

The Corn Tree

by
Julian Fernandez

Hester kneeled at the base of the tree.

“I told you it was real,” said Grester. She plucked a low hung corn ear and threw it to Hester. He caught it.

“I really didn’t think corn could do this,” said Hester. His voice cracked on ‘corn.’ “Do you still have my butter?”

Grester smiled and took Hester’s cube of butter from her pocket. “I love corn,” she said, and she threw the butter to him. He caught this, also.

The corn shone gray beneath the overcast; it had rained on their way there, but now the sky hung still. Hester rubbed circles with the butter-cube against the corn.

Grester said, “I wanna climb it.”

Hester kept his focus on the corn. “Why do you wanna climb it?”

“I saw—there was a giant piece of corn at the top. Yesterday. It was the size of a mattress. Glistening in the sun. It was beautiful, Hester. I wanna eat it,” said Grester.

“You want to eat such a beautiful piece of corn?” said Hester.

“Of course I do. It will regrow; death gives birth and birth gives death, and so on,” said Grester.

“And so on,” Hester tasted. “Alright, let’s climb it. But let me eat this corn first.”

Grester plucked another ear and sat next to Hester. They each ate, biting a single grain of corn at a time. Grester smoked a cigarette.

“It’s nice to be here,” said Hester.

“It is,” said Grester.

When they finished their ears, and Grester her cigarette, they set their husks gently at the base of the tree. They rolled up their sleeves.

“That branch looks sturdiest,” Grester pointed.

“The best starting branch,” Hester said. He approached it, and then leaped into the air and grasped it. He swung back and forth wildly by his arms.

“What kind of strategy is that?” said Grester.

Hester fell to the ground. “Let’s eat more corn first,” he said.

“No, Hester. Get up. We have to eat the corn at the top of the tree.”

“I just wanna eat this normal-sized corn,” said Hester.

“Hester,” said Grester. “That normal-sized corn is the corn of despair. We can’t mope about, eating the corn of despair, falling all over the place. Let’s climb the tree. God’s sakes.”

“Fine,” said Hester. “Right. Let’s climb the tree.”

Grester reached out an arm and let Hester to his feet. The grass bristled.

“Let’s try the same branch,” Grester said.

Hester nodded and then jumped into the same hanging position he had just been in. Grester did the same, and they faced each other with strained arms.

“Okay now we gotta—we gotta pull ourselves up,” Hester said. He strained and his hands felt dusty against the bark. Grester kicked, and it looked like a good idea—Hester also kicked. A strength came, and he angled himself to the top of the branch. When he sat and breathed, Grester was there as well.

“This is great,” Hester said. “Let’s take a quick break and eat some corn.” He plucked an ear on his right.

Grester said, “No!” and she slapped the ear out of his hand to the ground.

“Christ,” said Hester.

“We have to get to the top,” said Grester.

Hester said fine. Grester turned her head. “That branch over there looks like the next best step, but I don’t think I can jump to it,” she said.

Hester looked. “Me neither.”

Grester looked above them.

“But I’m going to try,” said Hester. “I’m sick of not eating corn.” He prepared himself.

“Wait,” said Grester. “Look at the distance you are trying to leap. That is the length of four or five tables. For God’s sakes. Look above us.”

There was an excellent branch above them just out of arms reach.

“Let’s jump on three,” Grester said. “One—

“Why do we have to jump at the same time?” Hester asked.

“Two—it’ll be fun—three,” and they jumped.

They were hanging again, as before, facing each other.

“This corn is going to be delicious and gigantic,” said Grester.

They climbed some more.

The corn tree grew thick near the top. Green bristles and harsh, thick stalks blocked their climb. They came to a ceiling.

Grester stood on her toes and kneaded the sideways corn stalks above them. “The tree’s got us beat,” she said. “Corn’s too thick! We can’t pass through here.”

Hester tested the stalks. Individually, they were soft, but they were so plentiful and tightly strewn together—Grester was right, it seemed. Nothing could be done.

“What about punching?” Hester said. “We can punch the corn.”

“I guess that’s reasonable,” Grester said. They turned upwards and threw their fists against the green canopy, over and over.

“I’m making a dent,” Hester said. His knuckles ached.

“Me too,” said Grester.

“I lied,” Hester punched again. “This corn is impenetrable.”

“I also have not made a dent,” said Grester.

They sat on the branch beneath the dark green and breathed heavy. Hester lay back. “We’re completely immersed in corn,” he said.

“There’s stalks all around us,” said Grester.

They were right. No longer visible was the sky, the earth, or even the trunk of the tree. Corn grew thick and complete in the space around them, sideways, upside-down. Corn grew right-side up from roots in stalks grown sideways. The air was dense and smelt of light yellow.

“Maybe we should turn back,” said Grester.

“We came so far. I want to see the top,” said Hester. “I want to see the big corn.”

“But what can we do about this thick corn ceiling? We’ve tried punching it. It’s impenetrable,” said Grester.

“The ceiling is made of material that can be torn. We know it can be torn. Nothing—”

“I’m so tired,” said Grester.

They breathed some more.

“Have you ever eaten frozen corn, Hester?” asked Grester.

“Why would you freeze corn?” asked Hester.

“It’s like a dessert—

“No it’s not,” Hester said.

“It’s like a dessert. It tastes cold.”

“Please,” said Hester. “I don’t want to think about desserts right now. I just want to sleep.”

“Then maybe we should sleep,” said Grester.

And they each lay down with their backs to the branch, with Hester’s feet pressed against Grester’s. Hester fell into a clouded dream.

Hester woke in the dim morning. “Wake up,” Grester said. She shook him. “We have to keep going.”

Hester nearly rolled off the branch. “It smells like corn,” he said.

“Stop smelling the corn. We’re in a corn tree. Of course it smells like corn,” Grester said.

“I want to eat the big corn.”

“Right,” Hester sat up. “Right.”

Crickets droned from somewhere. Wind crinkled the corn around them soft.

“I’ve thought of an idea,” said Grester.

“What is it?” said Hester.

“Eating. Let’s eat through the impenetrable corn.” Grester tore an ear from the canopy. It left behind a perfect corn-shaped indent. Bits of green and twigs and other detritus fell.

“You haven’t even taken a bite, and already your plan is working,” said Hester. He smiled. “Let’s eat.”

He took an ear from above them in each of his hands, bit them one by one, and then cast them away. “It’s so rich,” he said. “Up here the corn is—

“It’s delicious,” said Grester.

“Do you have any more of my butter?” asked Hester. Grester handed him another cube from her pocket. Somehow it had not melted.

Hester made a motion to apply the butter to his corn, but then threw the butter as far as he could out of the tree. He smiled at Grester. “That’s how good I think this corn is.”

“Let’s just keep—

And they kept eating.

They dug a tunnel upwards, and they climbed, the corn-shaped indentations their footholds.

Hester held onto the corn-wall and removed an ear above him. Behind it was open-air. “Grester,” he said. “I think we’ve come to it.”

Grester was opposite from him, holding onto her half of the wall. “We’ve come to it.” She smiled.

Hester and Grester emerged into something like a room. Its walls were composed of green and yellow corn stalks and light branchwood.

In the room's center was an ear of corn. Tall and wide as an elephant, protruding through the green ceiling, nearly glowing.

"I can't believe it," said Hester. He looked at Grester. She wasn't smiling. She didn't say anything. She went forward to touch it. Its kernels were bigger than her hand.

Hester went to the corn and placed his hand against it too. It was warm, and beat softly on his palm like a heart. He pulled his hand back quick. He hadn't expected it to feel so alive.

Grester nursed a kernel in her arms and bit it trembling. Hester didn't want to touch the corn with his hand again, so he pushed his face against a kernel and bit. Its golden flavor matched its golden texture matched its glowing scent. Hester calmed himself. His nose ached against the sweet smell. He pulled a glob of the kernel and closed his eyes and chewed. He touched the corn again and took another bite. The taste brought him to his knees. He kneeled.

Grester spoke. "This—

Hester chewed.

"--is bigger than a mattress."

Hester nodded and pressed his face into the corn again. He chewed.

"I think I've never felt happier," said Grester.

Hester felt a rumble against his face. The corn was shifting. Hester stepped back. Grester held herself high up on the corn.

"You're scaling the corn," said Hester.

She said, "I'm so happy," and bit the corn and pulled herself higher, her arms spread wide like a bear.

“Grester,” said Hester. “Come down. You’re so high up.”

The corn shook.

“You’re shaking the corn.”

Grester didn’t say anything. She climbed higher and chewed the corn. Hester thought to return and keep eating, but he couldn’t bring himself to do that.

“Grester,” Hester said again.

The corn shook again, and then a great crack sounded from the base of the corn and the corn tilted sideways, and then fell against the stalks at Hester’s feet. Corn juice shot from behind Grester’s hands. She turned and saw him a moment, corn on her face. Her eyes gave no clear expression. She looked like she was enjoying eating. A sensation of ice crawled quickly up through Hester’s legs.

The floor of the room broke away against the great corn’s weight. The corn heaved with a crack like lightning out of the tree. Grester held onto it as it went. Green leaves and husks and stalks trickled from the broken ceiling onto Hester’s shoulders.

He didn’t look down.

His heart beat. He climbed down the tunnel, and then through the thick canopy, and then down the branches. His heart beat.

He eased down the last branch, held onto it with his arms, and then dropped. The great corn sat in the grass 20 or 30 footsteps from Hester. The sun had risen. There were no clouds, no wind.

He found her in the tall grass, away from the great corn. She must have let go midfall. Hester kneeled at her body. Her eyes were closed. He didn’t know any prayers.

He looked up at the great corn tree. It stood, the sun next to its broken peak. He held his hands against his stomach and breathed.

“And so on,” he said. “And on, and so on and so on and so on and on. And on.”