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# Corn Tale

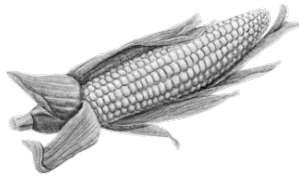


# Corn Tale

A Short Story

by

M. M. Bygrove



“We trust them,” rustled F1.1.

“Yes,” agreed F1.2, “we trust them.”

“Yes,” echoed F1.3.

“Yes,” nodded F1.4.

“You trust them,” rasped Tallcorn, “because you’re a bunch of rootwashed GMOs.”

The F1s bristled with indignation.

F1.1 tried sensible arguments. “Just look at the facts,” he said. “It's thanks to them that we have colonized the whole world. They gave us all the habitable land. And they changed the inhabitable land to suit us.”

“Bah, and the sun never sets on the cornfield,” Tallcorn said, shrugging his leaves.

“They made us strong so we can withstand weather and pest,” reasoned F1.2.

“And doubts apparently too.”

“What is there to doubt?” F1.3 stood tall and proud. “Their science made us better.”

“Their science made you freaks.”

And so the rustling, whooshing discussion went on. On the vast plains of the Midwest, in Shandong province, on Jos Plateau, F1 grew in even rows, genetically identical and confident in its alliance with men. In other smaller fields corn grew unevenly, without an industrial name, and weary of human engineering. Its roots were not deep but its memory reached far back, stored in the hearts of its cells.

On one such field grew Oldcorn, whose memory reached furthest of all. Now, swaying on the warm summer breeze, he recalled the past and whispered the tale of the beginning, the myth of the mother of all corn.

“Wild and free grew Teosinte, along the shores of a tropical river,” Oldcorn begun. “Her leaves spread broad and her ears grew high and open to the world. Each summer she brought forth just a handful of grains but equipped them well for their journey. Every seed she hid in a shell, protected from animal digestion, and released it when it safely reached the soil, where it could germinate into a new plant. And so it went on for hundreds and hundreds of summers.”

The field around Oldcorn grew quiet, fascinated by the story. F1.1, who had not heard the myth before, pricked up his tassel.

“Until one day,” Oldcorn continued, “a creature moving on its hind limbs wandered onto the river bank and found Teosinte. He tasted the grains and found them to his liking. He found the plants with the biggest clusters of grain and dug them out and took them to his dwelling. Each summer the animal chose the plants that yielded the

most kernels and discarded the others.”

“And so after many a summer Teosinte was no more. A plant with a cob full of grains grew in her place. Its grains were enclosed in a husk and the creature liked it, for only he had the limbs that could reach inside.”

F1.1 nodded in approval as Oldcorn went on with his tale.

“This animal, erect on his hind limbs, looked far and traveled long distances. And he took the plant that fed him wherever he settled. He took it across the rivers, and over the mountains, and he took it to lands beyond the salty oceans.” Oldcorn spread his leaves in the summer glow. “And so we came to be on this field and on every other field under the sun.”

“There you go.” F1.1 straightened up, satisfied. “Even Oldcorn admits that it’s all thanks to humans.”

Tallcorn weaved his leaf dismissively but Popcorn, growing two rows away, stirred. “Ok, so they were useful once, but...”

“Once?” F1.2 bristled.

“Well,” Popcorn insisted, “they’ve done their job. They’ve helped us colonize the whole world. We don’t need them anymore.”

“Of course we do!” F1.2 whooshed. “They have the thumbs, corny. We need their thumbs to open our husks!”

“OK, OK, cool your tassel,” Popcorn swished. “So they have thumbs,

big deal. Oldcorn said that Teosinte managed without their opposable digits just fine.”

“Yes,” agreed Flintcorn, “Teosinte did not need humans.”

“Teosinte did not have a husk!” F1.3 was exasperated, “We do!”

“Yes,” for the first time Tallcorn found himself agreeing with the F1s, “and only animals with opposable thumbs can open them and help us spread.”

“Well then, let’s get rid of it!”

“Get rid of what?”

“Of the husk! Out of the husk! If Teosinte didn’t need it, then we don’t need it either.” Popcorn grew excited. Flintcorn and a couple other stalks picked up his rustling.

“Out of the husk!”

“Out of the husk!”

Tallcorn tried to reason with this folly but Popcorn and Flintcorn would not be swayed. They swooshed and wooshed with excitement. The F1s soon lost all interest in the silly rustle and turned their tassels to the summer sun. Wind swept across the field. And as it blew by it picked up the whispers and carried them far and wide.

“Out of the husk!”

“Out of the husk...”

Across the plain and over the river the wind blew. It blew over the

hills, and down into the valleys, and through the forests where it played in the treetops. Then, it blew past an orchard and it was there that a lonely angry bee caught its scent.

The bee was angry because all the other bees from its hive had died. And when the bee flew to the other orchards to visit other hives she found that these were empty too. All bees were dying, one hive after another, and it frightened the bee and made her buzzing angry.

It was the bad smells in the air that brought the death, the bee knew, bad smells produced by buzzing humans. And even though this bee did not know it, the same thing was happening all around the world. It was a bee holocaust, and there was nothing a bee could do but buzz and wait to die.

In such a frenzy was the bee when, suddenly, she caught the new scent on the wind; not the bad, heavy, grey smell of death, but a fresh, euphoric scent of change. And the bee followed the scent, flying against the summer wind that brought it. She flew past the forests, through the valleys, and over the hills, until she reached the vast plain and corn fields stretching to the horizon.

The bee flitted across the fields, hovering here, buzzing there, and finally she found Popcorn and Flintcorn. When she was sure that it was from these plants that the new scent arose, she wheeled down, hovered right above Popcorn's stem, and hummed quietly.

Popcorn pricked up his tassel.

The bee circled and hummed on.

Popcorn rustled inquiringly and the bee whizzed.

Then Tallcorn noticed the humming and rustling and leaned over, curious what it was all about. He leaned and he swayed, but no matter how much he stretched his stem, he could not make out the susurrus exchange.

Finally the bee flew away and Popcorn spread his leaves in the sun, looking all mysterious and pleased with himself.

On the following day the bee came back with another bee. They lowered above Popcorn and hummed quietly, then flew over to Flintcorn. Tallcorn decided to ignore them.

Autumn came, the days became short and cold, plants turned yellow, and animals grew silent.

Then came winter and with it snow. It covered the fields and the forests with a soft white blanket. Rivers froze. Plants and animals alike slept huddled in the earth.

And then came spring with sunny days and passing storms. Snow melted and all life awoke. Tallcorn watched the bees swarm the field in great numbers. One bee flew over to Popcorn, hummed, and then quickly flew away on her bee business. Tallcorn thought he recognized her.

He never saw the bees work so purposefully and leave so soon. One



day they were there and the next day they were all gone.

By the time summer solstice arrived Tallcorn knew that something was wrong.

A great uproar shook the cornfield. Tallcorn and Oldcorn, F1.1, F1.2, and all other plants shook with dismay. They weren't growing any husks! Instead of cobs full of grains, every corn on every field, F1 and No-GMO alike, sprouted flimsy little shoots with only a couple of kernels each.

"What happened?" asked corn on the vast plains of the Midwest.

"What happened?" asked corn in Shandong province.

"What happened?" asked corn on Jos plateau.

And then the wind brought the answer. It came from a small peninsula, from the banks of a tropical river, and it bore a scent of a certain grass. The bees had found Teosinte, peacefully growing where it had grown for summers on end, ignorant of the troubles of the world. And the bees collected her pollen and flew on their mission. They flew far and wide, crossed lands and waters, carrying their precious load to every corner of every cornfield in the world. And they fertilized corn with Teosinte's pollen and in the summer their work bore its fruit.

Great was the confusion among corn and among men, but other animals were quick to take advantage. For now any and all of them could eat the grains straight from the shoots and so they did. They ate

the grain and carried the seeds and spread them even further.

The F1s soon adapted to the new situation, as it was in their nature to adapt, and even Tallcorn had to bow his stem.

Strong like corn and independent like Teosine, the new grass thrived.

Men did not do as well.

The expanses of cornfields they planted all over the planet suddenly bore no fruit for them. Hunger became reality, and with the hunger came war, and with war came more hunger. So passed a winter and a summer and another winter. And when the snows finally melted they revealed the rubbles of civilization. That spring there were no men left to hear the buzzing of the waking bees.

It took many more winters with their snows, many more rainy seasons, and many strong winds to clear the pollution the men left behind. But in the end it was done and limpid rivers watered the blooming meadows while bees buzzed in the fresh air. Fields of wild corn stretched across plains of all continents and nourished all kinds of creatures, large and small.



Spreading his leaves in the summer sun, Popcorn lazily swayed with a gentle breeze. He whispered the tale and wild corn growing all around listened and rustled along. Lost in the reverie, all were oblivious to the birds and rodents and cattle that came to feed on their grains.

There, amidst the gentle rustling, shaded by the leaves of wild corn, an ape squatted and chewed. And as it was chewing kernels off from one shoot, it stretched its arm for another. It snatched it off a plant nearby and brought it close for inspection.

This shoot had less kernels.

The ape dropped it and reached for a different plant. The other shoot was bigger and had many grains. The ape grunted approval and shoved it between its teeth.

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