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Whispers

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Whispers

Chris Elms is a name I've never forgotten. I think you remember too much of everything. Memory has a mean streak as well as a kindness. We tend to want to remember what we like. I have no other occasion to remember him. There was a real elm tree in their yard. A big pane of glass looked out onto it, as big as a man, or a boy. It's hard to decide what you are at thirteen. They were in that bedroom on a summer day, Chris and my brother. I was ten. One decade, but it had seemed so huge to me.

"Don't go there," my grandmother said. Her voice was fierce. I hadn't heard it like that before. She meant the Moselle house. They were German Catholics, or Spanish and German Catholics. Their colors weren't certain. The father, Vince, had haunting green eyes, as did his wife, Emily. They had two boys, as our family did, only two. This was years before that summer of the window and the elm tree. I was six.

"Do you want any gum?" Emily, the mother, had asked me, her hair black and her skin darker, more enigmatic than her husband's. The boys' skin color was in between their mother's and their father's, which was lighter, his skin almost uncomfortably silken, as of a dead body. I don't even remember him talking to me. He had a kind-looking face, and he was thin, and so was she.

"Black Jack," I said. That was a popular chewing gum, in sticks.

"I'll bring you some." She smiled at me, then left us alone. The boys were going to entertain me. They took me into their room in a house that was two doors down from our own, on Crestlake. There was an alley behind, and all the houses had front and side doors and garages, and the trash stayed in the alley. I don't know how I got in the house, whether they invited me or I asked. I didn't know that my grandmother, who was spending a week with us to clean my mother's house—her daughter-in-law's—would be so angry about my thoughtless visit.

The room was messy, unmade beds, two of them. I remember looking at a jar, a Kerr jar, with a little red cloth over the otherwise gaping hole of its round top, held in place with a rubber band. "What's that?" I said.

"Why do you like Black Jack gum?" the younger boy said. (I don't remember his name, nor that of the other; they were boys, they had faces; I had written my name on the back of the wood leg of one of my

mother's chairs in the living room; no one had found it yet, and I relished that fact.)

"I just like it," I said.

"That's no reason. That doesn't make sense," he said.

I repeated my question in different terms. "What's that jar doing there on the table?"

The older boy looked at me, then exchanged glances with his brother. "Should I?" he said.

"Yes, go ahead. Tell him. I dare you to tell him. You should tell him everything."

"God's in that jar," he said.

I couldn't believe it. God wasn't seen, or known, or even imagined, just prayed to, every night when my mother would come in, and we would have to say them, these prayers, and it was the same prayer every time, and we had to remember them, these people, whom we must ask God to bless; first, our parents, the insistence on which did seem narrow to me—not quite true in the sense of what God was. I was repelled by the jar, then, because, in some ways, it matched prayer.

"That's a lie," I told them.

Even at six, you possess your own mind about some things.

They got angry. "You just don't understand how we know this," the older one said. He wasn't smiling. I was a little frightened. They were so smug. This was their house, a mess, and I wanted out of it. I left their room and they followed me. "What about your Black Jack, Jake?" the younger said. They knew I was on my way. I would tell someone about it, and what I didn't realize is that that would only get me into more trouble.

"Don't you ever—do you hear me?—go there again." My grandmother said that. Then she said, "Don't tell your mother you went there."

I didn't know what this was all about, until four more years had passed, struggling, easing my way through grades, and teachers, always women, and the rooms themselves on their descending levels, down a hillside that faced the Pacific Ocean, which was only a horizon.

Of course Clancy had lived before me. He knew more life. That was the way I saw it. He went back to when my father was in the war (I came after), and they were back east somewhere (when I would be fifty, my parents would tell me this story for the first time); he came out of his bedroom, this was in government housing, and stopped them both, insisting, "No more boom-boom." That was when they made love and meant it. It didn't last very long. My mother said, in later years, a decade. That was all. That's all he gave her before he betrayed her

boundless love. It was boundless. She never loved or desired anyone else. She tried such a thing for a day or two with one of my father's college friends, but it fizzled. She loved my father or she loved no one, as a woman. I am quite sure of this now that they are both dead.

Clancy wasn't the kind of brother who was anything but a big brother. You know how they are. They're bosses, and only on their good days are they nice. They always bring other boys over their own age and they look down on you. You are the joke. You're little. Clancy was raised during the war years (this never happened to me) by my grandfather on one side, who was my mother's father. He was Clancy's only father until my dad came back, and he cried when my father held him, it had been so long, two years, and only my mother and her family had had anything to do with him. All he had known was the house of my grandparents.

He grew up earlier than I did. But he was always negative. He was a good student and I was a terrible one, the older I got, as I slipped into the grades he'd already covered, making them dull places in my parents' imagination. Clancy would come home and say he'd done badly on a test. Then the results were posted and he had himself an A. Even an A+. You know how grades are. They jar you into a sense of your own stupidity and carelessness.

Of course, the Moselles had moved. This would have happened. My own memory only recalls a trip to my mother's parents' house. Years later, my mother told me her father had said, "Leave him. You're still young." I never understood her that way. Dad wasn't with us. I remember that much. He wasn't. And we didn't see him for a while. I don't know, days. That grandfather, on my mother's side, died one year, the man who had raised my brother for a while. At work, on an August day when we were camping in the Sierras, when I was just eight, he put his head in his folded arms and went to sleep. A bottle of oxygen couldn't bring him back, and my brother's grades went down for a long while, before they recovered.

That was between the first and the second time. There was some healing in our household, a silence that felt like it weighed something, and then things came back into place, and it was never, never ever mentioned. My mother didn't talk about it with us. The second time had told me now what the first one was.

The second time, I was ten. So I saw it differently. I was conscious, now, of everything. Nothing escaped me, my notice. I came home from school (they were adding on to our house, which would be big now, and I would have a bedroom of my own after the walls that had been torn out were expanded and replaced; all of it, for the record, wood nailed

together and covered with a kind of board and then plastered over in a way that didn't seem very safe), and I found that this thing had happened—"another woman," as my mother called it, only this time our parents argued right in front of us.

Clancy was thirteen. He'd begun to listen to music on a little battery radio when he went to sleep, and we rarely talked in bed anymore, separated by a dresser full of six drawers, his three top ones and my two bottom ones. (I would leave the dresser behind when I got my own room.) He seemed more alone to me now, or wanted to be alone. I was repulsive.

The two of them, strange to us now (ourselves irrelevant), argued in the car several times, both of us in the backseat, keeping our mouths shut. I had trouble with my eyes blinking when someone looked at me now. My mother leaned over the seat, and slapped me, to make me stop. It wasn't much of a slap. She was terrified. But I still couldn't stop. It was a month before I could. I openly hated my father for weeks. He left again, and he came back, and it was over. For maybe a year thereafter I was cold to him. I thought he'd done it to us, to all of us, while I relished, in the beginning at least, the idea of not having a father who could get mad at you and be disgusted with you, if only for a matter of hours. He was a good man and he loved us, both boys, and he never meant or wanted to do us harm.

Clancy had several friends now in the neighborhood where we lived, in sand, beach sand, close to the bay. All of the vacant lots had seashells that would dry to an odorless white, like something left in the desert. I thought about the jar, how silly that thought had been about God living in such a place. But now I knew, with the sharpness of a knife, what Emily and the boys and Vince had meant to all of us, including my father's mother, who loved her son and was loyal to him (he would sit in the chair next to her bed in the convalescent home, when that time came, night after night and year after year, stopping every night on his way home until it was no longer necessary), but she said he was a bastard that second time and she meant it.

My father had been her only child. This was the same summer our grandfather on my father's side died. He got up to turn off the television in their apartment in Maywood (he'd had some pain), and he fell on a coffee table, breaking only the corner decorative wood, and my father went into the garage of our renovated house and cried and said he'd killed his father and my mother found him and said he hadn't. And he hadn't.

The third time—I don't have much time here; I'm getting old myself; I've known a lot of things, and you can't always put things together, invent something smooth to patch it all, make it into something intelligible and meaningful without exhaustion—I was out of the house and on my own, what you'd call a grown man, oddly enough. And my mother was in her early fifties, and her adopted sister Barbara (Dark Barbara, she called her) was dead of diabetes.

Helen had been the second, I should say. I left that out, the woman of the second occasion. And the third and the fourth, in quick succession, went by the names of Jean and Hazel; and my mother told me, when she came to see me in the apartment where I lived alone, that she had thought of suicide, and then she'd had a dream—it wasn't a long one, but her sister and her father had been beckoning her toward them, toward death, naturally, and she was tempted. "I haven't dreamed of my father and sister in years," she said. "They waved me toward them. I wouldn't go."

She went home, back to my father, and then I took a shower. I was glad that I lived alone. I didn't think I'd be lonely, but eventually I was, and it was our family home I dreamed of, couldn't quite eliminate from my mind. You get used to thinking about things in a different way, and it's hard to break the hold of whatever you've decided.

They separated, my parents, for not more than ten or twelve days; my mother couldn't stand more than that, I think. My brother and his family had invited my father to fly with them to Hawaii, where they were vacationing. My mother gave in and followed them after a handful of days. They had a baby coming. It was about this time my brother began to have trouble with anxiety.

It wasn't much at first. They all had a good vacation together in the rented Oahu North Shore house that resembled a movie set, it was so perfect—and they took pictures of my niece, who was the first of two and later three, a boy, the third the only one who would know what we had known, when his own father brought the same story to his wife (but in his case, there was a child "out of wedlock," as they say, costing tens of thousands of dollars over an eighteen-year period). They still have the pictures. And they are lovely.

That October, there were headaches, and then there was fear, a little. But it got bigger. There is a clumsy word for it, mechanical: depression. He rolled himself into a ball on his bed and was afraid of the telephone buzzing in his ear. That's what it sounded like, buzzing, humming, as of voices. He was afraid to get out of bed. He wanted to remain there. He didn't want to go to work or be a husband. He wasn't enough for his

wife. He said that. He had competed well in track and field in school, and he had begun, he told me, to imagine he would be able to jump farther in the long jump each year, a foot farther each year, without any diminution of his ability.

My days off—I wasn't that committed—I spent time with him, a handful of days, really. He was put on anti-depression medication for suicidal impulses, and we talked about the limitations of the people we loved, and his fixation on the landlord of a house we'd rented in Mexico in years past—my parents had leased a summer house there of concrete blocks with a wood roof—who'd come up on the bus from the border point in San Diego, to ask my father for money, ahead of the lease payment time, because he needed it and had walked through the rooms of what was still our house, saying, "Nice, nice, nice," thinking of the money he could borrow, and whom he, my brother, wanted now to kill.

Clancy couldn't imagine killing my dad. He couldn't think that. Once I had hated him (I've said that; I remember saying that) and had repented of it, finding I was as human as he was, and easily as fallible. I talked Clancy down, patiently, from these thoughts, from killing someone he hardly knew, and when I knew he was getting better (he was then twenty-nine), he said to me that he had smoked a cigar that morning (we still did that, then) and that it had tasted good.

We had been camping during both of those deaths, of both of our grandfathers, one on each side, and it had been the same month in both cases, August, and a highway patrolman had found us and told us, so I had come to think of nature as vehement. Clancy had said to me when he was sick, "I don't feel anything." He'd said to my mother when he was seventeen, "I don't feel anything about girls, I don't know why. Is there something wrong with me?" He wouldn't stand for our grandfather on my mother's side being talked about unless it was with reverence. Anything else would make him angry, deeply, uncomfortably angry.

"Do you think the world will end?" I would say to him in bed, in that one bedroom I haven't seen since, except in thoughts and dreams.

"Go to sleep," he always answered. "I have a test. I have a test I have to think of. It's going to be a disaster."

"What test?"

"That's not your business."

"Then tell me an answer."

"The world will not end. It will go on and on and on. Are you happy? Will that shut you up now?"

I would shut up. I had to. He was bigger. But then I would have all these worlds of thought. I would think sometimes of a hundred things that would happen or could happen or could never even be imagined. I was always the one with the strange idea about this or that. And there was a kind of fear in him of anything beyond bounds I had to say.

He called it “going off the edge.” The edge. He liked sunlight, and he would lie in it on the beach, and he liked working with my father, and he never (that I can remember) had a harsh word to say about him. They were very close, actually, in the things they liked doing. Hiking, fishing, working on the boats (we had that, too: days of rocking at anchor with the lines down in fabulous water that kept itself clean and without human memory).

When my father died at eighty-nine—this was after several days of just breathing, until the breaths came between moments of silence, and no one could wait, and no one wanted to sit in that room—my brother came in and sat in a chair and looked at him. We took the ashes (they were like shells: in a bag, heavy, and when they were emptied out, there was the same sound of shells), and I put half, and he, my brother, put half, into the Pacific, beyond the jetty in an unmarked place, and we went back running to the piers, both of them, in the distance and along the inward breaking shore, until we slowed to make way again into the harbor.

I went home and watched a movie, not very sure of myself, edgy, and woke in the night sitting up in my bed, saying it, “Dad’s dead.” I think it was five years later, somewhere there, that my mother sat looking at me, in her wheelchair. I resembled my father increasingly as I aged, beyond anything even approaching good looks. She said to herself out loud, looking at me, as if I was the object, because I resembled him now, “He betrayed you.”

I knew those women. I knew them all by name, and I had spoken to each, beginning with Emily. They were women who had occasion to be around, about my family. They were nice, all of them, kind, and, yes, all of them married, all. Did he know (he must have known) about the connection to us, his sons, whom he loved without reservation, closer to my brother, I think, than myself, but with esteem, for both of us, sufficient to take us both through our own lives, if you leave out scarring? What do we do with ourselves when we’re finished? Is there a judgment we can rely on, to say what we were and are and may not be? Is that perfection, finally, understood as a boy learns how to put on his shoes and wear them out?

I was at the swim beach. My father had been called and so had my mother. I wanted to go home. It was hot. I was finished with swimming, tired of it. I had sand all over me. I had stayed down at the beach with our neighbors to the left of our house. The same distance as the Moselle house. Two doors down. Two lawns. Two mailboxes. Only different street numbers. Odd and even.

She wouldn't let me go. Mrs. Sanderson. She was imperious, suddenly. I couldn't go anywhere. I had to stay with her. I couldn't go. I couldn't make my own decision. Who was she?

The elm tree at Chris Elm's house was huge, old, I think, and something to look at. It reminded me of peace. This was that second time now, when Clancy was thirteen. He and Chris were talking about girls at what is now called middle school but then was junior high, with all that greater dignity. Chris had gone to the bathroom. Chris's house was more modern, as it was thought, then, than ours. The window was plate glass, and formed the entire wall. Not a wall at all, although it served for one. Glass wasn't so good at keeping the heat and the cold out.

Our second grandfather had been dead one week. His body had been burned. There was only one thin, dark beam above what had to be ten feet of this same glass, thin, not tempered, because no one could think of the possibility.

Clancy had to go to the emergency room, where a doctor picked out the glass fragments from his hand and arm all the way to his shoulder. My mother saw the muscles of his exposed hand and remarked on them, their complexity. That was Clancy all over. He'd walked through the glass. It was supposed to be a window.

I wonder what he thought he saw on the other side.