

Jumping Beans

by Joe Alan Artz

While waiting in Ace Hardware for my dear husband to rescue me from the pouring rain, I buy some Mexican jumping beans. I can see them jumping inside their plastic box. They clack against the sides of the box at a pitch slightly higher than the chatter of the rain on the roof of Ace Hardware. The rain on the roof is a D below middle C, and the beans are two steps higher, the rain on the plate glass front windows an augmented fifth above that, making a chord in G major.

I can't help it. Perfect pitch. Cellist. It's how my brain works. I carry my little plastic box of beans toward the checkout counter.

My daughter hates piano lessons. She seems to have no ear and certainly no discipline for practice. We're wasting money on lessons, I'm wasting time waiting for Bobby to rescue me because I knew it was about to rain and could have taken the bus. He's wasting gas, driving to rescue me, and I'm wasting money on Mexican Jumping Beans. No, I'm not, I think again, as I set them on the counter. They lie without eyes in a slight curl, curiously fetal. Now and then, they jump. Not constantly, just now and then. First one, then another. One deep in the pile, then one on top, then one somewhere in the middle, like notes appearing on a staff.

The cashier's a kid I've never seen, and I've been called to Brianna's school enough this past year you'd think I would know all the kids on this side of town by sight. I give him a defiant look, expecting him to at least smirk, or maybe even laugh, at the college professor, soaked to the skin, buying Mexican Jumping Beans when the first thing inside the door is a large bin of colorful umbrellas for only \$9.99.

He doesn't even make eye contact, just aims the handheld scanner at the barcode on the box. The red laser flashes. He asks if I have an Ace Rewards card. I can't even answer because my beans have stopped jumping. I wonder if the laser light harmed them. Then one jumps and another, and I hand the boy some money, suddenly

very fond of my beans. As soon as I'm home I'll count them and Google how they jump. The boy's asked if I want a receipt. I straighten myself and say, Yes, please, daring him to comment on how distracted I was by my beans he had to ask twice followed by a "Lady?" He tears the receipt off the little printer and hands it to me, not even looking.

He mumbles a thank you, but he's looking elsewhere with a dopey expression on his face. "You're welcome" self-immolates on my tongue. The most satisfaction I can apparently claim is to follow his eyes to see what's more important to this kid than his customer.

Across the store, a slip of a girl wearing the red vest of Ace "Is the Place" Hardware looks up and trades a shy smile with the boy. Her face might have turned a little red, but his definitely does. His pimples turn to sunspots against the hormonal inferno. I've seen the girl. Her mother's often in the principal's office at the same time I am. She's often wearing a McDonald's uniform. I've usually got my 16th century cello in its white, hard case. We've never talked. I'm certain our daughters aren't friends.

The girl has a mop. She's cleaning up a rather large puddle of water in front of the jumping beans display. Out the big plate windows, an automobile's horn honks. D sharp, a shade flat, Honda. It's Bobby. My jumping beans leap, knocking against the plastic. "Daddy's here," I tell them, and run out into the rain.

