The Tale: Jack and the Beanstalk

A widow and her son have little left except a cow. When the cow stops giving milk, Jack is sent to market to sell her. On the road he meets a stranger who offers a handful of beans in exchange. Jack accepts. His mother, faced with beans where the family's last asset used to be, throws them out of the window and sends him to bed hungry.

By morning a beanstalk has grown beyond the clouds. Jack climbs it and finds a giant's house. The giant's wife feeds and hides him, though her husband can smell that a stranger is near. Jack steals a bag of gold and returns home. Later he goes back for a hen that lays golden eggs, and then for a harp that sings. On the third visit the harp cries out. The giant chases Jack down the stalk; Jack reaches the ground, takes an axe to it, and the giant falls to his death.

Jack and his mother are now rich. The tale closes before anybody asks what the giant's wife thought when the house became quiet, or whether the gold had once belonged to Jack's father, as some versions insist. Those omissions are part of the story's strange power.

Above the clouds

Jack's exchange is usually called foolish because it ignores the ordinary value of a cow. His mother's fury is the response of somebody who understands scarcity. Curiosity is easier to praise when there is food in the cupboard. The beans ask us to hold the exhilaration of risk beside the terror of having very little left to lose.

The climb changes Jack's sense of himself. On the ground he is a poor boy who has disappointed his mother. Above the clouds he becomes daring, quick and capable of entering a world that had seemed unavailable. Many of us know this discovery: a move, a

course, a relationship or an act of defiance reveals capacities our old setting never required.

Then comes the theft. It is tempting to explain it away because Jack is hungry and the giant is frightening. The tale may support that reading, but it does not settle the matter. Need, envy, restitution and entitlement become tangled. A risk that enlarges a life can also trespass upon somebody else's. Growing up does not always leave our innocence intact.

Questions from the path

Describe one decision that looked foolish from the ground and different once you had climbed.

Whose caution lives in you when you are about to take a risk? What has that caution protected?

Is there anything you have described as courage because the less flattering account was harder to bear?

Your Reflections

Describe one decision that looked foolish from the ground and different once you had climbed.