

Wild Goose

A novel of childhood & adolescence

by

Damaris West

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Contents

Chapter 1 - Blue Necklace	1
Chapter 2 - The Jay's Feather	5
Chapter 3 - Sandcastles	9
Chapter 4 - Jemima Puddle-duck	13
Chapter 5 - Brambles	18
Chapter 6 - The Touch	22
Chapter 7 - The Kingfisher	27
Chapter 8 - Chrysalis	30
Chapter 9 - Vermin	34
Chapter 10 - The Fox	38
Chapter 11 - The Tower	42
Chapter 12 - The Green Rucksack	46
Chapter 13 - Hunger of the Quest	49
Chapter 14 - Doors	56
Chapter 15 - On the River	60
Chapter 16 - Cottage in the Wood	64
Chapter 17 - The Kingfisher Jug	67
Chapter 18 - Gesture	71
Chapter 19 - The Observatory	76
Chapter 20 - Houndstongue	82
Chapter 21 - Releasing	86
Chapter 22 - Loyalty	91
Chapter 23 - Missing	95
Chapter 24 - Searching	100
Chapter 25 - Dragons	105
Chapter 26 - The Owl	110

<u>Chapter 27 - Visitors</u>	118
<u>Chapter 28 - Reconciliation</u>	122
<u>About the author</u>	127

Chapter 1 - The Blue Necklace

Sometimes when she closed her eyes Jemima could still see the greyness: slate-greyness, with colour changes so subtle that they hardly seemed to exist at all. There was not a single white fleck of relief; only a steady swelling motion and a shadow at the bottom of the troughs. She could feel again the coldness against her neck, and the drag in her arms as her feet sank lower and lower into the silky depths. She could taste the salt-bitterness that rasped her throat as it crept in round the corners of her mouth. Most memorable of all was the silence. She had not known the sea could be so silent.

But that aspect had changed. When she reached the awesome precipice in her mind from where she would have to let go and slide into the agony of drowning, something made her draw back. Immediately it was as if a cosmic switch was flicked. She became aware of the lap of the water below her ears, the swish of her flailing hands and the gasp of her breath. The waves were sighing continuously and a far-away gull screamed. In a panic-stricken flurry of movement, she turned and floundered blindly, without further thought, towards the dark line of the shore.

The sea had let her go; it had let her choose. Even now she was not afraid of it.

* * * * *

There was a voice in the background, tugging at her with its insistence.

"Jemima, I'm going to start by taking you right back in time. I want you to tell me your very first memory."

It was a Counsellor speaking, a middle-aged woman with very short hair, a lined face and intense eyes. She wore a full skirt of flimsy material, red and blue, with little silver discs sewn into the hem. She had already tried to establish a chummy atmosphere by inviting Jemima to call her Anna. The most remarkable thing about her was her earrings: complicated silver contraptions which dangled below her chin and caressed her neck at every slight movement. Jemima could not take her eyes off them.

"Well there was one time that I remember really well. I would have been three. I think it's probably my first memory."

"That will do fine. Tell me about it."

"It was summer ..."

With those words, suddenly she was there, in the garden belonging to her grandparents, on a beautiful day at the best time of year. Maybe her memories were a composite of the summers she had spent there – there was no way of knowing – but it was all so clear and sharp she almost choked with the power of it. She wondered afterwards how much she had formulated into words for Anna's benefit and how much she had simply re-lived in her head.

There were pigeons crooning in the huge elm trees that overhung the house. Under the low boughs of the apple trees in the orchard, daisies shone through the shadows like white pebbles in swaying water. Here and there a penny of light blinked, multiplied and vanished. The green of the grass and the leaves had seeped somehow into the air, thickening and stilling it, while the pervasive hum of bees was like the sound of green, burbling everywhere.

Three-year-old Jemima was conscious of an atmosphere of happy, excited anticipation. Grandfather, who had been mowing, had stowed the noisy machine in the little brick shed that had once been a privy, and slipped away to engage in the necessarily calm activity of observing his hives. He was never demonstrative but Jemima knew him well.

In the kitchen, its door open to admit a splash of sunlight on the tiled floor, Grandma bobbed between sink and cupboard, dresser and stove. Over the scrubbed pine table in the centre of the room she had spread a red-and-white-checked cloth, and every time she passed she deposited something on it, like a river dropping silt at a bend in its course. The piece of black crotchet which she wore over her grey bun was slightly askew, as were her spectacles, which steamed up as she bent over the boiling ham.

Jemima herself had been sent outside to be out of the way. Judging by the photographs of the time, she would have cut a serious, stumpy figure in her best dress and the black patent leather shoes that made Grandma stamp and suck her fingers when she tried to fasten them. Excitement was beating like wings in her chest but she was squinting with concentration.

It was hot and she was feeling uncomfortable. Her fair hair was fuzzy from being shampooed earlier in the day and it irritated her as it fell across her sticky forehead. Every time she brushed it aside, it sprang back into her eyes. She knew that in a day or two, when it was a bit dirty, it would no longer be fuzzy and fly-away and would actually stay put when she pushed it back, so she thought she would try to bring that time forward – by making it prematurely dirty. She walked over to a flowerbed behind a low wall out of sight of the house, dug her fingers into the soil, and emptied two fistfuls deliberately over her head. Most of the soil fell straight out, but some of it stayed behind and only trickled gradually past her eyes and down her back and shoulders. But the experiment failed because her hair still flopped when she flicked it back. The full extent of her naughtiness immediately came home to her and smothered the wing-beats of anticipation.

She slunk away to one of the more secluded vegetable plots, rubbing vigorously at her scalp to rid herself of the earth. She was still in hiding when there was the sound of a car coming down the lane and turning in through the open gate. Normally she would run to greet anyone, whoever it was, but this time she hung back, fearful and ashamed, and Grandma had to call her:

"Jemima! What are you doing? Come and say 'Hello' to your father!"

With bowed head, Jemima emerged into the courtyard where a tall man stood expectantly by the open door of his car. Terrified that her crime would be discovered,

she walked forward in wooden obedience towards the expression of hurt and disappointment on his face. He talked to her gently, though, squatting down to her level, and only then turned away to see about unpacking his car and driving it into the barn-like outhouse which served as a garage - just for him, as his parents had no car.

Grandfather went into the house ahead of everyone else. He never got involved in lively reunions, and in any case his deafness made it difficult for him to join in the rapid exchange of news between mother and son as they piled the luggage onto the flags outside the kitchen door. He would not carry the bundles upstairs, either; he was too old. Leonard would do it afterwards, at his leisure.

Jemima found Grandfather in his usual chair in the living room, thoughtfully drawing on the pipe he had just lit. His back was to the western window, through which streamed the honey-coloured light of late afternoon. The smoke caused a strange effect of tendrils around his head, giving him the air of a hirsute patriarch in an ancient sepia photograph. In his ponderous, welcoming way, he looked at Jemima and patted a corduroy-trousered thigh in encouragement. She hoisted herself up, dangling her legs between his knees, and rested her head against his bristly chin. He would not ask questions. It was for this reason, and in spite of his deafness (which in any case was selective), that he was the person to whom she talked the most. Sometimes she would talk to him without even opening her mouth or uttering a sound.

Grandma's little bell rang to summon them to the meal. Jemima was not to sit in her usual place facing the open kitchen door, with a view of the sparrows on the clothesline and the neighbours' chickens jabbing at the courtyard grass. Instead, she had her back to the light; her plate was in shadow; and she cowered behind the teapot, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible under the continual flow of talk.

"I hope you don't mean to read all those books," said Grandma, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright with the prospect of having her son at home again.

Leonard Green laughed, his spectacles glinting and a gold tooth glittering in his brown beard.

"I have to keep a step ahead of my students," he explained. "And some of them are picture-books for Jemima."

Jemima, used to the droning tales of her grandfather and the impatient practical demonstrations of her grandmother, stared over the top of her boiled egg, unsure whether she was going to like these picture-books. Her father had cut bread soldiers for her, leaning over her in order to do so, and her terror of discovery had been renewed.

After their high tea, the family moved to the living room to sip coffee from the green and gold fluted cups which Jemima so admired in their normal position high on the Welsh dresser. Grandma had produced her knitting from behind the sofa cushion and sat next to her son, her fingers busy in the navy blue folds of a cardigan

for Jemima. Grandfather had brought a piece of whittling from his workshop. With a newspaper between his feet to catch the shavings, he was steadily filing the pierced heart of a love spoon. He made a love spoon for anyone he knew who was getting married, and each was unique. Jemima adored them. Even when she saw them develop, she could never quite believe they were made all-of-a-piece, but kept looking for the join in the links of the chain or in the rings that moved up and down the twisted stem of the spoon and symbolised the wedding rings. The little balls trapped inside their wooden cage were the most fascinating of all. Grandfather let her watch them being set free from the parent block of wood and rounded out through the framework of the cage, so that they rattled when she flicked them with her finger. She knew that the number of balls stood for the number of children the couple wanted.

Leonard had stretched out his feet across the hearth-rug and appeared to be dozing, lulled by the familiar peace of home. Jemima, being ignored, had crept close. Her chin was on the arm of the sofa next to him when he suddenly woke up.

He fished in the inside pocket of his tweed jacket and handed her a small package wrapped in crimson tissue paper. Inside she found a necklace of blue plastic flowers, each daisy-like head linked to its neighbour by means of a yellow centre on the end of a protruding tongue. It was the prettiest present she had ever had. Even now, thirteen years later, it was a treasured possession, although it lacked a few links and was scarcely long enough to go round her wrist. Earthy hair forgotten, she had nestled against her father's soft beard, chuckling with delight and twisting the blue flowers about their centres, one after the other round the chain.