

# Jack: The Original Story



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## Forward

This story begins in much the same way as “Jack and the Beanstalk”. The hero is named Jack, and he’s even given some strange seeds at the start of his adventure.

However, this isn’t a story about giants, or castles in the sky: it’s a story about people. And although our Jack never climbed a beanstalk or stole treasures from a giant, he’d soon face an incredible situation which would test every aspect of his character, with both his family and the entire countryside at stake!

Read on, and you’ll see how something small and simple can grow into something unexpected!

## Chapter One: Jack

Jack grew up in a poor, rural land. He lived on a farm several miles from town, and he managed his livestock and fields with great skill and pride. In town, Jack was best known for his generosity: if a family couldn't afford the full price of his crops, he'd only ask them to pay what they could afford. As a result, Jack's farm wasn't as profitable as it might have been... but Jack himself was happy and well-regarded by his neighbors.

One year, the town was troubled by rumors of a famine in a distant land. Everyone had a different version of the story, but most people agreed that it had been caused by a series of crop failures. As you can imagine, it was all the townsfolk talked about for weeks: they speculated about the crop failures, and wondered whether the same thing would happen to them. Inevitably, though, their thoughts returned to everyday matters: the local crops seemed to be doing just fine, so the subject was gradually forgotten.

In the meantime, Jack had his own problems to worry about. A thunderstorm spooked his livestock overnight, causing them to break through a rotted section of fence. The next morning, Jack was horrified to find that the escaped animals had eaten and trampled most of his crop, and then scattered across the countryside. It took days for Jack to gather his cows back to the farm, and his pigs were simply never found. As for the crop, it was beyond recovery: Jack had not only lost his food for the winter, but also his income for the year. With few options left, Jack decided to sell some of his cows in town, so that he could buy food for the approaching winter. It was under these circumstances that something remarkable happened.

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On the road to town, Jack was approached by an unfamiliar old man in a gray cloak. The old man regarded Jack's cows speculatively. "These creatures still have plenty of years left in them," he observed, "Why are you taking them to town?"

Jack sighed. "I lost my crops, so I need to buy enough food to survive the winter. And the only way I can afford that is to sell my cows."

The old man nodded thoughtfully. "But then you'll have enough to feed your family?"

Jack shrugged. "Actually, it's just me. I live alone."

The old man gave Jack a long, measuring look. Then he reached into his cloak and brought out a strange object. "Well then... I've got something for you."

Jack examined the object closely. It appeared to be some sort of fruit... but it wasn't like any fruit he had seen before. It was shaped like a flattened melon. Its skin was scaly and deep red, but it was also flecked with green patches, especially at its two ends. It smelled sickeningly sweet. For a few moments, Jack simply regarded the bizarre fruit, before he realized that the stranger was offering it to him.

"Take it," the old man urged, "It's the most valuable fruit in the world! Just one of them can sustain a man for an entire year."

Jack regarded the fruit skeptically. "How is that possible? Wouldn't the fruit spoil in a matter of days?"

"It might, but that doesn't matter," the man smiled, "The fruit's nutrition is concentrated in its seeds. In fact, if you eat just one of the seeds, you won't need to eat for the rest of the year!"

Jack raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Nutrition can't work like that," he pointed out.

"Yes, it can," insisted the man, "Forget your money problems... the seeds in this fruit will feed you for the rest of your life!"

Jack thought about that for a moment. "Let's say I believe you. If this fruit is going to feed me for life, then it must be packed full of seeds, right?"

"No," explained the old man patiently, "The fruit only contains two seeds. You eat one of them to keep you going for this year, and then plant the other one. By this time next year, the seed you planted will produce a stalk with a single new fruit. Pick it before the stalk dies, and then you'll have two more seeds. Eat one seed to keep you going, and plant the other one for next year. And the year after that, you do it again. See?"

"The stalk only grows one fruit?" Jack asked, curious in spite of himself.

"That's right," the man replied, "And the stalk dies as soon as you pick the fruit, so you'll only get two seeds per year. But that's okay: as long as you keep planting one seed and eating the other, you'll have all the nutrients you need. It's yours, now. Use it wisely." The old man grasped Jack's hand and placed the fruit into his palm, then turned to leave.

Jack may not have been the "sharpest tool in the shed", but he wasn't born yesterday, either. "Wait a moment," protested Jack, "If this fruit is so valuable, then why are you giving it away?"

The old man hesitated. "My king ordered me to destroy it," he admitted, "He said it caused too many problems. As far as I know, the fruit you're holding now is the last of its kind. But I couldn't bring myself to destroy something this remarkable. I'm entrusting it to you, instead."

"But why *me*?" Jack persisted, "And what kind of problems was your king worried about?"

"The only problem you should be worried about right now is surviving the winter," replied the old man evenly, "As for why I picked you... well, you were on hand. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to return before I'm missed."

He began walking away, but he called behind his shoulder: "Remember: eat one seed, and plant the other! As long as you can remember that, year after year, nothing bad will happen. Farewell!" And then he was gone.

Jack regarded the strange fruit in his hand with curiosity, and just a little fear. What kind of "bad things" could this fruit possibly cause? Now that the old man was gone, the whole encounter had a surreal quality to it. For a moment, Jack seriously considered just leaving the fruit on the ground and continuing his walk to town, but he hesitated. Continuing to town meant selling his cows, and Jack didn't want to part with them if he didn't have to. Besides... what was the harm in giving this a try? If he ate one of the seeds and he was still hungry, he could always sell the cows tomorrow, right? That decided him.

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Jack took the fruit back to his house, and carefully sliced it in half. Just as the old man had said, there were exactly two seeds buried deep within it. Jack took one seed outside, and planted it in a sheltered place behind his house.

Next, Jack went back into his house and examined the other seed. It didn't seem very big or impressive. Once again, Jack found himself doubting that it could sustain him for even one meal, let alone a year. But he didn't see any harm in giving it a try. He popped the seed into his mouth, chewed it carefully, and then swallowed. The seed left a nutty aftertaste in his mouth, but other than that, Jack didn't notice any immediate difference.

By now it was late, so Jack decided to sleep on it. "By tomorrow, I'll definitely know if I'm still feeling hungry," he reasoned. Jack went to bed and fell asleep a few minutes later, his head spinning from the day's events.

## Chapter Two: Sarah

To Jack's surprise, the seed worked exactly as the old man had claimed. The next morning, Jack woke up to find that he wasn't even slightly hungry. In fact, he felt more refreshed than he'd been in a long time. For the first few days, he still tried to nibble away at the food in his house. However, it left him feeling uncomfortably full, and by the end of the week he gave it up.

Without the need to eat every day, Jack had more time to focus on winter-proofing his house. He fixed up every crack and crevice he could find, and by the time the first snowfall set in, Jack was confident that he'd have a draft-free winter. It was also the first winter where he wouldn't need to worry about food.

Winter thus passed without incident, and in the spring, Jack was pleased to see a small stalk sprouting behind his house. He built a protective fence around it, just in case his livestock broke free again, and spent the rest of the spring and summer working his farm as usual. As the months passed, the stalk continued to grow, and Jack woke up every day feeling refreshed. Without the need for food, Jack even had extra money, which he lavished on the crops that grew in his fields. The town had missed his business last year, and Jack was determined to make it up to them.

Unfortunately, the crops proved to be the year's biggest disappointment. Despite all of the time and money that Jack spent on his fields, many of the plants died in the late summer. By harvest time, he only reaped half of the yield he normally expected. Jack was disappointed by the poor harvest, but he tried not to worry too much: after all, as long as the stalk behind his house produced its fruit, he wouldn't need any other food for himself. That meant he could sell everything he grew to the town.

That's when Jack received his second disappointment. The townspeople who purchased Jack's crops complained that they tasted more bitter than usual, and many of the fruits and vegetables were rotten on the inside. Jack apologized profusely to his neighbors and promised that next year's crop would be better, refunding as much money as he dared without bankrupting himself for next year. With nothing else to do, Jack stayed home and anxiously watched the stalk for any signs of a blossom. With almost no income and food for the second year in a row, Jack was in deep trouble if the fruit didn't sprout.

A few weeks passed, and autumn's chill began to descend on the countryside. Jack felt his hunger beginning to return, and his anxiety progressed to despair. Finally, just as he'd nearly given up hope, Jack looked out his window one morning to find that a fruit had sprouted from the stalk overnight. He eagerly rushed out and plucked the fruit from the stalk, which he immediately brought inside and cut open. There they were again: two precious seeds, just like the ones which had saved him last winter. Without hesitating, he ate one seed and planted the other. When he woke up the next morning, relief flooded over him: he felt full. The seed had worked again!

*Everything's going to be fine, Jack reassured himself, So what if my crop was disappointing this year? I can try again next year, and in the meantime, I'm in no danger of starving. As long as I have these seeds, things couldn't be simpler.*

\* \* \* \* \*

However, things did not remain simple. During the winter, Jack fell in love with a young woman from the town named Sarah, who'd been his friend since childhood. Jack wanted to marry her, but he wasn't sure

he could provide for her. Until his farm was back on its feet, Jack's survival depended on his seeds... and that arrangement would fall apart pretty quickly if two people had to survive instead of just one.

*I only have one seed to eat, Jack thought, If I give it to her, I'll starve, and I won't be able to look after her. But if I eat the seed myself, she'll starve instead. And if we eat both seeds, then we won't have anything to plant next year, so we'll starve anyway. What am I going to do?*

As long as the farm wasn't producing any food, it seemed like an unsolvable problem... and Jack was reluctant to propose to Sarah until he'd come up with a solution. However, things didn't go as planned. One day, when Jack was walking through town, he bumped into Sarah unexpectedly. They started talking, and before Jack knew it, he'd poured out his heart to her and explained the entire predicament. Sarah looked thoughtful as she considered the problem.

"What would happen if you planted both seeds?" she asked. "You'd get two stalks and two fruits, wouldn't you?"

Jack looked surprised. "Well... I guess so. I never thought of that. But if I planted both seeds, then what would I eat this year?"

Sarah shrugged. "There, I'm not so sure. But you survived for years without these seeds, right? If you could just endure one year without them, then you'd end up with two fruits instead of one. And then we'd each have a seed to eat, and a seed to plant for next year."

Jack grinned widely. "That's a great idea! As soon as this year's fruit appears, I'll plant both of the seeds. And next year, we can get married!"

Sarah smiled back. "I'd just as soon get married this year, Jack. I love my parents, but it's getting harder and harder for them to put food on the table for us. If I'm going to be starving either way, can't I starve with you?"

Jack couldn't think of a reply for that. They were married a few months later. In the autumn, they picked the fruit and planted both seeds together. To earn enough money for food, they sold their remaining livestock except for 2 milk cows and a bull.

The following winter was brutally harsh, and every bit of food had to be rationed. After the bull was eaten, they were completely out of meat. Without the seed's nutrition to sustain him, Jack was weaker than ever before. Sarah smiled bravely through their hunger, but some days it was all she could do to get up and help Jack with the chores. Every last reserve of food was used up, and several times Jack was certain they'd both starve. Still, they helped each other to endure, and even the bitterest winters must eventually give way to spring. The first day Jack saw a patch of grass peeking out of the snow, he nearly wept with joy.

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The months that followed were the happiest in Jack's life. He and Sarah were still as poor as could be, but the countryside around them grew plenty of things to forage and eat. It wasn't as filling as standard farm fare, but they weren't in any danger of starving. Jack wanted to throw everything he had at the crops this year, but Sarah suggested that they scale back a little from before: perhaps the ground had



simply been overworked from previous years, and needed a break. They agreed to try a more modest harvest.

It was just as well that they didn't spend as much time or energy working the field that year: the crops fared even worse than before, and most of it died before the summer was over. The plants which remained didn't produce anything edible. With no crops to manage, Jack and Sarah decided to sell their ploughs and other farming equipment. They used the money to purchase new livestock, which would now become their sole income. Jack and Sarah spent most of their time tending their herds outside, while the months were still warm.

"It's too bad we can't eat grass like the cows do," Jack wryly remarked to Sarah one day, as he kicked distastefully at the remains of a withered vegetable. "Then we wouldn't need to bother with these stupid crops at all."

Sarah laughed gently. "I thought your mysterious seeds already had our food covered!"

Jack sighed. "It just bothers me. In every sense that matters, this farm is failing."

"Not in every sense," Sarah reminded him, "The livestock are doing just fine. Our two cows even gave birth this year, and the new ones are healthy and growing bigger."

Jack's mouth smiled, but the anxiety in his eyes didn't quite disappear. "Okay, fine. Let's just enjoy the summer for now. But sooner or later, people are going to wonder why we haven't starved when we've completely abandoned our fields."

Sarah frowned. "I hadn't thought of that," she admitted, and she looked in the direction of the stalks that were growing near their house. "Maybe we should improve the fence around the stalks... you know, make it harder for someone to discover them by accident."

Jack agreed, and they spent a couple of weeks building a full wooden wall around the stalks. The wall was cleverly designed to resemble a shed that was attached to the house. In actual fact, however, it was just a tall wooden enclosure with no roof, so that the sun could still reach the stalks.

"That should protect our stalks from prying eyes," declared Jack, "Although I wish we didn't have to be so secretive about it."

"It's just a precaution," Sarah assured him.

At the end of the season, both of the stalks produced their precious fruit, and Jack brought them inside to prepare them. He cut both fruit open and dug out two seeds each.

"Finally," Jack breathed, "I hadn't realized how hungry I'd been all year until I saw these. That's one for me, and one for you."

Before he could eat his own seed, however, Sarah gently held his arm. "Jack... what if we just eat half a seed each, and plant the other three?"

Jack looked wary. "I'm not sure if that would work... the old man didn't say anything about eating just half a seed."

"I've been thinking, though," Sarah insisted, "If we just ate a half seed each, that would probably get us through the winter. That's the most important part, right? Once things warm up, we can just live off the countryside like we did this year."

"Yeah, but why go through that at all?" Jack protested. "We've beaten the odds and survived the entire year, and now we both have our own seed to eat. Why spend even *half* a year feeling hungry again?"

Sarah's voice grew gentle. "Jack, we're going to want more seeds sooner or later."

Jack blinked. "More seeds... why?"

Sarah smiled. "One of these days, we'll have other mouths to feed."

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Meanwhile, several miles down the road, a farmer named Bill surveyed his field in perplexity. Every year, he'd carefully tended his crops, and every year, he'd been able to reap a generous harvest from them. Why had half his crop died off this time?

## Chapter Three: Famine!

The next few years flew by amazingly fast, for both Jack and Sarah. Sarah's plan worked to perfection: the half-seeds sustained them through the winter. By the next autumn, they now had three stalks, and reaped a total of six seeds. Jack and Sarah each ate a full seed, and then planted the other four. The next year, they had four stalks, which produced eight seeds. They ate two seeds, and planted the other six. Jack wasn't sure whether they needed so many seeds, but not planting them seemed like a waste. If everything went as expected, they'd have twelve extra seeds this year at harvest time.

Unfortunately, the surrounding area had taken a turn for the worse. Crops across the entire countryside were failing, and the price of food was skyrocketing. Starving townsfolk were baffled by the earth's apparent refusal to grow anything, and some called to mind the distant famine from years ago. The townsfolk managed to stay alive by hunting and foraging the surrounding area, but it was never enough. Simply put, the people were slowly starving.

Of course, Jack's farm wasn't faring any better. At first, he simply let his unproductive fields grow wild, so that they'd still provide extra pasturage for his livestock. Within a year, however, even grasses and thistles had a hard time growing in Jack's soil, and he was forced to lead his animals to distant hills where they could still graze. The critical difference was that Jack and Sarah had the seeds to nourish them. Even during the famine, Jack and Sarah could live comfortably in the knowledge that they only needed enough money to maintain their house and look after their livestock.

In the early spring, Sarah became pregnant, and Jack bounded off to town to spread the good news to the townsfolk. When he reached town, however, he was horrified to see how much it had deteriorated since his last visit. The roads were unkempt, the buildings were dirty and faded, and the townsfolk were demoralized. A few houses had fallen into complete disuse, abandoned by townsfolk who'd decided to make a fresh start elsewhere. Jack regarded the scene with sorrow for a few minutes, feeling the weight of the famine for the first time. Then he turned around and headed home, his mind a blur.

Jack found Sarah behind the house, coaxing one of the cows to eat a bundle of withered grass that she'd gathered from a nearby hilltop. Sarah looked up from her work and smiled as Jack approached. "So, how was your visit to town?"

Jack quickly explained what he had seen, and Sarah paled at the news. "Jack, what are we going to do? The countryside is dying all around us!"

"We use the seeds," Jack replied, without hesitation. "We use the seeds to stop this famine."

"We don't have nearly enough seeds for that," objected Sarah, "This famine's affecting hundreds of people. Even if we double our seeds every year, we'll never grow enough before people start dying."

"We can't just stand by and do nothing!" Jack insisted.

Sarah's eyes filled with deep sadness. "Jack," she gently replied, "We are surrounded by desperate, starving neighbors. If they learn that we have seeds which feed a man for an entire year, what do you think will happen?"

Jack was taken aback. "Well, they... I suppose things would get out hand pretty quickly, wouldn't they?"

Sarah nodded somberly. Jack continued, "But that doesn't change the fact that people *are* starving all around us, and meanwhile, we're sitting on more of these seeds than we know what to do with. I don't think I can live with that."

"I don't think I can, either," sighed Sarah, "But could we take some time to come up with a plan? If we think this through, maybe we'll find a way to help our neighbors without endangering our family." Jack agreed, and their conversation turned to more pleasant topics.

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That evening, there was a knock at the door. Jack opened it, to find a local farmer named Bill on his doorstep. Jack and Bill had known each other for many years, but this was the first time he'd visited Jack at home.

"Evening, Jack!" Bill greeted him, "Do you mind if I drop by for a moment?"

"Not at all!" Jack replied. "Come on in."

Bill came inside, and Jack realized with some embarrassment that he didn't have any refreshments to offer his guest. The seeds were providing all the nutrition that Jack and Sarah could ever need, so as the price of food increased, they'd simply stopped buying it. Bill greeted Sarah politely, took a seat by the table, and looked Jack in the eye.

"Jack, let me get straight to the point," Bill began, "I'm a farmer, just like you. You know that I take a lot of pride in my fields, and I'd never ask for charity if it wasn't a matter of life and death." Bill hesitated, and Jack noticed how pale and haggard he looked. "But it *is* a matter of life and death," Bill blurted out, "If I don't find some food for my family soon, I don't... I don't know what will happen."

Jack felt a fierce stab of guilt, remembering his conversation with Sarah just that afternoon. Here was the famine, personified right in front of him. But what could he say? There hadn't been any time to come up with a plan which wouldn't put him and Sarah at risk. Jack made a mental note to help Bill's family the moment they figured something out, and phrased his next words very carefully.

"Bill, I feel terrible for you," Jack replied, "And believe me, I really wish we could help you. But you've seen our crops: they started failing even before yours did. We don't have anything to give you." That much was true, at least. The new seeds weren't due to appear for another month, and beyond that, Jack really didn't have anything to offer.

Bill gave Jack a strange look. "Are you sure about that?" he asked, and his intonation was almost accusatory. An unpleasant sensation stirred in the pit of Jack's stomach. Did Bill already know something?

Stalling for time, Jack feigned confusion and asked rather lamely, "What are you talking about?"

Bill snorted. "Don't try to be sly, Jack," he growled, "You aren't good at it. We're caught in the middle of a famine... and as you've just pointed out, your crops are doing worse than mine. And yet both you and Sarah are a picture of health. Something's not adding up here!"

Jack faltered. "The, uh, the town... when we buy our food..."

“Enough!” thundered Bill, as his fist banged down on the table. “We both know you haven’t bought food from the town in months, and you sure aren’t getting anything from your fields! So tell me your secret, Jack... because I have a family to look after, too, and I’m not leaving without a way to help them!”

Jack’s mouth worked, but no words came to his frantic mind. What could he possibly say? Bill was getting angrier by the minute, and there was no way to satisfy him without spilling the secret.

Sarah’s voice broke the tense silence. “We’re working on a way to save the whole town,” she explained earnestly, “But it won’t be ready for another month. Will you give us that much time to make it work?”

Bill turned to face her, and his eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Why didn’t you mention this earlier?” he demanded. Jack tensed, fearing for his wife, but she stood her ground.

“Because people are getting desperate,” Sarah replied, “And if they think we have a way to save them, they’ll ruin everything by demanding it before it’s ready.” She gestured helplessly in Bill’s direction. “Look at how you reacted just a minute ago, Bill! Now imagine the whole town threatening us! *That’s* why we haven’t told anyone.”

For the first time since entering their house, Bill was taken aback. A look of shame spread across his face.

Jack decided to jump in, while the conversation’s momentum was on their side. “Bill, it’s me! I’m still the same guy who used to discount my crops when people couldn’t afford them. And our plan could really work... you can see for yourself that Sarah and I are healthy. We just need a little more time to make it possible for everyone.”

Bill pondered these words for a minute, as several different emotions passed across his face. Finally, he sighed in resignation. “Those are awfully vague promises, Jack, and normally I’d demand a better explanation. But the truth is, at this point, I don’t have anything to lose by trusting you. If you’re saying that you can help my family in a month, then fine.”

He got up from his chair and headed for the door. As he grasped the knob, however, he paused and turned back to Jack and Sarah. “But for your sake, I hope you’re telling the truth. I’m not the only one who thinks something strange is happening on your farm... and the way things are going, people will be even less reasonable a month from now.” He left the house, leaving Jack and Sarah stunned by the sudden turn of events.

“Sarah, that was magnificent,” Jack breathed, “The way you handled that...”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Sarah replied anxiously. “If our plan isn’t ready in a month, we’re in serious trouble.”

“We’ll think of something.” Jack assured her.

## Chapter Four: The Revelation

The next four weeks were a nightmare. Every day, Jack and Sarah discussed how they could use the seeds to save the countryside around them, but they couldn't arrive at a workable plan. No matter how they approached the problem, there simply weren't enough seeds to help more than a handful of people, and that left the issue of how everyone else would react. The problem seemed truly unsolvable.

The harvest day finally arrived. Jack and Sarah harvested the twelve seeds and spread them out on the kitchen table. They were out of time, and they still didn't know what to do. For several minutes, they just sat there staring at the seeds. After a long silence, Sarah decided to make a final attempt at forming a plan.

"What if we give a third of our seeds to the weakest people," she asked, "And then plant the rest for next year?"

"Wouldn't that make the strongest people angry at us?" asked Jack dispassionately. Sarah could tell that he was on the edge of despair.

"We could plant our own seeds, to set the example for everyone else!" she offered.

"Wait a minute," Jack objected, "I thought we were trying to keep our family out of danger... how can we give up our own seeds, especially when you have baby on the way?"

"Jack," Sarah reasoned, "Even if we gave away *all* of our seeds, most people won't be getting one. But they might be less angry at us if we're in the same boat as everyone else."

"Well, then maybe we *should* give away all our seeds and be done with it!" replied Jack in frustration, "Life was a lot simpler without them!"

"Don't say that," chided Sarah, "If it weren't for these seeds, we wouldn't be here at all. They're the only thing that grows around here anymore."

Jack nodded reluctantly, but then he suddenly froze in his chair. A horrible thought had just struck him like a thunderbolt. "Sarah. Do you realize what you just said?"

Sarah frowned with concern. That look on Jack's face... "What's wrong, Jack? What did I say?"

Jack's thoughts raced. It was too awful to be true, and yet it explained so much. Jack stared dumbly at the floor, and a note of desperation crept into his voice. "You said the seeds are the only thing that grows here anymore... and you're right! In fact, the more seeds we grow, the worse the crop failures get... we should have questioned that... oh, we should have questioned *everything* about these wretched seeds... you can't get something for nothing..."

Sarah was becoming scared. "Jack, for goodness sake! Tell me what's going on!"

Jack looked back up at Sarah, feeling almost numb with horror. "Our seeds are causing the crop failures," he said simply, "*We caused the famine.*"

Time seemed to stop inside the house, as the full force of the revelation hit Sarah. "That's not possible," she whispered hoarsely, "There must be some other explanation..."

Jack shook his head emphatically. "No, Sarah, it's the *only possible* explanation. We never bothered to ask ourselves how just one seed could feed someone for an entire year. Well, isn't it obvious? The stalks drain every last nutrient from the soil, for miles around. It's all gone into these horrible seeds! Without even meaning to, we've ruined the entire countryside!"

Sarah nodded glumly, as she began to accept the situation. "Jack, what are we going to do now? All our plans hinged on using these seeds to help the town!"

Jack groaned, as he remembered their current predicament. "Sarah... those seeds are what caused this disaster in the first place, and planting more stalks has only made things worse. I don't think we can't help the townsfolk, after all!"

A bleak silence fell on the room, as Jack and Sarah reflected on the situation. After a few minutes, Sarah spoke. "We have to leave." she whispered.

"You're right," Jack muttered. "I hate myself for it, and the townsfolk will think the worst of us, but we can't fix this. If we stay here and try to explain things, we'll just get ourselves killed."

"No," said Sarah, with an urgent shake of her head, "I meant we have to leave *now*."

Jack realized that his wife was looking out the window, and he followed her gaze. Down the road, in the distance, there was an organized mob of townspeople. They were heading directly for Jack's farm!

"No... not *now*..." Jack muttered. How bad could things get before they hit rock bottom, anyway? "We'll run out the back door... they're less likely to see us that way. Come on, let's go!"

Sarah jumped up. "Okay, just let me get my -"

"There's no time!" Jack interjected, as he stole another glance out the window at the approaching mob. "We can't take anything!"

"What about the seeds?" asked Sarah, "Do we take *them* with us?"

Jack hesitated for a moment. Those seeds had been their only source of nutrition for years. Now that they were about to lose everything else, they'd need every advantage they could get. But something stopped him. These seeds had brought ruin to his farm, his neighbors, and the entire countryside. Perhaps the seeds had even caused that distant famine they'd heard about, years ago. No matter who used these seeds or where, they were nothing but trouble.

"No," said Jack, "This has gone far enough. We have to stop this now, before it gets any worse."

Desperately scanning the room for inspiration, Jack's eyes fell on the fireplace, still lit with the evening's blaze. On impulse, Jack scooped up all twelve seeds from the table and tossed them into the fire. Sarah gasped and stared at the blaze, but Jack grasped his wife's hand and ran out the back door with her.

Moments later, the seeds in the fire began smoldering, tinting the flames a curious shade of green.

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As Jack and Sarah passed by their barn, Jack's pace suddenly slowed. They rounded the barn's corner, and then Jack stopped to catch his breath. "Sarah, are you sure we're doing the right thing by running away? It doesn't feel right, leaving everyone in the lurch like this!"

"We can't explain ourselves to an angry mob, Jack," Sarah reminded him, "Maybe in the morning, once everyone's calmed down..."

"I'm going to eavesdrop on them," declared Jack, "Then we'll know for sure!"

Jack dashed back around the barn's corner, staying low to the ground. Sarah nearly shouted in protest, but she checked herself just in time. She dropped to her hands and knees and cautiously peered around the barn. She was determined to keep an eye on her husband, although she had no idea what she could do if things went badly.

Meanwhile, Jack had reached the back of the house. He carefully edged along the wooden wall they'd built to conceal the stalks, taking great care not to make any noise. However, he stopped in his tracks when he heard someone pounding on his front door, on the other side of the house.

"Jack!" bellowed an angry voice, "Open this door! Whatever you've been working on, we need it now!"

"They wouldn't wait any longer, Jack!" added another voice. Jack recognized it as Bill. "I'm sorry, but you've got to come clean now!"

A brittle silence followed, but it didn't last long. "Last chance, Jack!" roared the angry voice, "If you insist on holing up in there like a thief, then we'll break down this door!"

"And then we'll take whatever you've got in there for our families!" added another voice.

From behind the house, Jack felt paralyzed. Was this really happening? Were these really the people Jack had known his entire life?

Jack's thoughts were interrupted by a deep, earthy thudding sound which shook the ground under his feet. Something had exploded inside the house! Jack staggered back in confusion, looked up at his roof, and gasped in shock. Strange green smoke was now billowing out of the chimney, chased into the night air by slender emerald flames. Jack had no idea what was going on, but the mob decided to interpret the flames as an act of defiance.

"He's burning something so that we can't have it!" declared an enraged voice from the front of the house.

"Alright, Jack!" bellowed the first angry voice, "You asked for it!"

There was an ugly splintering sound at the front door, followed by the crash of a shattering window. Jack didn't wait to hear the rest. He tore back towards the barn where Sarah was hiding.

"You were right," he said simply, "Let's get out of here."

As they ran for the nearby hills, Sarah asked between gasps, "What did you hear?"

Jack grimaced angrily. "I heard enough."



## Chapter Five: The Resolution

Jack and Sarah rested on a hilltop several miles away, catching their breath. By now, their entire home was on fire: either the initial explosion had spread to the rest of the house, or the mob was deliberately burning their house out of spite.

Jack looked away in disgust, and regarded the surrounding countryside. Even up here, the grasses and bushes were long dead, and the trees around them had lost their leaves. In every direction, the landscape was scarred by the dead soil. Jack couldn't help wondering how far the devastation had spread.

Sarah, who'd finished crying almost half an hour ago, felt oddly detached from it all. The strange green flames were still there in the middle of the blaze, dancing about and tinting the billowing smoke which rose up from the wreckage. "Why do you suppose the flames are green?" she asked, after a long silence. "Do you think it has something to do with the seeds?"

Jack shrugged. "Probably. I mean, what else could be causing it? Maybe that's just what happens when you burn a year's worth of nutrients all at once." He grimaced. "I shouldn't have thrown them into the fireplace... that was stupid. Now those nutrients aren't going to benefit anyone."

Sarah shook her head. "Honestly, Jack... in the long run, it's probably for the best. If you'd left those seeds behind for the mob, someone might have found them and tried planting them. This was the only way to make sure that it never happens again." She squinted. "Speaking of the mob, can you see what they're doing? From this distance, I can't see them very well."

Mobs and crowd mentality had always hit a nerve with Jack, who snorted contemptuously. "They're just milling around our property right now. Maybe they're trying to figure out if it's worth torching our barn, too. At this point, I wouldn't put anything past them."

This time, Sarah actually laughed. "You should forgive them, you know," she said, "Tomorrow, more than a few of them are going to feel guilty about storming our property."

"Forgive them!?" Jack snarled. "I knew those people my whole life, and when push came to shove, they stormed our farm like a pack of hardened criminals. They didn't even try to put out the fire, or see if we were okay. If that's the way they're going to act, then they deserve this famine!"

Sarah shrugged. "Stay angry, then. But they've been starving for months, and we haven't. If those seeds had gone to someone else instead of us, are you sure we would have done any better?"

"I don't know," Jack muttered disgustedly. "Don't I get to be even *slightly* angry at them?"

"If it helps, sure," Sarah smiled, "Just... try not to hate them for being fallible, alright? They were probably hoping to find something on our farm that would save their families, and now they're going to go home empty-handed."

There was a brief silence. "Fine," sighed Jack, "I'll forgive the stupid townsfolk."

Neither Jack nor Sarah had noticed the clouds gathering overhead. Without warning, a torrential downpour of rain burst upon the land, soaking everything in sight.

“Oh, give me a break!” shouted Jack over the roar of the deluge, “Even the weather’s against us today!”

Sarah shrugged and smiled resignedly. “At least it’s a warm rain.”

They found shelter under a nearby abandoned wagon, and began watching the downpour. As Sarah gazed at the falling droplets, a strange look appeared on her face. “Jack, the rain! It’s green!”

Jack squinted quizzically at the downpour. It was faint, but unmistakable: the raindrops had a distinctly green tint to them. “What in the world...” Jack’s eyes met Sarah’s, and the same thought hit them both at once.

“You don’t suppose,” Jack began, “That burning the seeds actually... *spread* the nutrients into the air, instead of destroying them?”

Sarah smiled. “Get some rest, Jack. I think that tomorrow’s going to be a much better day.”

Nearby, a single, delicate blade of new grass pushed itself out of the soil.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few weeks later, the countryside had come alive with new growth. The mysterious rain had apparently restored the ground’s lost nutrients, and then some! Everywhere, vegetation seemed determined to make up for lost time. Many of the fields had grown and matured in a matter of weeks, and crops were being harvested around the clock. Winter was imminent, but for the first time in years, no one was dreading it.

At first, things were decidedly awkward between Jack and the townsfolk: Jack still saw them as the people who’d mobbed his farm, and the townsfolk still suspected that Jack had held out on them during the famine. Still, none of that seemed quite as important anymore, and both sides were willing to move on. The town even supplied some materials and helpers to rebuild Jack’s house.

With the famine finally averted, Jack and Sarah were starting to plan for the future again. Sarah was still a few months away from giving birth, but she and Jack had already decided on two possible names for the child, depending on whether it was a girl or a boy. As for the seeds, Jack was confident that the troublesome plant would never rise again. Twelve perfect scorch marks on the hearth’s stones were all that remained of world’s most dangerous crop.

A few days after the first snowfall, Bill called on Jack’s house again. He was greeted warmly and treated to some fine produce from Jack’s fields.

“You know,” Bill began, after a delicious meal, “We never heard the full story of what happened over here. Did you really cause that weird rain which brought everything back to life?”

Jack and Sarah exchanged glances. “You might say that,” replied Jack, “I suppose there’s no harm in telling you the full story now.”

Over the next hour, Jack and Sarah told Bill their tale.

“Incredible!” he exclaimed, “To think that so much trouble could be caused by a handful of magic beans!”

"They weren't magic." objected Jack.

"And they were seeds, not beans." added Sarah.

"Yes, of course," Bill said, looking thoughtful. "Would you mind if I wrote this story down, and shared it with others? As you said earlier, there's no harm in telling people the full story now."

Jack and Sarah considered carefully, but in the end they didn't have any objections. Bill left with a grin on his face, intending to chronicle Jack's tale that very evening.

"Do you think he'll get our story right?" asked Sarah.

"I doubt it," observed Jack wryly, "He didn't take any notes."

\* \* \* \* \*

As you may have guessed by now, the final story that Bill produced bore very little resemblance to the one which Jack told him. Somewhere along the line, over multiple retellings, Jack's simple story about people became a sensational tale about giants, and castles in the sky.

Jack and Sarah accepted this strange turn of events with a philosophical shrug, and Bill's distorted version of the tale became a favorite among the townsfolk. But Jack and Sarah made a point of telling their own children the original story, too: although it never achieved the fame of Bill's version, it still managed to survive down throughout the generations.

And now you've read it.

**THE END**

## Afterward

I wrote the original version of this story nearly 20 years ago, in 2006 (or possibly even earlier... my records from back then are slightly sketchy). It was revised in 2011, and again in 2020. As of late 2025, this is now the “fourth edition” of the tale... and I just thought it was time to make it more generally available.

Although the core of the story has mostly remained the same, there have still been some significant changes over the years:

- The original versions featured an antagonist named Richard, who deliberately stirs up the town and provides a human face for the mob against Jack’s farm.
  - In the first version, the seeds had to be boiled before you could eat them: otherwise, they were deathly toxic. Richard ate an unprepared seed to prove to the mob that Jack and Sarah had been holding out on them... and died as a direct result.
  - In the next revision, Richard burned the seeds in anger, thus unwittingly ending the famine and becoming the town hero (Jack and Sarah shrugged this off).
  - Later revisions dropped Richard entirely: he simply wasn’t necessary. Then again, maybe Richard is the angry (but unnamed) voice leading the mob!
- Until the most recent version, the old man seemed to have some specific (yet vaguely defined) reason for choosing Jack as the recipient of the rare fruit.
  - Originally, the old man reasoned that Jack had a “good heart”, and would know what to do when the time came. This is a strange comment, because Jack’s actions initially cause another famine.
  - In any event, the last scene in the story was originally the old man watching Jack and Sarah with approval from a distant hilltop, concluding that Jack knew exactly what to do after all. This was especially confusing in the earlier revisions, since Jack didn’t personally destroy the seeds back then... he just ran away with Sarah and left the seeds behind.
  - In that final hilltop scene (now dropped), the old man also implied that Jack’s success was largely due to Sarah’s help.
- Speaking of Sarah... original revisions portrayed her as a borderline-infallible character who never made mistakes and always knew what to say.
  - This was well-intentioned (I wanted to cast the female protagonist in a positive light), but it was also unrealistic. Sarah has to come across as human!
  - Even now, you can still see traces of the original “perfect character” syndrome: compared to Jack, Sarah is often more level-headed and less likely to give up. But at least the current story gives Jack his own moments to shine!

In all likelihood, if I review the story several years from now, I’ll see other ways to improve it... but for now, I think it’s at least “good enough” to share. I hope you’ve enjoyed it!