

ground thawed. Aunt Ruby, of course, took care of everything. Grandma looked well preserved in her drawer, she said, just a little rouge dusted off one cheek. Grandma had bought a steel case to enclose her coffin — waterproof, wormproof, just like her husband's. Two men from town were hired to sink her next to Grandpa and Uncle Arthur in the Lutheran family plot. Just outside the cemetery gates, Aunt Ruby said, three new houses were built that spring, and Johnny Merklinger had moved his mother, Grandma's best friend, into one.

Afterwards, Ruby took Grandma's pearls, the blue and white pitcher and basin, her Bible and the lace tablecloth. She felt superstitious about opals — did Mother want the engagement ring? The silverware Grandma willed to little Mary (that was me). No, the headstone really did not look that small, and would be ready in May. Would Mother please check when the time came.

So Grandma died and was buried. And I thought that was the end. Just a memory now and again, or an old photograph. I got older. I finished school. No more Grandma, I thought. I married. Then the dream started...

The farm house went up for sale. I drove back by myself, with no money, but hoping to buy it. It stood like a ship on the land, the woodshed a prow pointing into the past. The yellow brick walls were so long, I walked and walked the length, but never reached the end. Begonias still bloomed in the windows, and the blue-

grey shutters hung warm and rough in the sunlight. I ran my fingers over the slats, finding some loose and ready to fall.

As usual, the door from the orchard stood unlocked. The dining room hadn't changed, still weighed down with the massive black table, the chairbacks carved with gargoyle faces. The china cabinet leaned heavily into the room. The mirror behind its shelves shot back everything clearly, but where I stood, the reflection blurred.

Up the narrow, boxed-in staircase, the upper rooms opened, unchanged. Uncle Hubert's fat alarm clock crouched on the dresser, minus its spidery hands, the small door at the end of the landing invited, treasury of my past — baby carriage, ruffled clothes, trunks, a bird cage, yellowed books — piles dust-thick with memories, perched on the narrow open floor, casting down to the woodshed below. But when I bent and pushed through the door, the attic was gone!

A vast, barren hall yawned before me, like a rotted country church, crossbeams hung grey with moss. Thin streaks of sunlight sifted through cracks in the board walls. I stepped forward slowly. The floor sagged with each step, like wood sponged by fungus in spring. I stopped, afraid. Grandma, where are you? No answer. I backed to the door, and down the narrow steps.

Outside, a crowd of prospective buyers eddied and flowed, murmuring up from the plum trees, towards the old walls' trumpet vines. Nobody knew me. As I

drew closer, face after face blurred.

Again and again I dreamed of the house. Always I climbed to the attic. When I tried to cross the floor, it sagged, always I stopped and called out for Grandma, but could not see or hear her, although I felt she was near.

I found her on moving day. Finally Jay and I had bought our first home. With the unpacking mostly finished, we wanted to celebrate. I lifted Grandma's silver chest from a carton, wiped off the dust, and set it beside the sink. Sunlight filled the window above. In the distance spread a comforting blur of new green... I put my hand on the lower drawer. Then I remembered. Grandma was there. After she died, I tucked her into this chest, face upturned in the sunlight, smiling. But after so many years, what would I find?

The drawer stuck. I asked Jay to give it a tug. Up over the edge, showered a bright spray of yellow. "What th —!" Jay leapt back.

"That's just Grandma," I laughed, unprying the drawer from his grasp. Not a bone, not a bit of flesh. Grandma had turned to pure light, light that danced from drainboard and dishes, spilling into my hands.

I look at my mother now. Hips broadened by age, her legs grow heavy with fluid. Already her knuckles have stiffened. By the end of the day, her smile grows quiet, rouge a little smudged off. Although she still wears it short, sometimes I notice blue shadows, forget-me-nots blurred in her hair.

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# The Beanstalk, et al

*A Short Story by Marvyne Jenoff*

Jack hacked down the beanstalk with such fierce and exuberant leaps that the remaining stump reached well above his head. He flung down the axe, kicked at the giant to make sure he was dead where he lay, and ran off to find a girlfriend to whom he could boast. When he found her he brought her back to the stump of the beanstalk. There in the shelter of the few

remaining leaves Jack built them a simple house.

The giant's widow looked down through the hole in her cloud where the beanstalk had been, and she did not like what she saw. There, outside the little house were displayed the bag of gold, the hen that laid golden eggs, and the golden harp, all of which Jack had stolen from the giants' house. And there was Jack in front

of his girlfriend and a few passers-by, gesturing with his arms wide as if boasting about a fish he had caught.

Mrs. Giant could have killed them in one swoop. She could have simply let herself drop down through the hole in the cloud and landed on them and their house, doing away with herself in the process. But she didn't. For, by killing something so small, the principle went, she would

become small herself, and that wouldn't do at all. By a similar principle, a giant-killer takes on giantly qualities, and Mrs. Giant decided she would wait until Jack became a worthy opponent. She was also curious to see which of her husband's qualities Jack would manifest, and what sort of man he would become. Jack was the only boy who had visited them three times, and she had grown fond of his courageous spirit and the irrepressible energy with which he moved. She remembered how they had giggled together before the giant appeared and Jack had to hide behind the stove and keep silent as she discreetly passed him the tastiest bits of their dinner. Finally, embarrassed at dwelling on Jack, Mrs. G. pulled herself together the only way she could, by remembering how Jack had robbed them and killed the giant, and she proceeded to grieve her husband and set the record straight about him.

People who know the story from the conventional point of view have no appreciation of what life on the cloud was like. People seem to have the idea that the giant was uncouth, but Mrs. G. had only to frown with disapproval, or be about to frown, and he would immediately remember his manners and shower attention on her. It is true that the giant had a taste for boys. Perhaps it was because of this that his enthusiasm is generally mistaken for crudeness. The giant is usually thought to have been greedy, and that is why he counted and recounted his golden coins, waking the world with wanton thunder. But that wasn't it at all. For she and her husband, with their giantly knowledge, had appreciated what the Chinese did with the abacus, and using those principles the giants created with patterns of coins their own flights of higher mathematics. The hen that laid the golden eggs was the result of the giants' patient and affectionate breeding, and when they had made their commercial success with such hens they were planning to refine their breeding techniques even further and produce hens with moral qualities. As for the golden harp, of course it had cried out Master when Jack was stealing it. The harp, which the giants had created together in their early love, had been their child, their companion, and when the three of them sang together they produced what came to be known as the music of the spheres. And on the cloud

Mrs. G. had had her own personal mission, to take care of the boys who visited, and she was able to save almost every one of them. For she had only to pout, or be about to pout, and her husband, overcome with remorse for having neglected her for even a moment, would become solicitous and have eyes only for her. And so Mrs. G. always had as much attention as she asked for. In fact, the only person who had ever paid more attention to her, with no effort on her part, was Jack. And she remembered her fascination with Jack, and her anger.

With appropriately vengeful feelings Mrs. G. looked down once again from her shelf of cloud. And she was so gratified to see what was happening at Jack's house that she watched for a long time. The gold coins sounded flat as Jack counted them. Their talents unrealized, they were despondent as Jack spent them one by one. By the time the coins were gone, the gold standard had been replaced by the air and water standard. The golden eggs, beautiful as they were, became worthless in the conventional sense, and Jack and his girlfriend were reduced to using them for food. And the harp, so long away from expert hands, lost its tune and began to quarrel with the hen.

Against the background of this cacophony Jack and his girlfriend walked out of step with each other. And that was just fine with Mrs. G.

As she continued to look down she noticed something that Jack and his girlfriend were not aware of. She saw the beanstalk beginning to grow again from the old stump, and she decided that was how she would descend for the kill. She would wait until the beanstalk reached her cloud, for as yet Jack had shown no sign of changing. She would wait, and then step down the leaves majestically, as befit a person of her stature. She began to plan what she might wear.

Now the beanstalk, having once been so brutally felled, was shy and determined to grow very cautiously. It was not about to repeat that impetuous one-night stand that heaved the earth and Jack with it. The beanstalk really wanted to be a tree, or at least to grow as sturdy as a tree, to withstand any weapon and any man. It understood what the world had come to. So the beanstalk took its time and did what it had to do. And with a giant's patience, Mrs. G. waited.

And she began to appreciate her new life on the cloud. With the abundance of air and water she was rich according to the current standard, and furthermore the air was much sweeter now that it was no longer fouled by her husband's pipe. Now that flesh-eating had gone out of fashion, Mrs. G. was no longer embarrassed by her husband's tastes. With the remaining gold coins she invented new games of solitaire, to enjoy the golden patterns and the musical sounds, for the coins were proud of where they belonged and clinked joyfully. To this counterpoint Mrs. G. would sing, songs reminiscent of those she used to sing with her husband and their harp, but with his gruffness gone she no longer needed the sweetness of the harp for balance, and the songs became hers alone. As she sat using her golden darning egg she contemplated these pleasures. For company there were the other hens who laid whatever colours they pleased. And even before the beanstalk had quite reached the cloud, the boys she had saved, who had heard of the giant's death, climbed up to visit her. They were men now. Some came with their girlfriends or families. Some came by themselves and took their time. No longer anxious for their welfare, Mrs. G. was able to relax with the boys and enjoy the results of her accomplished mission.

Her new mission was to keep the air and water fresh and justly circulating. Scientists and politicians came to learn her methods, and stayed to learn also from the aesthetes. Aesthetes came to experience at source their refined pleasures of breathing and slaking thirst, and stayed for the further pleasure of their hostess's company. And so Mrs. G., as she now called herself, who had once mourned the golden age of her married life, bloomed differently in the heavenly age she was experiencing now. As for what she could do about Jack and his girlfriend, it was much more pleasant at the moment to enumerate the virtues of procrastination than to bother about them at all.

In fact, it wasn't until the visitors stopped coming that she was curious enough to look down from the cloud once more. When she saw the mass of leaves beneath her she understood what had happened. The beanstalk had turned itself into a new species that defied classification. It produced no beans, but that was of no concern, for it had another plan

for immortality. The beanstalk had grown into the tallest free-standing organism in the world, a great, tree-like thing, so strong and spread out at the top that, rather than growing back through the hole, it had lifted the entire cloud higher than anyone could climb, and certainly past the point where Ms. G. would have been able to step down.

At first she was angry. She thought, No beanstalk is going to get the better of me, I can still fall on them. But she remembered the principle that if you go so far to kill something you can never, ever, return the same. And there was no way Ms. G. was going to change anything she had or anything she was. She looked around her, seeing her cloud anew, and she noticed

the intricate carpet of beanstalk leaves making her cloudpath firmer, supporting her at higher and higher altitudes, in the slow walk of her contentment, in the heaviness of her age.

Now when she looked down from her great height she could barely see the couple. But there seemed to be more animals in their yard, more people, perhaps children. The whole yard had a golden aura — were there that many eggs now? Jack and his girlfriend, going about their daily business, seemed to walk in step now, now lively, now peaceful, and Ms. G. thought she could hear the echo of their rhythms in the faint music of the golden harp. And that was fine.

The beanstalk continued to lift the

cloud, and the higher Ms. G. gets the less she sees and the more she seems to understand. She is much less interested in Jack now, though pleased with what he has become. He has not increased much in stature, and he does not bear much resemblance to the giant, but he has grown into a new breed of man, the kind who cook and know their folktales well.

As for his girlfriend — Ms. G. waxes eloquent here. For Jack's girlfriend has grown into the image of Ms. G. in her youth, a real beauty, though of course much less impressive in size. How purely she sings, how gracefully she bends, as she goes about her woman's work! And look — there she is now, beginning to write a woman's story.

# The Last Class

*A Short Story by Cynthia Norris Graae*

**T**he final assignment for my creative writing class at the Fine Arts Center on the Randolph Estate was:

*Combine the techniques we have learned with your own natural spontaneity into an oral presentation, with a beginning, middle and end. Make notes to use in class, but plan to use them only to refresh your recollection.*

But I was late again, and — as usual — unprepared. I flung open the classroom door and dashed toward the only empty seat, across the table from Moonbottom (the teacher) and Peter Canary.

He beamed a flicker of recognition, so precisely aimed that only someone in his direct line of vision could detect it. That someone was me. His crisp white shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, flattered his tan. He was the only one who wasn't sogged out by Washington's humidity.

Moonbottom frowned. "Could you shut the door?" he asked as I reached for the empty chair. His short-sleeved polyester shirt was shiny and graying. It was

almost transparent, revealing his torn undershirt. He looked as if he had body odor, the sweet-putrid kind. Oh, why did my imagination conjure up such intimate details?

"Could we leave it open?" I inquired.

"It's like a swamp in here," said one of the graduate students. At least I had one supporter. I sat down and shoved my backpack under my chair.

"The air conditioner is working tonight," said Moonbottom. "It'll cool down faster with the door shut."

"I'd really feel better with it open," I said.

A graduate student leaned toward Peter Canary. He didn't quite cover his mouth with his hand when he said to Peter Canary, "She's just nervous about having to tell a story. I hope the teacher doesn't let her get out of this one."

"You'll feel better after you've had your turn," reassured a woman with frizzy yellow hair.

"Why don't you go first?" Moonbottom asked me.

Peter Canary, having perfected the art

of silent communication, winked in my direction without moving even an eyelash. The air conditioner was not working. It was circulating hot air. I felt flushed. I asked about the door again.

The graduate student sitting next to Peter Canary said to me. "You're just procrastinating. Mr. Jenks, you should tell her to get with the program or let someone else have a turn." Apparently he lacked the authority to call his teachers — even Moonbottom — anything but "Mr."

I said, "The thing is, I haven't done the assignment. I mean I really thought it was terrific, but —"

I was in a hole.

Peter Canary caught my eye again. Elaborate a little, he was telling me, imperceptibly to anyone else, and I began talking.

"I put the instructions in my notebook during class last week. Driving home, when I approached the traffic light on Wisconsin Avenue, I reached into my backpack to have another look at the instructions. I wanted to think about my presentation while I drove. I discovered