senior year in college. They were studying at the library together or trying to, nudging each other and giggling as she wrote up flashcards and he went over and over the same passage in an art history book. He tore out a page – a loud ripping sound that caused heads to shoot up several tables away. He picked up his pen to write, using his other hand to shield the article on art deco. There on the page was "Want to Get Married?" And they had done it the very next summer, over the protestations of both sets of parents. She was attracted by his intellect, he by her joie de vivre. They balanced each other. He grounded her, she drew him out. They thought that would be enough.

Blues and grays were the primary colors Richard and Mimi saw when they entered the dimly lit main floor of the aquarium. The air managed to be both cool and humid. A huge column fish tank emerged from a penguin grotto and dominated the room. Rings of cement walkways encircled the tank of swirling fish.

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"It's like a little Guggenheim," Richard said.

"Except for the smell of rotting seaweed."

"Yes, well, I guess that's one for the New York snobs."

"Just the one?" Mimi snorted. "For a while there, I thought we'd lost you to the dark side."

"You mean marriage?" He laughed.

"No – the Big Apple."

He winced like an oenophile rejecting a Pinot "Please don't call it that – "

Splash. A penguin jumped from a man-made rock into the water, darting underneath the surface, delighting a group of screaming curly-haired toddlers.

"Yes!" Mimi cried, when the penguin emerged from the water, seeming to notice his audience. "Don't they look like fat little airplanes?"

"Yes, I guess they do, though I can't say I know nearly as much about aviation as you do."

Todd had been a pilot.

Mimi looked at him. "No, I guess not." She felt tired.

"What made you decide to go back to teaching?" After the divorce, Mimi had given up teaching and had been a flight attendant for United.

"I don't know, I flew for almost ten years. I saw the whole world. Rome and Bombay were my favorites. I didn't fly international right away, though. I just got bored after a while, basically serving drinks and dealing with jerks. I was tired and all I wanted to do when I landed was sit on my couch and enjoy staying in one place. It just wasn't as exciting as it once was."

"Yes, passion fades."

Mimi tried to avoid thinking about his words. "I just wanted some more substance again. And sometimes dealing with teenagers all day can be just as mind-numbing, but there are breakthroughs and challenges. They don't just try my patience all day, like say, a man in 4F who wants another vodka tonic before you've barely got the serving cart down four rows."

"Yes, I could see how that could be," he said, looking down to remove a piece of neon green lint from his pant leg. "Sort of like when a client tells you he wants something 'really different'" – he gestured his arms out theatrically – "and then they edit the plans down so the building lacks all personality."

Richard had dreamed of being a Wright or a Gehry, but until recently had spent most of his career designing office parks.

They walked onto the first cement ramp and stared into the huge tank, the fish swimming hurriedly in a circle, all but a few going right. A giant sea turtle swam to the glass, his pitted paddles knocking against it.

"I've really liked some of the stuff you've done, especially in Boston."

He started back in an almost imperceptible display of surprise and smiled softly. "Thanks."

They stared for a while at the fish, swirling blue grey masses swimming endlessly upward.

"You know, I think the real reason I was done being a flight attendant was that I saw enough to know that there were so many people in this world, so many other great cities, so much going on. It's very liberating. All my little screw ups don't mean a thing. I'm utterly insignificant to this world and that's kind of comforting."

"And what of the WWII flying ace?"

Mimi practically heard the sever of the fragile bond that had developed over the past few minutes. She looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, we weren't together that long. I don't even know what he's up to these days, maybe still flying."

"Keeping the skies friendly, no doubt."

She wanted to punch him.

Richard cleared his throat. "What is that fish?" He pointed to a large flat gray one, with a squished-in face, like an angry ex-prize fighter.

Mimi looked down at the plaque that identified the various fish in the tank. "I think it's a goliath grouper. It's native to –."

A girl of about seven ran forward to see the rays, bumping them out of the way. She leaned her entire body over the descriptions.

"Well, I guess we'll never know," said Richard, offering his arm like a peace offering.

"No, a mystery to be buried under the sea." She took his arm and walked further up the ramp to find a new viewing window.

Profile of a New England Shark

"Look at that guy! He's going the wrong way!" screamed a boy in a Boston Red Sox cap to his friend. The two boys ran from window to window, trying to keep pace with the slink of gray. The shark paused slightly in front of Mimi and Richard. Its tiny white eyes stared coldly.

"I think it can smell my fear," said Richard.

They had only been dating for two months when they decided to get married. She didn't know him that well, but that was part of the thrill – a sense of mystery, of new discoveries about each other every day. She always figured that after they had been married for a while, sharing a

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bed each night, that she would come to know him deeply. Be able to comfort and assuage his fears, share his joys. But she couldn't be sure if that had ever really happened.

"God, he's creepy," Mimi shuddered. "I don't think we can blame Steven Spielberg solely – sharks are just scary."

"I never knew you to be afraid of things." Richard looked at her. He smiled gently.

She shrugged. "Maybe it's catching up with me." The two boys darted past them to see the shark. "Remember jumping off the swing set when you were little? No care as to whether you'd fall and scrape your knee. I challenge most adults to do the same."

"But, I thought you said the best thing about getting older was that you stop caring?" Richard said.

Mimi threw up her hands "I can't win with you." Mimi's smiles never looked like she was trying to hide them. "You always used to beat me at every game we played – checkers, board games, everything."

"You always got too involved. You couldn't see the mistakes you were making."

A balloon fish passed by, puffed up with black spikes, no doubt induced by the shark.

"You can't analyze the game while you're playing it. Then where's the fun?"

"Are you serious? The fun part comes from winning."

The shark slipped around the curve of the tank, falling out of view. "A relationship is like a shark –" she said.

"It has to keep moving," Richard finished the line for her, the way he always did.

“Look at that,” Mimi laughed, pointing out yet another fish. She scanned the placards to name it. “The ‘sergeant major’ is a type of damsel fish.”

“So do you think the shark sometimes just stops moving because he doesn’t know which way to go?” Richard asked.

The shark bobbed and weaved in front of them. Mimi wondered what he was seeing.

“No way, a shark shouldn’t have to have a plan. I mean, who’s going to mess with a shark? No natural predators – just them in the wide sea. They are only a danger to themselves.”

“Oh really?” Richard’s eyes followed the shark until it swam out of their view. “You should have a show on ‘Animal Planet’ or something.”

“Darn if that isn’t what I’ve been saying for years. I just can’t get the execs to take a meeting. I guess I might have to resort to the old casting couch.” Mimi paused and smiled a little. “Emphasis on “old” not intentional.”

Richard laughed, placing an arm around her shoulders as if it were the most natural thing. They went on to the featured exhibit.

The Amazing Live Jellies

A freckled teenager with blue eyes and strawberry-blonde hair checked that they had purchased tickets to the jellyfish special exhibit. Inside the exhibit hall, the lights had been dimmed and the tanks gleamed purple. The lazy floating of pink blobs – like hollowed out brain tissue – seemed to still the blood. The children screamed less and were transfixed. Mimi and Richard stood before the moon jellies, undulating silvery membranes in a tank of dark water.

“She was cute, wasn’t she?” Mimi asked. She marveled at how the jellyfish rippled and flapped but never seemed to move anywhere.

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"Who?" His voice was lower. The luminous little moons inspired gravitas.

"The girl with who checked our tickets. She reminded me of Lucy." Lucy had been a friend of theirs when Richard was studying architecture at Harvard and Mimi was working on a teaching credential as Lesley.

"I could see that." Richard coughed, staring at the description of the jellyfish exhibit. "Latin name. Aurelia Labiata"

"I was convinced that you were having an affair with her."

Richard met her eyes. "I *was* having an affair with her."

She felt a dull pang that shocked her, even after all this time.

"Mimi?" Richard looked worried.

"And all these years, I'd felt guilty about Todd and I," Mimi said, more to herself than to him. A four-year-old with a chocolate-stained face turned to stare at her.

Mimi walked off to the upside-down jellies. They looked like steaming cups of tea. Their caps were inverted and stuck in the sand of the sea bed, their tentacles floating up, drifting with the artificial currents. Their official name was Cassiopeia, she read, after the queen destroyed by Poseidon for claiming to be more beautiful than his daughters. Richard walked over.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"So am I."

They were silent again for a moment, letting their thoughts float unhindered like the gossamer and ephemeral jellies.

Then Richard said, "We just didn't know each other well enough then. We were too young."

Mimi nodded her head and smiled. "But it was a lot of fun sometimes."

"Yeah, there were a lot of good moments." He looked as if he might say something more, but Mimi cut him off.

"Okay, okay, enough. Look at the upside-down jellies."

"I see them."

"Today's jellies are remarkably similar to their 600 million-year-old ancestors, who predated the dinosaurs," she read from the display showing a geological timeline. "That's pretty amazing. I wonder why they've survived so long?"

Richard laughed softly, "Simple living, I suppose."

Have you seen your picture yet?

Visitors to the cathedral of jellyfish spilled like a waterfall into the gift shop.

"Ah, and now from the sublime to the ridiculous," Richard said, shielding his eyes from the bright fluorescent lights and the neon stuffed animals placed low enough to tempt the aquarium's youngest visitors.

"Naturally," said Mimi, picking up a rubber jelly fish covered in glitter.

Richard came up to her and handed her a silver pen with a dolphin dangling from the end. "The pen, an ancient writing instrument, not commonly used anymore."

"Thanks."

"Mimi, it's been really fun."

"It has," She touched the tip of the pen to her forehead. "Hey, maybe we could make it a regular thing. July at the MFA?"

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"I could certainly do with more culture in my life." He jingled the change in his pockets and smiled.

Mimi wasn't sure if it would really happen, but it was nice to think it might.

They walked toward the exit.

"Sir, ma'am? Have you seen your picture yet? They're available for purchase," said a young man in an aquarium t-shirt.

"Oh yes, the picture we took when we came in," Mimi said picking it up. She saw the flecks of gray around their faces, but also their youthful expressions. They looked nervous, but hopeful. They each bought a copy, then floated outdoors into the light.

– Sara Oliver Gordus is a graduate of the University of California at Davis and Lesley University. Her fiction has previously appeared in the Jamaica Observer and the Blood Orange Review, and received an honorable mention nod in the Dylan Days Creative Writing Contest. She lives in New York City.