



Jemima J: A Novel About Ugly Ducklings and Swans

by Jane Green

Excerpt

Chapter 1

God, I wish I were thin.

I wish I were thin, gorgeous, and could get any man I want. You probably think I'm crazy, I mean here I am, sitting at work on my own with a massive double-decker club sandwich in front of me, but I'm allowed to dream aren't I?

Half an hour to go of my lunch break. Half an hour in which to drool over the latest edition of my favorite magazine. Don't get me wrong, I don't read the features, why would I? Thousands of words about how to keep your man, how to spice up your sex life, how to spot if he's being unfaithful are, quite frankly, irrelevant to me. I'll be completely honest with you here, I've never had a proper boyfriend, and the cover lines on the magazines are not the reason I buy them.

If you must know, I buy them, all of them, for the pictures. I sit and I study each glossy photograph for minutes at a time, drinking in the models' long, lithe limbs, their tiny waists, their glowing golden skin. I have a routine: I start with their faces, eyeing each sculpted cheekbone, heart-shaped chin, and I move slowly down their bodies, careful not to miss a muscle.

I have a few favorites. In the top drawer of my chest of drawers in my bedroom at home is a stack of cut-out pictures of my top supermodels, preferred poses. Laetitia's there for her sex appeal, Christy's there for her lips and nose, and Cindy's there for the body.

And before you think I'm some kind of closet lesbian, I've already told you the one thing I would wish for if I rubbed a lamp and a gorgeous, bare-chested genie suddenly appeared. If I had one wish in all the world I wouldn't wish to win the lottery. Nor would I wish for true love. No, if I had one wish I would wish to have a model's figure, probably Cindy Crawford's, and I would extend the wish into having and keeping a model's figure, no matter what I eat.

Because, tough as it is to admit to a total stranger, I, Jemima Jones, eat a lot. I catch the glances, the glares of disapproval on the occasions I eat out in public, and I try my damndest to ignore them. Should someone, some "friend" trying to be caring and sharing, question me gently, I'll tell them I have a thyroid problem, or a gland problem, and occasionally I'll tack on the fact that I have a super-slow metabolism as well. Just so there's no doubt, just so people don't think that the only reason I am the size I am is because of the amount I eat.

But you're not stupid, I know that, and, given that approximately half the women in the country are a size 14, I would ask you to try and understand about my secret binges, my constant cravings, and see that it's not just about food.

You don't need to know much about my background, suffice to say that my childhood wasn't happy, that I never felt loved, that I never got over my parents' divorce as a young child, and that now, as an adult, the only time I feel really comforted is when I seek solace in food.

So here I am now, at twenty-seven years old, bright, funny, warm, caring and kind. But of course people don't see that when they look at Jemima Jones. They simply see fat.

Unfortunately they don't see what I see when I look in the mirror. Selective visualization, I think I'll call it. They don't see my glossy light brown hair. They don't see my green eyes, they don't see my full lips. Not that they're anything amazing, but I like them, I'd say they were my best features.

They don't notice the clothes either, because, despite weighing far, far more than I should, I don't let myself go, I always make an effort. I mean, look at me now. If I were slim, you would say I look fantastic in my bold striped trousers and long tunic top in a perfectly matching shade of orange. But no, because of the size I am people look at me and think, "God, she shouldn't wear such bright colors, she shouldn't draw attention to herself."

But why shouldn't I enjoy clothes? At least I'm not telling myself that I won't bother shopping until I'm a size 10, because naturally my life is a constant diet.

We all know what happens with diets. The minute you cut out certain foods, the cravings overtake you until you can't see straight, you can't think properly, and the only way to get rid of the craving is to have a bite of chocolate, which soon turns into a whole bar.

And diets don't work, how can they? It's a multi-million-dollar industry, and if any of the diets actually worked the whole caboodle would go down the toilet.

If anyone knows how easy it is to fail it's me. The Scarsdale, the High Fiber, the Atkins Diet, the six eggs a day diet, Slimfast, Weight Watchers, Herbalife, slimming pills, slimming drinks, slimming patches. You name them, I've been the idiot that tried them. Although some have, admittedly, been more successful than others.

But I have never, even with the help of all these diets, been slim. I have been slimmer, but not slim.

I know you're watching me now with pity in your eyes as I finish my sandwich and look furtively around the office to see whether anyone is looking. It's okay, the coast is clear, so I can pull open my top drawer and sneak out the slab of chocolate hiding at the back. I tear the bright orange wrapper and silver foil off and stuff it into the dustbin beneath my desk, as it's far easier to hide a slab of dull brown chocolate than the glaring covering that encases it.

I take a bite. I savor the sweet chocolate in my mouth as it melts on my tongue, and then I take another bite, this time furiously chewing and swallowing, hardly tasting a thing. Within seconds the entire bar has disappeared, and I sit there feeling sick and guilty.

I also feel relieved. My bad food for today has just been eaten, which means that there's none left. Which means that tonight, when I get home and have a salad, which is what I'm now planning to eat for dinner, I can feel good, and I can start my diet all over again.

I glance at the clock and sigh. Another day in my humdrum life, but it shouldn't be humdrum. I'm a journalist, for God's sake. Surely that's a glamorous, exciting existence?

Unfortunately not for me. I long for a bit of glamour, and, on the rare occasions I do glance at the features in the magazines I flick through, I think that I could do better.

I probably could, as well, except I don't have the experience to write about men being unfaithful, but if I had, Jesus, I'd win awards, because I am, if I say so myself, an expert with words.

I love the English language, playing with words, watching sentences fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but sadly my talents are wasted here at the Kilburn Herald.

I hate this job. When I meet new people and they ask what I do for a living, I hold my head up high and say I'm a journalist. I then try to change the subject, for the inevitable question after that is "Who do you work for?" I hang my head low, mumble the Kilburn Herald, and, if I'm really pushed, I'll hang it even lower and confess that I do the Top Tips column.

Every week I'm flooded with mail from sad and lonely people in Kilburn with nothing better to do than write in with questions like, "What's the best way to bleach a white marbled lino floor that's turned yellow?" and "I have a pair of silver candlesticks inherited from my grandmother. The silver is now tarnished, any suggestions?" And every week I sit for hours on the bloody phone ringing lino manufacturers, silver-makers, and, apologizing for taking up their time, ask them for the answers.

This is my form of journalism. Every now and then I have to write a feature, usually a glorified press release, a bit of PR puff that has to be used to fill some space, and oh how I revel in this seemingly unexciting job. I pull the press release to pieces and start again. If my colleagues, the news reporters and feature writers that mill around me, bothered to read what I'd written they would see my masterful turn of phrase.

It's not as if I haven't tried to move up in the world of journalism. Every now and then when boredom threatens to render me completely incompetent, I drag myself into the editor's office and squeeze into a chair, producing these few cuts and asking for a chance. In fact today yet another meeting is due.

"Jemima," says the editor, leaning back in his chair, putting his feet on the table and puffing on a cigar, "why would you want to be a news reporter?"

"I don't," I say, restraining myself from rolling my eyes, because every time I come in here we seem to have the same conversation. "I want to write features."

"But Jemima, you do such a wonderful job on Top Tips. Honestly, love, I don't know where we'd be without you."

"It's just that it's not exactly journalism, I want to write more."

"We all have to start at the bottom," he says, the beginning of his regular monologue, as I think, yes, and you're still there, this isn't the Guardian, it's the Kilburn bloody Herald.

"Do you know how I started?"

I mutely shake my head, thinking, yes, you were a bloody tea boy for the Solent Advertiser.

"I was a bloody tea boy for the Solent Advertiser." And on, and on, and on he goes.

The conversation ends the same way too. "There may well be a vacancy on features coming up," he says with a conspiratorial wink. "Just keep on working hard and I'll see what I can do."

And so I sigh, thank him for his time and maneuver myself out of the narrow chair. Just before I get to the door, the editor says, "By the way, you are taking that class aren't you?"

I turn to look at him in confusion. Class? What class? "You know," he adds, seeing I don't know what he's talking about. "Computers, Internet, World Wide Web. We're going on the line and I want everyone in the office to attend."

On the line? Doesn't he mean online, I think as I walk out with a smile on my face. The editor, desperate to show off his street credibility, has once again proved he's still living in the 1980s. It's about time we got Web access at the office.

I march back to my desk passing the news reporters, all busy on the phone, my eyes cast downwards as I pass my secret heartthrob. Ben Williams is the deputy news editor. Tall, handsome, he is also the office Lothario. He may not be able to afford Armani, this being, as it is, the Kilburn Herald, but his suits fit his highly toned body, his muscular thighs so perfectly, they may as well be.

Ben Williams is secretly fancied by every woman at the Kilburn Herald, not to mention the woman in the shop where he buys his paper every morning, the woman in the sandwich bar who follows his stride longingly as he walks past every lunchtime. Yeah. Don't think I hadn't noticed.

Ben Williams is gorgeous, no two ways about it. His light brown hair is floppy in that perfectly arranged way, casually hanging over his left eye, his eyebrows perfectly arched, his dimples when he smiles in exactly the right place. Of course he is well aware of the effect he has on women, but underneath all the schmooze beats a heart of gold, but don't tell him I told you. He wouldn't want anyone to know that.

He is the perfect combination of handsome hunk and vulnerable little boy, and the only woman who isn't interested in him is Geraldine. Geraldine, you see, is destined for greater things. Geraldine is my only friend at the paper, although Geraldine might not agree with that, because after all we don't socialize together after work, but we do have little chats, Geraldine perched prettily on the edge of my desk as I silently wish I looked like her.

And we do often have lunch together, frequently with Ben Williams, which is both painful and pleasurable, in equal measure, for me. Pleasurable because I live for those days when he joins us, but painful because I turn into an awkward fourteen-year-old every time he comes near. I can't even look at him, let alone talk to him, and the only consolation is that when he sits down my appetite disappears.

I suspect he thinks I'm rather sweet, and I'm sure he knows I've got this ridiculous crush on him, but I doubt he spends much time thinking about me, not when Geraldine's around.

Geraldine started here at about the same time as me, and the thing that really kills me is that I started as a graduate trainee, and Geraldine started as a secretary, but who's the one who gets to write features first? Exactly.

It's not that I'm completely cynical, but with her gleaming blond hair in a chic bob, her tiny size 8 figure squeezed into the latest fashions, Geraldine may not have an ounce of talent, but the men love her, and the editor thinks she's the biggest asset to the paper since, well, since himself.

And the thing that kills me even more is that Geraldine is the one woman here that Ben deems worthy of his attentions. Geraldine isn't interested, which makes it just about bearable. Sure, in a vaguely detached way she can appreciate Ben's good looks, his charm, his charisma, but please, he works at the Kilburn Herald, and by that fact alone would never be good enough for Geraldine.

Geraldine only goes out with rich men. Older, richer, wiser. Her current boyfriend has, amazingly, lasted eight months, which is a bit of a record for her, and Geraldine seems serious, which Ben can't stand. I, on the other hand, love hearing what I think of as "Geraldine stories." Geraldine is the woman I wish I was.

For now I settle down in my chair and pick up the phone to call the local veterinary practice.

"Hello," I say in my brightest telephone voice. "This is Jemima Jones from the Kilburn Herald. Would you have any idea how to remove the smell of cat spray from a pair of curtains?"

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