

## Thumb

Once upon a time, there was a tiny little person named Thumb. And that tiny little person was me. Most people thought it was unfortunate to be so small--but not me, I didn't mind a bit! There are several advantages to being small--I mean really small, like me.

Webweaving! Not everyone gets to learn straight from the horse's mouth--or rather, the spider's legs. I know all about cobwebs, orbwebs, and sheetwebs; I can tell you when to use a curled thread and when to use a crossed thread or a straight thread; I can describe the important qualities of the different grades of spidersilk; and I know all about radiant lines, spiral lines, parallel lines, and guy lines--in fact, I spend as much time designing as I do weaving. I have one intricate pattern that's very, very beautiful--if it proves to be functional as well, I'm going to enter it into next year's Spinneret festival.

Not only can I webweave, I can webwalk too! The Theridiidae taught me how to step along from one shiny strand to another--like a tightrope or a balance beam. It's kind of tricky with only one pair of legs, but if I fall, well that's okay: a web underneath catches me and bounces me about--like a trampoline. Sometimes I fall on purpose because it's so much fun!

What else can I do that big people can't? Well, I can explore the pond for hours in my leafboat--or if I feel like it, I'll just drift about, lying in the sun; I take dance classes at the Centipede Studio; an ant is teaching me subterranean architecture; and birds take me for rides all the time--a swallow is like a glider, a sparrow is like a small plane, and a hummingbird is kind of like a helicopter.

I have to be careful about the wind (and the rain and the snow); but because I'm so small, I can fit almost anywhere, so I have lots of cozy hideaways. All in all, it's not bad being a tiny little person named Thumb--I've been pretty happy just being me.

That is, until recently. A little while ago, people started getting very concerned about me--and very confused. I got concerned--and confused--too. You see, suddenly my sex was very important--everyone wanted to know if I was a girl or a boy, a man or a woman. So I thought and thought and thought and finally I came up with the reason--marriage! Suddenly my sex had become important

because I was expected to get married! --and I was expected to marry someone of the other sex! So! You see? They had to figure out what sex I was.

Well, now that I understood, I thought I knew what to do. I simply told them that I had no intention of getting married. I figured then my sex would become irrelevant and everyone would leave me alone. Not so! Some said 'Oh, that proves he's a man--he wants to sow his wild oats first!' Others said 'No, she's one of those stuck-up feminists--they all think they're too good to be a housewife and mother!' Then someone else said 'No, don't you see he's got no time for a wife and kids--he must be someone very important or very intelligent'. I told them none of it was true. But their curiosity grew into anger. 'You must be a lesbian then--and you hate men!' and 'You must be one of those faggots--don't want to settle down and be responsible--like a real man!' I turned away and tried to ignore them. 'If only he were bigger, we could see at a glance', I heard someone say as they finally left. 'Or *she*', someone added.

Things kept getting worse and worse. People kept bothering me with the most ridiculous strategies. Once a group of them came to ask me if I was pretty or not. I asked them why they wanted to know. They stuttered and mumbled, then one said 'If you say yes, then you're a girl!' 'And if I say no?' One laughed and said 'Well I'd change my mind about proposing'. Then one of them tried a slightly different approach: 'Is it important to you--to be pretty?' I said no. One immediately declared with victory, 'See--*he* is a man' but at the same time another stated 'See, I tell you she's one of those lesbians, they don't care how they look'. They began shouting at each other then, and continued to badger me with questions--what was my complexion like, what was the shape of my face--I finally asked them to leave. As they were doing so, I heard one say 'She *can't* be pretty, with a tongue like that', and another, 'speaks his mind--reminds me of my husband, that man.'

Another group pestered my tailor. 'What kind of clothes does she wear?' 'He orders trousers, doesn't he, never dresses?' They were told--very loose-fitting pants with pockets, and loose-fitting tunic tops. The truth only served to irritate them. 'She must not have a good figure, wants to hide it!' 'Typical man--baggy, frowsy clothes.' 'No, she *asks* for loose-fitting--don't you see, only a woman would be attracted by the way loose garments drape and fold over the body.' 'Practical dressers, that's us-

-you women can't move, everything's so tight.' After a while, someone tried again: 'What colours?' My tailor told them. 'Browns, blues, greens--' 'Ah-see!' '--reds, oranges, pinks.' 'No--see!'

One time, someone asked what I did for a living. I told them about a few jobs I had had: feather stylist at a bird salon; assistant at a watch repair shop; social worker for an exterminator business (a humanitarian approach--far superior to fumigating--I simply helped the unwanted tenants relocate); official at the grasshoppers' high jumping meet. Then I told them what I hoped to be one day--a chief microsurgeon or a pioneer in petit-pointe. My answers were clearly not too helpful. They asked then what I did in my spare time. I told them about my dance lessons and my architecture lessons. I told them about exploring the pond, and basking in the sun. They went away more frustrated than ever.

Unfortunately, there were a few who did not stop as asking. They started telling--telling me what I should and shouldn't do. Those who had decided that I was a woman reprimanded me for being overly ambitious, outspoken, bold, arrogant, mixed-up, immature, and irresponsible. Some, however complimented me on some of the webs I'd woven and encouraged me in my dance lessons. Those who had decided that I was a man accused me of being an underachiever, lazy, a sissy, a coward, mixed-up, immature, and irresponsible. A few, though, had good words to say about my drive and independence, and one even offered to pay for my first year at medical school.

Over the next few months, the people became more and more divided in their opinion. Quite a rivalry developed between those who thought I was a man and those who thought I was a woman. Many let me know that I was responsible for splitting the town into two warring factions

One day, I found that someone had left a microfilm of the local newspaper for me--that day's issue featured two stories, written by two of the townspeople: one was called "Thumbelina" and the other was called "Tom Thumb". I read them both. They were amazing.

The first one was about a tiny little girl. Who was very pretty. (This was mentioned eleven times.) She had a soft and sweet voice. The second one was about a tiny little boy. Who was very clever. He had sharp and sparkling eyes. Thumbelina was kidnapped twice--first by a toad and later by a cockchafer. Tom Thumb was never taken against his will--he allows himself to be sold so his poor father can get lots of money. The first time, Thumbelina is freed by fish, and the second time, she was

eventually abandoned (because all of the other cockchafers thought she was ugly). She sat and cried a lot. Tom Thumb, on the other hand, escapes on his own. Again and again, from several situations. All escapes reveal his cleverness, and, interestingly enough, they all involve his making a noise, his shouting, his crying *out* (instead of just crying). Eventually a mouse takes Thumbelina in (she didn't go looking for the mouse; she was "wandering" and "all at once came across" the mouse's door) and he arranges her salvation through marriage to a rich mole. Thumbelina didn't like the mole at all, so a swallow (whom she had nursed back to life earlier) offered to take her away instead, but she declined--the mouse would be sad if she left, she said. But just as the marriage was about to take place, the swallow reappeared and Thumbelina accepted his rescue this time. The swallow takes her to a tiny king--he proposed, she accepted, and they lived happily ever after. Tom Thumb also lives happily ever after, having eventually found his way home.

When I had finished reading the stories, I realized how very serious the situation had become. The entire town had developed a split personality: not quite a good-bad split, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but rather a male-female split. There was clearly a great deal of unhealthy repression going on. Which resulted in grotesque distortions: the only time Thumbelina shows any resourcefulness or intelligence is when she hitched her lily pad to a butterfly; and the only time she was at all non-passive was at the very beginning when she passed the time rowing a tulip petal around in a bowl; and Tom Thumb shows no remorse at all at having a cow and a wolf killed for his sake (when the cockchafer carries Thumbelina from the lily pad, she worries about whether the butterfly will starve or manage to free himself); and the closest he comes to kindness, gentleness, compassion--indeed, any kind of love--is the initial bargain he consents to, which gives his father money. The polarities were disturbing, to say the least.

But what could I do?

Since we are not dead, and are living still...

