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*Preceding
TK*

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*Hunter's
Hunter*

When ~~H~~ Hunter got back and saw the carriage and the beautiful horse tied near his stall, he was instantly alarmed. No man he knew drove a X carriage; no horse in the county had hair cut and combed that way. Then he saw the boy's mule and calmed down a bit. He stood in his own door and had a hard time making out what he was looking at. Pat's boy, Honor, was kneeling beside the cot on which a pregnant girl lay, and a golden haired man towered above them both. There had never been a whiteman inside his house. Hunter swallowed. All the pains he had taken shot to hell.

When the blond^d headed man turned to look at him, ^{his} the gray eyes widened, ^{then} closed, then, sliding slowly up from Hunter's boots to his knees, to chest to head, the man's gaze was like a tongue. By the time the ~~gray~~ eyes were level with his, Hunter had to struggle to keep from feeling trapped. In his own house. Even the ^{whisper} ~~groan~~ from the cot did not break the lock of the stranger's stare. Everything about him was young and soft--except the color of his eyes.

Honor looked from one to the other.

"Glad you back, ^{Mr. Henry} ~~Uncle~~ Hunter."

"Who be these?"

"They both in here before me."

"Who be these?"

"Can't say, sir. The woman she bad but coming around now."

*Order - Grandfather
① Victory
② Hunter
③ 900 bar*

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The golden haired man had no pistol ^{Henry} Hunter could see, and his thin boots had never ^walked country roads. His clothes would make a preacher sigh and Hunter knew from the lady-like hands the stranger had never made a fist hard enough to smash a melon. He walked to the table and placed his pouch on it. With one swing he tossed a brace of x in the corner. But he kept his rifle in the crook of his arm. And his hat on his head. The gray eyes followed his every move.

"The woman had a bad fall from what I can tell. This here gent, he carried her in here. I cleaned the blood up best I could."

Hunter noticed the red dress covering the woman, the dark black-blood spots on the sleeve.

"I got the fowl in and most of the pigs. "Cept Bubba. He young but getting big, Uncle. Big...."

The cane liquor bottled, uncapped, was on the table, a tin cup next to it. Hunter checked its contents and returned it to the table. Carefully he eased the stopper in, wondering ^what land this queer man came from who knew so little about the rules of hospitality. Woodsmen, white or black, all country people were free to enter a lean to, a hunter's shooting cabin. Take what they needed, leave what they could. They were way stations and anybody, everybody might have need of shelter. But nobody, nobody drank a man's liquor in his house ^{when he was away} unless they knew each other mighty well.

"Do we know one another?" Hunter thought ^t the 'sir' he left out

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was as loud as a bang. But the man didn't ^{her} it because he had a bang of his own. ^{lightly, chuckled.} "Wild, eh?" He turned to the

pale "No. Daddy. We don't." ^{"Daddy."}

He couldn't say it wasn't possible. That he needed ^a the locket portrait ^{or a piece of paper} to convince him. But the shock was heavy just the same.

"I never knew you were in the world," what ^{he} was he said eventually, but what the blond man had to say, planned to say in response had to wait because the woman screamed then and hoisted her self on her elbows to look between her raised knees.

The city man felt faint, but Honor and Hunter had not only watched the common and counted on birthings farm people see, but had tugged and twisted newborns from all sorts of canals. This baby was easy. It slipped out almost unaided. The problem was the woman would not (maybe she could not) nurse. Hunter sent the boy home. ^{they went, too.}

"Tell your mother to get one of the women to come out here. Come out here and take it. Otherwise it won't live out the morrow." ^{you think about her? Wonder where she was?}

"Yes sir!"

And bring ^{me some} can liquor if any's around."

"Yes sir!" ^{that I look like wondering where a whitegirl went?}

Hunter ^{he} bent down then to look at the mother who hadn't said anything since that scream. Sweat covered her face and, breathing hard, she licked beads of it off her upper lip. He leaned closer and when he turned his head to adjust the blanket over her, she

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raised up and sunk her teeth in his cheek. He yanked away and touching the ~~rear~~ ^{ear} lightly, chuckled. "Wild, eh?" He turned to the pale boy-man who had called him "Daddy."

"Where you pick up a wild woman?"

"In the woods. Where wild women grow."

"Say who she was?"

The man shook his head. "I startled her. She hit her head on a rock slab. I couldn't just leave her there."

"Reckon not. Who sent you to me?"

"True Belle." *remember. He was Joe's best friend, and they*

"Ahhhh." Hunter smiled. "Where is she? I never did hear where she went off to." *but tree Joe fell out of, but Victory would*

"Or with?" *could be there still, in somebody's backyard, but*

"Went off with the Colonel's daughter. Everybody knowed that. Quick they went, too." *down. One week of rapture, two days of*

"Guess why." *groes, encouraged by guns and beep, rode out of*

"Don't have to guess now. I never knew you was in the world."

"Did you think about her? Wonder where she was?" *to go and if*

"True Belle?" *place you think will welcome you, where is the*

"No! Vera. Vera Louise."

"Aw, man. What I look like wondering where a whitegirl went?"

"My mother!" *ers until shooed away for being the blight that*

"Suppose I did, eh? What'd be the next step? Go up to the Colonel? Say, look here Colonel Gray, I been wondering where your daughter got to. We ain't been riding in a while. Tell you what

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you do. Tell her I'm waiting and to come on out." Hunter passed his hand over his head. "You aint said where they at. Where you come from."

"Baltimore. My name is Golden Gray."

"Can't say it don't suit."

mtk

Victory might remember. He was Joe's best friend, and they hunted through and worked in that whole county. Not even a police map would show the walnut tree Joe fell out of, but Victory would remember it. It could be there still, in somebody's backyard, but the cotton fields and the colored neighborhood around them were churned up and pressed down. One week of rumors, two days of packing, and 900 Negroes, encouraged by guns and hemp, rode out of town on wagons or walked on their feet to who knew (or cared) where. With two days notice? How can you plan where to go and if you do know of a place you think will welcome you, where is the money to arrive?

They stood around at depots, camped in fields on the edge of the road in clusters until shooed away for being the blight that had been visited upon them--for reflecting like still water the disconsolateness they certainly felt, and for reminding others about the wages sin paid out to its laborers.

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They burnt the canefield where Wild hid, or watched, or laughed out loud, or stayed quiet. The sugar smell lingered in the smoke--weighting it. Would she know? Would she understand that fire was not light or flowers moving toward her, or flying golden hair? That if you tried to touch or kiss it, it would swallow all your breath away?

The little graveyards, with hand made crosses and sometimes a stone marker pleading for remembrance in careful block letters, never stood a chance.

Hunter refused to leave; he was more in the woods than in his cabin anyway, and seemed to look forward to spending his last days in the places he felt most comfortable. So he didn't haul the gear he collected to a wagon. Or walk the road to X as Joe and Victory did to look for a workplace. Some farm that gave you space to sleep and food in return for clearing brush. Or a mill that had a bunkhouse. Joe and Victory walked the road along with the others and knew they were near Crossland when they passed the walnut tree where they used to sleep on nights when, hunting far from home, cool air could only be found high in its branches. And when they looked back down the road, they could still see smoke lifting from what was left of the fields and the cane of Vernonsville. They both found work at a sawmill, then at x, then x, x. Then one spring the southern third of the county erupted in fat white cotton balls, and Joe left Victory at X for the lucrative crop picking outside Crossland. But first, first he had to know if the woman

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he believed was his mother was still there--or had she confused fire with hair and lost her breath to it.

[1. Joe goes back, tracks back to see if Wild is still there. that encounter depletes him.

And knew that *He had tracked her before* She wasn't always in the cane. Nor the back part of the woods on a whiteman's farm. He and Hunter and Victory had seen traces of her in those woods: ruined honeycombs, the bits and leavings of stolen victuals and many times the signal Hunter relied on most--red wings, those blue black birds with the bolt of red on their wings. Something about her they liked, said Hunter, and seeing four or more of them always meant she was close. Hunter had spoken to her there twice, but Joe knew that those woods were not her favorite place. Across the stream, beyond the place where the trout and the X were plentiful but before the stream went underground heading for the mill, the bank turned around an incline. On top of it, some fifteen feet above the stream was a sheltering rock formation its entrance blocked by hedges of old hibiscus. Once, after pulling ten trout in the first two hours of dawn, Joe had walked past that place and heard what he first believed was some combination of running water and wind in high trees. *Actually it was that* The music the world makes, familiar to fishermen and shepherds, *which* woodsmen *have* also heard. *g* It *hypnotizes* mammals. Bucks raise their heads and gophers freeze. Attentive woodsmen smile and close their eyes.

Joe thought that was it, and simply listened with pleasure until a word or two seemed to glide into the sound. Knowing the

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music the world makes has no words, he stood rock still and scanned his surroundings. A silver line lay across the opposite bank, sun cutting into the last of the night's royal blue. Above and to his left hibiscus thick, savage and old. Its blossoms were closed waiting for the day. The scrap of song came from a woman's throat, and Joe thrashed and beat his way up the incline and through the hedge, a tangle of muscadine vines, Virginia creeper and hibiscus rusty with age. He found the opening to the rock formation but could not enter it from that angle. He would have to climb above it and slide down into its mouth. But he saw enough tracks to know she was there.

He called out.

"Anybody there?"

The song stopped, and a snap like the braking of twigs took its place.

"Hey! You in there!"

Nothing stirred and he could not persuade himself that the fragrance that floated over him was not a mixture of honey and shit. He left then, disgusted, and not a little afraid.

But after the dispossession, after having seen the smoke and tasted the sugared air on his tongue. he went back. Skirting the burned ground, and fields of black stalks; looking away from the cabins that were now hot bricks where the wash tub stood, he headed for the stream and the hole in it where trout multiplied like flies. When he reached the turn he adjusted the rifle strapped

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to his back and dropped to his haunches. Slowly, breathing softly through his mouth he crawled toward the rocks shut away by greenery grown savage in sun and air. There was no sign of her, nothing he recognized. Entering the rock place he saw nothing a woman could use and the vestiges of human habitation were cold. Had she run away, escaped? Or had she been overtaken by smoke, fire, panic, helplessness? Joe waited there, till his listening made him drowsy and he slept for an hour or more. When he woke the day was slipping and the hibiscus was as wide as his hand. He hauled himself down the incline and, as he turned to go four red wing shot up from the lower limbs of a white oak tree. Immediately Joe is on his haunches, whiping: "Is it you? Just say it. Say anything." Some one near him is breathing. Turning round now he examined the place he has just exited. Every movement and leaf shift seemed to be her. "Give me a sign, then. You don't have to speak. Let me see your hand. Just stick it out someplace and I'll go; I promise." A sign. " He begged pleaded for her hand until the light grew small. "Are you my mother?" Yes. No. Both. Either. But not this nothing. Whispering into hibiscus stalks and listening to breathing, he suddenly sees himself pawing around in the dirt for a not just crazy but also dirty woman who happened to be his secret mother that Hunc^{ter}e once knew and cared for but who orphaned her baby rather than nurse him or coddle him or stay in the house with him. A woman who frightened children, made men sharpenknives, for whom woman left food out (might as well--otherwise she stole it).

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Leaving traces of her sloven unhousebroken self all over the county. shaming him before everybody but Victory, who neither laughed nor slant-eyed him when Joe told him what Hunter had said. "She must be tough, " was Victory's reply. "Live outside like that all year round, she must be tough."

Maybe so, but right then Joe felt like a lint-headed fool, crazier than she and just as wild. would he too slip into mud over black roots, patches of dirt crawling with termites. He loved the woods because Hunter taught him how to. but now they wre full of her, a simple-,minded woman too silly to beg for a living. Too brain-blasted to do what the meanet sow managed: nurse what she birthed. The small children believed she was a witch, but they were wrong. This creature hadn't the intelligence to be a witch. She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere.

There are boys who have whores for mothers and don't get over it. There are boys whose mothers stagger through town roads when the juke joint slams its door. Mothers who throw their children away or trade them for folding money. He would have chosen any one of them over this indecent speechless lurking insanity. The blast he aimed at the white oak limbs distrubed nothing for the shells were in his pocket. The trigger clicked harmlessly. Yelling he raced back down the bank and followed the stream out of there.

From then on his work was maniacal. He took every job offered or heard about. Cut trees, cane; plowed till he could hardly lift

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his arms; ^{plucked} picked chickens and ^{picked} cotton; hauled lumber, grain, quarry rocks and stock. Some thought he was money hungry, but Victory knew Joe didn't like to be still or thought of as lazy. Sometimes he worked so long and late he never got back to the bed he bunked in. Then he would sleep in the walnut tree; swinging in the tarp they kept there for when they needed it.

2. Later when he meets Violet, by falling out of the walnut tree, he is content to marry her and leave the area. ^{because of his last trip to find Wild.}

3. "He could feel Victory..." tracking Dorcus in the city.

4. Details of his meeting with Wild: deep blue evening sky and her hiding behind hedges and hedges of wild hibiscus.

5. "So when he closed in..." Arriving at Dorcus' party.]

As he tracks Dorcus, he could almost feel Victory by his side or Hunter, even, applauding when he got the scent; chuckling and shaking their heads when he lost it.

[Joe's meeting with Wild is ambiguous: did she acknowledge that she was his mother?]

When he closed in, there was neither blue water nor flowers of any kind.