

Stalking Beans

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SOMETIMES I TRY TO MAKE MY WIFE ANGRY. I CLUMP in from the dairy in boots fouled by cow dung; I let the hearth fire die; I spill greasy mutton on the fresh cloth Annie insists on laying each night as if we were still gentry and not the peasants we have become. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, in imitation of our neighbors. I get drunk at the alehouse. I stay away all night.

It's like fighting a pillow. All give, and feathers everywhere. Annie's pretty face flutters into wispy dismay, followed by wispy forgiveness. "Oh, Jack, I understand!" she cries and falls on my neck, her curls— that but for me would be bound in a fashionable coif— filling my mouth. "I know how hard our fall in the world is for you!" Never a word about how hard it is for her. Never a word of anger. Never the accusation,

You are to blame. Always, she invites me to sink into her understanding, to lie muffled in it as in the soft beds we once owned, to be soundlessly absorbed.

Sometimes it takes every fiber of my muscles not to hit her.

Only when, drunk, I traded our best cow to a dwarf for a sack of beans did Annie show a flash of the anger she should feel by right. "You... did... what?" she said, very deliberately. Her pale eyes sparkled and her thin, tense body relaxed for one glorious moment into anger. I took a step toward her and Annie, misunderstanding, cried, "Keep away from me!" She looked wildly around, and her eye fell on the shelf with our one remaining book, bound in red leather and edged with gold. She seized it and threw it at me. She missed. It fell into the fire, and the dry pages blazed with energy.

But she couldn't make it last. A second later her shoulders drooped and she stared at the fire with stricken eyes. "Oh, Jack—I'm sorry! The book was worth more than the cow!" Then she was on my neck, sobbing. "Oh, Jack, I understand, I *do*, I know your pride has been so badly injured by all this, I want to be a good wife to you and understand..." Her hair settled into my mouth, over

my nose.

Desperate, I said, "I cast away the beans in the forest, and vomited over them!"

"Oh, Jack, I understand! It's not your fault! You couldn't help what happened!"

What kind of man can never help what happens to him?

I can't bring myself to touch her body, even by chance. When one of us rolls toward the center of the sagging mattress, I jerk away, as if touched by rot. In the darkest part of the night, when the fire has gone out, I hear her sobbing, muffled by the thin pillow that is the best, thanks to my stupidity, we can now afford.

I get out of bed and stumble, torchless, into the woods. There is no moon, no stars. The trees loom around me like unseen giants, breathing in the blackness. It doesn't matter. My feet don't fail me. I know exactly where I'm going.

She is taller than I am by perhaps a foot, and outweighs me by thirty pounds. Her shoes are held together with gummy string, not because she doesn't have better—the closet is filled with gold slippers, fine calfskin boots, red-heeled shoes with silver bows—but because this pair is comfortable, and damn how they look. There is a food stain on her robe, which is knotted loosely around her waist. Her thick blond hair is a snarl. She yawns in my face.

"Damn, Jack, I didn't expect you tonight."

"Is he here?"

She makes a mocking face and laughs. "No. And now that *you're* here, you may as well come in as not. What did you do, tumble down the beanstalk? You look like a dirty urchin." She gazes at me, amused. I always amuse her. Her amusement wakes her a little more, and then her gaze sharpens. She slides one hand inside her robe. "Since he's not here ..." She reaches for me.

It's always like this. She is greedy in bed, frank, and direct. I am an instrument of her pleasure, as she is of mine, and beyond that she asks nothing. Her huge breasts move beneath my hands, and she moans in that open pleasure that never loses its edge of mockery. I ease into her and, to prolong the moment, say, "What would you do

if I never climbed the beanstalk again?"

She says promptly, "Hire another wretched dwarf to stalk another drunken bull." She laughs. "Do you think you're irreplaceable, Jack?"

"No," I say, smiling, and thrust into her hard enough to please us both. She laughs again, her attention completely on her own sensations. Afterwards, she'll fall asleep, not knowing or caring when I leave. I'll wrestle open the enormous bolted door, bang it shut, clump across the terrace to the clouds. It won't matter how much noise I make; she never wakes.

The morning air this high up is cool and delicious. The bean leaves rustle against my face. A bird wheels by, its wings outstretched in a lazy glide, its black eyes bright with successful hunting, free of the pull of the earth.

Annie is crying in the bedroom of our cottage. I'm not supposed to know this, since she thinks I'm still at market with this week's eggs and honey. I poke at the fire, adding up weeks in my head. They make the right sum. Annie must have her monthly flow again, our hopes for a child once more bleeding out between her legs.

I creep quietly out of the cottage to the dairy and sit heavily on a churning cask. I should go to her. I should take her in my arms and reassure her, tell her that maybe next month... But I can't go to her like this. The edge of my own disappointment is too sharp; it would cut us both. I sit on the churning cask until the two remaining cows low plaintively outside their byre.

Inside the cottage Annie has lit the candles. She flies around the dingy room, smiling brightly. "Stew tonight, Jack! Your favorite!" She starts to sing, her voice straining on the high notes, her eyes shining determinedly, her thin shoulders rigid as glass.

The tax collector stands in my dairy, cleaning his fingernails with a jeweled dagger. I recognize the dagger. It once belonged to my father. Lord Randall must have given it to this bloated cock's comb for a gift, in return for his useful services. The tax collector looks around my cottage.

"Where is that book you used to have on that wooden shelf, Jack?"

Once he would never have dared address me so. Once he would have said "Master John." Once. "Gone," I say shortly. "One less thing for you to tax."

He laughs. "You've still luxury enough here, compared to your neighbors. The land tax has gone up again, Jack. You owe three gold pieces instead of two. Such is the burden of the yeomanry."

I don't answer. He finishes with his nails and sheathes the dagger. In his fat face his eyes are as shiny as a bird of prey. "By Thursday next, Jack. Just bring it to the castle." He smiles. "You know where it is."

Annie has appeared in the doorway behind us. If he says to her, as he did last time, "Farewell, pretty Nan," I will strike him. But he bustles out silently, and Annie pulls aside her faded skirts to let him pass. The skirts wouldn't soil his stolen finery; Annie has washed and turned and mended the coarse material until her arms ache with exhaustion and her skin bleeds with needle pricks. She turns to watch the tax collector go, and for one heart-stopping moment her body dips and I think she's going to drop him a mocking, insolent curtsy. But instead she straightens and turns to me.

"It's all right, Jack! It wasn't your fault! I understand!"

Her arms are around my neck, her hair muffling my breath.

Her name is Maria. Seven times I have climbed the beanstalk, and I've only just learned it. "Why did you need to know it before?" Maria said lazily. "You're not exactly carrying my favor into battle." She laughs her mocking laugh, the low chuckle that says, *This is not important, but it's amusing nonetheless.*

I love her laugh.

"If I know your name is Maria," I argue lightheartedly, "I can call you that when I demand something. I could say, to give an instance, 'Maria, rub my back.' 'Maria, take off your shift.' "

"And do you wish me to take off my shift?"

"It's already off," I say, and she laughs and rolls over on her stomach, her enormous breasts falling forward onto the rumpled sheets. For once she hasn't fallen asleep. On the

bedside table is a half-eaten orange, the skin dried and wrinkled as if it had been there several days. Maria yawns mockingly.

"Shall I put my shift back on so you can take it off again?"

"Do you want to?"

"I don't mind," she says, which is her answer to almost anything. She puts a hand on me, and a shudder of pleasure pierces from groin to brain. Maria laughs.

"What an amorous poppet you are."

"And how good you are to be amorous with, *lux vitae*, Maria," I tell her. But even then she doesn't ask me my other name, just as she has never asked my circumstances. Does it strike her as odd that a man dressed like a peasant can flatter her in Latin?

She reaches for her shift, puts it on, and then proceeds to take it off so slowly, so teasingly, lifting a corner over one thigh and lowering a strap off one shoulder, bunching the cloth between her legs, mocking me from under lowered lashes, that I can barely keep my hands off her until she's ready. Not even when I was who I was, before, not even then had I ever known a woman so skilled in those arts of the body that are really the arts of the mind. When at long last we are sated again, and she is drifting off to sleep, I impulsively say to her, "You are extraordinary in bed. I wish I could take you back down with me."

Immediately a cold paralysis runs over my spine. Now I've done it. Now will come the start of feminine hope, the fumblingly hidden gleam of possession, the earnest, whispered half-promise designed to elicit promises from me: *Oh, do you think someday we actually might be together...*

I should know better. Instead, Maria gives me her mocking smile, rich with satisfaction. "Ah, but that would spoil everything. One always does most stylishly the things one cares nothing about. Don't you even know that, you ignorant boy?"

In another moment she's asleep.

I get out of her bed and start for the door. But in the corridor I stop.

I have never explored the rest of the castle. What I

wanted—the careless mocking smile, the voluptuous body, the instant dismissive sleep—were in this room, the room I stumbled into on my first journey. But now I walk down the stone passageway and open a second door.

And am staggered.

He must be gargantuan, different from Maria not just in degree but in kind, as she is not from me. The bed stretches the length of my father's tiltyard. An oaken chest could serve for my cow byre. How can Maria, lying in that enormous bed, be large enough to... I don't want to know. Whatever they do, it certainly hasn't soured her for bedding.

I have already turned to leave when I catch the glint of gold beneath the bed.

There is a pile of coins—not on his scale, but on mine. Human coins. They look small there, unimportant, and maybe that is why I only take three. Or maybe it's from shame, having already taken from him so much else that he doesn't know about. Or maybe it's neither of these things, but only my sense of justice: I only need three to pay the tax collector. Justice is one of those things that separate me from such as Lord Randall. I am still an honorable man.

As I leave the room, I hear a harp begin to play, light and mocking as Maria's laugh.

Annie is in the yard beside her washpot, stirring hard. Steam rises in smelly clouds. All over the bushes and lines and the rough-hewn wooden bench I made for her are clothes I don't recognize—tunics and leggings and shifts too fine for our neighbors but not fine enough for Lord Randall and his thieving sons. Annie looks up, pushes her damp hair off her forehead, and smiles through exhaustion.

"What are you doing? Who do these things belong to?" I thunder at her.

Her smile disappears. "To the servants at the castle. I took them to wash. If I can do eight pots every day I can earn—"

"You'll earn nothing!" I shout. "Do you think I want my wife to be a washerwoman! *You*, who should have been Lady Anne? How much do you think you can make me bear?"

Annie starts to cry. I hurl the three gold coins at her feet, and my arm remembers casting away the beans in the forest, which only increases my rage. "Here's the tax money! Why did you once again—*once again*, Annie—assume that I'm not man enough to get it? That only *you* possess will enough to save us?"

I don't think she hears me; she's crying too loud. But then Annie stoops and picks up the coins. She bites down on one, and her tears stop. She looks at me, smiles tremulously, and takes a step forward. "Oh, Jack, you earned the money for us—you're so *good!*"

Her face glows with light. She understands with her whole tense, determined body how good a man I am.

Annie returns the clothing to its owners. Before she does, I rub the unwashed ones with dirt. I don't want anybody paying her anything, she who should be issuing orders to them. Annie watches me ferociously scrubbing dirt over a pair of breeches and says nothing. I don't look at her face.

The next time I go up the beanstalk, Maria is asleep when I arrive. It's hard to wake her. The smell of sex lies heavy on her ripe body. I pause a moment, but then the very fragrance makes me try even harder to wake her; I have no right to be repulsed by being second with her. In fact, it seems to me that I owe him that. To leave now would be to insult him further by refusing to accept second place.

I finally wake her by sucking on the wide, sweet aureoles of her breasts, first one and then the other, alternating until she stirs drowsily and reaches for me. Afterward, she falls asleep again, and I creep down the stone passageway.

The pile of gold coins under the bed is gone. Instead, the room is full of giant chickens.

I stand in the doorway, astonished. All the chickens turn their heads to look at me, and they start such a cheeping and squawking that I might be a puny fox. I back out and slam shut the door, but not before one of the watch-chickens—what else could they be?—has darted past me into the passageway. The stupid creature is shrieking to wake the dead. I punch it; it's like punching a

mattress. Even Maria, sated with sex, must hear it squawking.

I grab the chicken and run from the castle. Halfway down the beanstalk it gets its claws loose from against my jacket and rips open my left forearm. I scream and drop it. The chicken plunges to the ground, far below.

When I reach the forest floor, the dead chicken is staring at me with reproachful eyes. Its rump, on which it landed, has been reduced to pulp. Among the oozing meat and dingy, scattered feathers is a golden egg, slimed with blood.

I stay in bed for two days, waiting, but nothing happens. Annie brings me hot ale and broth and a porridge she says is nourishing. She says very little else, but she smiles brightly, and hums with so much determination that it is painful to hear.

Maria's voice mocks me: *One always does most stylishly the things one cares nothing about.*

By evening of the second day I decide that nothing is going to happen after all. The room was full of chickens; probably he didn't even know how many he had. Probably one was not even missed.

I get out of bed, wash, dress in what is left of my finery, and kiss Annie good-bye. I tell her I'll be gone for many days. She smiles brightly and clings to me too long. For many miles I feel her arms clenched on my neck.

In the city I put up at the Swan and Rose, pose as a traveling merchant set upon by robbers, and set about selling my one remaining piece of stock, a golden egg fashioned for a foreign princess who died before it could be completed. I get a good price. I pay my inn reckoning, buy a good horse, and travel home with dress material for Annie, a new leather Bible to replace the one she cast into the fire, and sixteen gold pieces.

Halfway home, sleeping in the best room of yet another inn, I have a dream of Maria's body. The dream is so powerful that my body shakes and shudders in ecstasy. In the dream, Maria and I were not in her bed but in *his*, while birds swoop around us unfettered as the wind.

At home, Annie fingers the dress goods. For once she doesn't hum, or smile, or sing. She looks at me quietly, her

pretty face pale. "Don't go out again tonight, Jack. You just arrived home. Please..."

But it seems that somewhere I can hear a harp play.

"You took a hen," Maria says, later, in bed.

I freeze. She had said nothing, hinted at nothing, seemed the same as always... I'd thought nothing had been noticed.

At the sight of my face, Maria laughs. "Do you think I care, little one? What's one hen more or less?" She reaches for her shift, a single lazy motion of bare arms, and leans back against her pillows.

"The hen... did *he* notice..."

"Of course he noticed," she says, amused. "He always knows what is his." She follows this chilling remark with a malicious smile. "But not always what is not."

"I don't understand you," I say stiffly, the stiffness because instead of falling asleep she has become more bright eyed, more alert. This is not the pattern.

"I have a harp," Maria says. "Small—you would like it, little one—and very pretty. He had it ensorcelled. You see, he very much wants a child, and very much wants to keep accounts on everything he owns or does not own. From the moment he owns it. So the harp sings when I am with child. Listen."

I heard it then, a high sweet tune, very faint.

"I shut it in a cupboard," she says. Her eyes are as shiny as a bird's. "After all, one can't listen to a damn harp all the time, can one? Even if it knows the exact moment one is to double its keeper's chattels?"

The exact moment. I remember the smell of sex on her that day, and it seems I can feel all over again the sharp claws of the hen ripping my skin.

"It could... he and I both... it could..."

"Oh, it could indeed," Maria says, and laughs. "He won't know which of you it is for months yet. Not even the cursed harp will know for months yet." Her face changes, the first time I have ever seen on it anything but amused pleasure. She says in a low, quick rush, "And he thinks he can *own me. Me.*"

I climb, naked, off her bed. My legs buckle at the knees. Before I can speak, a door slams and the whole room rumbles.

"Oh!" Maria cries, and stuffs her hand in her mouth.

Looking at her, I know that her amused indifference, which pulled me like a lodestone, has finally run out. She did not expect him home so soon. Her eyes dart around the room; the skin on her neck pulls taut; her mouth rakes down in fear. She looks ugly. There is no stylishness to her now.

She cares about being caught.

I turn my back on her.

The door opens. A huge voice shouts, "Where is he? I smell blood... I smell *human* blood!"

I dive under the bed. The floor shakes, and a boot as tall as my cow byre looms into view. On hands and knees, I scuttle backward under the bed, until I can slip out the far side and run toward the door. I cross the open floor, but to my surprise, the giant doesn't follow. He doesn't seem to see me. I realize that he is blind.

"*I smell him!*" he bellows, and the great head turns and peers, contorted with anger. But smell is not sight. He cannot tell from which direction it comes. I run out the open door, my bare feet soundless on the stone.

In the passageway, I hear the sound of a cupboard door yanked open. A harp sings a melody I don't recognize.

A bellow rips the air, followed by Maria's scream. Then there are footsteps behind me, shaking the world. I scramble down the beanstalk, expecting at any moment to be yanked back upward into the murderous sky. Birds circle me, crying with excitement, and one of them flies so close its talon creases my neck.

On the ground, I cut down the beanstalk, working feverishly. It crumples to the earth not like a tree but like a rope, falling in stringy loops, its leaves whispering softly. It falls a long time, unnerving in its breathy quiet. But at the end there is a sudden noise: wood splintering and the sharp discordant sound of strings snapping, as the harp knotted into the top tendrils hits a pile of curling vines and shatters.

Naked, I stumble home through the forest—where else

should I go? Annie is not there. She has not even taken her new dress goods.

Once more it is deep summer. The hay is thick and yellow in the fields of the manor house. Summer flowers, looseweed and bouncing bet and wild roses, scent the warm nights. I sit outside my cottage and play the harp, which I have mended. The music is not very good; the harp was badly damaged in its fall, and I am no musician. Or maybe it's not that at all. The best music, the kind made by careless laughing musicians at the yearly Harvest Fair, is made by a light hand. One touch on each string, barely there. And the next day the musician moves jauntily on to another town, another fair, whistling down the road he may never see again.

I know where Annie is. But she will not see me, not talk to me. I have tried.

I know, too, that my child has been born. I heard it in the heavy music of the harp, lugubrious with exile. There are many things to hear in mended music of such as my harp.

Last night I went to the inn. A dwarf in the taproom had beans he was trying to peddle. Magic, he said. The start of an adventure. He winked, one dirty eyelid sliding lewdly up and down, the other eye still. But even without him and his greasy beans, I would have known that Maria was alive, and stalking again, and unchanged. Except to me.

Or maybe it's I that have changed.

I work my one field in all weathers. I milk, and plant, and mend, and weed. The sweat runs down my neck and under my collar, and birds follow me quietly in the furrows, nibbling on grubs overturned by my hoe. As I work, I try to plan, but all my plans have the rhythms, the tinkling inadequacy, of mended music.

I could buy the beans from the dwarf. I could grow the beanstalk, mount it until I found Maria asleep and *him* away. But what then? An infant is not a coin, nor a hen, nor even a harp. It might wake and cry. If it squalled too loud, I would have to drop it and run, or put my hands around its neck until it was quiet again, or let it fall down the beanstalk to make good my own escape. And I couldn't do that. Even though only a child will bring Annie back, I

couldn't do that. Even though I have spent every spare moment carving a cradle with swooping birds on the wooden hood, I couldn't do that. I would botch the job, strain too hard and so ensure that the situation itself cracked.

I would, finally, care too much.

I don't know what to do. By the firelight within my cottage the empty cradle swings, and the one book sits upon its shelf, and the stolen harp sings.