

Jack and the Beanstalk

by Siobhan Tebbs

“We’ll have to sell the car,” said Mum, with tired eyes. “Or there won’t be enough money to put dinner on the table.”

“But it’s only broken down. Can’t we fix it?” asked Jack, already feeling a rumble in his stomach owing to a rather paltry lunch. “What’s a taxi driver without her taxi?”

“People are hardly taking taxis round here any more, anyway,” said Mum. “It’s all about the bicycles these days.”

“Well, school’s finished for summer. I could get a job? I hate seeing you this worried, Mum.”

“You’re so thoughtful, Jack. The thing is, you’re sixteen, so you’d be on minimum wage. We need more money than that to feed us both! I’m planning to get another job myself—maybe start a bicycle workshop. But right now, we need money fast.”

“Then selling the car it is,” said Jack, and he took out his phone.

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As soon as he'd posted the photo of their old maroon Toyota, Jack received a mysterious message on the app.

"Hello, my friend," it said. "I would like to offer you these magic beans in exchange for your car. I haven't posted the ad yet—you're lucky!"

Jack laughed.

"Nice try!" he replied. But then the seller shared a photo of some shiny dark green beans that did indeed look quite magical.

"Listen," wrote the seller. "If you plant them tonight, by morning they'll have grown right up to the sky!" Jack thought about it for a moment. A sky-high beanstalk could make him an Instagram sensation, never mind minimum wage!

"Let's do it," he said, and the next day they met in town to make the exchange.

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When Jack got home, Mum came up to him in the hallway, eyes wide with excitement.

"What did you get for the old Toyota, Jack? A few hundred pounds? A thousand? Not two thousand, surely?"

"I got these," he said, lifting up the bag of beans. "The strange lady said they were magic."

Mum's face sagged as she scratched her forehead. Her face dropped into her hands. Jack followed her into the living room, where she fell to her knees and began to shake her head slowly.

"Oh, Jackie boy," she said. "You're a good listener, but you shouldn't have listened this time. You've been swindled. I should have sold the car myself. I'm afraid there are only cornflakes left for dinner tonight."

Lying in bed, Jack felt a hole in his stomach—not just from hunger but from seeing Mum look so sad. He blamed himself for being bad at selling things, just as he seemed to be bad at almost everything else. He sat up, scooped a handful of the beans from his bedside table and tossed them out of the window into the garden.

“Take that!” he said, as though it were all the beans’ fault.

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When Jack woke up the next day, his room was filled with streaks of sunlight. There were long winding shadows all over the bedspread and the walls—shadows that had never been there before. He leapt out of bed to look out of the window and saw something astonishing. A green stalk, thick as a tree trunk, had grown up out of the garden. Curling around it was a winding vine with big green leaves flapping in the wind.

The beanstalk was so tall that he couldn’t see the top. It was very close to his window. He forgot all about Instagram and instead jumped out in his pyjamas, wrapped himself around the stalk and started to climb. He climbed and climbed until he passed through the clouds. There, he saw a long paved road and stepped off the beanstalk to follow it.

He walked for a long time and eventually saw a huge house up ahead of him with a blue wooden door. A little scared, but hungry enough to be reckless, he knocked on it with all his might. It opened, and a huge woman with a face like mashed potato stood there, towering above him.

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“H-hello,” said Jack. “I’m so sorry to bother you. It’s just that I’m hungry. Do you have any food you could give me?”

“I see. I’m Ophelia,” boomed the giant woman. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Jack.”



“Well, Jack. I’m an ogre, and so is my husband. He likes to eat Englishmen for breakfast—especially young ones like you. He’ll be downstairs soon. Are you sure you want to come in?”

Jack thought for a moment. Any danger was better than the gnawing in his stomach.

“Yes.”

So in he went, and Ophelia gave Jack some bread and butter. While eating, he noticed a perky hen hopping around the kitchen. At one point, it stopped in a nest in the corner, squawked and laid what seemed to be a golden egg. Jack almost choked on a piece of crust.

“So, does your husband cook the Englishmen or what?” he asked when he had swallowed the mouthful, trembling.

“I bake them into pies for him,” said Ophelia, looking down at the floor with a rather red face.

“Do you like living with him?” asked Jack. But there was no time to talk further: a loud stomping could be heard on the stairs.

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“Quick!” said Ophelia, as low as an ogre could whisper. “Get into the oven! He won’t see you there.”

From the oven, Jack heard the booming voice of the husband approaching. Through the glass, he saw a giant figure with another mashed potato face appear in the kitchen.

*Fee-fí-fo-fúm,
I smell the blood of an Englishman.
Be he alive or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make my bread.*

“Oh, you must be mistaken,” said Ophelia, smiling at her husband. “I’ve made you a fry-up for breakfast. Enjoy it, my love!”

The husband gave a loud *hmmph!* He didn't kiss his wife good morning, like Dad used to do to Mum, or seem grateful to her for cooking him up such a hearty treat. When he'd finished his breakfast, he left the kitchen again, and soon a loud snoring could be heard.

"Now! Get out while he's asleep!" whispered Ophelia.

Jack climbed out of the oven and dashed towards the door. But then he remembered Mum.

"Ophelia," he said. "I see your hen lays golden eggs. I was wondering, could I take one so that my Mum can have money for food?"

"Gosh, you're such a polite boy," said Ophelia. "Most of the youngsters I help just steal one. Go on, take that one she just laid."

So Jack did take that egg, and he ran back along the road. He climbed down the beanstalk and found Mum staring up with confusion at the enormous beanstalk that had taken over her garden. Jack showed her his treasure.

"Did you steal it?" she quizzed him.

"No. I just asked," he said, and Mum looked proud.

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Jack and Mum were able to live off the money from the golden egg for a year, and even started a bicycle workshop. But neither of them was much good at fixing bikes. Soon, the pile of money from the golden egg began to dwindle. The beanstalk still stood in the garden.

"I'll have to go up there again," said Jack. "And, to be honest, I've been worried about Ophelia. She must be lonely up there with that ungrateful Englishman-eating husband."

"You're such a caring person, Jack," said Mum.

And with that, Jack was off up the beanstalk again.

“You’re pretty good at climbing too, if you ask me!” called Mum sweetly from the ground, her face already far below him.

When he’d passed the clouds, again he took the paved road to the giant house with the blue door. Again he knocked on it with all his might, and when it opened, Ophelia was standing there on the doorstep.

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This time, she had her coat on, a weighty rucksack slung over her shoulder and a fiery look in her eyes.

“Jack!” she said. “I’ve been waiting for you to come back!” Jack saw that she was also carrying a cage with the perky hen in it—and a golden harp.

“Where are you going?” he asked, surprised.

“Last time you were here,” said Ophelia, “you asked me if I liked living with my husband. You were so gentle and curious. It made me think. I’m tired of him, Jack, and I hate cooking him pies—all those poor Englishmen! I’ve left him a goodbye note. Will you show me the way to the beanstalk?”

“Of course!”

“This hen is my friend, so she’s coming with me. This golden harp was my mother’s, and it plays the most beautiful music in the land. I’ll share the hen and the harp with you and your Mum.”

“Thank you, Ophelia!”

Jack led Ophelia to the beanstalk, and the two climbed down with Ophelia’s things. When they reached the bottom, Mum was shocked to see an ogre with a mashed potato face accompanying him.

“Don’t worry, Mum,” said Jack. “This is Ophelia. She’s been very kind to me.”



“And your boy has been very kind to me,” said Ophelia to Mum. “He’s gentle and caring, and he helped me see what I was feeling.” Jack felt himself beaming with pride.

“And she’s brought her hen—the one that lays the golden eggs—and a golden harp, which plays the most beautiful music in the land.”

“Oh, that all sounds wonderful!” said Mum.

“Wait,” said Jack to Ophelia. “What if your husband finds the beanstalk?”

“You’re right,” she replied. “He’ll be waking up around now. Do you mind if I chop it down?”

“Not at all,” said Jack. “I still have some of the beans left, so if you ever want to go and talk to him, we could grow another beanstalk.”

“I’m happy about that. I do love that old ogre. He just has a lot to learn. And I’m never going near him again until he stops eating Englishmen.”

So Mum lent Ophelia an axe, and she chopped down the beanstalk. Jack let the hen hop around the house; it seemed content, laying a golden egg later that day. As soon as they had exchanged it for money, they cooked up a delicious feast and sat enjoying the dishes to the sound of the golden harp’s melodies.

“Where am I going to live?” asked Ophelia from the garden, sipping from a bucket of soup. “I don’t fit into any of the houses here.”

“I know an abandoned warehouse, taller than you, up on the hill beyond the forest,” said Mum. “We can take our time and make it comfortable for you!” And Jack was happy because his belly was full, and he saw that Mum and Ophelia were going to be friends.