

JEMIMA
SMALL
Versus 
THE UNIVERSE 



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JEMIMA
SMALL
of Versus ☆
THE UNIVERSE
☆

TAMSIN WINTER



USBORNE



This book is dedicated to everyone who has looked
in the mirror and felt like nothing. I hope this story
reminds you that you are not nothing.
You are everything.

And to my niece, Lucia,
for always listening to my stories.



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SPACE

I'm going to tell you the word that ruined my entire life: Big.

Jemima Big.

Jemima Big.

Jemima Big.

Jemima's as big as a whale! Which is completely stupid. Even the smallest species of whale is 2.5 metres long and weighs 181 kilograms. But it's pointless telling anyone that. People at my school don't care about facts. They still say I look like one. They still call me Jemima Big when my name is Jemima Small.

It's typical of my life that I look like the exact opposite of my own name. And you can't change your name when you're twelve because the government doesn't let you. Not

without your parents' permission anyway. And considering I haven't seen my mum since I was six, and my dad never lets me do anything good, it's not going to happen. Begging doesn't work with my dad. Neither does emotional blackmail. He's unsympathetic to my problems, mainly because he doesn't believe I have any. Even though she left, I wish I had my mum's surname. Jemima Bouviere sounds a million times better than Small. Adjectives as surnames should not be allowed.

When I was younger, I thought being the biggest girl in my class was the same as being the tallest, or having the longest hair, or being double-jointed like Izzy Newman, who could bend her thumbs all the way back so they touched her wrists. I thought my size was a simple fact of nature, like the freckles on my forearms and Izzy Newman bending her fingers into weird shapes at break time. Then there was this day at the beach when I figured out I was wrong. Like, majorly wrong.

It happened during the summer holidays, a few months before I turned eight. Nana was staying at ours and Dad suggested we all go to the beach. We'd gone to the beach almost every day of the holidays anyway. It's, like, 0.4 miles from our house. So close I can hear the sea from my bedroom. Which might sound good, but it's the reason we never go on a proper holiday abroad. Dad thinks

going rock-pooling then putting 2ps in the coin-pusher game at the arcade counts as a summer holiday. It doesn't. It's technically staying closer to my house than going to school.

The first bad thing to happen that day was when I came downstairs in my bikini. The straps were digging in, so I went to show Dad the red marks under my armpits. As I walked into the living room, Dad gave Nana this look I hadn't seen before. It was probably the exact same look the commander of the Apollo 13 space mission had on his face when he found out their oxygen tank had exploded. Like: "Nana, we have a problem."

Dad took me to Dolphin Bay Beachwear, this swimsuit shop on the promenade. Dolphin Bay's the name of the beach. It's kind of false advertising, because you never see any dolphins there. My brother, Jasper, said he saw some through his binoculars once, but he could have been lying. It's the type of thing he does. Dad said dolphins sometimes come here to mate, so actually I'm glad I've never seen any.

The lady in Dolphin Bay Beachwear had pencilled-on eyebrows – I know because one of them was slightly smudged and she raised them as soon as we walked in. She looked down at my tummy and declared, "You're very round!" in a voice that made it sound like a compliment.

But when I looked up at Dad, he was smiling at her apologetically, as though the shape of my tummy was something he should be sorry about. He was standing right next to me with his hand resting on my shoulder, but suddenly I felt like he was galaxies away.

“Puppy fat!” he said eventually, and rubbed his beard, like he always does when he doesn’t know the answer to something.

The lady said to me, “Never mind, dear. I have some swimsuits that will help disguise it a little.”

My cheeks burned and I felt intensely stupid, like that time in Year Four when Miss Reed discovered I could do long multiplications in my head. She made me stand at the front of the class and asked me to work out 391×39 . But I got the answer wrong because this boy, Dylan Taylor, was making annoying faces at me and I forgot to add one of the carried-over numbers.

Miss Reed probably felt a bit stupid that day too. She’d got a new poster for our classroom that said: *A diamond is a chunk of coal that did well under pressure!* and I informed her that diamonds aren’t even formed from coal. She said, “Motivational posters don’t always need a factual basis, Jemima!” Which probably tells you everything you need to know about Miss Reed. Luckily for her, a question about diamond formation didn’t come up in our SATs.

But knowing how diamonds are formed and doing long multiplication in my head didn’t help me at Dolphin Bay Beachwear. I folded my arms over my stomach and followed the raised-eyebrows lady to a rail of swimsuits, wondering why no one had told me before that I was supposed to disguise my stomach. And feeling utterly brainless that I hadn’t figured it out by myself. She held up a black swimsuit, but Dad pretended to faint when he saw the price tag, and told me to choose something from the sale rack. Maybe because he didn’t think I’d been humiliated enough already.

When we finally got to the beach, I walked down to the Plank with Jasper. It’s this wooden platform that juts out above the sea. No one knows who built it. It’s been there for years apparently. My dad remembers it from his childhood, so it could have been there for centuries. It was busy with tourists, so we had to queue up. The wooden steps were wet because of the sea spray, and I walked up slowly so I didn’t slip. The proper word for sea spray is spindrift, but if you call it that people look at you weird.

Jasper ran all the way along the Plank and dived in. He always dives in. He says it’s seven metres high, but Jasper exaggerates everything. (Mostly his own intelligence.) The sea *below* is about seven metres deep; the Plank’s only

about four metres above sea level. It still feels like a big jump though. I heard the crash of Jasper hitting the water, then walked carefully to the end of the platform and curled my toes over the edge.

I watched Jasper's head emerge from the waves. He shook the water out of his ears and shouted, "SHARK!"

I ignored him. He says that every single time. The only sharks around here are basking sharks and they don't even attack humans, so he was being doubly stupid. I took a deep breath, pinched my nose and peered down at the water.

Then I heard a voice behind me: "A whale, more like."

Someone sniggered and said, "Yeah, watch out for the tidal wave!"

I wanted to tell them that tidal waves are caused by gravity, not by someone jumping off the Plank, so it was an idiotic thing to say. But they looked a few years older than me and I was worried about my new swimsuit not disguising my stomach properly. Anyway, from the way they were both laughing, I could tell they didn't care about scientific facts. I tugged at the edges of my swimsuit, trying to cover an extra centimetre of flesh.

Then I heard someone else. It was only just louder than a whisper. "She's grotesque."

But it wasn't someone young this time. It was a woman about my dad's age. Her wet hair was swept back and her

swimsuit had shapes cut out of the sides, revealing a tummy that looked flat, not round like mine. She glanced at my stomach for a split-second then looked at her husband and shook her head. My brain stopped thinking about gravity and whales and tidal waves then, because I could feel their disapproval surrounding me, like water vapour condensing into tiny droplets and forming a fog. It clung to my skin and suddenly I understood the look Dad had given Nana that morning, and why I needed a swimsuit with brand-new tummy-shaping, silhouette-flattering technology.

I jumped into the sea and swam back to shore without stopping. Jasper called me a few times to come back, but I carried on, even though I was almost out of breath. When Nana asked why I was crying, I told her some boys had called me a whale.

She rubbed a towel over my hair and said, "Oh, sweetheart, it's because whales are strong swimmers!"

But I knew she was lying. She gave me a packet of soft mints and Dad sighed extra loudly then looked at her the same way he had that morning about my bikini, so I didn't say anything else.

Maybe you think people can't weigh you with their eyes, but they can. Maybe you think people who love you don't lie, but they do.

For the rest of that day, I sat on one of Nana's beach mats with a towel wrapped around me watching people walk past. I listened to their feet sinking into the pebbles, and felt the tiny crystals of sea salt on my skin. And this is what I figured out: there are good-shaped bodies, and bad-shaped bodies, and mine was one of the bad ones.

It's called having a moment of realization. Like when Isaac Newton saw an apple fall from a tree and discovered gravity. Well, I discovered I sucked. And once you've figured out something like that, it stays lodged in the frontal lobe of your brain. And each time you look in the mirror, or get changed for PE, or stand up in class, or feel your stomach roll over your school skirt, or notice someone giving you a second look, you get reminded. The frontal lobe is kind of annoying like that.

I didn't move from the beach that whole day. I didn't go swimming or push Nana along the promenade in her chair, or go to the arcade, or get an ice cream. I just sat there trying to figure out a way I could hide my body from everyone. Including myself. But it was impossible. How can you hide from your own body? Especially when you're wearing a neon-yellow swimsuit with a picture of a flamingo on it.

Almost every night after that, before I went to sleep, I wished on the stars to have a body like the other girls in my

class. To be the right shape, like them. I wished for my mum to come back too. Because when your dad thinks your body is the equivalent of an outer-space emergency and complete strangers find you grotesque, you kind of need her.

According to my Auntie Luna, when you wish on the stars, it gets beamed out into the universe. She says if you keep wishing, eventually the universe will listen and it will come true. But, when it's the first full moon of the year, Auntie Luna strips totally naked and bathes in the moonlight to capture its cosmic energy. So, she's not exactly a reliable source of information.

Anyway, no matter how much wishing I did, my body stayed the same shape, and my mum didn't reappear either. She was probably like the stars: too far away to hear my wishes. I tried not to think about her, but I could feel this empty space growing in my heart where she was supposed to be. The human heart is only nine centimetres wide, but the empty space inside mine felt bigger than the universe sometimes.

I still wasn't immune to the name-calling, even after my first year at Clifton Academy. I'd been called Jemima Big so many times, my heart should have developed antibodies or something, like my blood cells did after the flu jab.

But it didn't. Which is probably why hearing the stuff whispered about me during the end-of-year Awards Assembly kind of hurt.

Jemima Big knows so much about space because she takes up so much of it.

Jemima Big should do some exercise instead of reading so many books.

Jemima Big can solve maths problems but not her weight problem.

Being clever when you look like me isn't a formula for success. My achievements just meant everyone gawped at me like they'd never seen someone my size holding a certificate before. And instead of feeling proud, I felt disapproval clinging to my skin each time I went up. So when Ada MacAvoy in Year Nine tripped over a chair walking up to the front, I did feel bad for her. But mostly I felt grateful no one was looking at me any more. And she knocked into this annoying boy in my class called Caleb Humphries, which was an added bonus.

I thought Year Eight would be better. I knew I'd still be called Jemima Big, but I thought I'd get used to it. Like Dylan Taylor's voice shouting "sumo" at break times eventually fading into the background. And I had things to look forward to. Like turning thirteen in October, which meant I'd be a teenager and Dad would finally have

to raise my pocket money. It would still be way below the minimum wage, but unfortunately my dad thinks household chores don't count as exploitation.

I was still sort of dreading the first day back. I knew people would look to see if I'd had some kind of dramatic transformation over the summer. Well, I hadn't. I was still Jemima Big. And stupidly, I thought that would be the worst thing.

But it's like when you look up at the night sky – what you see isn't the whole picture. And it wasn't long before I started wishing that the entire universe had an escape hatch.