

C o r n



R . j . h O y l E

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Corn

R.j. hOyle

Dedication

To every farmer and rancher around the world -- we hear you.

Hemmet kicked a small dried-out dirt clod with the tip of his boot. It exploded into smoky particles and a wizened kernel of corn fell from its core. He stared at the aborted seed. He figured the dirt clump had traveled in on the tractor's wheels after he had finished planting a few weeks earlier. The fractured kernel looked weak and useless as it lay in the glare of the high, mid-morning sun. Hemmet stood next to his paint-starved back porch and cradled a large manila envelope in one arm while he scanned the stark blue sky.

No clouds, no rain. No rain meant no corn. No corn meant no food for the cattle. No cattle meant . . . no ranch. And now, the ranch only had enough water for the herd and the house. Nothing else. The property had been in his family for over a hundred years. It was the only work he had ever known, the only life he had ever known. It was the only way he knew how to live.

He leaned back on a porch post and watched an iridescent great-tailed grackle ruffle its feathers in a divot of loose sand in the driveway. For over seven years, a choking drought had gripped Central Texas. In a normal spring, after the heavy rains had come and gone, a thick mantle of bright-colored flowers would spread across the deep brown of the dense soil. Instead, the earth lay cracked and fallow, and a stifling layer of tawny dust coated the gray and brittle creosote bushes and the sharp, tangled branches of the yellowed mesquite trees.

Throughout the drought, Hemmet and other family ranchers in the area struggled to hang on. As the drought persisted, they found it harder and harder to grow enough corn to feed their cows. Most of the family farmers and ranchers had given up and sold out to the corporate farms or housing developers. Or worse, too many had simply walked away with nothing. Hemmet, and his wife, Eltrice, along with a handful of stragglers clung to their properties with thin prayers and sparse funds.

Twenty years earlier, as a protective measure, he and Eltrice had divided the land and kept the house and a few acres as personal property. They turned the rest of the ranch into a corporation and named it Corn Top Ranch, LLC. The name was Eltrice's idea. She loved corn and was a whiz at baking cornbread and hoecakes. Before they got married, her jalapeño corn relish won a first prize for four years running at the county fair. She gave their favorite breeding bull the name, Cornelius. They were both so proud of him, that even long after his good breeding days were done, they kept him on in a corral by himself, away from the young bulls, and close enough to the heifers to make him think he was still the king.

However, since the drought, what little profit they made from the cattle business went toward feed corn. And that wasn't cheap. A few weeks

earlier, even though the ranch loan was five months in arrears, Hemmet had spent their last few thousand dollars on feed. Now, they only had enough left in their personal account to get by for two months. The thought of the tower of bills piling up pained him, so he waved one hand in the air as if to erase the idea. Then, he stuck a toothpick in his mouth.

The grackle, startled by his gestures, made a piercing cackle-whistle and flew away.

Hemmet looked down again at the useless kernel and toed it into the dirt until it disappeared. A wispy thought threaded through his mind about how he might be getting too old for this kind of life. Every part of his body ached, and the arthritis in his spine had started acting up again. Earlier in the morning, he had made the mistake of bending down too fast to check the corn level in the storage bin, and when he did, an all too familiar shock ripped through his back. As he crouched down on all fours to peer at the dusty marker, he saw that there was only enough food to last five weeks.

Standing next to the porch and thinking about the dwindling corn supply made his stomach twinge and pinch.

Eltrice called from the kitchen, "Hey, Darlin'! Since Ceilly's at work, when you see Raffin, ask him if she is leaving town soon. I want to take over some preserves before she goes to her ma's."

Behind Hemmet, the screen door squeaked open.

Eltrice poked her head out and spoke to his back. "Remember how Miz Delaney used to send us all those goodie baskets when we was first married?"

Without turning, Hemmet gazed at his rust-spattered truck by the barn and nodded. "Sure, do."

"I just want to be sure Ceilly takes her ma a little something from us. It's the least we can do after all her kindnesses." Eltrice let out a soft sigh. "I don't know if I could stand being shut up in one of those nursing homes like that. She must be missing her people a powerful lot."

The sweet, dense smell of chocolate drifted out of the door.

Hemmet turned and said, "I know, Sweetheart. It's rough for her." He smiled. "Smells good in there."

"Don't it? When you get back, your chocolate cake should be ready for a slice. Now, don't you forget to ask Raff—"

"No worries. Like we discussed last night, let's see if this might help." He patted the envelope and gave her a short wave as he walked to his truck.

Less than twenty-four hours before, a certified envelope had arrived at their door. It was a sample of a short-term lease contract offer from Imperial Synergies to perform an exploration of the property for "energy reserves" on the ranch. The letter assured them that, if Imperial found any fuel worth harvesting, then the use of hydraulic fracking was a safe and secure process.

After he and Eltrice read through the papers, they talked about it over dinner.

Eltrice said, "If they find anything, then maybe there'll be enough money to help get by a bit."

Hemmet flicked a stray crumb off the table and said, "If we let them on the land, then nothing will ever be the same. You know what a wreck the Hanslick's place got to be after they dug up the hell outta that place. That . . . and the water ain't been right since."

"Well, if we don't do something, it won't matter. They'll likely get this goddang place at auction. And we'd be stuck in the house and surrounded by the drilling with no way to make money. Then, they'd get the house too."

"Not all true. I might be able to . . ." Hemmet's eyes rolled toward the ceiling. "I could go to truck driving school. Get a CDL."

"Now, how'd that work? With your back and your macular degeneration coming on?"

Eltrice tossed her spoon on the table. Hemmet looked down at his pudding.

Eltrice said, "Sweet, Jesus! The way we are headed, we'll have to move in with your cousin in Lubbock. You know I can't stand his wife. She's snippy and too full of whatever God's gift she *thinks* she is."

"Well, all right then," Hemmet said. "I'll go down to the Armitage tomorrow and run the idea of the contract by Raffin. See what he thinks. Maybe you're right, maybe it'll give us some breathing space."

After Eltrice went to bed, Hemmet sat on the back porch in an unpainted rocker made of soft, coarse wood. He dug his thumbnail into the armrest and made a series of small crescent shapes. Above the ranch, the last quarter moon hung in the black sky like a deflated, sallow ball. Its dim light created an eerie, vaporous glow on the steel roofs of the barn and sheds. He stayed in the rocker until a few hours before dawn. He knew his exhaustion would cost him later, but he couldn't sleep.

As Hemmet got into his truck, Eltrice stood behind the screen door and clutched a dishrag in her folded arms. She squinted as she watched the

truck disappear into a flurry of dusty exhaust.

Hemmet drove ten miles east to Bucek, Texas. The Armitage Savings and Loan sat on the corner of Elm and Main. On both sides of Main, some stores had signs that read, "All Sales Final. Going Out of Business." A few shops had long since shut down, and moldy sun-bleached oriented strand boards covered their fronts. When Hemmet pulled into the S&L's near empty parking lot, it was late morning and the asphalt was already beginning to shimmer and glare. He wasn't sure what to say to Raffin, so he sat in the truck and fingered the envelope.

Raffin's great-grandfather had opened the thrift in 1885, and Raffin's and Hemmet's families had enjoyed a long stretch of friendly history with each other. Before Raffin and Hemmet were born, Hemmet's people saved their money at the S&L. The families socialized at church picnics, met up at county fairs, and Raffin's family always had Hemmet's family over every Christmas Eve for dinner.

As boys, Raffin and Hemmet played together, went to school together, and later, when they got married, they were each other's best man. When Eltrice gave birth and their one and only child died four days later, Raffin was the first friend to knock on their door. He and Hemmet sat in silence on the porch as they passed Raffin's whiskey bottle back and forth between them.

Hemmet gave the steering wheel a short squeeze and got out of the truck. He eased open the bank's door and as he walked across the floor, the splintery pine boards creaked beneath his boots.

Raffin was alone in the bank sitting behind his desk in the back. He looked up when he heard the door open and he tilted his chair backwards.

"Hemmet! Good to see ya."

"Raffin," Hemmet said as he tapped the front brim of his hat.

Hemmet slid into an old walnut chair next to Raffin's desk, took off his hat, and dangled it from one hand. "Did you have a chance to go over all of the numbers again?"

Raffin set his chair upright, scratched his round chin, and said, "Well, yeah, I did. Problem is . . . as you know, we really don't have enough in our reserves to float you any longer. Them sumbitch big ol' boy banks are breathing down my neck as it is, trying to buy me out. Being small *and* honest just don't cut it no more."

Hemmet nodded and bowed his head. Raffin leaned forward and pulled Hemmet's file onto his lap. He flipped through the paperwork, closed the

folder, and then shifted it back onto his desk. Hemmet glanced up.

Frustrated and embarrassed, Raffin looked down and wiggled his polished shoes around as if he was searching for gum or some other debris stuck on them.

"No matter how I turn it -- this way and that -- I just can't get the numbers to work for y'all." His face was puffy and creased. He looked over at Hemmet and breathed out, "I am so goddamned, horribly sorry, Hemmet."

The men looked at each other—then away. Raffin leaned his elbows on his desk.

Hemmet pinched the rim of his hat and said, "Yeah, I kind of figured there wouldn't be any leeway. A few months ago, I done sold off over half the cattle worth selling. Don't need to tell you -- the markets dropped a bit since then." His chair crackled as he shifted sideways. "I surely appreciate how much you've done for us so far."

Raffin jiggled his leg and said, "I even called my buddy up over there at the Bakersfield Credit Union to see if they might be able to swing a deal, but . . ." Raffin shook his head. "This economy, Hemmet . . . this economy."

Hemmet handed Raffin the manila envelope and said, "Well, I brought this in. Thought maybe it might help."

"What's this here?" Raffin asked as he leafed through the papers.

"It's an offer from Imperial Synergies. They wanna do exploratory work. They've offered a few dollars for the inconvenience, and there'd be further possibilities about compensation if . . . they find anything."

"How much is Imperial willing to pay for exploring?"

Hemmet gave his head a short shake to the right, "Fifteen hundred a month for two months."

Raffin put the paperwork down and released a stream of air through his pursed lips. He rapidly tapped his pen. "That's not even half the ranch's mortgage." He stuck the bottom of the pen in the corner of his mouth and said, "Well, I heard that the Jacobs did make a few dollars when they started pulling gas off'a their land. I think it was 'bout five hundred a month. But it took near a year before those returns started coming in."

Hemmet dipped his head down and in a soft voice said, "That little and that long?"

Raffin removed the pen from his mouth and began to scribble swirly shapes on his notepad. "Of course, that was the biggest reservoir found so

far out here. So, I guess it's possible to find a bigger reservoir on your land, but—"

Hemmet looked up.

Raffin twiddled the pen with two fingers and continued, "These things take time. So, it is, well . . . you know. I hate saying this to you, but you are so past due on the ranch's loan that . . . I have to call it all in. Or -- you know."

Hemmet looked at the folders on Raffin's desk and said, "Yeah. I know."

Raffin winced, and said, "Do you want to take the foreclosure paperwork or should I mail it?"

Hemmet said, "S'okay, Raffin. I'll take it."

Raffin signed and dated the documents and handed them to Hemmet.

"Well, that's that," Hemmet said as he gathered up the bank papers and the envelope from Imperial.

Raffin noticed that Hemmet's thin frame looked frailer than usual.

Hemmet looked at Raffin's desk, and said, "Just don't know what to do this time Raffin. Just don't know."

Raffin put down his pen, stood up, and put his hand on Hemmet's shoulder, "You know if there is anything else I can possibly do, all you have to do is let me know."

Hemmet glanced up and nodded.

Raffin said in a hoarse whisper, "God bless you both."

Hemmet wobbled a little as he rose from his chair and said, "Thanks Raffin, thanks." He cleared his throat, wiped his nose with a red handkerchief, and tapped Raffin's desk with one finger. "A'for I forget. Eltrice wants to know when Ceilly is leaving—for to see her ma?"

"Ah, that would be early tomorrow."

As they shook hands, Raffin gently encased Hemmet's hand with both of his. After Hemmet left, Raffin sat back down. Shoulders hunched, he picked up his pen, and with a tight fist he drew a series of X marks on his notepad.

When Hemmet got to his truck, a soft, dry wind began to swirl down the street. He opened the door and wedged the paperwork into the slot next to his seat. He put the key halfway into the ignition—then stopped. He

stared at the key. The warm humid air in the cab felt like a hot soothing cloth. His vision blurred as a deep sinking pulled from below. He began to blink and nod -- he ached for sleep. He tried to rouse himself by shaking his head back and forth and taking deep breaths in and out. It sort of worked -- he wasn't as foggy.

Then, he leaned back and called Eltrice on his cell phone.

"Hey, Hon—" His throat was tense, so he coughed before continuing, "Raffin says Ceilly is leaving early tomorrow."

"All right. Good enough. But, what'd Raffin say 'bout Imperial and the loan?"

"Well . . . it don't look good."

"How's that exactly? As in, maybe he can still loan us money or give us time—or is he still looking for another bank to help?"

Hemmet paused and watched the wind chase a tan plastic bag across the sidewalk. As the bag blew past the front of his truck, it executed a fitful, desperate dance.

"Well . . . neither of those. No hope for the loan, and the Imperial's offer is too little too late." He took a deep breath. "Reason being, seems like any of that would take too long to happen. Even if there was something out there."

He paused, and rubbed his right hand across his face. His skin was as dry and drained as the parched earth of his land. His beard stubble made a scratchy sound as he raked his calloused knuckles across his jaw. "I'm sorry, Darlin'."

He heard Eltrice slam down a pan. "Well, I told you we oughta sold the property three years ago. You never listen to a goddamned thing I say, Hemmet!"

Hemmet flinched. Eltrice went quiet. He watched the digital clock click over to the next minute.

Then, Eltrice said, "Oh hell, never mind, we'll talk about it later. I better get these preserves over to Ceilly right now. You changed the tire on the station wagon, right?"

"Yeah, I did it this morning."

After she hung up, a brief worry crossed his mind.

Did I tighten the nuts enough?

He thought so.

Or did I?

He thought so.

He was so tired . . . so worn-out-tired.

I just need sleep is all. Gotta try and stay on top of all this.

The plastic bag floated onto a decapitated parking meter and got stuck. The breeze whacked it and pulled it. The bag flopped and swelled, but it was trapped on the pole.

He said out loud, "What was I just thinking about?"

He couldn't remember, so he chucked the phone onto the passenger seat and drove back to the ranch.

The road ran through flat, wide-open land, and on the way, he only passed a few cars. Three miles from home he saw swollen clumps of murky storm clouds coalescing far to the west. Too often, over the last seven years, he had seen many dark cloud banks rise above the horizon miles and miles away. The giant clumpy clouds looked like disfigured jellyfish as their long rain tendrils raked the land below. The storm fronts would plod toward him, bloated with promise, but twenty miles or so before they reached the ranch - they always dissolved into useless wispy puffs.

From his right -- a flash of dark brown shot into view. A wild boar had bolted out of the high piles of dried-out underbrush. Colliding with him could wreck the truck or worse. So, Hemmet yanked the steering wheel hard to the right. The truck tipped onto two tires, began to roll, then it shimmied, hovered, and finally slammed back down on all four wheels before fishtailing down the road. Hemmet twisted the wheel in the opposite direction of the slide, and as the car slowed, he pumped the brakes, until the truck finally eased to a stop.

As he sat in the idling truck, he looked in the rearview mirror and saw the unharmed boar trot to the other side of the road. Its tiny sharp hooves kicked up a heavy cloud of dust that hid the boar from view. All Hemmet could see was the boar's bristly, upright tail poking in and out of the swirling cloud. It looked like a fuzzy beacon winking on and off, on and off.

Then, Hemmet felt a series of sharp stabs spread across his back. Twisting the wheel had aggravated his arthritis even more. He pulled out a small tin of ibuprofen from his shirt pocket and popped five pills into his mouth. There was a two-day old, half-filled water bottle sitting in the cup holder, so he grabbed it to wash down the pills. He frowned. The water was hot and tasted like tin.

The engine was still running, so he gave it a little gas. As soon as the

truck started to move forward, he recognized the horrible tumbling, clunking sound of a broken axle. He gingerly nursed the truck onto the shoulder.

He needed to call Eltrice to come get him, but when he reached for his phone he realized that when the truck had titled, the phone had flown off of the seat. He was too stiff and sore to root around for it, so he grabbed the paperwork between the seats and got out of the truck. He locked it up and then tied his red handkerchief onto the side mirror. As he walked to the ranch, every step sent burning jolts up his back. Even though, Hemmet did not like the idea of hitchhiking, the pain made him wish for a ride -- even from a stranger.

No cars came down the road.

Two miles from the house, the light, dry breeze turned into a strong, chilly wind. The once far-distant storm front streamed toward him. Small raindrops began to pelt his face. A few more splashes -- and then -- the sworling sky let loose a volley of stinging, dime-sized hail balls. As he pulled his hat closer to his head and his shirt collar up, he thought of the young shoots of corn in his growing fields. If the hail lasted much longer, the plants would be too weak and the downpour would shred them to pieces. After twenty minutes, the storm subsided, the clouds blew past, and the wind petered away. The mid-afternoon sun blazed alone in the pale azure sky.

Despite the brevity of the precipitation, Hemmet knew the meager crop was done for. With this last blow, his feed options had run out. As he walked, he felt his last shreds of optimism peel away and fall behind him like dried, dead skin. He walked. He moved forward. But, each step felt as if he was walking further away rather than closer to home.

When he got to the house, Eltrice had not yet returned. His back didn't hurt as much, so he went to the barn to feed and water the cattle. He poured the feed into empty barrels on the tractor's wagon, and then, he drove out to the pastures. The engine's noise had alerted the cows, so two hundred, skinny, brown and white Longhorns strolled up to the gate and lowed and mooed in anticipation. As they waited, they nudged and bumped into each other and flicked their tails as he filled up the water troughs and shook out the gritty, cracked corn into a handful of feeding bins.

By the time he finished, the sun had turned into a wobbly red ball slipping into the horizon. On his way back to the barn, the light faded, and a cool wind curled in from the north. It blew through a large motte of cedar trees near the house, and as it rattled and shook the branches, it carried the scent of their brisk, sharp perfume to Hemmet. He inhaled the fragrance, and it reminded him of a far-off time -- a time when Raffin and he were kids. A time when they used to make forts and fences out of the fallen cedar branches and with small sticks poised above their heads, they would breach

each other's walls while wearing cardboard armor as they transformed into knights with lances or pirates on the sea—sabers drawn—ready to cut off the heads of any and all enemies.

The cedar was also the smell of long ago winters.

Every Christmas Eve, his father and grandfather chopped up the cedar's flakey trunks into logs and lugged them into the house to stuff into the living room fireplace. After lighting the fire, they would warm their icy hands over it and tease him, "We don't need matches. Your red hair is flame enough to ignite the wood."

Hemmet's father showed him how to spear a marshmallow on a stick and roast them to a golden-black over the flickering, aromatic flames. The cedar gave the marshmallows an earthy, spicy taste. Later, Hemmet hung his stocking on the mantle above the dying embers. Until the age of ten, he had tried to stay awake to see Santa Claus appear in his red and white suit. He never stayed up long enough to witness that magical moment, but each Christmas morning, a special wish was always answered: a bike, a secret decoder ring, a box of caramel chocolates, *yes, a box all for me . . .*

The cedar was also the smell of summer barbecues. Shortly after Eltrice and he got married, every summer, for many years, he would mix mesquite and cedar in a large pit and roast great clumps of pork shoulders and ribs. Neighbors would stream in from miles around with sweet tea and creamy pecan pies.

Everyone always said that they gave the best parties. There was laughter then. Even over small things. Always laughter.

Hemmet could not recall the last time there was such a gathering.

Maybe, fourteen years ago—or maybe . . . twenty.

Besides the already departed ranchers, the crumbling economy had scared away other neighbors, and they too had scrambled off to seek opportunities closer to Austin, Houston, and Dallas. Some even went so far as Oklahoma and California. The few that remained were too old or too busy trying to find ways to stay alive to bother with get-togethers. The days of parties and good cheer were long gone. All he and Eltrice had left to keep them company were hungry cows and distressed corn.

As he drove past the cornfields, he forced himself to look. In the dim light, he could see the bent and splayed young stalks. All across the ridge-lined fields, he saw row-after-row of nodding, broken heads.

His chest burned. It was hard to breathe. He said out loud, "What else . . . is there?"

When he got back to the house, Eltrice was still not home. He looked around the kitchen. Eltrice had left everything neat and tidy like she always did. He saw the iced chocolate cake on the counter with Eltrice's apron folded next to it.

A few months earlier, she had redecorated the kitchen. He had always kept up repairs, so the house didn't need much done to it.

Maybe we can sell the house fast and just move away.

Maybe not.

She could manage for some time -- even if I needed to leave.

He sat in a chair for a few minutes. Then, he shook his head.

Shit fire, whom I kidding? The ranch is as good as gone.

He looked up and noticed the flashing light on the answering machine. When he played it, he heard Raffin's voice and a brief sizzle of optimism went through him.

"Hemmet, I'm so sorry, please call me when you get home. I tried to call your cell, but it kept going to voicemail. Something bad happened . . . there's been a car accident." Raffin paused and breathed heavily. "I'm at the hospital. I was coming home. I was a few cars behind Eltrice when her tire came off and she . . . she ran into another car." Raffin made muffled sounds before continuing, "Call me, and I'll come get you."

Hemmet dragged the phone receiver off of its stand and punched the redial button.

Raffin picked up right away, "Hemmet, Hemmet, you O.K.?"

"I'm, O.K., Raffin."

"Hemmet, I'm so, so sorry. The doctors tried to do everything, but, Eltrice—"

Hemmet wavered. His eyes burned. "She's gone, Raff'?"

Raffin's voice cracked, "I'll come pick you up, wait there."

"No, no, that's all right, Raffin. I can drive."

"No, really, you shouldn't. A time like this—let me or Ceilly come get you. Or, I can call the Nyquists. They're only a mile away."

The room felt close. His face went hot, then, a searing cold raced through him. He heard a loud roar in his ears.

"Let me call you back," he said, as he hung up and slid to the floor.

A dry heave rose . . . his heart pounded and thrummed faster and faster. His tongue felt like a fat fist. Guilt-drenched thoughts rushed forward.

My fault, I forgot to tighten the nuts . . . God no, I forgot to tighten them.

His mind raced in a frantic jumble as panic whirled inside of him. His thoughts blew out of his head and filled the room. They bounced off of the walls and floor, and then, they streamed back toward him. They poured in and out of his chest, his mouth, his eyes, and then they flew back out into the ceiling, before they crashed back down into his body. They spilled and fell and tumbled about as if they were a torrent of ground corn streaming and swirling into a silo. His thoughts fell so fast out and down and around and through him that they sucked everything out of him . . .

Until, finally, it all stopped.

Only one thought remained.

For the first time, he felt light and airy and as untethered and unchained as an escaped weather balloon floating over the town. Floating above the cows and the corn, floating far above the pale, dry earth -- he was floating toward the top of the sky, floating . . .

There were no neighbors close enough to the ranch to hear the gunshot.

When Raffin walked into the kitchen, he found Hemmet's body on the floor. Raffin's face drained. He grasped the top of a kitchen chair.

"Oh, God, Hemmet, what have you done?"

As he tried to catch his breath, he looked at the wall in front of him and noticed the delicate print of Eltrice's new wallpaper. It was covered in tiny scenes of happy farmers working in their fields—fields of corn.