

The Boy and the Whale

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Prologue

I have a secret story, one I haven't shared with anyone to this very day. So listen closely!

Have you heard of the boy who was as small as an itty-bitty fly when he was born? Who could fit into the palm of your hand? Who could curl up for a cozy little snooze in a teaspoon? Later, years later, when this boy grew up – of course he was still a teeny-weeny little fellow – he could hide himself from prying eyes no matter how hard they pried. He became utterly unnoticeable. And not just utterly unnoticeable, but magnificently mysterious. So of course you haven't heard of him. Hardly anybody has heard of him. This boy originally lived on an island, and he was always wandering about in the far North. In fact, he wandered so far he once wandered all the way to the ends of the Earth.

Those who met him hadn't the slightest clue that he existed. That there was anyone there at all. He was like a needle dropped onto a shag rug.

"It's a thimble boy!" his father had squealed happily when his son was born. Yes indeed, he was bursting with pride that fate had given him such a special little baby. He trusted that someone who came into this world well before they were expected would grow up into fine young man just like anyone else in their seaside village.

While he was still a baby, his mother rocked him, nursed him, and sewed him itty-bitty little clothes. Up until he turned four, he would pretend to be an army man and hide in her sewing box to surprise her. When he was big enough, his mother took him on his first seal hunts. They say the boy's best friend was a huge, infamous mammal of the sea he could speak with in secret.

His parents could never find him in his room. They would call and call for him. And of course they played that he was smaller than he really was. "Thimble buddy, where are you hiding? Lunch is ready! Thimbly, you're not a fly, come down off the ceiling! We're going to the park! Get down out of that spider web! Thimby-wimby, did you fall asleep in the cat's milk dish again? Get out of there this instant! Run along and get your fishing tackle, hop to!"

At such times, Thimble – that's right, that's what his parents called him – would sigh. A deep and quiet sigh. He wasn't brave enough to talk back to them. Even if he would have been, they wouldn't have heard his thimble-thin protests. We don't get to choose our own nicknames! And if we happen to get the cutest little baby nickname from someone, we must accept it no matter how we really feel about

it. But boy did he hate his nickname! He sighed, climbed down from behind the curtains, and dutifully did what his parents told him.

His father made him work out five times a day, even joining his son for the exercises. Like a clever little flea, the thimble boy clung there on his dad's arm all the live long day. Sometimes his dad tucked him into a rolled-up sleeve or the cuff of a pant leg to carry him around. Or hooked him right onto his belt when he was driving his truck. See, he was a truck driver, and more than happy to bring his little boy along on his longer hauls. During these trips our little thimble boy would travel on the windshield, the dashboard, or the steering wheel. His cheeks would be red as ripe strawberries he loved traveling so much.

But more than anything, he loved running – running until he couldn't run anymore! There was no obstacle he couldn't overcome, and he rightly become the running champion of the village. Before long, the odd little boy had befriended all the animals that lived in the forested hills and volcanic mountains and vast oceans.

In time, he came to be better friends with birds, seals, seagulls, and mosquitos than with people! Because people constantly reminded him of how small he was, they couldn't get through a conversation without bringing up his size. "How's it going, small fry?" "What's hangin', Tom Thumb?" They even bullied the little fellow. "You're nothing, you're nobody!" "Get lost, loser!" "Let's throw him off a rock!" they would shout. Thimble thought things would be better if he just disappeared. Became invisible forever. He really did want to get lost, anywhere that wasn't here, the farther away the better. He would have to run a long, long way. He greatly preferred gazing at the ocean by himself than being stuck up in a room playing with the other kids.

When it came down to it, Thimble wasn't so different. Quite the contrary! He looked exactly the same as anybody else, just a super miniature version. Like he'd shrunk in the wash. But the littlest folks have the biggest imaginations. They can live hidden away like a microscopic cell. Like the teeniest plankton in the ocean.

And here we must remember the fact that our story is playing out on a spectacularly unique stage. The cold, cruel North. As far north as North goes. Where the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea meet. Where, bet your bottom dollar, the nights are shiveringly cold. Storms surge, winds whip, and rocks rumble across the landscape. The jagged cliffs hide all manner of dangers, not just for animals but for humans as well. Waves crash upon the shores with a force the stones can barely withstand. Never-

melting ice bursts forth from stone, snow-covered peninsulas from the shore. And beyond the North Sea begins the empire of eternal ice – what comes after that is just frozen frost. Its name: The Seas Beyond. The Infinite Empire of Giant.

There, in that dense, misted land, where the bottomless depths of the sea meet the open ocean, enormous whales roam the waves. They glide with their calves from bay to bay, ever in search of more food.

And who in the world would have a whale as their best friend? We'll find out soon enough!

Follow me! Hop to!

Part 1

I'm Running Away

The sea cannot be evil. Nor can the sea be cruel. Here in the North, enchanting swaths of light dance upon the sea every sun-soaked morning. It was early summer and the ice of winter was melting when our hero, Thimble, went out fishing with the other children. They assembled amongst the stones. In a short while the world's quietest and yet most enthralling children's event was to start: The Great Fishing Competition. Word had spread that the river warden in the nearby village had contracted seagull flu and wasn't able to get over it. For days on end he'd been asleep in bed, like a hamster hibernating through the winter. Not eating, not drinking. And no river warden means open poaching season! No one to ask what you'd caught. Only the size matters. Whoever could catch the biggest living creature from the depths of the sea would be the fishing champion of the island.

What do you mean, fishing is boring? Only someone from down South would think that way! In the North, if you can't catch a fish, then you're practically useless.

So, let's see who will catch some fish today! The children launched their boats one by one. Everybody was focused on fishing. The gentle murmur of the waves drowned out the far off clamor of gulls. This is when the sea critters either venture closer to the rocky shores (and you'll make your catch), or pop off for a nap in the sunshine (and you'll get nothing but sea urchins in your net). From time to time the slap of a whale tale or the splash of a dolphin would break the tense, taut motionlessness of the horizon.

Thimble reached in to haul up his net. There weren't any fish. Instead there were far too many crabs, seahorses, giant clams, and hefty lobworms.

Meanwhile, one of his classmates had slinked up behind him. "So, pipsqueak, how many fish did you catch?"

"Not a single one."

"And seals?"

"None of those either."

"And what about... whales?" he laughed loudly and cruelly.

"Shut up!"

Thimble turned around and shoved the boy hard, drawing a crowd of students who wanted to see the altercation.

"I *did* see the migrating whales! They're right there, just look! And I'll swim after them soon enough."

Thimble gestured vehemently, flailing his arms and legs. His classmates closed their circle around him, clearly not believing what he said.

"You're a fly, not a boy!"

"Your arms are like pencils!"

"Your legs are like little worms!"

"You're thin as a matchstick!"

"Tadpole!"

"Bone lizard!"

"Teaspoon!" they teased, each trying to one-up the student before them.

The children began pushing and shoving him. He was bumped back and forth from hand to hand, which of course scared him. They clapped him on his head, since he barely came up to their waists. By now his whole body was shaking. Thimble never once cried out, clenching his teeth shut instead. He was ready to erupt. His face was blazing, then turned purple.

"A teaspoon of raspberry syrup, that's what you caught!"

"Aww, what's the matter little liar, can't talk to your whales anymore?"

"You eat a fib machine for breakfast? Come on, cough it up!"

They pressed him closer and closer against the stone. Someone plucked out a tuft of his hair. “Thimble boy, thimble boy, thimble boy!” They shouted his nickname, and the sea echoed it back. The tumult was becoming unbearable. How was he supposed to get through this?

And then suddenly, out of nowhere, a blisteringly cold wind howled down out of the North. The waves boomed and crashed against the shore. Thimble clapped his hands to his ears to block out both the cruel taunting and the wind’s roaring. In the zeal of their taunting, his classmates didn’t even notice as he escaped the circle. He squeezed out through a gap in the legs and took straight to his heels. He ran and ran, dashing along as fast as he could. When the others noticed he’d slipped from their grasp, they took off after him. They jostled one another as they chased him, trying to get him to admit he doesn’t know the first thing about whales, and that he certainly isn’t friends with animals. He can’t fish and he can’t swim, not in a thousand years would he ever win the fishing competition. What good is the life of a tiny, useless little person like him? It would be better if he’d never been born!

“Let’s squish him! Let’s stomp him!” the mob shouted angrily.

Thank goodness Thimble could run circles around this lot. Before they knew it, he’d made his getaway. Don’t forget, he was the fastest runner in the area! On and on he huffed and puffed, never once looking back.

He’d covered more than three miles when he reached a wide, grassy field. The air was crisp, and he’d lost his pursuers. A handful of innocent deer were grazing in the ravines hidden amongst the hills. He couldn’t even count the number of times he’d had to run away. He had thousands of hiding places, from fox dens to beaver dams to bear-less caves. He’d had enough! He had to put a stop to this! He needed change, something new. Never again would he let the others pin him up against the rocks like that.

Now he was sure: he had to run away.

Part 2

Meeting Lída

Thimble was determined. Free and full of joy. If he had to, he would walk all the way to the ends of the earth. He clumped and clomped along the rocky shores, looking for somewhere to sleep and something to eat. He built his own little hut to start making his plan a reality. That is, to never ever see

anyone from the village ever again. What a wild joy! To live without people, classmates, or parents. He was wholly convinced that running away was the best thing one could ever do.

As he strolled along in his boots, his every step seemed light as a feather. The steep gravel climb seemed a wide, paved walkway. He didn't hear any shouting classmates chasing him. Just the cries of sea gulls, the fluttering wings of sparrow hawks, the whistling tune of the wind blowing away every cruel word. And just like that, the stones that always settled on his chest after his classmates bullied him fell away. Fell away and rolled right to the bottom of the ravines.

Silence blanketed the stony clearing. A silence both dense and tense. The clamoring and yammering of the gulls that had been filling the air slowly faded away.

Thimble suddenly heard a strange noise.

Somebody was whimpering nearby, their voice coming from behind a prickly bush.

"Who's that sniffing?"

"Nobody. Go awayyy," came the response.

"Nobody? Then who's sniffing if nobody's here?"

"Who could be sniffing, I'm all alone here. A nobody."

Hunched over and hunkered down was a little girl hiding behind the bush. Thimble recognized her. They'd played together several times in the past, but he couldn't quite remember her name.

"Why are you hiding here all alone at by the side of the road?"

"No reason," came the response. The girl turned her back on Thimble, covering her round, puffy face. "Now leave me alone!" she repeated, grumpier than ever.

At least she's calmed down and stopped crying for a moment, Thimble thought.

"Lída, is that you?" her name finally came to him.

Lída recognized him as well. She was quite fond of the minute little fellow. "Well, if it isn't little Tom Thumb!" she thought. She saw him as so innocent, and loved being around him. She loved ogling his tiny little form, loved admiring how fast he ran.

"What are you doing here?"

"Just out for a walk... no reason... you know... I had to get away from them..."

"Were they bullying you again?" Lída asked. She hadn't thought Thimble to be the type to give up.

"I'm in the middle of running away."

“So they were bullying you again.”

“Not a chance! Let them try!” Thimble snapped, and turned on his heel. “Goodbye! I’m leaving. I have a lot to do. It was nice to see you.”

“I need a tissue. Do you have one?” Lída acted as if she hadn’t even heard what Thimble said.

“Here you go,” he said as he passed her his handkerchief.

The girl wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

“What did you say? Where are you going?”

A tense silence followed, Thimble didn’t respond. His voice was stuck.

“The ends of the earth aren’t a bad idea,” the girl broke the silence. “How do you plan on getting there?”

“Well umm, I guess... I’m walking. I’ll follow the coast, the fjords, the sea, take a boat. Surely the ends of the earth can’t hide for long, I’ll find them. I’m not coming back to the village, so bye-bye!”

“Thimble, wait!”

“What do you want? I already said goodbye.”

“I think you’re cool!”

Lída liked the boy’s determination. Thimble turned around, pleased by her compliment.

“So you’ve decided to stop your sniffing? That’s good. I thought you were going to cry forever.”

“No way, I stopped! I was thinking about jumping into the sea. I would have jumped already, but you showed up and interrupted me.”

“Into the sea? But it’s cold, it’s wet, it’s freezing! Are you crazy?” Thimble shuddered. “You’d be sneezing afterwards for days. You’d be sicker than sick! There aren’t enough handkerchiefs in the world.”

“I don’t know...” Lída was perplexed. She fell silent, turned her head, and faced the sea. “I’ll find out. If there’s no better option...”

“The sea is wild and dangerous, Lída! Don’t even dip a pinky toe in.” Thimble warned the girl. “Anyway, have a good trip.”

Of course Lída didn’t know the first thing about the sea, her parents had coddled her so much. She’d never even been out to see the seaside cliffs.

“All the better” she finally turned back. “I can hardly wait to live at the bottom of the sea for a bit. It’ll be better than school, at least. Don’t you think?”

"I don't think, I know. Drat!" Thimble continued. He was proud of knowing so much about the sea and being able to speak with animals. "The sea truly is wild, its animals dangerous. They're hunters, they kill each other. It's full of swimming predators. You can't see from here what's going on down beneath the surface. The sea is deep and dark, concealing thousands of dangers."

"Then can I go see the cliffs with you?"

"Go see the what?" Thimble raised his eyebrows.

"Alright, fine, can I run away with you?" Lída grinned.

"A girl?" Lída's request caught him off guard.

"What, got a problem traveling with a girl?"

Thimble blushed and stammered. "No, uhhh, no, of course not! Not at all! If you want to, of course, come along. You can come with me, a-okay."

Thimble pondered what traveling with Lída would be like. She had never been mean to him before, so maybe, just maybe, they would get along okay together.

"Cool," said Lída, and fell in line behind Thimble, ready to go.

"Wait a second. Don't you need to ask permission from your parents?" Thimble suddenly thought.

"What for?"

"Because you're supposed to. A child can't just leave home without –"

"My mom thinks she's always keeping an eye on me, but in reality she doesn't pay the least bit of attention. She forgets to make breakfast. She forgets to cook dinner. She doesn't even notice if I'm not home." Her eyes filled with tears as she explained. She knew what she was saying wasn't entirely true, and her parents were sure to worry, but she didn't want to talk about it.

"What? They don't make you food? I can hardly finish all the potatoes and carrots I get."

Plump little Lída started listing off the mean names she was called:

"Jelly roll. Porky pig. Lard butt. Roly-poly. These are the names I get called. At night I sneak out of my room and eat all the chocolate I can find in the pantry. Chips, snacks, cookies, I love them all! It's no wonder my thighs jiggle like this."

"So this is why you wanted to jump into the sea?" Thimble sighed.

"Because I'm fat. And of course all my cousins are thin. They even do ballet!"

Thimble now understood why the girl wanted to run away.

"I'll get you something to eat Lída, don't worry! Can you fish?"

"I'll learn."

"And paddling a boat?"

"Can't wait!"

"Then you're welcome to join me. I'll teach you how to speak to animals. Let's run away and teach your parents a lesson."

Lída cast her eyes down.

"But I really do love eating. Chocolate snails. Nutella. Bonbons."

"Woah, me too! And licorice..." Thimble licked his lips hungrily. "But I can't ever have it for lunch, all I get is carrot stew. Blech!"

Both of them shuddered at the thought of carrot stew.

Lída then reached into her pocket.

"Check it out, I've got some extra pastries stashed away. Jam-filled, cinnamon, poppy seed muffins, lemon curd, and... what kind do you like?"

"Cottage cheese."

"Oh, I don't have that one."

"I love the chocolate ones too."

"Here, this'll help you grow up big and strong." She offered him a squished, but ultimately very tasty, chocolate snail. They munched and crunched their way happily through the pastries from Lída's pocket.

Once they were finished, Thimble turned to Lída. "Just don't ever call me small! Pencil-neck, matchstick..."

"Noodle boy!" Lída laughed out loud.

"Not that one either! Don't say those names, and you can come with me."

"Okay. And you can't call me roly-polly or fatso or pudgy or flabby."

Laughing, they set off along the shoreline. Thimble held tightly to Lída's hand, and on and on they ambled, searching for their new home at the ends of the earth.