This Wonderful Thing

HarperCollins Publishers

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HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2021
HarperCollins *Children's Books*
is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd,
HarperCollins *Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road
Dublin 4, Ireland

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ISBN 978-0-00-826708-7

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11pt Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in England by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

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For Kate Higgins, without whom Jessica and Milly
would never have existed

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CHAPTER ONE

Jessica

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Here's something that will make you LAUGH.

Yesterday we went to this place called Cuckmere Haven (Mum, Dad, Milly, Benji and me) and we played Pooh Sticks.

What, not clutching your sides? Not rolling on the floor in fits of giggles? Well, get this.

We played Pooh Sticks with a REAL POO!

We did! Honest! The poo belonged to Benji, who suddenly needed one. Dad had left his potty in the car so Mum pulled his shorts down by this big stream. Once Benji had done it, the poo rolled down between his trainers, bounced down the bank and jumped into the water. It sank, came up and swirled round to the middle, which would have been quite funny on its

own. But Milly had an idea, something I have to admit because she's bigger than me and, if I take the credit, she'll hit me. She grabbed a stick from beneath a bush, me not knowing what she was up to until she'd lobbed it in.

'Pooh Sticks!' she bellowed. 'Pooh Sticks! We're playing Pooh Sticks with poo!'

'And sticks!' I shouted, as I grabbed one too and bunged it in after. 'We're playing Pooh Sticks with poo and sticks!'

And we weren't the only ones. Mum said, 'Girls!' and, 'Stop that!', but Dad clearly didn't think that 'Girls' applied to him. He grabbed a stick and chucked it in as well, leaving Mum to tut, and wipe Benji's bum, as the three sticks (and poo) began to move. Now we'd done what most people do when they're playing Pooh Sticks – cheat. Milly had thrown her stick in front of the poo, I'd thrown my stick in front of hers, and Dad had thrown his in front of mine. But it did NOT matter. While our sticks turned in circles or got snagged on weed and reeds, the little brown ball from Benji's bottom overtook them all.

'Poo,' Milly shouted, jumping up and down on the bank, 'is really good at Pooh Sticks!'

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‘Not all poo, I shouldn’t think,’ Dad said. ‘Good job it wasn’t a Sticky Poo!’

And, if you’re not laughing now, forget it.

Well, Benji wanted to know what the fuss was about so, once he was bum-wiped and dressed, Dad hoisted him on to his shoulders. We all ran along the bank, Mum still not that amused as Milly and I shouted, ‘Go, sticks!’ while Dad and Benji shouted, ‘Go, poo!’ (and some birdwatchers looked on in shock). Mum was even more embarrassed when all the sticks got jammed up on some stones and Milly (who had Crocs on) ran into the stream.

‘What are you doing?!’ Mum yelled. Milly had pulled her dress up and was holding it in place with her chin.

‘I can’t let him win!’ Milly said (she’s super competitive). ‘Sticks are useless!’

But Mum bellowed so loud that Milly got out without doing her own poo and we had to watch Benji triumph, our sticks soon far behind as the poo (almost as if it knew it was in a race) sprinted on. It swept beneath a footbridge. It wobbled past a few ducks, which some other birdwatchers were looking at. It began to go so fast that we could hardly keep level,

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Benji almost hoarse from shouting and Dad panting to keep up with Milly and me. Then the stream got wider: there was a beach up ahead. The water was shallower and the poo started to skip, hopping out of the water as it leapt over little stones and round small boulders. It was hard to see, then more so as the sun burst out and made the water all sparkly.

'We're going to lose the poo!' Milly shouted, urging me to go faster. We stumbled on, thinking it was gone forever, until Milly caught sight of it. She pulled me by the arm and we sped up, just in time to see the poo roll out of the stream and on to the beach in front of us.

We stared down at the poo in awe and with respect. It didn't even look tired.

'Olympic standard,' Dad said, puffing to a halt beside us, then coughing. He's been having some problems with his fitness recently. 'Olympic-standard poo.'

'Let's do it again!' Milly said. 'Let's go back, only the poo belongs to me this time!'

'You pick it up then,' I said and, because Milly wants to win stuff so much, I swear she would have. But Mum arrived, really cross now, hissing at Dad

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about being poorly recently and how he wasn't supposed to run, as she scrabbled around in her backpack. She pulled out a nappy bag, scooped the poo up and marched off towards a bin. Milly sighed, and I was disappointed too, turning back to see if any of the sticks had made it that far. Maybe I'd come second, or First Pooh Stick Made Of Stick Not Poo. When Milly realised what I was looking for, though, she spun round too, both of us shielding our eyes until the sun went in.

Which is when I saw it.

In the water.

My eyes just settled on it and I stared, blinking, sort of calm inside as if, for some reason, it had wanted me to find it.

Not a stick.

Or another poo.

No.

I saw the thing that would change our lives forever.

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