



Bean Magic

By J.H. Jones



“Ma, you’re going to like what I brought home.” My son, Jack, beamed with pleasure as he deposited his treasure into my cupped hands.

“Beans?” After waiting for him for hours, peering out the front window of our cottage, I hustled him out of the cold and dark, and positioned him close to the fire, where I anxiously examined his pockets for food or gold. Instead, my only reward was the mound of blue-speckled ovals. “Where’s the rest?”

Jack’s smile stuttered. “Rest of what?”

“Where’s the money? The food?”

“I got these beans instead. These are better. These are magic.”

My chapped fingers cradled the mound close to my nose, and I drew a deep breath, savoring the scent of wet earth mixed with cinnamon. My stomach growled, and I said, “So, you exchanged our cow for a handful of beans.”

“Magic beans, ma.” His face brightened with confidence.

What makes him so happy? I wasn’t happy. The winter was long, and our luck had been short. Desperate, I had sent Jack to the market to sell our cow for cash, as cold and hard as the frozen fields that surrounded the house. The money would see us through spring, I reasoned. But Jack ruined my plans, like his father before him, because, instead of fulfilling his promise, he brought home funny-looking beans and words like ‘magic’ all tied up in the enormous bow of his smile.

Worse, the smile reached up to his eyes, crinkling them in an expression of something I couldn’t name. I had seen that expression before and tugged out the little locket around my neck. My fingers traced the dented edges, then I cracked the clasp with my thumbnail. Inside, a single faded photograph. Yet, I could still make out the grinning man with eyes exactly like Jack’s own.

The photograph brought everything into focus. From father to son, a pattern had emerged that worked evil. Whatever emotion they shared, I had no time to lose and had to get through to Jack before it was too late. True, he was young now, but would soon grow into a man, maybe one day with a woman and a child. Would he leave them, as his father had abandoned us? Would he cause the same struggle that we suffered at this moment? I had to stop the cycle now. Flinging our door open, I stumbled into the frosty night and threw my arms out wide, hurling the beans as hard and far as I could, scattering them across the frozen ground.

“Ma, no!” Jack’s face crumpled.

Good. The smile was gone, and in its place was disappointment. He felt what I felt. *Despair*.

I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “You see? Magic doesn’t exist. Go to your room until I call for you.”

He dragged himself down the shadowy hall as I scoured our cellar, praying for a miracle. Somehow, somewhere, I had to find a forgotten potato or an overlooked onion. We had to eat something. *Nothing*.

There was one last hope—if the animals hadn’t gotten to them already. Rushing out into the frosty night, my long skirts twisting around my ankles, I scrambled like a spider across the icy wasteland. The moon, full and luminous, cast its silvery rays over the barren landscape, revealing the beans. They caught the light and twinkled like diamonds against the hard snow. I gathered each one with care, then carried my precious burden to the pot of water boiling on the hearth.

The beans cooked down quickly, forming a steaming slurry, which filled the room with the smells of spring grass and wildflower honey until, unable to stop myself, I greedily spooned some of the soup into my mouth.

My first bite crushed one bean’s glossy skin, releasing a burst of effervescence. A thousand tiny bubbles prickled across my tongue and danced down my throat. The sensation sparkled and spread behind my breastbone, then dropped into the hollow of my clenched stomach. The tightness of anger and hunger unfurled, and the fizzing melted into a warm, spreading satisfaction that traveled along my limbs, reaching all the way to my finger and toe tips. Comforted, I drew my thick shawl around my shoulders and nestled deep into the old chair by the hearth, promising myself to rest for a moment then call Jack to supper.

I must have fallen asleep because cramps seized my feet, peeling my eyes wide. The spasms came sharp, hitching my breath in my throat, and my toes stretched downward, pulling skin and nails to the floor. With a kick, I sent my thin shoes flying then splayed my feet flat to work the knots loose. Like twin vises opening, the pains eased, and I sagged back in my chair and closed my eyes, hoping to rest again, when new contractions clutched my ankles with sickening force, over and over. Each wave climbed higher—from ankles to calves to knees to thighs—a ladder of agony that left me gasping. I hauled myself up and staggered back and forth, trying to work the cramps away.

But the floor felt coarse and rough, rubbing uncomfortably against my bare feet. Something clung to my soles, and I reached down to brush off whatever it was but realized that jagged sticks had emerged from my heels. The sticks were as sharp as broken glass, and I panicked, careening with confusion, until I balanced on my tiptoes, searching for some place to rest my feet. Inside, nothing released the frenzy working up and down my limbs, but I sensed relief lay outdoors.

With a lurch, I heaved myself outside, where the winter air had lost its edge under a sun that burned bright and hot. A beam of gold caressed my skin, then trickled through the pores into my blood to rocket through my veins. In a moment, my toes broke through the softened snow and ice to burrow into the damp ground. At the same time, my chest arched toward the sky. Ribs creaked, spine elongated, and my torso spun around, and a force sent my arms up and out and stretched my neck through the rising mists. Pain was everywhere now, but mixed with an ecstasy of becoming.

Yet, what was I becoming? My flesh toughened and turned green, and terrified, I called my son, but my voice tangled in my throat—as tangled as my hair that curled into glossy verdant ringlets, springing from my head, and emerging from beneath my arms and tattered skirt. Still, I could reach his window, and as my fingers split and sprouted into velvet nubs, I brushed against his windowpane, entreating him to wake up.

Sleep-tousled, Jack appeared, frowning, then threw open his window. An understanding passed between us. How? I did not know. But his face lit up with the wild look, the same emotion as he showed before. He reached out as if to test my boughs and I tried to warn him, yet only made breezy sighs, until his fingers closed around a twig, and a tremor of anticipation rippled from his fingertips into my entire being, from my deepest roots to my highest leaflets.

He swung upwards, gripping my branches, hand over hand, as his feet found purchase along my trunk. Each step shook me with fear and loss. I cradled him as he ascended, fearful for him as I led him up toward a swirling haze beyond my top. At the same time, I grieved, knowing we would part soon, and he would go on alone. With my roots bound in earth, I could never climb into those clouds with him.

I waited, fearing Jack was like his father, and doubting he would ever return, yet yearning to be wrong. The yearning worked on me from the inside, like borers nibbling at my core, hollowing me out bit by bit.

After what seemed like an eternity, I sensed a movement above. Jack raced across the cloud tops, but changed: taller, muscled, and weighted with a sack bursting with gold. Next to him, spurring him on, ran a girl with hair like midnight and eyes as bright as starlight. Behind them both, ominous thunder, pounding like a giant's footfalls, shook the heavens.

Quivering with fear, I urged them to come to safety, and they clutched at me as they began their descent. I welcomed them, but with my cavity, the weight was more than I could hold. First, my twigs snapped, then my green shoots gave way, until my hollow stem swayed under them. Fighting to remain standing, I willed my fibers to resist and focus on this one last task. *Keep them safe.*

But the ground seemed to entice me closer, with irresistible whiffs of damp and dirt, until I veered too far and with a crack sent shudders up and down my length. Their feet touched earth, but my stalk splintered, crashing into the mud that once nourished me. Flat, I listened to the sound of futile roaring overhead with quiet satisfaction. Whatever the threat was—Giant? Creature?—Jack and the girl were safe below, along with the treasure. *Is the treasure the magic of the beans made real?*

Yet, the treasure couldn't have been the magic because, to my surprise, it meant nothing to my son or his companion. They kicked it aside as their eyes fastened on each other. And like the treasure, I too seemed forgotten.

Or was I? My son rested his hand on my broken stalk, and his touch carried echoes of his anticipation, but softer now, tinged with thanks. His gratitude warmed me like a soft rain, bringing an understanding of the bright emotion I saw in his face and the photograph. It was hope and love. Once upon a time, I looked at the world with hope and love, but a man's callousness and hunger and anger had made me forget. When darkness prevailed, it had been easy to choose misery and slide into the pit of despair,

where I tried to break the cycle of suffering by causing more suffering. I had forgotten we live in a world of true magic, as Jack tried to remind me with his beans.

“You saved us.” Jack stroked my withered leaves, which I rustled in response. Death would approach me soon, like a gentle frost, and now I was ready for its embrace. But Death didn’t embrace me. The girl did, though I hardly knew her. Yet, she had powerful arms thrumming with life, circling my wasted boughs. Her restless fingers poked and probed beneath my leaves until, with a sharp wrench, she pulled out a bean pod. She held it in the air triumphantly, then hugged it to her heart and shook with joyous laughter. “The real magic!”

Magic? From me? In my long vigil and desperate last moments, I didn’t realize my transformation had borne fruit. While something of me would return to the earth, something else of me would survive, not just in memory, but as seeds that would grow through Jack, the girl, and beyond. My transformation brought forth the beginnings of new possibilities through hope and love—the real magic of this world.

Sleep stole over me, and I let go, feeling a completeness and a joy at knowing I gave the future what Jack and the girl would harvest in the years to come.

THE END

