

The Journal of Jenny September

Isaacsen-Bright

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

This book is for...
Jenny Isaacsen, an immigrant,
Jenny Moorman, a daughter,
and especially for all the courageous
Jenny Septembers who are homeless.



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Royal Fireworks Press
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ISBN: 978-0-89824-441-0

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kennitz
Editor: Jennifer Ault
Book Designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl
Cover Illustrator & Designer: Christopher Tice

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper
using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility.



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This is the journal of Jenny September.

I'm Mrs. McCarthy, her homeroom teacher. In our school, Liberty Junior High, we decided that homeroom was a waste of time until we came up with this plan: each student would choose one or two projects to work on every day in homeroom. Some projects would be short, such as reading a book or writing a letter to Congress. Some projects would be year-long. Jenny chose one of those—a journal. It didn't have to be written in every day, but it had to have at least a hundred pages of writing. And she had a choice: When she handed it in on June 1st, she could write on the first page, "THIS MAY BE READ," or "PLEASE DON'T READ THIS."

Jenny's journal was late coming in. One morning, three days before school was out, I found it on my desk. She must have dropped by and asked the janitor to give it to me. At any rate, it was full; almost every page was written on. As I riffled through it just to see that there weren't pages of repetitions such as "I hate notebooks, I hate notebooks," I saw that she had written way more than a hundred pages.

Turning back to the first page, I saw that the words "PLEASE DON'T READ THIS" were crossed out. Instead, there was a note: "You can read this if you're interested. I won't be back next year because we've moved. Thanks, Jenny September."

I hadn't gotten to know her well—or hardly at all, for that matter. She sat in the second row, third from the back. There were thirty-two others in my homeroom, and most of them were noisier and more demanding than she.

Anyway, I ate lunch in my room that day, grading tests from another class. When I finished them, I happened to pick up Jenny's journal.

I don't think she'd mind if I shared it with you.

Mrs. M. McCarthy

~~PLEASE DON'T READ THIS~~

You can read this if you're interested. I won't be back next year because we've moved.

Thanks, Jenny September

September 14

This is my second day in this school, and it's my first day in homeroom. In case you don't remember, I chose to do the journal as a year-long project. We didn't do year projects in Reno. But this looks like something I'd like to try. You said it had to be more than a hundred pages—which seems like a lot. I'm glad you said we have a choice about whether you read this or not. If I forget to put it on the front, I choose NOT. I hope you keep your word because I don't have a friend, and I really need someone to talk to. In case I don't get one, I'll talk to this journal. So since I don't have anything much to write yet, I'll tell how we came to move here to San Lucas.

My dad played in a band called the Piney Mountain Jug Band. He can play almost anything, but he likes jug. They didn't have too many gigs, but they practiced a lot. My mother always worried about where the money was going to come from. She had a job as legal secretary. But she said that wasn't enough. And I don't think she liked it that the guys were always over at our house practicing. But she said it was better than my dad being over at theirs.

She was right. About the money, I mean. Bills were piled on the counter between the kitchen and the living room, on the end table by the back door, on the shelf by the phone. Bills, bills, bills.

One morning—it was very early, just about dawn—my mother sat on my bed and touched my shoulder so I'd wake up. When I rolled over, she said, "Jenny, I'm leaving. Do you understand?" I nodded to show her I did, but I didn't. She left every morning to go to work. Then she said, "I'm going back east to law school." I was going to say, "Back east? Whereabouts back east?" I waited for the rest, but that was all she told me. She leaned over, and she hugged me hard, and her hands and arms were strong, and they held me tight. "Be good," she whispered. "I'll come back for you." But she looked away when she said it. She didn't look me in the eye like when you promise.

I started to say, "Take me. I want to go too." But she got up so quickly that the bed bounced. I heard the front door close softly. And that was worse than all the times I've heard it slam.

I jumped out of bed and ran over to the window and looked down. (We lived on the third floor.) There was a cab there, waiting. I saw her come out the front door and go down the front walk. Her window, but she didn't look back or up. She got in, the door shut, and after a second the cab went around the corner really fast.

I stood looking down at the empty street, and I knew two things: it was never going to be the same, and it wasn't going to help to cry.

September 16

I hope this is how a journal is supposed to be done. I've never written one before, so go easy, okay? That's pretty dumb because I told you not to read it. Anyway, I didn't finish what I was writing, so I will now.

When my dad came home from his part-time job at the TV station (he worked the lights), he said, "Well, why not change everything." So he called in and quit his job. And he called the guys and told them he wasn't going to play with the band anymore. He rented a truck and hooked our VW Bug on the back, and we just threw everything in boxes. I put all the bills in a big brown paper grocery bag. And we came out here to the coast. That was in July. We got a little apartment, and he joined another band—Misty Mountain Backwoods Boys. Then he changed his name. He used to be Johnny Jones, and he always said it didn't have a special ring to it. So since Mom and I and he all have September birthdays, he changed his name to Johnny September. I don't mind being Jenny September. He did it legally, so we wouldn't get in trouble with the law. I think it's a nice name, and it's got a ring to it alright.

When we got here, I didn't bother pouring the bills out on the kitchen table and counter again. I just put the whole sackful on the counter where he could see it. He didn't get a job right off, so almost right away there were more. I didn't want to mix them, so I got down the big wooden fruit

bowl and started putting the ones that came in the mail in that.

This is a pretty dull journal. But really, nothing much has happened to me since we've moved. Maybe I ought to do another project.

September 19

I went over to Harper Caldwell's house for overnight! I was worried that I wouldn't have a friend here because all the kids would be in clicks (cliques? clix?). But she said to ask my mom, and I didn't say I couldn't, so I went over. They've got this big house on Larchmont. I'm kind of worried that I won't be able to ask her over to our place because it isn't as nice. I think they're pretty rich.

Anyway, we had fun. We did "Worst Thing," and I told her about Mom leaving. Afterward I wished I hadn't. Her worst thing is that her hair's too curly (big deal!). She told me that the girls over here do a thing called "Deep Description," where you describe each other? She guessed that I swam a lot because my hair's not exactly brown, but it's sun-streaked. I told her I was thinking about cutting it because it's a mess and the ends are split. But she said long hair's in, so I guess I won't. She said my eyes are confusing because sometimes they're sort of greenish-brown, and then they go golden-green. I told her it depends on what I wear.

She said she had a friend once who had one green eye and one blue one. That'd be neat! She said that I'm too thin, too short, and my eyes are too weird to be "in." What else is new? But my hair's okay. She's going to loan me her earrings that pierce your ears! She said to ask Dad. He'll just say, "Whatever you want, Jen."

Something happened that was funny—not haha funny, though. We were goofing and giggling, and Mrs. Caldwell opened the door and said to be quiet. And Harper said, "Okay, Mom," like that. And then she said, "We want waffles for breakfast." Her mother said okay or something. But later, she was asleep (I hate to be the last one to sleep), and I was thinking about that. Waffles for breakfast. She has a mom who's going to make her waffles for breakfast. Right then I missed my mother more than a whole lot. Waffles for breakfast. I couldn't get over it.

Then I couldn't get to sleep because started thinking about the grocery bag full of bills. Full! And the stack in the wooden bowl is getting pretty deep too. I wish Dad had a real job. They didn't have any gigs this week.

Sometimes I wonder what's going to happen.

September 21

Today's my birthday! I'm twelve! Next year I'll be a teen!

I started another year-long project. This school does a bunch of big projects, I guess. Anyway, this one's for history. I could have chosen to write to the president every week, but I thought that'd be boring. Like, I'm sure he wants to hear from me. I decided to do a map instead. It'll be like an old, ancient map of the world. I took a piece of art paper almost as big as our kitchen tabletop. Then I mixed brown and yellow paint with a lot of water and just sloshed it all on. Mr. Bails (the kids call him Mr. Boils) says that when it dries it'll look like old leather or parchment. I hope so. It looks like a mess now.

September 22

Dad forgot my birthday. But I didn't let him. We went out to Tony Po's for dinner. I had chicken with almonds, fried rice, sweet and sour pork, and something else—I forget the name. And fortune cookies. Dad's said, "Someone will meet you halfway." He said that means the band's going to get more jobs. I don't know how he figured that. Mine said, "The winds of change blow harder." I wonder who writes those things. I don't know how much more change could blow my way.

I didn't get a card from my mom. I know she didn't forget. Maybe she's really way back east—like Calcutta or Singapore!

September 23

We got time to work on our projects in history. Mr. Bails gave me three geography books with pictures of ancient maps in them.

My map's still kind of damp, so I couldn't do anything on it yet. I looked through the books. Then I went over where my map's drying. I sort of tried to look at it as if I were a sailor back then. It's going to have unknown oceans, unknown shores and lands, and unknown dangers. And I felt that it was kind of like us—Dad and me. I don't know what's ahead.

I do know one thing: there were more bills in the mail. Two of them were in red envelopes. One said "Past Due," and another said "Close-Off Notice." I propped them up by the coffeepot so Dad would see them. We've only been here three months.

I hope he doesn't decide to move again. Harper and Ava and Emily are sort of getting to be my friends. We sort of hang out by each other's lockers and stuff.

September 24

Last night Dad and I had Salisbury steaks. I didn't know that was just hamburgers. I guess I didn't look at the

package. It's funny, but food out of a little cardboard box just doesn't make me feel like I've had a real meal. I miss my mom's cooking. Sometimes I wonder where she is, what she's having for dinner, if she's worried. I told Dad about the red bills in case he hadn't noticed. He just said, "Not to worry, Jen." Not to worry? If I don't, who's going to, I'd like to know. He's too easy-going.

September 25

I'm not going in by the front door of the apartment building again. Mrs. Webster, the manager, keeps meeting me. "Pay!" she yells. As if I had a wallet full of money just to hand to her. (If I had any money, I'd go to Styles. They've got the cutest sweaters—big and bulky. One's in a shade of green to die for.) So I decided not to go in the front door. But today, after I snuck up the back stairs and came around the corner of the hall to our place, I saw that she was still at it. She left a note that said, "See me!" and another long legal letter taped to our door. It even had a seal on it.

I pulled them down and gave them to Dad when he came in from practicing at Pinch's house. He just said, "I'll take care of it, Jen." Yeah, right, Dad, sure thing.

Harper kind of hinted that we should come over to my place and study together for the math test. That'd be a

laugh. Pinch and J.J. were practicing at our place twice this week. It got late, so they just stayed. In the morning I had to step over Pinch. J.J. was sprawled on the couch, snoring. He snores better than he plays the bass. I just tried to be quiet. I started the coffee, grabbed a piece of toast for breakfast, and stuffed a yogurt and an apple in my backpack for lunch. I can just see Harper Caldwell stepping over Pinch.

I can remember when it was different. When my mom was here (there), she was up first, and we'd talk. Now coming home in the afternoon is different too. I hate bills. I hate knowing my mother isn't coming home from work at six.

September 28

I'm already crazy about my map! I'm drawing stuff in real lightly. Later I'll color it in and go over the lines and names and stuff with pen. Yesterday I drew in the coast of England and part of the west coast of Europe. Those guys weren't so far wrong. I took one of the geography books home, and I saw lots of neat stuff I can put in.

There was one picture. It was of a sea monster. I'd seen other sea monster pictures, but when I turned the page and saw this one, I just sat still like.... Once I saw a baby rabbit in the park, and this dog wasn't on a leash, and it

was sniffing around. And that bunny rabbit stayed so still! And that's what I felt like. It was like that. This monster was huge! Its bulging eyes had snake-like slits. There were big billows of smoke coming out its nostrils, and flames shot about a foot from its mouth. And it had fangs, long and sharp, and a forked tongue that was out, licking the air like it could already taste the prey. The scales were slick, and there was slime and muck that sort of stuff stuck to its green back. And the tail had a long, sharp stinger at the tip of it.

I knew it was only a picture, and even the Loch Ness monster isn't supposed to be as gross as that. But as I sat on my bed looking at it, I almost felt that it was nearby. I know that's silly, but I did, I felt cold and scared.

September 30

Friday! Ask me if I'm glad or what. Harper, Emily, and Ava are going to the game tomorrow. They asked me to go too! They're talking about being cheerleaders. Ava sort of dropped it that the uniforms cost almost fifty dollars! I kind of laughed and said, "I'll take two; they're small." They laughed too, but even talking about that much money made me nervous.