



JChap 7

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[opening moved from jchap5]

A thing like that could harm you. Thirteen years after Golden Gray stiffened himself to look at that girl, the harm of her was still alive. Pregnant girls were the most susceptible, but so were the grandfathers. Any fascination could mark a newborn: melons, rabbits, wisteria, rope, and more 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 her?

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 at them. One swing of the cutting blade 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 the man the grandfathers called Hunters 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 shuddering but he didn't hear a single crack. Because he was 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, 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 after the first few days following the bite, 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

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all day. Unwarned, they weren't prepared for the way their blood felt when they caught a glimpse of her nor 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 sugar shack, left their beds in the shank of the night, wet themselves, forgot the names of thier grown children and where they'd put thier razor strops.

When the man they called Hunters Hunter knew her--tended her--she was sweet but touchy. If he 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 by now. Local people used the story of her to caution children and pregnant girls and it saddened him to learn that instead of resting, she was hungry still. Though for what, exactly, he couldn't say, less it was for hair the color of a young man's name. To see the two of them together was a regular jolt: the young man's head of yellow hair long as a dog's tail next to her skein of black wool.

He didn't report it, but the news got out anyway: Wild was not a story of a used-to-be-long-ago-crazy girl whose neck cane cutters liked to imagine under the blade, or a quick and early stop for hard-headed children. She

was out there--and real. Someone saw the man they called Hunters Hunter jump, grab his shoulder and, when he turned around to gaze at the canefield, he murmured loud enough for somebody 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 till the edges whistled. But the old men started dreaming. They remembered when she came, what she looked like, why she stayed and that queer boy she set so much store by.

Not too many people saw the boy. The first wasn't Hunters Hunter, who was off looking for enough fox to sell. The first was Patty's boy, Honor. He was looking in on Mr. 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 pigs and chickens were still alive--it was 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 a ghost had taken over the place. Then he realized he was looking at a whiteman and never believed otherwise, even though he saw Mr. Henry's face when the white man told him he was his son.

When Henry Lestroy, the man people called Hunters

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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 mule Patty's boy rode and calmed down a bit. He stood in his own door and had a hard time making out what he was looking at. Patty'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. Hunters Hunter swallowed. All the pains he had taken shot to hell.

When the blond man turned to look at him, 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 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."

"Who be these?"

"They both in here before me."

"Who be these?"

they "Can't say, sir. The woman she bad but coming around now." anybody, everybody might have need of

shel The golden haired man had no pistol 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." she had to wait because the woman

sore Hunter noticed the green 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, Mr. Henry. Big...."

people 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 unless they knew each other mighty well.

"Do we know one another?" Hunter thought the 'sir' he left out was as loud as a bang. But the man didn't hear it because he had a bang of his own.

"No. Daddy. We don't."

He couldn't say it wasn't possible. That he needed a locket portrait to convince him. But the shock was heavy just the same.

"I never knew you were in the world," what was he said eventually, but what the blonde 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 looked 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 clear immediately: the woman would not (maybe she could not) nurse. Hunter sent the boy home.

"Tell your mother to get one of the women to come out here. Come out here and take it. Otherwise it won't

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live out the morrow."

"Yes sir!"

"And bring cane liquor if any's around."

"Yes sir!"

Hunter 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 raised up and sank her teeth in his cheek. He yanked away and, touching his bruised face 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."

"Ahhhh." Hunter smiled. "Where is she? I never did hear where she went off to."

"Or with?"

"Went off with the Colonel's daughter. Everybody knowed that. Quick they went, too."

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"Guess why."

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

"Did you think about her? Wonder where she was?"

"True Belle?"

"No! Vera. Vera Louise."

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

"My mother!"

"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 you do. Tell her I'm waiting for her and to come on out. She'll know the place we meet at. And tell her to wear that green dress. The one make it hard to see her in the grass." 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."

"Suit you if it was Golden Lestroy?"

"Not in these parts." He slipped his hand under the baby's blanket to see if its heart was going. "Baby boy's weak. Got to get some nursing soon."

"How touching."

"Look here. What you want? I mean, now; what you want now? Want to stay here? You welcome. Want to chastise me? Throw it out your mind. I won't take a contrary word. You come in here, drink my liquor, rummage in my stuff and think you can cross-talk me just cause you call me Daddy? If she told you I was your daddy, then she told you more than she told me. Get a hold of yourself. A son ain't what a woman say. A son is what a man do. You want to act like you mine, then do it, else get the devil out my house!"

"I didn't come down here to court you, get your approval."

"I know what you came for. To see how black I was. You thought you was white, didn't you. She probably let you think it. Hoped you'd think it. And I swear I'd think it too."

"She protected me! If she'd announced I was a nigger, I could have been a slave!"

"They got free niggers. Always did have some free niggers. You could be one of them."

"I don't want to be a free nigger; I want to be a free man."

"Don't we all. Look. Be what you want--white or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you got to act black and don't bring me no whiteboy sass."

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Golden Gray was sober now and his sober thought was to blow the man's head off. Tomorrow.

It was the girl who changed his mind.

It would swallow all your breath away?

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.

They burnt the canefield where Wild hid, or watched, or laughed out loud, or stayed quiet. The sugar smell

Back to
Joe's
adoption
here

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

He had lived first with the fear of her, then the joke of her, finally obsession followed by rejection of her. Nobody told Joe she was his mother. Not outright; but Hunters Hunter looked right in his eyes one evening and said "She got reasons. Even if she crazy. Crazy people got reasons."

They were cleaning up after eating some of what they'd caught. Joe believed later it was fowl, but it could have been something with fur. Victory would remember. Victory was wiping the roasting stick with leaves while Joe leveled the fire.

"I taught both you all never kill the tender and nothing female if you can help it. Didn't think I had to teach you about people. Now, learn this: she aint prey. You got to know the difference."

Victory and Joe had been joking, speculating on what it would take to kill Wild if they happened on her. If the trail of her all three of them sometimes saw and followed led straight to her hide. That's when Hunter said it. About how crazy people have reasons. Then he

looked raight at Joe (not Victory). The low fire galvanized his stare. "You know, that woman is somebody's mother and somebody ought to take care."

Victory and Joe exchanged looks, but it was Joe's flesh that cooled and his throat that tried and failed to swallow.

From then on he wrestled with the notion of a wildwoman for a mother. Sometimes it shamed him to tears. Other times his anger messed up his aim and he shot wild or hit game in messy inefficient places. A lot of his time was spent denying it, convincing himself he misread Hunter's words and most of all his look. Nevertheless, Wild was always on his mind, and he wasn't going to leave for Crossland without trying to find her one more time.

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

river, beyond the place where the trout and the X were plentiful but before the river went underground heading for the mill, the bank turned around an incline. On top of it, some fifteen feet above the river 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. The music the world makes, familiar to fishermen and shepherds, woodsmen have also heard. It hynotizes 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 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 to his back and dropped to his haunches. Slowly, breathing softly through his mouth he crawled toward the rocks shut away by greenery grown ruthless 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, whipering: "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 Hunter 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 sharpen knives, for whom woman left food out (might as well--otherwise she stole it). Leaving traces of her sloven unhousebroken

Tense

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self all over the county. Shaming him before everybody but Victory, who neither laughed nor slant-eyed him when Joe told him what he believed Hunter meant by those words and especially that look. "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 as he slipped into mud, tripped over black roots, scuffed through patches of dirt crawling with termites. He loved the woods because Hunter taught him how to. But now they ^{were} full of her, a simple-,minded woman too silly to beg for a living. Too brain-blasted to do what the meanest 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 disturbed nothing for the

shells were in his pocket. The trigger clicked harmlessly. Yelling he raced back down the bank and followed the ^{river bank} 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 his arms; picked chickens and 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.

Victory would remember (assuming he was alive and prison had not rattled him) because Victory remembered everything and could keep things clear in his mind. Like how many times x hens had used a certain nest. Like whether a particular tree--the ones whose roots grew up the trunk-- was in bud two days ago or a week and exactly where it was. As Joe put on his coat and cap he could practically feel Victory at his side that icy day in January when he set out, armed, to find Dorcus. He didn't think of harming her, or, as Hunter had cautioned, killing something tender. She was female. And she was not prey. So he never thought of that. He was hunting

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for her though, and while hunting a gun seemed as natural a companion as Victory.

He stalks through the City and it does not object or interfere. It's the first day of the year. Most people are tired from the night before. Colored people however are still celebrating with a day-gathering, a feast that can linger into the night. The streets are slippery. The City looks as uninhabited as a small town.

"I just want to see her. Tell her I know she didn't mean what she said. She's young. Young people fly off the handle. Bust out just for the hell of it. Like me shooting in the leaves that time. Like me saying all right I'll marry you just because I couldn't see whether she put out her hand or not."

The street lamps are slick and black. [tk]

Again
But He had looked for the tree--the one whose roots grew backwards as though, having gone obediently into earth and found it barren, retreated to the trunk for what was needed. Defiant and against logic they climbed. Toward leaves, light, wind. Below was the river whites called Treason where fish raced to the line, and swimming among them could be riotous or serene. But to get there you risked treachery by the very ground you walked on. the slopes and low hills that fell gently toward the river only appeared welcoming; underneath vines, carpet grass,

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wild grape, hibiscus and [tk], the ground was as porous as a seive. A step could swallow your foot or your whole self.

"What would she want with a rooster? Crowing on a corner, looking at the chickens to pick over them. Nothing they have I don't have better. Plus I know how to treat a woman. I never have, never would, mistreat one. Never would make a woman live like a dog in a cave. The rooster's would. She used to say that too. How the young ones couldn't think about anybody but themselves; how in the playground or at a dance, all those boys thought about was themselves. When I find her, I know--I bet my life--she won't be holed up with one of them. His clothes won't be all mixed up with hers. Not her. Not Dorcus. She'll be alone. Hard-headed. Wild, even. But alone."

Beyond the tree, behind the hibiscus was a boulder. Behind it an opening so badly disguised it could be only the work of a human. No fox or foaling doe would be so sloppy. Had she been hiding there? Was she that small? He squatted to look closer for signs of her, recognizing none. Finally he stuck his head in. Pitch dar, No odor of dung or fur. It had, instead, a domestic smell--oil, ahses--that led him on. Crawling, squirming through a space low enough to graze his hair. Just as he decided

to back out of there, the dirt under his hands became stone and light hit him so hard he flinched. He had come through a few body-lengths of darkness and was looking out the south side of the rock face. A natural burrow. Going nowhere. Angling through one curve of the slope to another. Treason River glistening below. Unable to turn around inside, he pulled himself all the way out to re-enter head first. Immediately he was in open air, the domestic smell intensified. Cooking oil reeked under powerful sunlight. Then he saw the crevice. He went into it on his behind until a floor stopped his slide. It was like falling into the sun. Noon light followed him like lava into a stone room where somebody cooked in oil.

[City tk]

"Don't explain. Don't say a word. I know how it is. She might think it's jealousy, but I'm a mild man. It's not that I don't feel things. I've known some tough times. Got through then, too. I feel things just like everybody else. [tk]

The color of the stone walls had changed from gold to fish gill blue by the time he left. He had seen what there was. A green dress. A rocking chair without an arm. A circle of stones for cooking. Jars, baskets, pots; a doll, a spindle, earrings, a photograph, a stack

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of sticks, a set of silver brushes and a silver cigar case. A pair of man's trousers with buttons of bone. Carefully folded a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy--except at the seams. There both thread and fabric were a fresh and sunny yellow.

The trolly stops suddenly, throwing passengers forward. Almost as though it knows that Joe Trace is looking for her, for Dorcus and....