

I SUPPOSE IT WOULD BE FASHIONABLE TO ADMIT TO SOME RESERVATIONS as I undertake to write the History of My Life. Popular memoirs of our time suggest a certain reticence is expected, particularly when the author is a female. We women are timid creatures, after all; we must retire behind a veil of secrecy and allow others to tell our stories.

To that, I can only reply, "Rubbish!" I have let others—one other, in particular—tell my story for far too long. Now is the time to set the record straight, to sort out the humbug from the truth, and vice versa.

Has any other female of our time been written about as much as I have? It was not so very long ago when it was impossible to open a newspaper without reading about my husband or myself! We even preempted the War Between the States during its very darkest days. For a solid week, every newspaper in the land was interested only in our wedding plans—the guest list, the presents we received, my trousseau, in particular, receiving much press. President and Mrs. Lincoln were so eager to make our acquaintance that they put aside their own cares, graciously welcoming us to the White House on our honeymoon journey.

During the elaborate reception in the Blue Room, where we met a number of dignitaries, including many generals who would win themselves Glory on the Field of Battle, I permitted

Mr. Lincoln to kiss me. This was not something I allowed strange men to do as a rule, but felt I had to acquiesce to a presidential request. My husband, however, had no reservations of this sort; without even asking, he rose on tiptoe to bestow his usual happy kiss upon Mrs. Lincoln, who twittered and giggled and blushed a rosy red.

“Mr. Lincoln,” she exclaimed with surprise. “The General kisses every bit as nicely as you!”

“Well, why shouldn’t he, Molly?” Mr. Lincoln asked with a twinkle in his gray eyes. “I reckon he’s had much more practice!”

Everyone laughed appreciatively, and none harder than my husband. I could not join in; it was a sore subject between the two of us already, so early in our marriage.

I determined to mention it to him later that night, when we were preparing for slumber. A more immediate problem, however, soon drove the thought from my mind. The enormous four-poster bed, piled high with the downiest of mattresses, pillows, and plush counterpane, was so tall that we despaired of ever reaching the top. Even my wooden steps, which I had carried with me since childhood, were not high enough. With great embarrassment, I had to summon a hotel chambermaid to assist us in attaining our goal. Once ensconced, naturally we were required to put off any thoughts of nighttime ablutions, unless we wanted to sleep the rest of the night on the floor.

The newspapers, naturally, did not recount this particular detail of our visit. This is but one example of why I have decided to write down my own recollections of my life thus far, and I vow I will do my best to keep them free of humbug.

Humbug. I can still hear my mother’s gentle voice admonishing me all those years ago. “Oh, Vinnie, my little chick,” she said with a worried shake of her head. “If you go with this Barnum you will be just another one of his humbugs. You will be caught up in

that man's snare, and however will you escape without losing your soul?"

Looking back, I'm forced to admit that my mother was right; I did lose my soul, and so much more. But I'm not sure that I didn't give it away freely. My mother did not know Mr. Barnum as I did; she did not understand him, nor did the world at large. My intimacy with him is a prize, one that I am not willing to share with anyone. Not even with my own husband, who knew him first.

Not even with Minnie, although she would never have asked this of me; she never asked anything at all of me, except to keep her safe. And in that, I let her down.

This is but one more reason why I am eager to share my life's experiences: because I will finally be able to provide a full account of my beloved sister's all-too-brief time on this Earth. My name may be on this volume's cover, as it was on all the handbills, headlines, and invitations, but for once I will not allow Minnie to remain in my shadow, although she was happiest there. I consider it my duty and privilege—even more, my penance—to tell her story, too. She deserves to be remembered; her courage needs to be known—as does the identity of the person, or persons, who killed her.

I have spent the last ten years trying to decide who was most responsible for her death, Mr. Barnum or me. Perhaps by the time I'm finished with this story, I will have figured it out.

Perhaps I won't, for I'm not sure I want to know.

Listen to me! I am putting the exclamation point before the salutation, as Mr. Barnum used to say; I had best dim the lights and commence my story before the audience grows restless. And there is no better way to begin this tale than by revealing, once and for all, my real name.

It is not, in fact—despite the manner in which I have been

introduced to Queens, Presidents, and even Mormons—Mrs. Tom Thumb. It is not even Lavinia Warren, which is how I was first introduced to the public.

No, God saw fit to bestow upon me the lamentable name of Mercy Lavinia Warren *Bump*.

And of the many obstacles He handed me at birth, Reader, I have always believed this to be the biggest.

*My Childhood,
or the Early Life of a Tiny*

I WILL BEGIN MY STORY IN THE CONVENTIONAL WAY, WITH my ancestry.

About the unfortunately named Bumps, I have little to say other than they were hardworking people of French descent who somehow felt that shortening “Bonpasse” to “Bump” was an improvement.

With some pride, however, I can trace my pedigree on my mother’s side back through Richard Warren of the Mayflower Company, to William, Earl of Warren, who married Gundreda, daughter of William the Conqueror. This is as far back as I have followed my lineage, but I trust it will suffice. Certainly Mr. Barnum, when he first heard it, was quite astonished, and never failed to mention it to the Press!

I was born on 31 October, 1841, on the family farm in Middleborough, Massachusetts, to James and Huldah Bump. Most

people cannot contain their surprise when I tell them that I was, in fact, the usual size and weight. Indeed, when the ceremonial weighing of the newborn was completed, I tipped the scales at precisely six pounds!

My entrance into the family was preceded by three siblings, two male and one female, and was followed by another three, two male and one female. All were of ordinary stature except my younger sister, Minnie, born in 1849.

I am told that I grew normally during the first year of my life, then suddenly stopped. My parents didn't notice it at first, but I cannot fault them for that. Who, when having been already blessed with three children, still has the time or interest to pay much attention to the fourth? My dear mother told me that it wasn't until I was nearly two years old that they realized I was still wearing the same clothes—clothes that should already have been outgrown, cleaned and pressed, and laid in the trunk for the next baby. It was only then that my parents grew somewhat alarmed; studying me carefully, they saw that I was maturing in the way of most children—standing, talking, displaying an increased interest in my surroundings. The only thing I was not doing was *growing*.

They took me to a physician, who appraised me, measured me, poked me. "I cannot offer any physical explanation for this," he informed my worried parents. "The child seems to be perfectly normal, except for her size. Keep an eye on her, and come back in a year's time. But be prepared for the possibility that she might be just one example of God's unexplainable whims, or fancies. She may be the only one I've seen, but I've certainly heard of others like her. In fact, there's one over in Rochester I've been meaning to go see. Heard he can play the violin, even. Astounding."

My parents did not share his enthusiasm for the violin-playing, unexplainable Divine whim. They carried me to another physi-

cian in the next town over, who, being a less pious man than the previous expert, explained that I represented “an excellent example of Nature’s Occasional Mistakes.” He assured my increasingly distressed parents that this was not a bad thing, for it made the world a much more interesting place, just as the occasional two-headed toad and one-eyed kitten did.

In despair, my parents whisked me back home, where they prayed and prayed over my tiny body. Yet no plea to the Almighty would induce me to grow; by my tenth birthday I reached only twenty-four inches and weighed twenty pounds. By this time my parents had welcomed my sister Minnie into the world; when she displayed the same reluctance to grow as I had, they did not take her to any physicians. They simply loved her, as they had always loved me.

“Vinnie,” my mother was fond of telling me (Lavinia being the name by which I was called, shortened within the family to Vinnie), “it’s not that you’re too small, my little chick, but rather that the world is too big.”

My poor, tenderhearted mother! She thought that she was reassuring me. She was a lovely, pious creature, tall and thin, a clean, starched apron constantly about her waist. She had shining brown hair that I inherited, slightly worried brown eyes, and an ever-patient smile upon her lips. She only wanted me to be happy, to be safe; she wanted to keep me home, where she was certain less harm could come to me. She was trying, in her simple way, to reconcile me to that future, the only future that she—or anyone else—could envision for one my size.

What she didn’t understand was that she was only inciting my curiosity about that big world. *Everything* was bigger than me; if the world was so much larger that she had to constantly warn me of it, what wonders did it contain? What marvels? I could not understand why anyone would not want to see them.

My father never tried to fool me in this way. He was not a demonstrative man, but around me, and then around Minnie, who was even smaller, he was extremely reticent. I believe he was terrified he might crush us with his big, work-worn hands, so he did not touch us at all, not a pat or a hug. He never seemed able to understand why God had made Minnie and me so small, and I believe he was slightly ashamed of us. Whenever we were out together as a family, he always kept his head bent; this way, he did not have to look anyone in the eye. I'm not sure he completely understood why he did this, or what he was afraid to encounter in the gaze of his fellow man; perhaps he simply didn't want to see pity for us there—or for himself.

Yet he loved us. And in the way of most men, he reacted by trying to *solve* us, as if we were the one wagon wheel that stubbornly refused to match up with the others, causing the whole contraption to wobble. This took the form of practicality, which, in the end, was much more useful than Mama's clucking and soothing. My first memory was of my father presenting me with a set of wooden steps, lovingly made by his own hands, which were too clumsy for caresses. They had crafted a beautiful set of steps, however, sanded to a honeyed glow so that not a single splinter might puncture a tender, tiny foot. They were lightweight, a miracle of engineering, so that I could easily carry them with me wherever I went.

Later, after the fire, Mr. Barnum gave me a gorgeous set of steps covered in crushed red velvet with my initials embroidered upon them. But they have never been able to take the place of my father's simple gift.

My brothers and sister swooped and ran and carried on like all children, happily including Minnie and me in their play, not worrying very much about whether or not we could keep up. And we could—or rather, I could. Unlike me, Minnie was content

with her small corner of the world; she knew she could not easily keep up with the others, so she didn't even try. She found happiness, instead, in what was easily within her reach; no stair steps for her! She spent hours playing with her dolls, sitting on her little stool by the hearth, sewing handkerchiefs or helping Mama prepare meals. She was very shy around others and felt their stares keenly, even though she was as beautiful as a china figurine. Minnie was blessed with impish dark eyes that were such a contrast to her bashful demeanor, black curls, and a smile that revealed one perfect dimple in her left cheek. Only with me, closest to her in size but still larger, able to protect her, did she ever sometimes show curiosity or boldness; once she surprised me by suggesting we creep outside in the middle of the night, to see if there really were fairies living beneath the flowers.

Amused, I took her outside, where we tiptoed, hand in hand, peeking under the forget-me-nots and ferns. While she lifted leaves and petals with dogged optimism, stifling an occasional squeal whenever she happened upon a frog or a startled rabbit, I found my gaze pulled upward. The moon was low and luminous in the night sky; cocking my head, I was just about to make out the face of the man in the moon when Minnie excitedly exclaimed, "Oh, look, Sister! I found one, with green wings!"

She tugged at my sleeve, and I bent down. "It's just a dragonfly," I told her.

"No, it's a fairy, don't you see?"

"I just see a sleepy dragonfly."

"You're not looking at it right, Vinnie. It's as beautiful as a fairy, all green and shimmery. Can't you see it?"

I looked at my sister, her eyes shining brighter than the moon above. Who would have the heart to contradict her?

Growing up, Minnie listened, much more closely than I, to Mama's worries about our safety. Horses were Mama's chief foes;

she feared, as long as she lived, that Minnie or I would be trampled or kicked by a stray hoof.

On our behalf, she also feared wells, rain barrels, unsteady tables, large dogs, poison left out for the rats (even after I had long passed the age where I could reasonably be expected not to eat it), doors that latched, broken window sashes, snowdrifts, and falling fireplace logs.

I never understood her terrors. Safe, to me, was exactly where I was; low to the ground, where I became more acquainted with the bottoms of things than the tops. For example, I grew very adept at judging a woman's character or station in life by the hem of her skirt. Tiny, too-perfect stitches or ornate ruffles of course denoted a woman of high class, although not necessarily one of good character. Sloppy, loose, or haphazard stitches didn't always mean that a woman was slovenly in appearance; more often than not, it simply meant that she had so many children and cares she could not spare the time to attend to her own clothing. Those whose skirts sported tiny handprints or burnt patches resulting from too much time in front of the kitchen fire were always the most kindhearted.

Skirts were not the only things with which I was acquainted. Naturally I was more familiar with flowers and weeds than the tops of trees; furniture legs and the unfinished undersides of tables than framed pictures or mirrors. And that is why I never was fearful, why I could not understand my mother's worries; the things with which I was most familiar were the sturdier, more substantial things in life. The legs of the table, the widest part of the tree trunk, the foundation of the house, the things upon which everything else was dependent, upon which everything else was built. These were my world.

What my mother feared most—even more than tables toppling over on either Minnie or myself—was other *children*.

While she dutifully brought us to church each Sunday, our Christian education ever in her thoughts, my mother was most reluctant to send me to school with my brothers and sister. Fearing merciless teasing, rough play with children who were not accustomed to one my size, she thought it would be best to educate me at home, herself.

I, however, did not share this belief. I'd heard my siblings talk of the wonders of school, of slates and lunch buckets and school-yard games and the glories of being asked to stay after to wash the blackboard. They came home taunting me with their knowledge, singing multiplication tables and spelling enormous words and pointing to the odd shapes on the globe in the parlor, proudly telling me the names of the continents and oceans.

So when I heard my mother tell my father she thought it best that I stay home with her and the younger children, I stamped my foot with as much authority as a seven-year-old can muster.

"No, Mama, you must allow me to go to school! Aren't I as smart as my brothers and sister? Why shouldn't I go with them, now that I'm old enough? They will look out for me, if that's what you fear."

Mama started to protest, but to my surprise, my father interrupted her.

"Huldah, I am surprised to admit it, but I agree with our Vinnie. She's a sharp little thing, with an intelligence that must be fueled. You could not give her all she needs here. Let her satisfy her curiosity at school, for a life of books is likely all the life she will ever have. It's best we give her that now. She'll have the rest of her days, I'm afraid, to stay home with you."

I was too young to fully understand my father's meaning. I heard only that he wanted me to go to school, and that was all I needed; I threw my arms about him even though I knew he did not appreciate such demonstrations.

“Oh, Papa, I am so very happy! Thank you! I promise I will never make you regret your decision!”

It would be a pretty story, indeed, if I could say that I never did! Yet I have to admit that I was so eager to be allowed my first foray into that large world that I became rather mischievous.

Full of high spirits, so delighted to be where I was, at first I could not be induced to remain in my seat. At the time, you might recall, country school desks were one long table affixed to the perimeter of the room, three-quarters of the way around.

On a dare, I discovered that I was small enough to fit neatly underneath the desk without having to duck my head; basking in the approval of my schoolmates, I took it a step further. Whenever the schoolteacher’s back was to us, I would slide off my perch—several large books piled on top of one another—and duck beneath the desk. Then I would run along, barely stifling my giggles as I pinched and poked at my schoolmates’ legs: the little girls’ sensible woolen pantalets, the boys’ worn and patched knees. I was so nimble that they could not catch me; I could run around the entire room and reach the end of the desk almost before the first child had reacted to my lively tugs with a squeak or a squeal.

“Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump,” Mr. Dunbar, our teacher, would sputter. “Sit back down immediately!” He would try to catch me, but being the imp that I was, I could elude his grasp easily; he was inclined to heaviness (from the many tarts and pies that the older female students showered upon him), and would flail about, breathing laboriously. By the time he straightened himself up, his face red, his oily hair hanging down upon his forehead, I would be sitting primly in my seat, seemingly oblivious to my classmates’ giggles.

“What am I to do with you?” he asked one day; standing over me, he shook his finger angrily in my face, pushed finally beyond

his limit. "Shut you up in my overshoe? It's just about the right size for a mite like you; how would you like me to sit you in it?"

To my astonishment, my schoolmates burst into laughter at this. I looked around, scarcely believing what I saw: My friends, who had so admired me just a moment before, were giggling at the notion of me sitting in the teacher's overshoe. They were *laughing* at me; they were laughing at my *size*.

Only my brother Benjamin—just two years older than I—was not laughing; he was hanging his head, unable to look my way. He was, I realized with a sick, hollow feeling in my stomach, ashamed of me. He was ashamed to be my brother. I had never before experienced such guilt and rejection, both.

This, I suddenly understood, was what Mama had so feared: that were I to venture out from the safety of home, I would not be the only one hurt. This realization hit me hard, knocking the very breath from my being; I hung my throbbing head and bit my trembling lip. Up to this point in my life, I had rarely given my size any thought other than for the many inconveniences it caused me—the constant strain at the back of my neck from looking up, even just to talk to my siblings; the extra effort required to do the simplest of tasks, since I had to haul my steps with me everywhere I went; the fear and worry I knew I caused my dear mother, which hurt me only because it hurt her.

Now, however, my size was no longer merely an inconvenience—it was an embarrassment and a weapon. One Mr. Dunbar had seized upon, first thing, in order to shame me into behaving.

Blinking furiously, staring at my slate—for it was the only object I dared look at—I took some comfort in the realization that my sums were just as neat as anyone else's. They, at least, were not remarkable for any reason other than their accuracy. And so,

with a great effort, I managed not to cry, for I did not want my tears to wash away this precious evidence.

That day after school, my brother Benjamin walked ahead of me for the very first time. Even though he waited for me to catch up with him after the rest of the children had fallen away, and picked me up and hoisted me upon his back without my asking, knowing that I was tired, for the first time there was a strangeness between us. He had been my closest sibling up until now, the one who would patiently carry me about, hold me up so that I might see the world the way he did. Now, unexpectedly, I didn't know how to breach this frightening new gap between us and I realized, even at such a tender age, that I never would—and that the gap would only widen with time. It grieved me to think that I had shamed him so; I did not stop to think that he might bear some responsibility for his feelings, as well.

From that day on, I devoted myself to study in the classroom, leaving play for the schoolyard or on the long walk home. I realized that one my size could ill afford to play the imp; I resolved to be dignified, always. And indeed, when I first became known to the Public at Large, this was what people remembered most about me; my gentility and deportment were always remarked upon with no little admiration.

Evidently I also impressed Middleborough's elders with my studious, dignified ways. For when I was sixteen, it was decided to divide the school into a primary and a secondary room; soon after, the school committee showed up at my parents' door, asking to speak with me.

"We would like to offer Miss Lavinia the position of school-teacher of the primary room," the chairman told my parents once we were all seated in the parlor. Mama was justifiably proud of this pretty room, full of her finest china lamps, snowy lace scarves

covering the polished wood surfaces. She always kept it neat and scrubbed and ready for unexpected guests.

My parents' surprise, I must say, could not have been greater. Mama gasped. Tears filled her eyes, and Papa colored and ducked his head the way he always did when he was pleased.

"Oh, how wonderful! How kind, how very kind! Vinnie, what do you think?" Mama turned to me with shining eyes, a wondrous smile illuminating her gentle face.

Seated upon my own rocking chair—one of the few pieces of furniture in the house that was made to my scale; Papa had fashioned it himself—I studied my hands, gracefully folded upon my lap. My heart fluttered with excitement, but I waited until it calmed down before finally looking up and fixing the chairman with a steady gaze.

"I accept, naturally, although I do wish to inquire about my pay. How much remuneration per school term are you offering?"

For some reason this amused everyone; the entire party broke into helpless guffaws, the chairman—a large man whose waist could not be contained by his waistcoat—slapping his fleshy knee with such gusto he very nearly toppled one of Mama's prized lamps. Sitting there, my face burning so hotly I thought my cheeks must be very scarlet indeed, at first I failed to understand their laughter. What was so amusing about wishing to know what I would be earning?

Yet I did understand it. For by now I was well aware that some people found it very odd to hear perfectly sensible, rational notions coming from me. This was because of who I was—or, rather, *what* I was.

And what I was, of course, was both small—and *female*.

As a female, not to mention a female with no other prospects, I was supposed simply to accept their kind offer for what, even

then, I suspected was likely an act of charity. Yet a *male* teacher would have been expected to inquire about his wages; if he hadn't, he would have been dismissed as a fool and not engaged.

I endured their laughter with flaming cheeks, allowed it to die, yet repeated my question without hesitation; I saw my father open his mouth to say something but then catch my gaze and hastily shut it.

"Miss Bump, I find it unusual, to say the least, that you would so boldly inquire about wages," the committee chairman said after he finally composed himself. "Naturally, I will speak to your father about what we will pay."

"But my father isn't the one teaching, is he?"

"No, but it is customary, of course—"

"As it is customary to engage a schoolteacher who will not be smaller than her pupils. Yet you have chosen to ignore this custom; let us dispense with the other. My wages?"

Perhaps it was because I remained—with great effort, struggling against my anger at the man's obtuseness—so composed that he finally managed to mutter the agreed-upon sum. I nodded in acceptance, to his obvious relief, and the matter was settled. When the committee rose to leave, I made it my business to quickly approach the chairman to shake hands, instead of leaving him to perform this customary ceremony with my father.

"Miss Bump, I declare, I'm mighty glad that I'm not going to be a pupil in your school. I suspect you won't put up with any mischief at all," he remarked as he bent down toward me, a twinkle in his eye.

"No, I assure you right now that I won't," I answered earnestly, for I would not allow him to make this—or me—into a joke. "There will not be a better run classroom in all of Massachusetts; just you see."

And I have to say, without false modesty, that there was not.

On the first day of class I induced Benjamin to drive me to school early, which he did despite his misgivings over this whole enterprise.

“Vinnie, don’t you see they’re making fun of you? Making you an experiment? How can you let them?”

“If that is true,” I replied as we hit a deep rut in the road, causing me to bounce upon the wagon seat as my feet naturally could not reach the floorboards, “I intend to turn the tables upon them. Then we’ll see who gets the last laugh.”

“I don’t understand you, Vinnie. It’d be so much easier for you not to be out as much in public.”

“Easier for whom? For I can think of no fate drearier than sitting at home by the hearth for the rest of my life, watching all of you go off one by one.”

Benjamin didn’t reply, but once we arrived at the school-house, he worked diligently to help me make sure the room was ready. He and I (aided by my indispensable stair steps) soon had the blackboards shining, the chairs smartly lined up, the *McGuffey’s Readers* laid out upon the desks. Mama had made me a special cushion for my desk chair, so that I could keep a watchful eye upon my pupils.

I asked Benjamin then to go ring the school bell so that when the first of my students arrived, I was standing calmly in the middle of the room. I did not attempt to hide my size by staying behind my desk or perching upon any kind of platform. I simply stood there, as dignified, as tall, as I could possibly make myself appear.

Mama had made me a new dress, the skirt long and full so that it finally reached the ground, hiding my child’s shoes, which were an unfortunate necessity. But I was wearing my first corset; Mama had ordered the smallest one that was carried at the general store, and altered it as best she could. She cut it down, removed

several stays, stitched it all back up again, but still it gapped in odd places. Yet I *felt* somehow more correct, more upright, even so. My chestnut hair was secure in a simple, becoming twist; my head felt heavy on top, while my neck felt bare. It was the first time I had not worn my hair in long braids down my back.

Thus, appropriately attired and groomed, I absorbed the unbelieving stares, the nudges and whispers, as the children filed into the room. Many of the pupils, naturally, knew who I was; some did not. Yet even those who knew me seemed taken aback to see the teacher's pointer in my hand.

My heart beat fast, despite my best effort to calm my breathing. I was not afraid, exactly; it was more as if I was standing upon the edge of a table, ready to jump—believing, somehow, that I would fly instead of fall. I felt as if this was the first important moment of my life.

After the singing of the morning hymn, I addressed my young charges in a firm, clear voice; I had practiced my speech the night before.

(Little did I know this would be the first of many, many performances to come!)

“My dear children, I can see you have a number of questions. Let me begin by introducing myself as your teacher, Miss Bump. Some of you I know already; the rest I am eager to get to know. The school committee selected me to run the primary school based on my excellent academic record; only a year ago I was a pupil, just like all of you!”

I smiled at the unbelieving gasps and whispers.

“I say this only to remind you of what is possible if hard work and diligence are applied to your schoolwork. Now, there is the matter of my size.”

More gasps, some giggles; holding myself perfectly still, I waited for them to fade away.

“Yes, my size. As you can well see for yourselves, I am of less-than-average height. In fact, I daresay the smallest of you is larger than me. Shall we see? Who is the smallest in the class?” I smiled at the astonished look of merriment that soon appeared on every young face; I knew, then, that this was the best way to approach the subject. The resolve that had first formed in my mind all those years ago, when Mr. Dunbar threatened to shut me up in his overshoe, now fully took shape: Never would I allow my size to define me. Instead, I would define *it*. My size may have been the first thing people noticed about me but never, I vowed at that moment, would it be the last.

I would repeat this vow so many times in the years to come. I repeat it even to this day. And to this day, I still don’t know if I was successful in keeping it.

One small lad was selected by his classmates to stand next to me—Jimmy Morgan, I believe his name was, although my memory cannot be trusted—and he shyly approached, tugging nervously at his red suspenders.

“Come, come, don’t dawdle; there’s nothing to fear,” I said briskly, holding my hand out to him. “See here, my head only comes up to your chin, doesn’t it?” I tilted my face up to emphasize the disparity; Jimmy’s blue eyes stared down at me, wide and astonished.

He nodded, his cheeks scarlet, as his classmates roared with delight. I motioned for Jimmy to go back to his seat; then I waited for the laughter to fade away.

“Now, you’ve had your fun, as I’ve had mine. We will forget about it from this moment forward; I am not your friend, not your doll, not your playmate. I am your teacher and will expect every consideration, every show of respect, that my position demands. You will see that my size has nothing to do with my mind or even my will; I am not afraid to use the whip or the ruler if the

situation arises. Now open your readers to the first page, and let us begin.”

Without a murmur, every child obeyed my command. And for the rest of the term, I had no trouble at all managing my classroom. The school committee chairman was most impressed, and soon became fond of bringing in other school committees, from neighboring townships, to observe my orderly pupils, their respectful harmony. If this was his idea of sport, I did not give him any satisfaction; I found myself growing more dignified by the minute when under the gaze of astonished onlookers, as if to make up in deportment what I so lacked in height.

Yet to my surprise—for I was still very sensitive, in those days, to remarks about my size—I enjoyed being watched; I basked in the attention, not minding what had prompted it so much as I minded that those who watched left admiring me. And I began to look forward to those days when I had an audience, planning special games and songs for my pupils. The rest of the time seemed dull and ordinary by comparison.

I do admit to having fun with my charges, though; I was still young, of course, and my high spirits could not be contained by my ill-fitting corset. While I refrained from joining them during recess, I did not always walk sedately home at the end of the day. On more than one occasion, stiff from sitting so long at my desk, I joined in footraces and sometimes allowed the biggest children to carry me on their shoulders, which was a privilege much sought after. And when the first snow fell, I was very touched when a contingent of boys appeared at my door with a sled; after I was tucked in with a bearskin, they pulled me merrily to school, sleigh bells jingling around their necks.

At the end of the fall term, when I handed out marks with the knowledge that not one of my pupils had failed, I felt the satisfaction of a job well done. I was seventeen now, an established

schoolmarm. My future seemed secure, and it was a future with which my mother, at least, was very content—a decent wage that I could put away for the time when my parents were no longer able to provide for me; useful work to occupy my days and tire me so that my nights were not sleepless with longing; respect within our little community so that I was no longer an oddity but a beloved, vital member, protected and cared for.

Yet there was still a sadness that clung to my mother, despite all this. It was unspoken, but no one ever expected me to marry. No hope chest was begun for me as had been done for my older sister at the same age, no bridal lace set aside.

One day I rounded a corner only to hear my mother whispering to my sister Delia; stifling a giggle, I quickly hid inside a cupboard, rejoicing over the advantage my size gave me in eavesdropping. They were talking about the birds and the bees; I listened eagerly, until I was startled to hear my own name.

“Could Vinnie ever—” Dee began in a strangled voice.

“Oh, it would be dreadful, impossible,” Mama replied, muffling a sob. “Don’t you remember the little cow on Uncle’s farm who . . .” And her voice trailed off.

I did not remember any little cow, but its fate was evident in my sister’s sudden horrified exclamation. *That* I never forgot; it made my blood run cold, my heart seize in a nameless fear. I lived on a farm, after all; I knew cows—and horses and goats and sheep. I knew *life*—and how wrenching its beginning could be, even among creatures built far more sturdily than I. Shaking, I stole away from my hiding place wishing I had not been so clever. And for the first time, I looked at myself as Papa did; I felt that there might be something broken within me, after all.

That night I could hear my tenderhearted mother weeping for me, even through the thick plaster walls of the second-floor bedrooms. It was not the first night she had done so.

Did I share in her sorrow? In many ways, I was still too young to be given over to such dire, unhappy thoughts. No one would ever have predicted I would be a schoolteacher, and yet—wasn't that what I had become?

I did have a longing inside me, however, that I could not entirely ignore. I loved my family, loved the farm, loved my work. But contemplating a future only within these confines made me increasingly restless. There was something missing; I could define it only by its absence, but I yearned for it those nights when I heard my mother crying over my lonely, loveless fate.

It was around this time that I went for a walk in the near cow pasture; it was early spring but warm for the season, the weeds already high. They made my progress more difficult, but I didn't mind; pushing through them, I imagined myself in a mysterious forest, like the ones in so many of the fairy tales I read to my young pupils.

Soon, however, I came upon a familiar tree: a tall maple tree with an unusually wide trunk. Upon this trunk, my brothers and sister and I had once scratched our names and ages, according to our height. Craning my neck upward, I could make out *Benjamin*, *George*, *Sylvanus*, then *James*, and finally *Delia*, their names plainly visible, high up the tree—

But where was I? Where was my name? I remembered standing against the tree one summer while James took out a pocketknife and carved a line right above my head; he had then scratched my name to the side of it—I could still see his tongue sticking out with the effort as he complained that our names were so devilishly long. . . .

Brushing aside the weeds, I finally located my name; it had been covered up by the tall grasses and the climbing, glossy green tendrils of creeping myrtle, its starlike blue flowers not yet in bloom. I was only an inch or so taller than that line, even though

I was years older. My brothers and sister, however—grown up now, as well—were all much taller than their childish measurements.

I had the queerest feeling; it was as if a shadow had fallen over just me, while the rest of the world remained illuminated by bright sunlight. At that moment I felt hidden from all eyes; looking at my name, covered over by weeds, I saw how easily it could disappear forever. I saw how easily *I* could be forgotten, compared to my brothers and sister, compared to everyone else, everyone who was taller, more noticeable, more visible to the rest of the world.

I did not want to be forgotten. More than that, I wanted, desperately—I fell to my knees and began to tear out the weeds, the vines, by their very roots—to be *remembered*. I wanted my name to be known, beyond this tree, this hill, this pasture, this town.

The weeds were in a pile at the base of the tree; my hands were stained green, my nostrils filled with the pungent, mossy scent of new grass, and my skirt was damp where I had kneeled on it. But my name was now plainly visible; I smiled in satisfaction, brushed my hands off on my skirt, and continued my walk. My fierce desire soon faded away into the twilight; the air grew chilly, and I saw the warm, beckoning lights of home twinkle on, one by one, as Mama began to light the lamps, which shone, at that moment, more brightly than the faint stars on the horizon.

And then I heard Minnie calling, in her surprisingly strong, clear voice, “Vinnie! Where are you? I want to show you the most beautiful four-leaf clover I found!”

I smiled, for I knew she would be standing in the doorway looking for me, clutching that clover in her tiny fist until I came back, no matter how long I might take. So I was content to turn around and return home, content with what I knew was waiting for me there.

So it was that when we broke for vacation that spring of 1858—remember that at the time, country schools were open only during winter and summer, as the children were expected to help with farmwork—I truly had no plans other than to enjoy my time off, sleep in later than usual, and make some new dresses for the upcoming term.

An unexpected knock on our door one afternoon soon revealed that God—not to mention P. T. Barnum—had other plans for me, instead.

The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events; to real people, living or dead; or to real locales are intended only to give the fiction a setting in historical reality. Other names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and their resemblance, if any, to real-life counterparts is entirely coincidental.

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