

# The Green Corn Dance

By Emily Gaskin

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I remember Big Cypress, its sun setting in purple and green amongst the willows and palmettos. The rustle of netting, scratchy like mosquito wings. The small gasp of roasted oranges between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. Grandmother spreading her rainbow skirts over the grasses to tell us the tales of the Panther, the Turtle, and the Warrior Twins.

It's a place that I long for, remember, taste, and go back to so many times these days, though I know I can never walk again there in life -- I, the wife of a white man who walks with ghosts.

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"Can't you do something for him?"

Steve's mother, Gloria. No hello, how is the weather, how are you feeling. Only this. Her phone calls have come to mark the hour of the day by the increasing degree of her frustration. Now her voice rings like metal in sunlight through the long-distance static.

"I thought your people had ways of treating this kind of thing."

I do not feel my courage, or my anger, rising up to meet her. Instead, I say, "I will make him tea to soothe him. If he wants to talk, he'll talk."

"I honestly don't know why I bother, Betty. The father of your unborn child. If he were one of your kind, you would help him."

If he were one of my kind, he would not be having haunted dreams.

Steve tells me about them, after we have both been sleeping. I see it as he talks in that low drawl of his. The room black as a gator's mouth, the moon filling up the window. The grey man comes and stands by his bed. He comes and does not move. He does not move, but he watches.

Steve says that I do not wake for this. I sleep and do not help him. He tries to talk, but no words come out. The grey man steals him from the bed, and he is so afraid.

"I will do what I can for him," I say. "But these are his visions and his path to follow."

"Like hell. I'll find him a therapist."

"That's not what he needs."

"Neither are you."

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I stand at the windows, waiting for Steve to come home from work. Sunlight falls through the thin gauze curtains, and I wrap myself in them. They are liquid with light, draping like the cathedral tents of mosquito netting in Big Cypress.

I cannot help but think of Grandmother. She moved with such grace amidst the generations of tribal women. She had walked all their paths, knew all their secret worries and how to soothe them. And she knew so many stories! They flowed sweetly from her lips, calming her audience with their wisdom.

As a child, I made Grandmother tell one of them again and again: the story of the Red Maiden and the White Man. How years ago, before the reservation, before we even knew such a word, the tribe had been driven from their hunting grounds. How they rode until their anger and their weeping made them stop and give fight. How, calling the Great Spirit for courage, they beat down the white man and regained their homelands.

She told how the tribe captured a youth from the white army, and they decided that he would be sacrificed at the next Green Corn Dance, in thanks to the Great Spirit for all his gifts.

But the chief's foolish daughter cast her eyes on the white warrior and fell hopelessly in love. She begged that his life be spared. The tribal chiefs roared and thundered, but seeing her sorrowful desperation, they at last relented, granting the young maiden's wish.

One day the newly joined lovers were sitting in their secret forest place near the water and the cypress. The Great Spirit descended upon them and saw the beautiful red maiden in the arms of the white man. Enraged, the Great Spirit sent his flaming arrow down upon them. When the smoke cleared away, nothing but a large hole in the ground marked where the lovers once had been. Then the God of the white man, who is also our Great Spirit, saw this hole he had made and grieved. He decided to sow the hole with seeds of growing life as a symbol of their eternal love.

When I married Steve years later, my father grumbled that Grandmother should

tell different stories.

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This night, like so many others, I lie awake and watch over Steve. He does not know I do this, for I lie very still and quiet until I hear his breathing change and see the softness fall into his face.

The moon comes down slowly through the window pane. My body becomes stiff from the waiting, and my eyes dry out. The baby makes my stomach restless. I watch all night, but no one comes.

I watch his eyes racing like river water under his eyelids, and I wonder what he sees.

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We meet for lunch at Ling's. I am not good with the chopsticks, but today I exaggerate my clumsiness, hoping to bring the sun back into Steve's face. He does not seem to notice.

Before long, the conversation turns, away from talk of another bad day at work. Steve's had so many lately, but he assures me no one has said anything to him about it yet. But I wonder.

"So," he says, drawing out the O. "You going back home in spring?"

"For the Green Corn Dance?" I stare into my rice, picking with the chopsticks. "No, I had not thought I would this year."

"Why not?" Steve frowns. "You can't not go, Betty. Especially this year, when we have our own special harvest to celebrate."

"But--" How can I tell him the strangeness I feel, in the midst of all the clans, knowing my husband is not at the dance ground with the men? "It is not as it once was," I say helplessly. "When I was a small girl, it was everything. It is not so important now. Besides, there is the baby."

"The baby? How could that stop you? I thought you Seminole women had your babies out in the woods."

"We go to hospitals now, you know."

Steve shakes his head. "You can say what you like, Betty Dove, but I know you want to go."

"It will be too close to term. I would rather not leave you."

"Then I'll go with you."

"Steve--"

"Sure, why not? We've been married three years. You'd think your clan would be over it by now."

I cannot meet his eyes. "That's not it," I say slowly. "They like you. They are happy about the baby."

"Right."

"But the Green Corn Dance, Steve, that is different. It is not for outsiders."

Steve's fist comes down on the table. My water glass splashes over. "You're carrying my child! How can I still be an outsider?"

I do not tell him that my family does not know, as I do, how love can grow around a hurt. They still have no medicine to forgive his kind.

Instead, I take Steve's hand, and I rub it against my face, the way I do when he wakes up shaking from his dreams. "Please."

My husband looks at me with that mournful, night-wind sigh.

"We'll go down to the reservation," I say. "There is the safari, and you can see all the hunters in the Everglades. Birds, alligators, maybe even the panther--"

"Dammit, Betty, that's a distraction for tourists." His voice is faint, like rushing grasses. He bites his lower lip, and his eyes become full.

"I need to go with you," he says deliberately. "I'm not well." He lowers his head into his hands, covering his face. "The dreams -- I don't think they're dreams, Betty."

I awake suddenly. Steve crouches over me, arms and legs spread out, pinning me like a panther cub. Smiling, he bounces the bed.

"Wake up, lazybones," he says.

I close my eyes even tighter and shrink down against the mattress. "I am tired," I grumble.

"But it's seven o'clock."

"Who cares about your clock?"

"But it's time to feed the baby."

"We're not hungry."

"Betty, my love, you've got to take care of yourself. You're carrying a baby now."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Betty! Don't you care at all?"

I open one eye. "My grandmother used to tell the story of the frog, and so I will tell it to you, and maybe you will let your poor wife get some rest."

"Not another one of your stories! Save it for the baby."

"Little Green Frog was sleeping on the edge of the water lilies," I begin, ignoring his protest. "Big Rabbit came along, came right to the lily pad and saw Little Green Frog sleeping the day away. 'Hello,' Big Rabbit said. 'Why are you sleeping? The day is too pretty to sleep. Wake up! Wake up!'"

"'Why?' said Little Green Frog. 'There is nothing I have to do.' But the irritating old rabbit kept pestering him until the little frog got so angry that he said, 'I'll fix you!'"

"Then Little Green Frog started singing his funny-noise song he makes to call the rain. Soon the wind began to blow, and the black clouds came. The rains came down and soaked the pesky rabbit so much he got cold and ran all the way home and left Little Green Frog alone.

"So, my sweet lover, let me sleep, or I will make the rain come down and wash you clean away."

Steve backs away and sits himself on the edge of the bed. I think maybe my story has had the right effect, but he starts to speak again.

"I have an appointment this afternoon. A man my mother wants me to see." He laughs halfheartedly. "I must have said too much at the family reunion, or at least the margaritas said too much. Anyway, the whole family's talking about how poor Stevie's gone crackers."

I sit upright. I draw behind Steve and put my arms around his shoulders. "Ghosts walk with you," I say. "They do not understand."

"Hell, I don't understand." He shrugs my arms off, shedding them like a snake skin. "Maybe the shrink can explain it."

He turns to me. His eyes, the color of shallow water, fix on me. "Why is this happening to me?"

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Steve joined my life when I left Big Cypress for Tampa. I was going to the university in the city and took a job at the Tampa reservation's bingo hall. They were hiring part-time in the smoke shop also, and I confess, I could have used the money, but I already had my fill in Big Cypress, selling to the whites who would drive hours to the reservation for tax-free cigarettes. To some of us, this is amusing. They come down, coughing in their white clouds, fighting for each breath, still asking for more. We will smoke them all dead, my brother used to say. But I could say nothing, also coughing in the smoke shop smoke.

In Tampa I wanted something happier, something that did not make my lungs itch, and so I took the job at the bingo hall, doubling as the girl who hands out the boards and the girl who shows off the Porsche jackpot. Now I was just taking their money, not inches from their lungs.

Steve worked the blackjack tables. Sometimes there are more whites working the tables than us, but I suppose the elderly whites find them more trustworthy. They never seemed to mind me, though, and always asked, as if I knew, which were the lucky bingo cards.

One night, a man became angry when he lost too many games of bingo. He rose from his seat and started shouting so that everyone turned their heads. He said I gave him the wrong card. He had asked for a particular card, but I had switched it with the losing card. I went to him and talked softly, offering to give him a different card if he wanted. He threw the card at my chest and raised another one as if to beat me with it.

Steve appeared from nowhere. He grabbed the angry man by the shoulders.

Steve is a big man and held him fast. He told him to calm himself, but the man's face darkened, and I thought he would fight. But the tribal police showed up, and the man backed down. The police escorted him away, and the bingo players, anxious to start another game, did not stop to watch.

Steve tells this story proudly to all his friends -- how he rescued me, how for once a white man did right by my people. I let him have his pride in this, but I wish he had not done it. Now he thinks he must always be saving me, each rescue proof that he is not one of the guilty. I do not tell him there are things he cannot fix, but instead say that I am very lucky to have such a brave husband. This always makes him smile.

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"Are you awake?"

I do not answer right away. Does he know I have not been sleeping? But then I know by his voice that he needs me, and I answer. "Yes."

"I've been thinking," Steve says. "Do you think the baby will have blonde hair like mine, or dark hair, like yours?"

"Dark, I think."

"And the eyes? Do you think they will be blue like mine, or black, like yours?"

"I believe they must be black."

He is quiet for a moment. "And will it be a boy, do you think, or will it be a girl?"

"That I cannot say, my husband." I roll over and kiss his cheek. It is hot and wet to the touch of my lips. Alarmed, I lay my hand on his forehead.

"I don't have a fever," he says.

"Steve--"

"Forget it. I was only thinking." He turns on his side, facing away from me. "Go back to sleep. You and the baby need your rest."

And that is the end of the conversation. I bury myself against his back. My cheek presses against the angle of his shoulder blade, and I fall into the rhythm of his breathing and, finally, into sleep.

I dream of the green forest and a great hole in the ground. Vines and ferns grow from it, climbing ever higher to the blue sky. I brush them aside to look into the hole's depths.

Down in the black shadows, a small grey face looks up at me and smiles.

I wake up with a start. The bed is empty beside me. My heart is fixed as if by an arrow. Have I been wrong about Steve's ghosts?

But then I hear the familiar interrupted grunt of a snore, and deep breathing. I lean over the bed, and find Steve asleep on the floor, curled up like a child.

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For dinner I make *taal-holelke*, boiled swamp cabbage. Steve has complained that our child will get no taste of authentic Seminole cooking if I do not stop feeding it pizza and egg rolls.

"Besides," he says, "It is healthier for both of you."

I make a face and add another tablespoon of cane syrup. "How was your visit with Dr. Michaels today?"

Steve looks up from his newspaper. "You want to know?"

"Of course I want to know."

"But you haven't been very interested in what he has to say." He puts the paper down slowly, flattening it carefully along the creases. "I thought you didn't approve."

"It's important to you, isn't it?" I move the cabbage heart in the water. "Then it's important to me."

Steve looks at me uncertainly. "Okay. The hypnosis is going pretty well, so Dr. Michaels has decided to fix me up with the group next week."

"The group?"

"People who've had experience with this kind of thing."

"With treating it?"



"No. With the abductions. Don't give me that look."

"But Steve!"

He shoots up from his chair like an angry black cloud. "It's no different from all your spirit babble. Except this really happened to me, Betty."

I suppress my "look." I turn down the heat on the stove. The cabbage smell turns my stomach and now is no time to vomit all over the floor.

"I know that you saw something," I say. I say this locking my eyes on his so he knows he can trust me. It is like persuading a bear that you mean no harm to her cubs. And Steve is a big man.

"Not something, Betty. Someone. One of *them*. Dr. Michaels says it is not as uncommon as one might think."

"Dr. Michaels does not want to know what I think."

"Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Okay." I throw up my hands. "Okay."

"We did a regression this afternoon," he says, sitting back down. "A long one this time. And I've seen things, things I've forgotten -- it's all beginning to fall into place." His face brightens. "We think we know why this is happening to me. It's not so . . . arbitrary."

I take the cabbage off the burner. It does not matter if it is done. Steve won't know the difference, and I won't eat it. I cross over to the pantry and hunt the shelves for saltines to quiet my stomach.

"The greys are prepping us," Steve explains. "They're going for a full-blown visitation."

I rip open the plastic wrapper with my teeth. "Where I come from, it's called an invasion."

"Don't be so negative. They haven't done anything to hurt us yet. All I've seen suggests they're only studying us. Maybe breeding us, but," he adds quickly, "their reasons could be benign."

I put the crackers down on the table. "You believe this?"

"I'm not the only one, Betty. This has happened to so many people. A woman in the group, Sarah, she's seen three of her, of their, children. I can't be making this up. Dr. Michaels says--"

"What does Dr. Michaels know about what you saw?" I cannot help the bite in my voice. "Why must he assume this is something from outer space? I know of visions. Maybe this is something else. A ghost. An ancestor."

Steve's face colors. "Oh, it's that, is it? I was wondering how long that would take."

"How long what would take?"

"How long before you started blaming me." He leans back in his chair, wearing that cruel sneer I see only when he wants to turn his hurting back on me. "I thought we had a few years yet, a mortgage maybe, before this came between us."

I cannot believe my ears. "Blaming you? For what?"

"For everything. For the reservation. For smallpox. For coming across the ocean and evicting you from some godforsaken swamp. I'm not my ancestors, Betty!"

"Where is this coming from? Steve?"

"You resent me." He is standing, thrusting his chair against the table. "God, I've done a lot of things, said a lot of things, but Betty Dove, you have always been able to believe me when I said it didn't matter. That your red Indian face didn't matter to me at all. I've never resented you. I never did. But now--"

He lets the sentence dangle, and I cannot find my breath. My lungs fight against my chest as I go to Steve. I try to hold his face in my hands, but he shrugs me off.

"Leave me alone," he says. He storms out of the room, and I hear the door slam and the car engine start up.

The cabbage is growing cold on the stove. I dump it in the trash without draining it. My breath returns, and I sit at the table, nibbling on cracker corners until dark.

I wake to find Steve in bed beside me. His hand lies on my stomach. My skin is warm under his touch.

I do not smell alcohol. That is good. But I do not ask him where he has been.

He notices that I am awake, and he quickly withdraws his hand. He turns away. His shoulders tremble.

I sit by him on the edge of the bed. He sobs audibly, and I hush him. I never saw Mother do this with Father, and she never spoke about it. But I think, sitting there in the soft, blue light, there must have been times.

His sobs slowly subside. We wait together in silence. Then he starts to tell me a story. This is what he tells me:

"There are bad parts of the dreams. Parts I haven't told you. On the nights, the nights when this happens, I am lying in bed, and you are beside me. You look so peaceful; you're even smiling. But then the light comes in the window. *She* comes through the window."

"She?"

Steve's face is white, completely drained of color, completely drawn in misery. "She is a woman. She doesn't look like one," he adds quickly, "but somehow I know. She is totally naked like -- no, you don't want to know what she looks like. But her skin. It's so cold. Like leather."

He shudders. "You never wake up for this. Never. You lie there, with that happy smile. I try to stop her, but there is nothing I can do. I've never felt so helpless."

He breaks down again, and this time I pull him down to my lap. I rock him and stroke the hairs on his head. "It's all right," I tell him, but I have never felt so helpless.

"Steve says you're not taking care of yourself. Are you taking your vitamins?"

"Yes, Gloria."

Steve's mother calls me every day now. It has become a ceremony between us. She tells me I am not helping. That in his time of need, I am failing Steve. If we do not fight over psychiatrists and medicine men, she accuses me of trying to lose this baby. As if Indian women are incapable of bearing children without a

white woman's help. I could tell her we have gone into the woods without a man and only a pole in the ground to hold onto, but that would only mortify her and increase the number of her instructional calls.

"It's important that you take those every day," Gloria continues. "Without the proper nutrition the baby might come out wrong. We can't be too careful, all things considered."

I bite down on the anger in my tongue. "The baby's fine," I tell her evenly.

"Like Steve is fine. I see."

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I talk to my father on the phone. Before he says hello, he asks me if I am well, if the baby is all right, and when I say I am fine, sounding nothing like a dying, desperate woman, he chides me for wasting my money on a long-distance phone call.

"It's Steve," I say. My father is silent. I cannot hear it, but I feel his back-throated grunt in my chest. The grunt I used to hear when I complained that my brother Joseph took my doll or took more than his share of the oranges. The grunt I heard when I told him I'd been admitted to USF.

"He has dreams of ghosts. They cannot be good."

"Then he should go to his Medicine Man. Soon."

"He is, in a way. But Father, I do not think his Medicine Man understands the danger. I know I cannot take him to our Medicine Man, but Father, is there family medicine I could bring to him?"

My father answers quickly, "There is nothing for him."

"Nothing? Nothing at all?" My mouth dries up like cotton. I know I shouldn't, but I press him. "At the last Corn Dance, what did you take from the medicine bundle?"

"There is nothing for him. You waste your money, daughter. The phone costs too much."

"But, Father. . ."

A pause on the other end. "Be well," he says, and I hear the phone click.

My fingers tighten around the receiver, so tight they are almost white.

The baby jumps in my womb. He kicks hard -- a good sign, but I do not feel like rejoicing.

I glance at the clock, but the numbers blur in my eyes. I pass my hands across my face, until I can see again. Almost seven. Steve will be home from his group meeting soon, and I must not look as if I have been crying.

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We do not say much during dinner. At first, Steve tries to tell me about his friend Rick's latest research into alien hybrids. Steve now thinks the grey woman he sees is collecting his seed for genetic experimentation.

The way he can talk about her now -- this ghost woman who plays wife with him while I carry his child -- so calmly, so matter-of-factly, unsettles me. The sweet potatoes are cold and bland in my mouth. I have nothing to say, and Steve notices. He stops talking and starts eating.

We sit at the table, quietly chewing, staring carefully not at each other, but at nothing, like cattle grazing.

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I find myself dreaming of *ta-nah-kee-kee*, the Green Corn Dance. I am a little girl again, carrying a food basket to the dance grounds in hopes of stealing a glimpse of the men's rituals. My brother has said they scratch themselves with nails until they bleed. Drink bad tasting medicine and throw it up again. Purge themselves to be pure enough to partake of the green corn.

Before I can stop myself, I am crossing into the forbidden dance ground. A large man from the Bird clan shouts and rushes up to me. I know I should turn around, but he towers over me, his eyes burning holes into my face. He barks something, and I drop my basket at his feet. I back away and start running.

I run so fast, I don't know where I am running to. I know the man will follow me and punish me for going where I should not, so I plunge deeper and deeper into the woods -- deep enough, I hope, to hide my shame.

A sharp crack and a yell split the silence of my dream. Instinctively, I crouch down low against a tree, to see and not be seen. There are two men ahead, one I recognize as our Medicine Man.

I know I should leave. Stepping onto the dance ground is one thing. To intrude

upon a private ritual, that is another thing entirely. But something compels me to see more. I find myself climbing up the tree in spite of myself. Every one of my nerves screams with danger.

The Medicine Man is facing my direction, while the other man has his back to me. This man wears no clothes, and he is completely white.

It makes no sense. A white man? At the Green Corn Dance?

He stands out like the wing of a heron against the green forest.

It is outrageous. He should not be here. But then I think, neither should I be here, dangling from a tree on Court Day.

The Medicine Man holds out a small bowl to the white man. "Will you drink this?" he says in a voice harder than rock.

The white man makes no answer. The Medicine Man raises up a whip, and I hear the sound of lightning. The white man's shoulder glistens with the color of red.

The Medicine Man speaks again. "You have committed great crimes against this people." He spits at the white man. "But God, the Breath that Everybody Makes, would keep us brothers." He holds out the bowl again. "Take the Black Drink. It is strong medicine. Will you take it?"

The white man does not move. I see the muscles tighten in his back, and again, the air breaks with the sound of lightning.

"I do not understand you." The Medicine Man walks toward me, and for a moment I think I have been seen, but he turns around and looks at the white man. "If you will be purified, you can rejoin the tribe of men. Your crimes are a sickness, because you do not understand."

The Medicine Man holds the bowl forth once more. "God's messenger *Es-te fas-ta* has given us this medicine," he says. "Drink it, and again be our brother."

The white man turns. His head hangs low, surrounded by long strands of matted, golden hair. Welts crisscross his chest. Angry red gashes streak his arms.

"Will you drink this?" the Medicine Man asks. The tone of his voice says this is the last time. There will be no more chances.

The white man raises his head. He looks up, directly to where I hide in the tree, and his hair parts like clouds from his face.

I know his face.

It is Steve's face.

Before he takes or refuses the Black Drink, I tumble from my limb. I claw wildly at the air, but I am falling. Falling.

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I wake, and Steve pins my arms fast to the bed. Bright red scratches rise up in streaks across his chest. I see them and see my own bloody fingernails. I start shaking.

"Shhh," he says. "It's all right. You're awake now."

"Steve--"

He lets go of my arms. "Shhh." He props up against the headboard and pulls me over. I rest my head in his lap, and he puts his arm around me to stroke my hair.

"I've got you," he says. "It seems I'm not the only one with bad dreams. Ah, Betty, dove, what is this doing to you?"

I lie quietly until I can stop shaking. I hear his pulse where my ear presses against his thigh. Its strong, steady rhythm reminds me of another dream I often have. It is the dream I have had since I knew I was carrying his child, the dream of our shining future.

I sit up and take his hand. I place it on my belly. As if he knows, the baby rises kicking against my womb. Steve laughs with sudden awareness.

For the first time since the visions came, I feel like I have my husband back.

Steve sighs. "How am I going to fix this?"

"Will you have this child?" I ask him.

Steve looks at me, and his eyes soften. "I will."

"And me? Will you have me as your wife?"

He nods. "I will."

I swallow hard. "These dreams of yours. The grey man. The invaders. Your ancestors. They're not you."

His eyes fall. "Betty, dove--"

I lift his face with my hand. I make him fill his eyes with mine. "They are not you."

He is quiet for a minute. Then he catches me by the wrists. "Do you believe that?" His eyes search my face with an earnestness I have never seen. "Can you believe that?"

"I believe it."

"But how?" Tears stream down his face. "You can't pretend I'm not. I'm one of them, Betty. Grey. White. You can't help but see that every time you look at me."

"What I see is my husband. The man I have chosen to love and to be with."

Steve simply stares at me, helpless.

"There is a medicine that has been given us. God has given it to us."

"Betty--"

"Kiss me." I touch the places on his chest where he bleeds. "Kiss me, Steve, and let go of your ghost dreams. Be with me. Be with our child. This is the medicine you must take."

Steve's eyes look as if they will flow over. He leans forward to touch my lips with his own. He drinks deeply of my mouth, cradling me in the bough of his arm, and I feel our child kicking hard in my womb.

No, not kicking. Dancing. Making the dance of the Green Corn.



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