

The Not-So-Secret Secret



by Heather Lore

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Dedicated to Michael, Erika, and Derek

<http://www.skyegg.com/>



CHAPTER ONE

Howling wind raced through the trees and scattered the fallen leaves in its path. Shadows danced across the full moon. Henry Hathaway was hiding his head in horror. Henry had been in bed for two hours. Poor young Henry could not fall asleep no matter how hard he tried.

Henry decided to try counting the shadows in his room. The first one he counted looked like a giant hand reaching through the gloom to grab him. The shadow hand turned out to be a leaf falling past his bedroom window. The second shadow looked like a Tyrannosaurus Rex. The T-Rex turned out to be a squirrel that was sitting in the oak tree outside his window. The third shadow looked like a flying ear of corn. And, it was!

Henry ran to the window. He opened it and peered outside into the night. A chilling gust of wind sent shivers down his spine. He pinched his arm to make sure that he wasn't dreaming. The sudden pain confirmed that he was awake. The ear of corn was in his yard. It flew past the squirrel which chattered a warning and lunged to catch it. The corn escaped and did a flip in the air as if it were all a game. Henry left the scene at the window long enough to

find and return with his camera. When he got back to the window, the flying corn was gone. Henry scanned the ground for any sign of the corn. There was nothing unusual. He sighed and closed the window. Then, he crawled under the warm covers and fell fast asleep.





CHAPTER TWO

Henry slept late. By the time he came to breakfast, his father was already hidden behind an open newspaper. Mr. Hathaway read as he sipped his second cup of coffee. While Henry was eating his favorite cereal, Monster Munchies, he noticed a strange story on the front page of the newspaper. According to the article, there had been spooky sightings in town overnight. Townsfolk had seen creepy corn that fantastically flew. Henry knew it was true because he had seen it, too!

After breakfast, Henry met his best friend, Johnny Jones, at the park. Johnny was reeling in the string leading up to a large kite shaped like a shark in the sky. The wind was tossing the shark kite back and forth which made it look like it was swimming in a sea of clouds.

“Did you hear about the creepy corn?” asked Henry.

Johnny stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth as he struggled to control the kite in the strong wind. He snorted in disdain and replied, “There's no such thing as flying corn. Somebody's pulling a prank. Corn can't fly. It's not scientifically possible.”

“I saw it,” stated Henry defiantly.

“You were just dreaming,” insisted Johnny who was rigorously reeling in the string of the kite.

“No, I'm telling you that I saw the flying corn. I was wide awake. It flew past my window,” replied Henry.

“You mean like this?” asked Johnny as the kite swooped down to land on the ground at Henry's feet.

“I guess so,” admitted Henry reluctantly.

Johnny gave Henry an I-told-you-so-smile as he picked up the kite. He held the kite up over his head and said, “It was most likely some kid like me out late taking advantage of the nice wind gusts for some kite flying. Nothing interesting or scary.”

The boys walked home in silence. As they were leaving the park, they saw an old man who was using binoculars to peer into the trees. The old man was wearing a tattered white lab coat as if he had just come from work. Henry stopped to look up into the trees to see what had the old man's attention. In a nearby oak tree alongside a couple of finches, there sat a strange looking green bird. From a distance, it was hard to tell what kind of bird it could be.

“Come on,” countered Johnny. He wanted to get home out of the cold wind and have

some cocoa.

“No, wait. I think I see something. It's a strange green bird in that tree over there,” whispered Henry.

“The old man probably lost his parakeet. Come on. I want to get home where it is warm,” retorted Johnny.

“You go on. I'll meet you at your house later,” said Henry.

“Suit yourself, but if you take too long there won't be any marshmallows left for your cocoa. You know that my older brother, Jimmy, will eat them all,” replied Johnny.

Henry nodded and laughed. Johnny waved to him as he rounded the corner and disappeared from view.

Daily Review

October 31, 2007

Strange Sightings Overnight!

Local residents claim to have seen unusual flying objects in last night's sky. One snapped a photograph of the scene, and it appears to show an ear of corn in flight. Officials have not denied or confirmed the reports.

Margaret Sneed of Amherst Avenue said that shortly after 7 p.m. her dog, Alphie, began barking in the yard as if there were an intruder present. When she went out to investigate, she caught a glimpse of what she believed to be a green bird perched in the branches of a nearby tree. Suddenly, to her amazement, the creature swooped down over her head and then flew over the roof out of sight. She said that the creature had a green covering over its body like a corn husk. Sneed's is one of numerous stories circulating all over town.



New Traffic Light Long Overdue

The installation of a new four-way stoplight at the intersection of First and Second Avenue downtown is long overdue, claims Mayor Bradford. After a series of town meetings, it has been decided that the town council will review bids from local contractors and submit them for vote at an upcoming hearing.



CHAPTER THREE

The old man who was using binoculars to peer into the trees was still at the park. Henry walked over to the him. Aside from the squirrels on the ground who were searching for acorns and the birds in the trees, there was nobody else at the park but Henry and the old man. Though, there was a neighbor who was washing his car in the driveway across the street.

“Excuse me, sir. Are you looking for a lost bird?” asked Henry.

The old man was startled at the sound of Henry's voice. The man jumped backwards and nearly dropped his binoculars. Henry waited for the man to recover and answer him.

“Goodness, boy. I didn't know there was another soul for miles. I've been distracted since...” replied the old man.

“Since you lost your bird?” offered Henry who finished the man's thought for him.

“Oh, no. Son, she's not a bird. She's a secret I've kept for twenty years. Did a pretty good job of keeping my secret...till now,” sighed the old man.

“I don't understand, sir,” admitted Henry.

“Here, have a look through these. Aim it right there at that branch,” said the old man as he handed Henry the binoculars.

Henry used the binoculars to look at the tree. Seated on the branch was the strange green bird that he had seen earlier. Yet, it was no bird. The green creature had clawed feet that clung to the branch, and it had a pair of green papery wings which it folded and unfolded as it tried to keep its balance. There was no visible head. Instead, a hood of the same green papery substance covered it. Then, Henry understood. He was looking at an ear of flying corn.

“I knew it. Johnny was wrong. It *is* scientifically possible for corn to fly,” said Henry quietly.

“Absolutely scientific. I know. I worked in the research center where these beauties were created. I'm sorry that I didn't introduce myself. My name is Dr. Masa,” said the man proudly, “Only six of these creature survive in the entire world.”

Dr. Masa continued, “When I retired from the center, they came to live with me. When these six are gone, there won't be any more. They do not reproduce, and they can not survive long in the wild. They depend on a special, expensive liquid fertilizer to survive.”

Then, Henry learned how the flying corn had come to live with Dr. Masa.

“The project team made the decision to close the experiment and left me as head of the department to care for the six survivors. I retired and took them home. Our findings were never published, and nobody came asking questions all these years. The secret was safe with me, but I guess I have gotten careless in my old age. I left a window open and out this one flew. At least, there are five more,” said Dr. Masa.

“Don't blame yourself. Don't give up hope. I'll help you catch...her,” offered Henry.

“I've been trying to do just that since last night. She won't last much longer out here even with her protective covering. The husk grows over her whole body like an exoskeleton when she is exposed to the varying temperatures of the outside environment,” said Dr. Masa sadly.

“Sir, what exactly happens when they...when they die?” asked Henry.

“They go back to being what they started...just an ear of corn. It's the inside of the cob that contains the vital organs which make it obvious that these creatures are animal. They are more like insects than birds,” explained Dr. Masa.

Henry tried not to look confused by the explanation. It was hard to imagine a living creature that was both a plant and an animal!

The old man continued to talk about the corn's characteristics, “The kernels are balloons which hold oxygen in a constant supply. Her parabronchi, or flight lungs, are more powerful than her resting lungs. When she isn't flying, her resting lungs take over. They are book lungs like those found in some spiders. These creatures also have sucking stomachs which are fed through tiny porous tubes running between the kernels like a canal system.”

Though Henry did not understand everything that Dr. Masa told him, he was fascinated by the flying corn and did his best to look interested in what the man had told him about it.

Dr. Masa finished his explanation by adding sadly, “Of course, on the outside, she looks like a regular ear of corn. I doubt anyone would think to open the cob to look inside even if she were discovered. If she dies out here, she'll be eaten by a squirrel or feasted on by birds before we can locate her.”

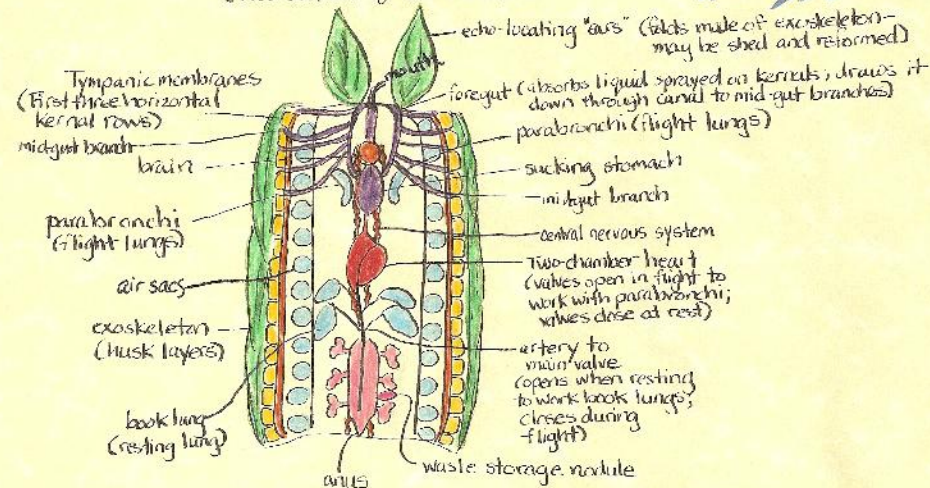
“We can't let that happen. I won't let that happen,” declared Henry.

“There she goes,” said the old man forlornly as the ear of corn flew out of the tree and darted across the sky.

“Look, give me your address. If I find and catch her, I'll bring her home to you,” said Henry. The old man handed him a worn business card which included the home address and phone number. Dr. Masa thanked Henry, and then they both left the park to go their separate ways home.

Anatomical Cross-section of Corn Creature.

Field Notes
Dr. Man



Other distinguishing physical features:

- No eyes (form sensory antennae as needed)
- No reproductive system
- Regenerative exoskeleton which hardens to form a protective shell when exposed to variable temperatures. Hormones or some type of undocumented chemical are released from the brain into the central nervous system telling exoskeleton signals to evolve useful appendages as needed - ear flaps, extra wing pairs, perching talons, etc.)

Observed behavioral characteristics:

- Tend to travel in flock like birds
- Gathers in areas where temperature is 70° - 80°F
- Emits sounds at 30,000 to 40,000 Hertz (Hz) Beyond range of human ear to echo-locate.
- Prefers the butter-flavored liquid fertilizer

• Closed File •
Specimen location unknown



CHAPTER FOUR

There was another article in the newspaper the next day. The article included interviews with townsfolk who had encountered the corn. One woman had lured the flying corn close to her window by using a stick of butter as bait. Another person had witnessed the corn hovering with some moths near a window that was illuminated by a candle.

If Henry hoped to catch the corn, then he needed a plan to trap it. Nobody was better skilled at trapping than Johnny Jones. Mrs. Jones was terrified of mice. Johnny created a special cage system to capture rodents without harming them. He modified an old hamster habitat complete with wheel and tube tunnels to attract the mice. Once they were trapped, Johnny took them to a field and released them. Henry called Johnny on the phone in order to ask for his help.

“Look, you are my best friend, so I'm going to give you my best advice free of charge. Let this crazy obsession with flying corn go. Did I mention that it's crazy? I don't believe the old man's story. He's probably just bored and lonely...or loony. I wouldn't go near him again if I were you,” warned Johnny.

“Are you going to help me or not?” asked Henry.

“Sure. I'll be right over,” said Johnny in an annoyed tone.

When Johnny arrived, Henry suggested that they work on the plan outside on the patio. Mrs. Hathaway was raking leaves in the yard. She had just finished watering the hanging baskets, and there were puddles all over the stone floor of the patio.

“This is no good. It's all wet out here,” remarked Johnny.

Henry didn't argue with Johnny because he had just noticed a green bird-like creature standing in a nearby puddle. He motioned for Johnny to be quiet and to sneak up behind the animal. Johnny took the hint and went behind the green creature to block its escape. The creature seemed to understand that it was cornered. It rose up on its legs, fluttered its wings pitifully, and promptly flopped over on its side. It lay perfectly still in the puddle.

“What's it doing?” asked Johnny in a hushed tone.

“Playing dead...I think,” whispered Henry.

Johnny bent down and scooped up the creature into his hands. Immediately, it wriggled wildly in a frantic attempt to fly.

“Don't crush its wings,” advised Henry as he reached out to help steady it.

“Wings? This thing feels more like its covered in husks...” said Johnny as he tried to hold onto it.

“Of course, it is. Don't you know what that is? It's the flying corn,” insisted Henry.

“No, it can't be. It must be some kind of huge bug like the ones in the museum. Remember how big those bugs were in the Asian exhibit?” argued Johnny.

“Enormous. Now, let's find something to put this in before it gets hurt,” said Henry as he and Johnny rushed into the house.



CHAPTER FIVE

There was a packing box on the floor by the patio door. Henry dumped out the packing materials, and Johnny placed the creature inside the box. The boys rushed upstairs with the box. They went into Henry's room and closed the door.

Johnny guarded the box, while Henry called Dr. Masa. When he heard that Henry had captured the corn, he asked them to bring him the creature as soon as possible. Johnny agreed to meet Henry at Dr. Masa's house. Johnny wanted to go kite flying again, and the old man's house was near the park. Johnny went home to get his kite, and Henry went to tell his mother that he was going to Dr. Masa's house to return a lost pet, which was true in some sense. Then, he went straight over to the old man's house.

Henry carried the box all the way to Dr. Masa's house. As he was heading up the sidewalk, Henry tripped over an uneven part of the pavement. The box fell out of his hands and landed on the grass. As soon as the flaps on the box flipped open the green creature flew out of it and landed in a maple tree in front of the house. Henry slapped his forehead in frustration. He had to catch that corn!

Johnny came walking up the street. He was trailing his shark kite aloft in the sky behind him. Henry jumped up and down and waved for him to get there faster. Johnny ran over to Henry, unfortunately the shark kite darted past the maple tree and spooked the corn out of the tree. Henry and Johnny watched helplessly as the corn flew over the roof of the house and then disappeared in a dive down the chimney. To their horror, the boys noticed smoke billowing from the chimney.

The front door opened a few minutes later. Dr. Masa stepped out onto his porch to greet them. Through the open door, a familiar, buttery smell mingled with the outdoors aroma. Popcorn.

The old man invited them inside. Johnny picked up the box and followed Henry weakly into the foyer. Both boys were dreading having to break the bad news to the old man. Obviously, the corn had popped when it went down the chimney. Henry felt it was his duty to speak and was about to admit the worst when Dr. Masa interrupted him by momentarily excusing himself from the room.





CHAPTER SIX

Time dragged on for what seemed hours as the boys nervously paced in the foyer. They were walking circles around each other. They passed the time in sickened silence.

When Dr. Masa returned, he was carrying a bowl of popcorn under one arm and a fairly large bird cage in the other. He handed the bowl of popcorn to Johnny who took it and tried not to look at it. He looked as if he were going to be sick any moment. Dr. Masa set the cage on the foyer table.

Silently and rapidly, Henry did the mental math. He counted the corn in the cage. One was walking around on the bottom. One was clinging to the side of the cage and cleaning its wing. Three were perched in a row on the stick extending across the cage. One was looking at its reflection in the small hanging mirror; it pecked at its image and caused the little bell suspended from the mirror to jingle. Henry counted them twice just to be certain. He could hardly believe it. There were six!

Henry tried to get Johnny's attention to share the good news, but Johnny was staring in horror at the popcorn. Instead, Henry directed his attention to the old man.

“Sir, about the missing corn...” began Henry.

“Miraculous! I came into the den here, and there they were all together again. All six,” said Dr. Masa merrily. He continued, “And just in time for their nightly feeding, too. Would you like to do the honors?” The old man handed Henry an unmarked spray bottle and instructed him to spritz each ear of corn three times. He explained that the spray bottle contained a fertilizer that provided the corn with the essential nutrients it needed to survive.

Johnny set the bowl on the table and watched in awe as the corn fluttered its wings in the spray.

“So, flying corn is scientifically possible after all,” he marveled.

“I am going to trust you to keep our not-so-secret secret,” said Dr. Masa as he stroked the back of one of the curious corn creatures.

“I have a plan,” said Johnny with a smile.

Daily Review

November 8, 2007

Flying Corn Hoax!

Johnny Jones and Henry Hathaway, two local boys, staged the prank. Jones constructed a kite that looked like a genuine ear of corn. The boys took the kite all over town and gave quite a few residents something to talk about over their coffee the next morning. As it was all in good fun, no trespassing charges or criminal mischief charges have been filed against the two, though they have been warned not to try any further pranks in the future. Town residents are reminded to warn their children of the dangers of flying kites near power lines. Power lines can entangle the kites and cause the children to be electrocuted when they attempt to untangle them. As a local doctor noted, parents should supervise their children especially during the evening hours! Both boys' parents offered their apologies for the boys' behavior and promised to give them more constructive things to do with their time. The local chapter of the Junior Engineers Society has offered a trial membership for Jones who has an inventive streak which they believe would be well-suited to their organization. Congratulations to our young Mr. Jones.



The newspaper ran a story the following day about two local boys who staged the flying corn hoax. Henry Hathaway and Johnny Jones granted the paper an exclusive interview in which they described how they used Jones' kite flying expertise to create a convincing corn-on-the-cob kite. The skeptics all claimed to have known it was fake from the first sighting. The believers were disappointed to find out that they had been fooled but had a good laugh about it. Life returned to normal for the town. And, thereafter, Henry and Johnny enjoyed a standing invitation to a certain house near the park. After their adventure, neither one of them ever ate corn or popcorn again!

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