

“The Coming of Corn” (Cherokee)

Long ago, when the world was new, an old woman lived with her grandson in the shadow of the big mountain. They lived happily together until the boy was seven years old. Then his Grandmother gave him his first bow and arrow. He went out to hunt for game and brought back a small bird.

“Ah,” said Grandmother, “You are going to be a great hunter. We must have a feast.” She went out to the small storehouse behind their cabin. She came back with dried corn in her basket and made a fine tasting soup with the bird and the corn. From that point on the boy hunted. Each day he brought back something and each day the Grandmother took some corn from the storage house to make soup. One day though, the boy peeked into the storehouse. It was empty! But that evening, when he returned with game to cook, she went out again and brought back a basket filled with dry corn.

“This is strange,” the boy said to himself. “I must find out what is happening.”

The next day, when he brought back his game, he waited until his Grandmother had gone out for her basket of corn, and followed her. He watched her go into the storehouse with the empty basket. He looked through a crack between the logs and saw a very strange thing. The storehouse was empty, but his Grandmother was leaning over the basket. She rubbed her hands along the sides of her body, and dried corn poured out to fill the basket. Now the boy grew afraid. Perhaps she was a witch! He crept back to the house to wait. When his Grandmother returned, though, she saw the look on his face.

“Grandson,” she said, “You followed me to the shed and saw what I did there.”

“Yes, Grandmother,” the boy answered.

The old woman shook her head sadly. “Grandson,” she said, “then I must get ready to leave you. Now you know my secret I can no longer live with you as I did before. Before the sun rises tomorrow I shall be dead. You must do as I tell you, and you will be able to feed yourself and the people when I have gone.”

The old woman looked very weary and the boy started to move towards her, but she motioned him away. “You cannot help now, Grandson. Simply do as I tell you. When I have died, clear away a patch of ground, on the south side of our lodge, that place where the sun shines longest and brightest. The earth there must be made completely bare. Drag my body over that ground seven times and then bury me in that earth. Keep the ground clear. If you do as I say, you shall see me again and you will be able to feed the people.”

Then the old woman grew silent and closed her eyes. Before the morning came, she was dead.

Her grandson did as he was told. He cleared away the space at the south side of the cabin. It was hard work, for there were trees and tangled vines, but at least the earth was bare. He dragged his Grandmother’s body, and wherever a drop of her blood fell, a small plant grew up. He kept the ground clear around the small plants, and as they grew taller it seemed he could hear his Grandmother’s voice whispering in the leaves. Time passed and the plants grew very tall, as tall as a person, and the long tassels at the top of each plant reminded the boy of his Grandmother’s long hair. At last, ears of corn formed on each plant and his Grandmother’s promise had come true. Now, though she had gone from the earth as she had one been, she would be with the people forever as the corn plant to feed them.