

Once upon a time, in a land where magic and adventure were uncommon, but not unheard of, there was a small village out in the countryside. It was a quiet town; the most exciting thing that happened was once or twice a year, some crazy adventurer passing through the town on their way to some quest or journey would tell magnificent tales. Afterward, the townspeople would chatter for a couple weeks, forget about it, and return to their mundane lives. And so they lived, removed from the other lands, while not altogether disconnected.

On the outskirts of the town, on a rundown farm, lived a widow, and her teenage son, Jack. It had been a rough year for the crops, and their single cow, Miriam, was growing old, and beginning to give less milk. Besides, things had never quite been the same since her husband had died. Jack was trying, but even their small farm always had something that needed fixing, and on top of that, now his mother was sick.

"Jack!" she called hoarsely one morning, and he promptly scampered in from the other room. "I need medicine, and we don't have any money" Jack knew that she was not as young as she once was, and had been under a lot of stress lately, so he didn't argue the fact that they didn't use money here; it was a bartering and trading town. "You take Miriam to town, and see if you can sell her, and get some money for medicine". Jack wondered whether this really was a good idea. If he sold, or rather, traded away their cow, he wouldn't have milk or cheese or butter anymore. With the crops in the state that they were, they would soon go hungry, unless Jack took up an apprenticeship with the butcher or something. On the other hand, his mother did need the medicine -- her condition worsening every day -- so Jack decided that he must try to trade the cow away,

Jack did as his mother said, but despite his best efforts, nobody needed such an old cow. At least until he saw someone coming into town. A shady traveling merchant from a place that Jack had never heard of. The merchant said that he would take Jack's cow for five magic beans. Jack took the trade, but couldn't find anybody to trade the beans with, not for medicine or anything else. By this time, it was growing late, and Jack started back home.

Over the next few days, he kept trying to get rid of the beans, but eventually gave up. The merchant had said that when planted, they would grow up into the sky in only one day. Jack decided, with few other options, to try it. But after three days of no results, and his mother's condition worsening steadily, he dug them back up. They hadn't even sprouted roots. He brought them in and threw them onto the table.

"That merchant lied! You're never going to grow, are you?" but then, to his astonishment, one of the beans yelled back.

"Well, what do you expect?" it answered in a small voice from the table, "you only gave us three days on hard, dusty ground - without water!" Jack was speechless. "We need the most nutritious soil and plenty of water if you want results in that time," the bean concluded. Jack sputtered, trying to find his voice.

"I-I'm sorry?" he stammered. "I, uh..." he cleared his throat. "...didn't realize you could talk," he finished lamely. If it was possible for a bean to look huffy and offended, it did.

“We’re *magic* beans,” scoffed another, “weren’t you paying attention when the merchant told you?”

“Well... uh... I thought he just meant that you grow really fast?” I thought I could have an extra-productive garden, and have some extra food to eat and sell. You know how salespeople like to exaggerate,” he prattled on, feeling more ridiculous by the minute.

“Well, he wasn’t exaggerating when he said we were magic,” said a third bean, and the others murmured in agreement.

By this time, some of the initial shock had worn off, and Jack began to wonder what to do with the beans. Why, maybe he could-

“Hey!” Another small voice interrupted his thoughts. “What are you doing, staring off into the distance?”

“Well,” said Jack frankly, “I was wondering how you might be useful to me. My mother still desperately needs medicine, and I have no way to get her any.”

“We’re good at giving advice,” offered one of the beans. Jack thought it was the third one, but it was difficult to keep track, and it didn’t really matter.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“People would tell us their problems, and pay us to say how to fix them,” it said.

“Who wouldn’t take advice from an ‘all knowing’ magic bean?” supplied another in response to Jack’s strange look. In reality Jack was just wondering why everybody seemed to think that they used money in this town. The more he thought about it, the better the idea seemed. So it wasn’t long before;

“COME SEE THE MAGIC TALKING BEANS!
ONE EGG TO HEAR THEM TALK, TWO FOR ADVICE!”

Soon, there was a long line leading out of the small tent Jack had acquired. He admitted the first man, who put two eggs in his basket and went into the bean meeting room.

“My friend and I have been arguing a lot lately. I was hoping you could help,” he said.

“Go find him and punch him in the stomach!” shouted the beans. Somehow, the man seemed convinced, and left the tent immediately, with a determined look on his face. Before Jack could do or say anything, another man came in, tall and important looking, with elegant robes and an impressive mustache. Jack was shocked by the sight of him, and momentarily forgot what he was doing.

“Don’t eat or drink for a whole day and night!” shouted the beans, and the man strode out, leaving Jack bewildered, wondering what request might require such a solution. But he didn’t have time to ask, because a woman bustled in and thrust two more eggs at him.

“My corn fields have been yielding less each year, and if this goes on much longer, I don’t know what I’ll do!” she complained.

“Burn them down and plant potatoes next time!” came the answer.

“No!” Jack protested, as the woman left the tent. He turned to the beans. “You have to stop giving people terrible advice! Word will get around, and they’ll come after us!”

But the beans did not stop, scoffing at Jack's interjections. "Do you want the medicine or not?" One after another, people left, told to shave their heads, sell their houses, and all sorts of things that made Jack feel that this wasn't such a good idea after all. At the end of the day, however, he looked at his basket, which was now a huge pile of eggs half his height and as wide as he was tall. He traded them away, and soon had the medicine his mother needed, with plenty left over, which he traded for other kinds of food.

He arrived at home very late, and very tired. When his mother had been woken and given medicine and food, she was very pleased. Jack, however, stayed awake for a long while, tossing and turning at the thought of what he would see tomorrow.

Jack slept in late that morning. Dreading what he might find, he did not go down to the village that day. Or the next. His mother began to feel better, but worried that Jack might be getting sick. After about a week, he really thought he'd better go down and have a look. People immediately recognized him as he walked down the street and ran at him, yelling, just as he had dreaded. They started to gather around.

But as Jack looked around, he realized that the yelling was not that of an angry mob, but of a cheering crowd. How could these people be smiling? They had all been given dreadful advice, sure to cause the worst things to happen. But somehow, they hadn't. Jack discovered that by punching his friend in the stomach, the first man had really saved him from choking. The important looking man was a lord. Not eating foiled an attempt to poison him, (though try as he might, Jack could not find out what his initial problem had been). Similar stories began to crop up everywhere as the bad advice was revealed to be *exactly* what those people had needed.

Over the next few years, Jack took his beans traveling with him. Together they earned real money, saw distant lands, and even had a few adventures. When he returned home, he and the beans performed and told stories of all they had seen and done. But they never met any giants, because giants don't exist.