



JChap 5

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Hunters Hunter

Joe was raised by a ~~family~~ ^{family} called Williams. Rhoda and Frank Williams ^{along with} and their six children, one of whom, Victory, had been born three months before Rhoda agreed to take ~~him in~~ ^{a 7th child}. She was the one who named him Joseph, after her own father, and did not think to give him a last name. None at all. Nor did she pretend he was her natural child. ^{Parcelling out chores or blessings} ~~In fact~~ ^{told him} she often said you are just like my own, and it was the 'like' that made him ask her--he was not even four years old--where his real parents were. Rhoda looked over her shoulder in genuine sorrow and told him they had ~~left~~ ^{disappeared} without a trace. Joe understood her to mean the 'trace' they disappeared without was him, and because he had to have two names in school, he told the teacher 'Joseph Trace.'

"Why you tell her that?" Victory asked him.

"I don't know. Cause."

"Mamma be mad. Pappy too."

Joe examined the sole of his foot. "No they won't. Your mama ain't my mama."

"If she ain't, who is?"

"Another woman. She'll be back. She coming back for me. My daddy too."

"They know where they left you. They come back to our place.

Williams place is where they know you at." Victory, trying to walk

double-jointed like his sister who bragged about how good she was

at it, cast an odd ^{darting} shadow on the ground where Joe sat fascinated

by a fresh cut in his foot.

"They got to pick me out," ^{Joe} ~~he~~ said. "From all of you all, they got to pick me. I'm Trace, what they went off without."

Victory laughed and put his arm around Joe's neck to wrestle him flat on the ground.

It was a long wait made possible by a solitary man who lived just off x Road and surprised everybody one day by inviting Joe and Victory to hunt x with him. His name was Henry and he was known

to like his privacy. Under his eye and with his instruction both boys were stamped with a fierce love of the woods. Especially Joe. He was the one to be counted on never to run off to a city because he would never be able to live int.^{ic} Not Joe. And if he did happen to find himself there, passing through, his country ways would stand him in good stead. His common sense, his industriousness, his uncanny power in the woods. And because of Henry's training Joe most of all would be incapable of experiencing loneliness. Country people, how could they know what and eighteen year old girl might instigate in a grown man in a ~~crowded~~^{the} City. Make him know a loneliness he could not imagine in a forest empty of people for fifteen miles,^{we} on a river bank.^{the} Convince him he had never known the sweet side of anything ~~until he met~~ Dorcus who became not only his protection from loneliness, she became his personal candy. It was the best thing, if you were young and had just got to the City. That and the clarinets and even they were called licorice sticks. But Joe had been in the city x years and wasn't young. Fifty if

a day. But I imagine he as one of those men who stop somewhere around sixteen. Inside. So even though he wore button up the front sweaters and round toed shoes, he was a kid, a strapling, and candy could still make him smile. He liked those peppermint things that last the livelong day, and thought everybody else did too. Passed them out to Gistan's boys and the other kids that grouped around them on the stoop like grapes. You could tell they'd rather chocolate or something with peanuts, but by his smile, passing that crumpled white paper sack around, you would have thought he was Santa's Santa.

Maybe she was. Candy, I mean. Maybe she was something else. If he had stopped blowing his nose long enough to tell somebody who might be interested, who knows how it would go?

"It's not a thing you tell except to a tight friend like Victory, but even if I had the chance I don't beleive I could have told him and if I couldn't tell Victory it was because I couldn't tell myself because I didn't know all about it. Candy. No. That's

something you lick, suck on, and then swallow and it's gone. No. This was something else. More like blue water and white flowers, but together, somehow. Together. I needed to be there, where the two mixed and where that was was Dorcus.

has? "She had long hair and bad skin. A quart of water ^{once} ~~twice~~ a day would have cleared it right up, her skin, but I didn't suggest it because I liked it like that. Little half moons clustered underneath her cheekbones, like faint hoofmarks. There and on her forehead. I bought the stuff she told me to, but glad none of it ever worked. Take my little hoof marks away? Leave me with no tracks at all? In this world the best thing, the only thing, is to find the trail and stick to it. I tracked my mother in Virginia and it led me right to her, just like tracking Dorcus led me to that blue water next to those white flowers. I had no defense. Something else takes over when the track begins to talk to you, give out its signs so strong you hardly have to look. If the track's not talking to you you might get up out of your chair to

go buy two or three cigarettes, have the nickel in your pocket and just start walking, then running and end up somewhere in Staten Island, for crying out loud, Long Island, maybe, staring at goats. But if the trail speaks, no matter what's in the way, you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it's the heart you can't live without.

I wanted to stay there. Right after ~~I shot her~~ ^{the gun went off (thuh!)} and the crowd

pressed in different ways, and the music was so good. I wanted to

stay right there. Catch her before she fell and hurt herself

because I could feel it--~~the water that blue, flowers big as my~~

^{We should be}
~~hand.~~ Together, Dorcus. Me and you. Here's my hand, take it. Take

my hand, girl, please. ~~It's just me and you,~~ and I'll let you do

anything you please, anything, but ~~I have to have that feeling.~~

~~I can't lose the feeling of you, where you are and where the blue~~

is right next to flowers big as my hand.

I wasn't looking for the trail. It was looking for me and

when it started talking at first I couldn't hear it. I was

rambling, just rambling all through the city. I had the gun but it was not the gun--it was my hand I was holding out to touch you with. Five days rambling. First High Fashion on 131st street because I thought you had a hair appointment on Tuesday . First Tuesday of every month it was. But you wasn't there. Some women came in with fish dinners from Salem Baptist, and the blind twins were playing guitar on the corner, and it's just like you said--only one of them's blind; the other one is just going along with the program. Probably not even brothers, let alone twins. Something their mamma cooked up for a little extra change. They were playing something sooty, though; not the gospel like they usually do, and the women selling fish dinners frowned and talked about their mother bad, but they never said a word to the twins and I knew they were having a good time listening because one of the loudest ones could hardly suck her teeth for patting her foot. They didn't pay me no mind. Took me a while to get them to tell me you weren't on the book for that day. Minnie said you had a

touch up Saturday and how she didn't approve of touch ups not just because they were fifty cents instead of a dollar and a quarter for the whole do, but because it hurt the hair, heat on dirt she said, hurt the hair worse than anything she knew of. Except, of course, no heat at all. What did you have the touch up for? That's what I first thought about. Last Saturday? You told me you were going with the choir on the el out to Coney Island, and you had to leave at nine in the morning and wouldn't be back till night and that's why. And that you'd missed the last trip, and your aunt found out about it so you had to go on this one, and that's why. So I didn't wait for Violet to leave and unlock Melvonne's apartment. No need. But how could you have a touch up the Saturday before and still make it to the el station by nine o'clock in the morning when Minnie never opens up before noon on Saturday because she's open till midnight getting everybody readied up for Sunday? And you didn't need to keep the first Tuesday regular appointment, did you? I dismissed the evil in my thoughts because I wasn't sure that the

sooty music the blind twins were playing wasn't the cause. It can do that to you, a certain kind of guitar playing. Not like the clarinets, but close. If that song had been coming through a clarinet, I'd have known right away. But the guitars--they confused me, made me doubt myself, and I lost the trail. Went home and didn't pick it up again until the next day when Melvonne looked at me and covered her mouth with her hand. Couldn't cover her eyes though; the laugh came flying out of there.

...I sat on the stoop a while. Nobody there but Mrs [tk] rubbing her knees. Across the street, leaning up against the iron railing, I saw three roosters. Not even ten in the morning and they shone like patent leather. Smooth. Couldn't be more than twenty, twenty-two. Young. The City, I thought. That's the City for you. Each one wore spats, and one had a handkerchief in his pocket same color as his tie. Had his hat pushed over a tad much. They were just leaning there, laughing and so on and then they started crooning, leaning in, heads together, snapping fingers.

City men, you know what I mean. Closed off to themselves, smart, young roosters. Didn't have to do a thing--just wait for the chicks to pass by and find them. Belted jackets and handkerchiefs the color of their ties. You think Melvonne would have covered her mouth in front of them? Or made roosters pay her in advance for the use of her place of a Saturday? Never would have happened because roosters don't need Melvonne. Chickens find the roosters and find the place too and if there is tracking to be done, they do it. They look; they figure. Roosters wait because they are the ones waited for. They don't have to trail anybody, look ignorant in a beauty parlor asking for a girl in front of women who couldn't wait for me to leave so they could pat on to the sooty music and talk about what the hell did I want to know about a girl not out of high school yet and wasn't I married to old hateful Violet? Only old cocks like me have to get up from the stoop, cut Mrs.[tk] off in the middle of a sentence and try to walk not run to the little park on Convent where we sat the first time and you crossed

your legs at the knees so I could see the green shoes you carried out the house in a paper sack so your aunt wouldn't know you tapped down Lenox and Riverside Drive and St. Nicholas Place in them instead of the oxfords you left the house in. While you flicked your foot, turned your ankles for the admiration of the heels, I looked at your knees but I didn't touch. I told you again that you were the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden, he left a rich man. Not only did he have Eve, but he had the taste of the first apple in the world in his mouth for the rest of his life. The very first to know what it was like. To bite it, bite it down. Hear the crunch and let the red peeling break his heart.

You looked at me then, right there on the park bench like you knew me, and I couldn't take your eyes in because I was loving the hoof marks on your cheeks.

I ^{went} ~~ran~~ there, to the very spot, same bench. Two whitemen were sitting there, but I sat right next to them until they got nervous

and moved to another bench and off of ours. D. and J. Carved on the third slat from the edge. But that was later on. When I brought you treats, worrying each time what to bring that would make you smile and come again the next time. How many phonograph records? How many silk stockings? The little kit to mend the runs, remember? The purple metal box with flowers on top full of Schrafft's chocolates. Cologne in a blue bottle that smelt like a whore. Flowers once, but you were disappointed with that treat, so I gave you a dollar to buy whatever you wanted with it. Half a week's rent. A whole day's pay. Just for you. Anything just for you. To bite down hard , chew up the core and have the taste of red apple skin to carry around for the rest of my life. It could have stopped there, but not after I felt the feeling, the place where the water met the fowers, where one was mixed up with the other, the blue all over the petals big as my hand. In Melvonne's nephew's room with the ice man's sign in the window. Your first time. And mine, in a manner of speaking. For which, and I will say

it again, I would strut out the Garden, strut! as long as you held on to my hand, girl. Dorcus, girl, your first time and mine. I chose you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that's the one for you. I picked you out. Wrong time, yep, and doing wrong by my wife. But the picking out, the choosing. Don't ever think I fell for you, or fell over you. Or fell in love with you. I didn't fall in love, I rose in it. I saw you and made up my mind. My mind. And I made up my mind to follow you too. That's something I know how to do from way back. Maybe I didn't tell you that part about me. My gift in the woods that even ^{the old man,} ~~Hunter~~ ^{Henry,} looked up to and he was the best there ever was. Ever."

Joe did have a gift in the woods. That was the way he found the woman he thought was his mother. He had this ability to find lost things and things hiding from you. And in Virginia, it was a gift as valuable as money most of the time--more valuable other times. But it wasn't the old man, Henry, who first told him about her. ^{who found her.} It was Joe who found the place where the woman called Wild

lived, although it's true that except for the old man Henry, everybody else tried to make sure that she stayed hid, stayed away from them because a thing like that could harm you. Pregnant girls were the most susceptible, but so were the grandfathers. Any fascination could mark a newborn: melons, rabbits, wisteria, rope, and mor than a shed snakeskin, a wild woman is the worst of all. So the warnings the girls got were part of a whole group of things to look out for lest the baby come here craving or favoring the mother's distraction. Who would have thought old men needed to be cautioned too; told and warned against seeing, smelling or even hearing Wild? ground level. You can see how he was confused: the

She lived close, they said, not way off in the woods or even down in the riverbed, but somewhere in that canefield--at its edge some said or maybe moving around in it. Close. Cutting cane could get frenzied sometimes when young men got the feeling she was just yonder, hiding, and probably looking. One swing of the machete could lop off her head if she got sassy or too close, and it would

be her own fault. That would be when they cut bad--too high up on the stalk or raggedy. Just thinking about her, whether she was close or not, could mess up a whole morning's work.

The grandfathers, way past slashing but still able enough to bind stalks or feed the sugar vats, used to be thought safe. That is until old man, Henry, got tapped on the shoulder by fingertips that couldn't be anybody's but hers. When he snapped up, he saw the cane stalks shuddering but he didn't hear a single crack. Because he was a trapper more used to wood life than tame, he knew when the eyes watching him were up in a tree, behind a knoll or, like this, at ground level. You can see how he was confused: the fingertips at his shoulder, the eyes at his feet. First thing came to mind was the woman he named himself, some twenty years ago because, after tending her, that was the word he thought of: Wild. He was sure he was tending a sweet young girl back then, but when she bit ^{him} ~~his~~ cheek, he thought, O, she's wild. Some things are like that. There's no gain fathoming more.

He remembered her laugh, though, and how peaceful she was in the beginning, so the touch of her fingertips didn't frighten him, but it did make him sad. Too sad to report the sighting to his co-workers, old men like himself no longer able to cut all day. Unwarned, they weren't prepared for the way their blood felt when they caught a glimpse of her and for how trembly their legs got hearing that baby-girl laugh. The pregnant girls marked their babies or didn't, but the grandfathers--unwarned--went soft in the head, walked out of the fields, left their beds in the shank of the night, wet themselves, forgot the names of their grown children and where they'd put their razor strops.

When the old man, Henry, knew her--tended her--she was sweet but touchy. Touchy and a bit stuck on that City man. To see the two of them together was a regular surprise: the city man with his head of yellow hair long as a dog's tail next to her skein of black wool. If the old man, Henry, had handled it right, maybe she would have stayed in the house, learned how to dress and talk to folks.

He thought she was dead. Local people used the story of her to caution children and pregnant girls and it saddened him to learn that instead of resing, she was hungry still. Though for what, exactly, he couldn't say, less it was for that city man with hair the color of his name.

The old man didn't tell, but the news got out anyway: Wild was not a used-to-be-woman whose neck cane cutters liked to imagine under the blade, or a quick and early stop for hard-headed children. She was out there--for real. Someone saw Henry jump, grab his shoulder and, when he turned around to gaze at the canefield, he murmured loud enough to hear, "Wild. Dog me, if it ain't Wild." The pregnant girls just sighed at the news and went on sweeping and sprinkling the dirt yards, and the young men sharpened their blades til the edges whistled. But the old men started dreaming. Like Hunter, they remembered when she came, what she looked like, why she stayed and that city ^{man} ~~Negro~~ she set so much store by.

Not too many people saw the city man. The first wasn't Henry who was off on some long trek looking for enough fox to sell. The first was Patty's boy, Honor. He was looking in on ~~Hunter's~~ ^{Henry's} place while he was gone, and on one of the days he stopped by--to do a little weeding maybe and see if the chickens were still alive--it had rained all morning. Sheets of it made afternoon rainbows everywhere. Later he told his mother that the whole cabin was rainbowed and when the man came out the door, and Honor looked at his wet yellow hair and creamy skin, he thought Henry had come back dead. Then he realized he was looking at a whiteman and never believed otherwise, even when the proof was there for all the world to see.