

The Afterlife

Amy Hempel

We are pleased to reprint Amy Hempel's much beloved short story, "The Afterlife," which appears in The Collected Stories (2006). It is followed by an original essay by her friend, the writer Jim Shepard, in which he discusses the story at length.

—The Editors

When my mother died, my father's early widowhood gave him

social cachet he would not have had if they had divorced. He was a bigger catch for the sorrow attached. He was kind, cultured, youthful, and good-looking, and many women tended to him. They cooked dinner for him, and sent their housekeepers to his Victorian near the Presidio Gate. My brothers were away in college, but I, who had dropped out of school, spent a good deal of time at the house.

Some of the women who looked after my father banked their right actions for later, I felt. One woman signed him up for a concert series, but it was a kind of music he didn't much like, and he had been at a concert—chamber music—the night my mother died.

One woman stocked his kitchen with candied ginger and snail shells and bottles of good red wine. I would prop bags of Oreos and Fig Newtons alongside so my brothers would find something familiar when they came home.

One woman sang to him; another, when he asked if she could sing, said, "If I were to sing, it would sound like talking louder." A couple of the women courted me as the best bet. There were shopping trips, lunches in their gardens, suggestions for cutting my hair. I was not used to that kind of attention, and seeing through it didn't mean I didn't also like it.

One woman was impatient with his mourning, another seemed excited by it. She didn't wear underwear when she came to visit; I knew because I heard her tell him. He told me she sent him pictures of herself naked; he was midwestern enough to be stunned.

The woman I liked—for a while she came over every night. She would get to his house when it was still light enough to see fog blowing down the street from the bay window in the living room. He would make her a drink in the kitchen, stirring in the Rose's lime juice with a chopstick from the Japanese take-out place. He would carry it in to where he had seated her on the toast-colored Italian couch in front of the fire. The house was a hundred years old, but the furniture was futuristic.

She was futuristic. She was forward-looking, although the past was what they had between them. Jane Stein had known my mother in college. She had married a friend of my father's, and then had not seen my parents since. She still lived in the Midwest, but not with her husband anymore. I had looked her up the month before when I was in Chicago. When I found out she was going to San Francisco, I told my father to take her to dinner. On their second date, she arrived at the house with a black cashmere sweater for me—a "finder's fee," she said.

On their third date, the three of us went to dinner. Other of the women had wanted me along so my father could see them draw me out. Jane wanted me there because we thought the same things were funny. When my father complained about a nosy woman who detained him in the grocery store, Jane said, "That's the trouble with people in general—you have to run into them."

When I hung back a bit walking to the car, she said, "Take up space!" and pulled me along by the arm. The next week, she didn't mind that I saw my father walk her to the front door in the morning.

One night: "I made a fool of myself on that trip," I heard my father say. "Staying in the places I stayed with their mother years ago—I was posing the whole time," he said, "playing the part of a man in grief, from St. Petersburg to Captiva."

He was telling her about the time he'd gone by himself to Florida, only a few weeks after my mother died. Jane and my father were in the habit of travel. Every night they returned to his house,

he mixed her a drink with a wooden chopstick, and took her on the trips he had taken to China, and Switzerland, and Venice with his late wife. Jane told him she would have thought she would be more interested in hearing about the places she had not seen herself, but was, in fact, more interested in where they gone in this country, especially the places that she knew, too, along the coast of Florida. “What year was that?” she would ask, then do the math to see what she had been doing at the time.

When it was time for her to leave for the night, or the next morning, my father would put an object in her hands for her to take; he would divest himself of yet another *thing*—a Waring blender, a toaster oven—he could not imagine using again. He gave her classical CDs, a copper omelet pan, several crystal vases, a Victorian planter, a set of good knives, sweaters if the temperature had dropped the slightest bit, a comforter, books, a pumpkin pie he had made—he gave her something every day. Most of it she gave to the women’s shelter she was in town to advise. Then she would reappear, note all that had been given up or given away—the travel, the glass stirrer for drinks—and let him return to a place she’d never been.

On the last night she visted my father, she asked him if the two of them might go somewhere together. And he said, “Darling, I don’t go to the *dining room* anymore.”

“Is there a place you *could* go and be happy?” she asked.

My father said that maybe he could go back to Aspen. That was where he and my mother, and sometimes we kids, went every summer for a handful of years. None of us were skiers, and in summer the town hosted a music festival in a huge tent set up in a meadow. World-class musicians filled small hotels, and swam in the pools with tourists like us. My father knew a lot about classical music, so he was happy discussing the afternoon program with the First Chair Violin while my mother read on a chaise in the sun, and my brothers tried to land on me in the deep end from the high board.

This was when we had lived in a suburb of Denver, and went rock-collecting weekends in the foothills. The lichen-covered rocks we brought back in the car ended up in the yard framing native flowering plants. I got to stay in the car and drink Tab after a rock I picked up freed something I still have dreams about. The mountains had nothing for me, and I did not yet know that *water* was going to be my place on earth, not swimming pools at small hotels, but lakes, the ocean, a lazy-waved bay, ponds ringed with willows, and me the girl swimming under low-hanging branches brushed by leaves for the rest of my days.

I heard Jane ask my father if he was happiest when he was in Aspen. He said, “I was, and then I wasn’t.” She said, “You can *was* again.” He said he didn’t think so. And she didn’t come back the next day.

In a note to me a couple of weeks later, Jane wrote from Chicago that she would miss us. She said she understood that my father’s life had ended with my mother’s death, and that what he inhabited now was a kind of afterlife—not dead, but not alive to possibility, to what else one might still choose, and “Who would choose to live less?” she asked.

I didn’t mention the note to my father but I asked him if he wished she still came over. He said she was a terrific person.

The women that followed included a self-styled libertine, and a beauty whose parents had called a priest to exorcise her when she was a child. Some of the women were contenders—generous, brimming, and game.

The woman he sees now seems decent and kind. I met her at his house this morning. She was clearing his garden of weeds, advising him on the placement of a eucalyptus tree.

She left before I did. My father waved to her from the bay window, and asked if I didn’t think she looked a little like Jane Stein.

I said, “That was a long time ago,” and he said, so I understood him, “*Nothing* is a long time ago.”

