

JEMIMA SMALL

VERSUS THE UNIVERSE

Tamsin Winter

FROM CHAPTER 1: *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 226 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 got over-excited when she 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. 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. I heard the crash of him hitting the water, then walked carefully to the end of the platform and curled my toes over the edge. Jasper's head emerged 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, and that 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, I could tell from the way they were both laughing that 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 another voice. 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. 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.



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