



Hunter

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Hunter.

Pregnant girls were the most susceptible, but so were the grandfathers. Any fascination could mark a newborn: melons, rabbits, wisteria, rope, and they tell me worst of all is a shed snakeskin. So the warnings the girls got were part of a whole groups of things to look out for lest the baby came 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.

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 Hunter got tapped on the shoulder by fingertips that couldn't be anybody's but hers. When he snapped up, he saw the cane stalks shuddeing 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 levell. 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 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 her fingertips didn't frighten him, but they did make him sad. Too sad to report the sighting to his co-workers, old men like him no longer able to cut all day. That's probably why they weren't prepared for the way their blood felt just thinking about her and for how trembly their legs got in her company. 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 Hunter 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 Hunter 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 (the way they used the boogie man), and it saddened him now to learn that instead of resting, 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.

Hunter 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 Hunter jump, grab his shoulder and, when he turned around to gaze at the canefield, murmur to himself "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 for real. But the old men started dreaming. Like Hunter, they remembered when she came, what she looked like, why she stayed and that city Negro she set so much store by.

Not too many people saw the city man. The first wasn't Hunter who was off on some long trek looking for enough fox to sell. The first was Betty's boy, Honor. He was looking in on Hunter'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 make afternoon rainbows everywhere. He told his mother Betty that the whole cabin was rainbowed and when the man came out the door, Honor looked at his wet yellow hair and creamy skin, though Hunter had come back dead. He stood there with his lips open waiting for the spirit thing to do some spirit thing, but all he got was a "Hey, there! You! Give me a hand?" Honor helped him get the carriage into the shed and stayed around to answer the man's questions. But he didn't get to

see inside, or weed, and he learned the man's name weeks later when Hunter got back. Golden Gray.

His Mama told the truth when she named him, but everything else she said was a lie.