Nelle

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Beans

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On her sixtieth birthday, Leslie received a padded manila envelope in the mail from a national senior citizens association. Inside was a mass-produced greeting card that said *LOOK HOW YOU'VE GROWN!* along with a packet of heirloom seeds. The seeds were labeled in all-caps—TANGENT BEANS—and sported a subtitle of miniscule, italicized print that read: *garden for a healthy mind*. Leslie, who had been incrementally and secretly reducing her medicinal intake in the hopes of once again thinking thoughts and feeling feelings, was instantly offended. This was clearly the work of her husband Dale and her neurologist-slash-Dale's golfing buddy, Dr. Neil Nesbitt. Dale and Neil had been in manipulative cahoots since their fraternity days, beginning with the hazing of hapless undergrads and culminating in the intellectual pruning of inquisitive Leslie.

"My wife suffers from overthought," was how Dale, seven years prior, had put it to Dr. Nesbitt.

To which Dr. Nesbitt, while needlessly prodding Leslie's neck glands and smiling the way farmers smile at November turkeys, had said, "I have just the thing."

The thing was thrice daily capsules the size of asparagus tips and once weekly electrodes, a combo that rendered Leslie blank and bland and…and…what was the word? At the six-week follow-up, Leslie was shown a "before" image of her brain activity next to an "after" image. One was fire, one was ice. Mars and Antarctica. Ratatouille, mashed potatoes.

"So, tell me," Dr. Nesbitt beamed. "How do you feel?"

Next to Dale in the examination room, in a chair that felt

neither hard nor soft nor just right, Leslie was incapable of producing the necessary vocabulary. Instead, her torpid mind coughed up a flickering vision, a clot of symbolic phlegm. It was a wan picture of the local IGA where she regularly forgot what she had gone in for. She saw the grocery store's back alley, its cod-colored cinder blocks, a forgotten cabbage on its loading dock. The cabbage had one loose leaf that flapped in the wind like a celery-colored comb-over. It was waving, weakly, at Leslie. Dr. Nesbitt and Dale waited, stared. Leslie opened her mouth to say what it was that she saw, but only one word came out. "Vegetable."

Dr. Nesbitt nodded at Dale. Dale nodded at Dr. Nesbitt. Leslie felt herself nodding, nodding, nodding off.

Again, that was seven years ago, and Leslie recalled all of it as she considered the generic birthday card and shook the packet of beans. They sounded like horse pills. Trachea busters. Leslie knew the sensation all too well. A fist in a sock. Dr. Nesbitt had eventually upped her daily intake to eight monstrous capsules, her weekly electrodes to M, T, W, R. That was how he'd put it. "Zap you on M, T, W, R, Leslie!" But on her fifty-ninth birthday, at the urging of Franklin, the electrode nurse who "loved to feel," Leslie had given herself the gift of weaning. It had taken almost nine months for her to go from eight capsules to four, but in doing so, she'd halved her oblivion.

It wasn't easy. There were side effects that rivaled vision quests. Leslie had seen spots. Static, tie-dyed swirls behind her eye sockets. Fireworks, shasta daisies, shivering cells merging and dividing. Some mornings, she'd felt like she was walking the circumference of a black volcanic mouth. Sometimes the devil appeared behind her in the bathroom mirror. He had the face of her high school chemistry teacher and cloven goat feet he placed on her shoulders. He said things like "I know where Dale keeps the ammo!" and "Look at you, you filthy slut." But Leslie had kept going. The fear

and sweats were at least fear and sweats. They weren't blahs and mehs or huhs and whatevers. Leslie had persevered, both in the face of terror and in search of it. The way she saw it, horror bested ho-hum, so three times a day, she'd taken the box cutter and shaved down each pill. She had a little help from vodka, a little from a crucifix, a lot from Franklin, who agreed to attach the electrodes to her biceps instead of her temples in exchange for off-duty hand jobs. "You'll thank me for this," he said. Which Leslie went on and did, because even at four pills a day, she had started to remember the word for gratitude.

Leslie shook the beans. Leslie read the card again. Now it was her big 6-0. See how much she'd grown? What was she going to gift herself now? Gardening? She looked in the foyer mirror.

"My oh my," the devil whistled. "Someone's gotten too big for her britches."

Leslie brushed the cloven hooves from her shoulders as easily as dandruff. She opened the Tangent beans and shook two into her palm. They were pear green and the size of earplugs. She placed them on her tongue and swallowed them whole. They settled near the hollow of her throat, bullets in a gun. Leslie knew it was finally time. She went into the bedroom and put on the white sack dress that Dale hated. She packed a suitcase with underwear and sweaters, the bean seeds, the birthday card, a pen, notebooks. She went back to the foyer and stood and stared into the den, at the back of Dale's head.

"I'm leaving," she said.

Dale didn't look away from whatever it was he'd been looking at for thirty-five years: the NASDAQ, cubes falling from an electronic sky and sliding into geometric order, men in plaid pants with white balls and metal sticks traversing green fields. "Ehn," he grunted.

Leslie closed the door behind her before Dale could ask her to pick up milk on her way back, even though she was neither going to the store nor coming back. She was going to the forest, about an hour away, to the land and building she'd bought with money she'd earned over the past year by donating plasma and blood and stool. Turned out her stool had been valuable. It wasn't much of a building. It was just one of those sheds for sale in the parking lot of Home Depot, painted maroon to resemble a tiny barn and complete with buttermilk trim and Xs on the doors. But it was hers. A week earlier, she'd hired someone named Floyd to trailer it out to the half acre on the cliff, hook her up a composting toilet and a generator. A little tank of water and a little tank of propane. A barrel for trash burning.

"Not much of a place for a woman your age," Floyd said when he was done.

Leslie chopped off Floyd's head with a look. She'd been completely off her pills for two days by then, and the facts were starting to come out. "At my age, I'm not much of a woman." After that, Floyd shut up, and Leslie smiled. A real smile for the first time in quite some time.

For the first week in the woods, Leslie wrapped the tangent beans in wet paper towels and left them in the sun. Then she took a spiral notebook and filled it with all the wrongs ever done to her. Without any medication, the wrongs were the first things Leslie's brain threw off, and she surprised herself by writing nine pages about a single incident that had occurred at the Dairy Barn when she was four. She had licked an entire scoop of grape sherbet right off the top of her sugar cone and onto the orange tile, and her stepfather had lost his mind. "Jesus H. Christ!" he'd shouted. It was 1957, South Carolina, and Jesus was still the man to know. Visibly, the other patrons in the ice cream shop took the outburst hard. The scoop was quite large in Leslie's memory, a purple softball-sized mound that her stepfather bent down and

retrieved barehanded, then threw at the silver swinging door of the trash receptacle, where it landed with an audible splat. Everyone present took note of this for a few silent seconds, before her stepfather yanked Leslie's left arm up and nearly out of its socket and paraded her from the store.

Leslie listed on a blank page in her notebook who she'd felt most sorry for that day. Number one: the patrons who had had to see such a scene. Number two: the employee who'd scooped the ice cream and neglected to press it firmly into the sugar cone; he probably blamed himself. Number three: whoever had to come and clean the orange tile floor and the trashcan's door. Perhaps the same employee? A tragic possibility. Number four: her stepfather. How wretched to be so wretched. Leslie was not religious, but she did believe in hell because, above all else, she believed in justice. Leslie felt certain her stepfather, who had died from a perforated ulcer when she was twelve, was in hell. Not just for the ice cream incident, but for a portfolio of similar occurrences that when, presented together, made an air-tight case for eternal damnation. Number five: Jesus H. Christ. Again, not religious, but Jesus was historical and undeserving of such ill verbal memorializing. Plus, the H. was completely and comically inaccurate. Number six: herself.

To be sure, there were other things in the notebook—Dale's affairs (at least the three she knew of), Dale making her get her head checked repeatedly, Dale making her take the pills, Dale and the doctor teaming up on her the way men do with opinionated women—but it was the ice cream entry that proved most therapeutic, and once the spiral notebook was filled with all notable slights, Leslie took it to the trash barrel and set it on fire. She let the notebook burn until the spiral was a red-hot coil, a hungry tendril, and in that incendiary time, Leslie stood over the barrel rubbing her hands together, even though it was June and her hands were not particularly cold. Afterward, she went and looked at the beans. They had sprouted fine, anemic hairs and looked like the tiny

decapitated heads of old white men. Namely, husbands and doctors and men who trailered sheds to and from the woods and commented on the age of women.

On the second week, Leslie planted the tangent beans. Though there was no real excavated land for a proper garden, there was sunshine here and there around her little red building, and Leslie went to and fro in the surrounding grass and leaves and underbrush, around the bases of trees, and poked the hairy beans into the earth. Beside each poke, she slid a piece of dried willow into the ground, and onto each branch of dried willow, she tied a piece of string. When she was finished poking and sliding and tying, Leslie gathered all the strings and ran them back to her house and tied them all to a big metal eye-hook near the roof. Soon enough, her house would be covered in vines and beans and she could sit under the vines and beans, and eat the beans raw and with her hands, in the shade of what she herself had made, no matter what it did to her digestively.

By the third week, there was not much else to do in the woods with the tangent beans now in the ground, and Leslie found herself sitting in her camp chair most of the time, staring out at the wooded hills and thinking. Her thoughts were now coming back to life with vigor and vengeance, all over the place, branching and winding this way and that, but on that third week her mind found something of a focused path and she mostly thought about sex. Not about having it or missing it, just the various acts thereof, and how, when considered as a whole, were truly abhorrent. Leslie counted eleven ways: penis in vagina, penis in mouth, penis in hand, penis in ass crack, penis in ass, penis between two breasts. Then there were two vaginas smashed together, vagina on face, finger(s) on vagina, finger(s) in vagina, finger(s) in ass. Leslie sat in her camp chair and stared out over the Daniel Boone National Forest. Technically, she supposed it

was not really two vaginas smashed together, a vagina on a face, or finger(s) on a vagina. Technically, she guessed these specific scenarios actually involved vulvas, so she changed the terminology in her head and went through the positions a second time, trying to be more scientifically precise. While she did this, she also wondered if the plural of vulva was actually vulvas or vulvae. Or perhaps it was a word, like fish or deer, where the singular was also the plural. One vulva, two vulva. One deer, five fish.

The pills had kept Leslie from thinking about anything interesting for decades, and without them, her brain ignited. *Watch this*, it seemed to shout. After the positions and the possibilities, came the friction. Leslie thought of all the frantic rubbing that had occurred since the dawn of humanity—the chafing, the desperation—and it reminded Leslie of those two-person saws that were used by lumberjacks to take down sequoias. In her mind, she heard the saw go back and forth until it took down an entire rainforest. She saw mounds and mounds—mountain ranges, really—of fresh, orange sawdust. Leslie thought of the millions of years of repetitive sex. She saw a world deforested. She was physically ill. Leslie went to the trash barrel and vomited her disgust onto the deteriorating black spiral.

Back in her camp chair, Leslie looked at the trees and asked herself: *what is humanity's path?* She asked herself: *what is its opposite?* Leslie didn't know, but whatever the opposite was, she made a promise to do just that. She looked out at the tangent beans and saw that they were slowly coming in green now. Bright chartreuse spirals could be seen here and there in the grass, like party streamers, coiled and ready, waiting to be hung. She did not miss her pills. They'd kept her from her first love, thinking, and now she was back in a wild romance. A mad infatuation.

Every two weeks, Floyd came by with gasoline and propane and water and whatever else Leslie had asked him to bring

from the last visit. That was the thing, when Leslie thought of something she wanted—a new pencil, dried cherries, salt—she had to wait and place her order the next time Floyd came around. So, if she thought of something right after he left, it was nearly a month before she got it. She could have probably used a pistol. Sunglasses. Cornmeal. A book of crosswords. A pet canary with clipped wings. There wasn't much yellow out here.

"Don't you think someone is missing you?" Floyd asked on his third resupply. Floyd was the only person who knew where she was. He didn't know who she was, which was a relief, but still, Leslie wished she'd hired a woman to get her hauled out and settled in the first place.

"Missing me personally?" Leslie asked. "Or my services?" Floyd stood and looked at her like he didn't know the difference, because he didn't. "I am confident," Leslie said, "that someone misses my orifices and chicken chili. But me?" She almost said her full name aloud but instead stopped short and yanked the first bean of the season from a willow branch at her calf. She split the bean open in her palm and tossed the pale pearls within it into her mouth like medicine. "You don't miss what you don't know."

Floyd gave her a long, hard look when he drove away. It was a look that said he might have to say something to someone about her whereabouts. Talking like she had had likely made Floyd feel stupid, which he was, and Leslie knew that a man made to feel stupid by a woman would go to no end to put that woman in danger, or at least spoil her fun. Leslie devised a plan to escape before Floyd could return with either the supplies she had requested or the sheriff she had not. She started with water. She hauled every drop of water she had, save for one thermos, out in a coffee cup to each tangent bean plant, and gave each plant four cups to drink. Then she went to her composting toilet and tore the wood seat from its top and, dipping down and using the same coffee cup she had for the water, she filled the cup and went back

out and gave every tangent bean plant two cups of waste. It was her waste, just like it had been her plasma and blood and stool and bone marrow, and this made Leslie feel good, as if she were slowly dismantling herself for something bigger and better.

When the tangent beans were watered and fed, Leslie sat in her camp chair, facing away from the plants and tried to work out, once again, the idea of a path and its opposite. But one thought wrapped around another and made Leslie tired. She closed her eyes and fell asleep. She dreamed briefly of sex, was disgusted, announced in her dream she was neither heterosexual nor homosexual but a Leslian. She dreamed she pulled a string through her mind to give her thoughts something to follow. She screwed an eye hook into her forehead, between her eyes, and tethered the string there and waited for her thoughts to get in line. When she woke, she could hear the birds, she could hear the wind in the trees. But she could hear something fainter still that sounded like the opposite of sawing, like the opposite of back and forth. Without opening her eyes, Leslie knew it was the tangent beans, growing. They had finally outgrown the willow branches and were now winding around the strings. It was not unlike a symphony. Leslie thought of what she'd said to Floyd—*you don't miss what you don't know*—and realized she was wrong. She'd never known what the sound of beans growing had sounded like, but as she sat there listening to the beans do just that, Leslie realized she'd been missing it her entire life.

Over the next week, the tangent beans unfurled with a fury. They uprooted the willow branches. They sagged the strings tied to the eye hook. The eye hook bulged from the wood composite of the red shed. The sprouts went from sprouts to stalks and the stalks were as thick as Leslie's ankles. Leslie got on the roof of her house and tied a clothesline through the eye hook and then looped the clothesline over the lowest

branch of a tulip poplar and then back around through the eye hook. Now that the sound of the beans growing was louder than the birds, louder than the wind through the trees, Leslie figured it was her job to show the tangent beans where to go, where to grow. Leslie sat on the roof and looked at her work. The beans made such a racket that Leslie feared when and if Floyd decided to return, she wouldn't hear the sound of his truck in the distance. She decided to stay on the roof for lookout. She decided that she would even sleep there, in her white dress, which was no longer white. She'd sleep right on the peak of the roof, one arm and one leg draped over each side, like she was sleeping on the spine of a book. The spiral of a notebook.

That night as Leslie slept, she thought of more transgressions and trespasses, which she wrote down until her wrist nearly snapped. When the sun came up, Leslie opened her eyes and saw: she was high up in the tulip poplar. The beanstalks had spiraled around her. They were wrapped around her entire body, from ankles to armpits, like giant fingers. Leslie was nothing more than a woman in a green fist, being carried up, by no will of her own, to a heaven she did not believe in. Inch by inch, Leslie rose up into the tree. By mid-morning, her house was no larger than a red notebook. By lunchtime, the trash barrel was just a scoop of purple, slowly melting away. By late afternoon, when Floyd's truck arrived, Leslie could hardly see that there were three others with him, but there were, she could make them out. Four men, four white beans moving here and there, around Floyd's black truck like four dots that had escaped a domino. By dinner, Leslie did not even want dinner, because she was dinner, was she not? And by bedtime, when the stars came out and Leslie was almost to them, a word came to her. *Deviate*, she thought. She saw a path like a stalk, and then a smaller one, off of it, like a tendril. "Deviant," she said.

Leslie looked up to where she was heading and back to where she had been. If someone wanted her down now, they'd

have their work cut out for them. No telling how many saws it would take. How many hands and bodies, how much time and friction. Leslie didn't think there were enough of those things on earth to bring her back. From what she guessed, the whole world could go back and forth, back and forth, forever and ever, and by the time they were even close to bringing her down, she would have already grown up. At least that is what she thought, that was what she was thinking.