



# Thumbelini

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Retold Fairy Tales

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There was once a woman who longed for a child of her very own. She lived alone in a small cottage at the edge of the woods. One day, a beggar man with sad eyes and nothing to eat rapt upon her door. “Please, madame, can you spare some table scraps for a hungry traveler?” he asked of her. The woman was a kind and generous woman so she agreed and welcomed in the poor man in to sit next to the fire. As the late afternoon wore into evening, the two strangers shared stories and laughter over large bowls of beef stew and freshly baked bread. When their stomachs were full and the stars shone brightly into the night, the beggar man bid the woman goodnight and turned to go. Just as he was leaving, he looked at her and said: “You have shown me such kindness and warmth, what is it that you desire most?”

Without hesitation the woman quickly responded “I would like to have a child, my days are long and lonely. I have no one to hear my stories or share my meals with”.

The beggar man reached into his pocket and pulled out a single seed, “Plant this seed in a pot full of fresh soil, water it and then wait until morning”.

The woman thanked him and did as she was told. She fetched a medium sized pot and filled it with fresh soil from her garden, in it she tucked the small seed and gently covered it with the remaining soil. She poured in a small amount of water and sat down to watch it. As she waited, she fell fast asleep.

In the morning, the woman awoke to a beautiful, nearly fully grown bright red tulip. It’s petals still tightly closed. “How strange and beautiful” she remarked, and bent down to kiss the newly sprouted flower. Instantly, the petals opened to reveal a small young man.

“Hello Mother” he said happily.

“My, what a handsome young man you are. I shall call you Thumbelini.”

That day, Mother gathered a small walnut shell, a corner of cloth and tiny bits of cotton to make a snug bed for him. She read him stories and together they sang songs. Thumbelini even used paper scraps to make himself an imaginary sword much like the ones the heroes had in the books they read. During the afternoons as Mother worked, Thumbelini explored the kitchen. At times, he would fall into the box of Salt or a cup of water and Mother would have to fish him out. Many weeks went by and the pair were delightfully happy.

One night as they prepared for sleep, a large father toad watched from the window sill. His heavy throat gulped in air silently as his bulging eyes watched intently. He waited until Thumbelini and mother were sleeping peacefully before he crept in through the window that was left cracked open for the evening breeze to come in. The toad swayed closer to the sleeping boy, careful not to make a sound. Once he reached Thumbelini’s bed, he slowly lifted the walnut onto his back, humming as he had heard Mother hum, and carried him out of the window and into the night.

“You will make a wonderful husband for my daughter Dortha.” he croaked. They traveled deep into a nearby swamp, the toad careful not to tip water into the nutshell and wake his passenger. When they arrived, Father Toad slowly moved Thumbelini out of the shell and onto a floating Lily pad and secured it tightly. Thumbelini remained asleep.

When he awoke, Father Toad and Dortha sat watching him from the edge of the lily pad eagerly.

“Where am I? Where is mother?” he asked sadly.

“This is your new home now.” Father Toad announced. “My daughter Dortha has been asking for a husband. You will keep her fly jars full and apply her wart balm at night ” He motioned towards her.

Dortha nodded enthusiastically, “Croak, Croak, Croak” was all she could say. She moved closer to him and opened her wide ugly mouth and croaked deeply once more, her sticky webbed fingers reaching for him.

“That’s enough for tonight, Dortha. He shall be your groom and live amongst the marshes with you soon enough. For now he must rest.”

With that, they dipped back into the water and swam silently away.

Thumbelini searched for a way to free himself, but the lily pad would not move and he could not swim. Frightened, he sat down and cried.

Two fish sisters swimming nearby heard his sorrowful wails and swam closer to look.

“He is alone,” one sister gurgled to the other.

“We should help him” the other insisted.

“Young man,” the older fish said, “do not cry. We will cut your lily pad loose and you shall float away. Beyond that bend, the swamp becomes a river. Perhaps beyond that, you shall find what you are looking for.”

Thumbelini thanked them and bid them farewell. Using a strong strand of Sawgrass to steer, he began his journey down the swamp and to the river. It wasn’t long before the shade and bearded swamp trees opened into a faster moving river. He watched with great interest as brightly colored butterflies flew over head and birds sang from the trees just beyond the river bank. The sun sparkled on the water’s surface and he felt safe once again.

Just as the sun began to set, Thumbelini’s Lily pad snagged on a fallen branch. He tried to pull his little boat to dry land, but the Lily pad wouldn’t budge and quickly began to sink. Thumbelini had heard stories about swimming, though he did not know how to do it himself.

“Help!” he cried out, “I can’t swim!”

Thumbelini now clung to the branch as the current pulled him down stream. Just as Thumbelini was certain he would lose his grasp and be swept into the deeper waters, he felt a strong hand grasp his wrists and pull him out of the water and onto the branch. Before him sat a wide eyed grinning girl with the most beautiful blue wings he had ever seen. Her short blonde hair curled under her ears. She was exactly the same size as him, if not a little taller. She moved closer to him. Her playful eyes watched him as she poked him on the cheek.

“Hello” she said.

“Oh!” he moved away from her prodding finger “Hello...”

“Where are your wings? What a funny little man you are. How can you fly without any wings?”

“I can’t fly.” he answered. “Why do you have wings?”

“Because I am a Winter Night Fairy. It’s my job to bring frost to the forest before the first big snow. Like this!”

She took a deep breath and blew tiny white ice crystals along the bark of the branch.

Thumbelini clapped his hands, “bravo!”

Off in the distance voices could be heard calling to her.

“I have to go. Are you lost, boy?”

“Yes. I was taken by an awful toad, and now I don’t know how to get back to my mother”.

“Well, it’s a good thing I found you then. Boy fairies are always getting lost, and it seems you are no different.

Well, except that you have no wings”.

Thumbelini crossed his arms at this.

“Well, here’s how you get home...” she began.

“Tut tut!” Thumbelini held up his hand and stood up “I don’t need a girl to tell me directions. You have already saved me from the dark waters and I thank you, but I can find my own way home, thank you very much!” With that he stomped his soggy foot on the branch and turned to go.

The voices searching for her became more impatient as they called to her.

She watched him walk away, deep into the forest before flying towards her calling Aunts.

Thumbelini walked for two days. The freshly delivered frost soon turned into a heavy snow. He bundled himself in dried leaves that cracked and crumbled in the ferocious wind. Shivering and weary, he sat down to rest against a fallen Pine cone. Just then, he noticed a small brown door in the snow. With no other options, he went to the door and knocked three hard knocks on the door. The home belonged to a friendly field mouse named Mari, he soon learned.

“Oh my, you poor dear! Come in out of the snow. You must be hungry”

He nodded and thanked her in a voice just above a whisper.

“Come and sit by the fire” she patted a small rocking chair with an orange embroidered quilt across it. “Go on then, sit down”

Mari brought him warm buttered Nut cakes and broiled corn tea. As the icy chill of winter began to thaw from his frozen fingers and toes Thumbelini recounted his journey to her.

“What a dreadful story, but you tell it so well. Do you know any other stories?” she asked.

“Oh yes, Mother and I used to read many books” he answered excitedly, and so began the many hours of storytelling, a quality that Mari soon grew to love. Thumbelini, quite warm now, leapt out of his chair and pranced about to act out the most adventurous parts of the story.

As the gentle hues of morning crept through the little snow covered window sill. Mari yawned. “Little boy, you may stay here with me throughout the winter if you promise to help with the cooking and the cleaning and you promise that you will always be good company.”

Thumbelini agreed gratefully. Though longed to be home with his mother, but dared not venture into the blistering cold fist of winter. He silently promised himself he would make his way home at the first sign of spring.

Life with the field mouse was never dull. When they cooked, she used every pan and every spoon. Batter splashed out of bowls and crumbs littered the tiny kitchen floor. Thumbelini scrubbed burnt bits from the pans and swept every last crumb. In the evenings, he told her stories. When he had run out of the ones he remembered, he made new ones up. The days were filled with laughter, Mari taught him how to play cards and told him about all of the forest animals. He made swords out of napkins and made shadow puppets with his hands by the fire.

One ordinary day, Mari looked up at Thumbelini and said “Tonight, we are going to have a visitor. My dear friend Mollandra the mole is coming by, you would be best to mind your manners and speak only when spoken to. Oh! And tell her your stories. She loves stories, and you will be rewarded with scrumptious treats! She’s rich and has the best treats!”

Thumbelini was not in the mood for company but did as he was told. He wished for sunshine and warm weather so that he could see his mother again.

When Mollandra arrived, she came in through a door that lead to a dark tunnel which in turn, lead to her house. "Mucky sunshine." she complained, blinking her tiny black eyes to adjust to the firelight. "I bet we can all agree that we are lucky it's winter. What sweet, sweet darkness the sky is today!"

"I like the sunshine" he said sheepishly.

Mari promptly pinched him on the arm under the table and gave him a look of warning.

"Well," Mollandra said, "It hurts my eyes".

"Thumbelini, tell her a story. Tell her your best story". Mari urged eagerly.

Politely, he agreed, though he had decided he didn't much care for the Mole. Thumbelini told tales of brave Princesses and hapless knights, of magic and sorrow. The mole was pleased very much. When it came time for the mole to say goodbye, she leaned over to her friend the field mouse and whispered in her ear. They looked at each other and gave a confident, reassuring nod.

For the next month, they visited with the mole on a nightly basis. Sometimes they made the long walk through the tunnel to the mole's drafty, but roomy home. Due to her severely impaired vision, accommodations were kept quite plain. Dark shades of grey and black pillows lined the floor, a few fluffy carpets covered the dirt.

"Less furniture for her to bump into" Mari told her when she saw Thumbelini looking around. The cupboards though, were overflowing with food. Biscuits, jam jars, prunes, dainty cream puffs, every type of nut.

Thumbelini thought he had never seen so much food in one place.

As they made the long walk through the tunnel to return each night, Thumbelini noticed a hole in the tunnel that opens up to the night sky. Each time they walked past it, he eagerly looked up into the starry night, hoping to see the moon. On a particularly cloudy night, he once saw a winged creature peering down the hole. He soon learned from a complaint of the field mouse that this was a white Sparrow.

"Dreadful things, those birds" she shook her head. "We ought to close up that hole. My cousin Martha was eaten by one."

Each night when Mari slept, Thumbelini crept out into the dark tunnel and stared up at the sky. Sometimes he

tried to climb the dirt wall, but it was no use. He would come tumbling back down each time.

One night, the Sparrow returned. "Little boy, do you wish to come away with me?" she asked. "I know not how the mouse and mole treat you, but it's no place for a sun creature to live".

"Oh yes. Please! I'd like to go home" he cried.

"I'm sorry, little one. I'm much too big to fit in this small hole. You'll have to climb. Climb up to me and you may ride on my back".

"I can't. It's no use." he sat down with his head in his hands.

As Thumbelini began to grow more accustomed to the mole, he was surprised with some unsettling news one day. "Thumbelini," Mari announced

"Mollandra has been so pleased with you lately that she has decided to take you in as a husband! You are to marry her on the first moon of the new Spring and you shall move into her home, which is much larger than this, and you shall have the great honor of being her companion. You will feed her grapes, rub her feet at night when her joints get stiff, do the fetching of the food. Oh and tell her stories, always always tell her those delightful tales!"

"I...I don't want to marry the Mole" he said quietly.

"Don't be ungrateful, boy. That mole has been very kind to you. You will marry the mole. End of story" She clanked the dishes loudly in the sink to let him know she was done talking.

The night before the wedding, Thumbelini visited the sky hole once more. The warm breeze comforted him as he knew that Spring was finally here. He sat beneath the hole until the milky sky turned light red, orange and yellow, their colors soothed him. Just as he was turning to go back before the field mouse awakened. he heard something. A low whistle called to him. He turned to see a small head of blonde hair and two blue wings peeking into the tunnel. It's owner hanging upside down. "This time it's a tunnel, not a river eh?" she called.

"Oh hello...!" he clapped his hands "Can you help me get out of here?"

Just then, he heard the field mouse calling for him.

"Yes" she said quickly and dropped down into the tunnel "climb onto my back and I will fly you up"

“Won’t I hurt your wings?” he asked timidly.

“No, fairy women are strong” she held up her arms to prove it.

“There you are!” Mari said angrily, “Get back inside now! You have to get ready for the wedding!” Mari hurried over, tripping on the lacy outfit she had sewn for the occasion.

“There isn’t going to be a wedding today” the fairy declared.

“Mollandra! Come quick! Your groom is escaping!” she shouted, her voice heavy with irritation.

The mole scurried out into the tunnel much faster than Thumbelini ever thought she could move. In an instant they were both upon them. Thumbelini climbed onto her back and they began to ascend.

“Oh no you don’t!” the mouse shouted. Mole and Mouse began to tug on his foot, trying to drag him back down “this is very bad company, little man. Very bad indeed! You promised!”

The fairy shook her wings and kicked her legs, causing them to let go.

Into the fresh air the flew.

“How did you find me?” he asked.

“The Sparrow is my friend. She told me about a little wingless man in need of help in the far tunnels.”

How quickly the sun lit up the morning, the warm Spring air rushed through their hair as they soared high above the hilltop of the field mouse and the mole, flew beyond the swamps and marshes of the toads, up and up and up! Off in the distance, they began to see houses, rooftops and window sills with quiet flowers in quaint little pots. As they flew closer, he pointed to the window sill with one red tulip resting in a beautiful clay pot. Home!, he thought.

No sooner had they landed upon the window sill that Mother was at the window to greet them. Her cheerful eyes dropped large tears of joy as she exclaimed how glad she was to have him home. The three of them talked, ate, laughed and danced.

“Perhaps one day,” the fairy said thoughtfully “I will offer you my hand in marriage”.

They all laughed but knew it was true. From that day on, she visited almost every day. Bringing them honey

droplets from the bees and news of winter.

To this day, if you listen carefully, you can still hear their gentle laughter and watch for signs of winter by the frost that comes delivered by the winter Night Fairy no bigger than a thumb.

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