

1941

## A House for Jenny

Elizabeth Martin Ouellet

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Martin Ouellet, Elizabeth. "A House for Jenny." *New Mexico Quarterly* 11, 3 (1941). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol11/iss3/12>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## A HOUSE FOR JENNY

*Elizabeth Martin Ouellet*

**T**HE EARLY sun crept into Jenny's room with morning in its hands and it touched Jenny's cheek with a warm and golden finger, awakening her. She lay there for a while wiggling her toes under the covers, blinking at the light, and then she rolled out of her bed and ran to the window where she pressed her face against the cool pane. Outside, the poplar, the secret-whispering tree, brushed back and forth against the screen, throwing flat circles of sunlight on her cheek, murmuring the secret of forever.

"Today," Jenny said, singing the words, "I'm nine, and Daddy's coming home, to stay forever like he said. I'm nine, and the poplar tree is high as my window, to the very top like Daddy said it would be when he came home to stay."

It was a school day but Jenny put on her Sunday dress of pale blue silk. She tied a blue ribbon in her brown and shining hair, and in her eyes there was an eager, waiting look.

Jenny turned her head and saw her mother standing in the doorway.

"Hello, Mums," she said. And she gave a tolerant little smile, as if to say you're sweet, but you're not Daddy; you can't ever be like Daddy. . . .

"Happy birthday, darling." Her mother spoke in a quiet, a very careful voice. She carried a white package in her hand. She wore a pink flowered apron and she seemed very young. Daddy Ben had called her Edie. "It came this morning," she said, handing Jenny the package. "For you."

"For me?" Jenny cried. "A present!"

She took the box and spread her brown fingers over it. Then she began to fumble happily with the ribbons.

Edie sat down on the edge of the bed to watch.

When Jenny drew a doll from its tissue paper nest, a doll with wide brown eyes, credulous eyes like her own, she gathered it into her arms with a quiet acceptance. She held it to her shining face and smiled.

Blinded, Edie turned away.

There was a tag fastened around the doll's neck. Very slowly Jenny read what was written there, holding each word. "Yours, forever and ever. . . ." She paused. "There isn't any name."

"No name, Jenny? How exciting." But Edie's eyes did not meet Jenny's. With the package there had come that morning a letter bearing a London postmark, a letter addressed to herself. It was folded now in the pocket of her apron.

In the letter Daddy Ben had said, "I hope Jenny likes the doll. She must be a big girl now; too big, maybe, for dolls."

Jenny laughed. Rapturously, she laughed. And when Edie looked at her then she saw the sun on Jenny's head and the morning in her eyes, a look of forever.

"There isn't any name," Jenny said, "but I know who sent it." A secret smile twinkled in the corners of her mouth. "And it's funny that he sent it, Mums, because he's coming home today, you know." She sat down beside Edie on the bed.

"Coming home, Jenny? Who's coming home?"

"Why, Daddy, Mums. You silly, didn't you know?" Jenny squeezed her mother's fingers. "It's going to be wonderful," she said.

"No . . . I didn't know, dear. I . . . I guess I forgot." Edie slipped her hand into her pocket and touched the envelope. She wanted to say, "I had a letter this morning from Daddy Ben. A long one . . . he said . . ." But not now. Not on a ninth birthday with Jenny wearing this look of forever on her face. "You'd better come down now and have your breakfast."

She leaned over and kissed the top of Jenny's head. Then she arose and went out of the room.

She walked slowly down the stairway where the floor showed through the worn carpeting. She had looked at carpets for the little brown house, but she had not bought them. She had made curtains for the dining room, Ben's favorite shade of blue; she had not put them up. Edie remembered the day Ben had gone away. Jenny had been seven. "Just a little stroll around the world," he had said to them. When Jenny was eight he had not come back, and even then Edie knew that

the world was a long, long walk. People like Ben forgot their way home. There had been a great many letters at first, good letters, gay and reassuring. For the past year they had come less often; they had been less gay. And now the letter had come that was not gay at all; one she must read to Jenny sometime, but not today. And maybe, she thought, her little burden of knowledge would never come to any words that she could say, and Jenny, with terrifying patience, would go on waiting.

Edie stood in the doorway and saw the kitchen recede and sway beyond a mist of tears. She thought she saw Ben there, and dreamlike, she moved towards him.

*He was sitting at the kitchen table, buttering his toast with great, extravagant slabs. His eyes were very blue.*

*"I think I'll plant the poplar today," he said. "The one Jenny wants to grow past her window. By the time she's nine she'll be able to reach out and touch it."*

*"It's a nice house, Ben. We'll have it all our lives."*

*"Forever," he said, "and ever."*

In the kitchen doorway Jenny asked, "Who were you talking to, Mums?"

Edie whirled about, blinking her eyes against the swiftness of time.

"Oh, hello there. Did you say something, dear?"

Jenny straddled a kitchen chair.

"I just thought I heard you talking to someone. When I came downstairs I thought maybe that Daddy was home already."

"No," Edie said, "there wasn't anyone. No one at all. I was thinking . . . out loud. Do you want bacon?"

"Hmnn . . . he said he was coming home today."

"I don't remember . . . did he?" Edie flipped the bacon over in the pan. "How many pieces, Jenny?"

"Three. . . . He said he'd be home to stay when the poplar touched the top of my window. That was when I was seven he said it. . . . I just went out to look, and it does . . . all the way to the very tip-top."

"That's fine," Edie said brightly.

"Anyway, Mums," Jenny went on, "he said he'd always come on birthdays, no matter what."

"You said that last year, honey. And he didn't come."

"I guess he just couldn't, Mums. But when I was eight the poplar was only as far as the window sill. Maybe he knew. Maybe he wanted to wait until it was all the way to the top so as he wouldn't have to go again."

Edie stepped outside to the service porch where she gripped the edge of the wash tub with her white fingers. "I can't tell her," she thought. "I can't ever tell her. Not today . . . not tomorrow . . . ."

She went back into the kitchen then and took the bacon from the pan and put it on Jenny's plate.

Jenny covered her toast with thick slabs of butter. She bit into it, and with her mouth half full she said, "I'm not going to school today because it's special. I wouldn't want not to be here when he comes."

Edie wheeled about then and faced Jenny, compelled to speak.

"Jenny," she said, "I don't think he's coming. It would be better if you went to school."

But Jenny only laughed.

"Why, Mums, of course he's coming. I'm just as sure as anything. It won't be any time at all now till he's here."

And Edie was silenced.

*Forever is a brown house. A brown house on a green street. With her doll in her arms Jenny stood on the front walk and looked at it, of all the houses she had ever seen or known, the real one. She had lived there always with Edie and Daddy Ben, and always was forever. Now Daddy was coming home again. She sucked in a sharp little breath of pure bliss. There was the sentinel poplar rustling softly in the familiar wind, and the snap-dragons coming up again in neat, bright rows beside the hedge. She could see Edie watering the flowers. She had on her pink sunbonnet, and she was laughing. Daddy moved across the lawn with his rake and the smoke curled up from his pipe in pudgy rings. Edie sat back on her heels and squirted the hose at him. When Jenny closed her eyes she could hear them laughing. Forever is a brown house, and Daddy coming home to rake the leaves away and see the poplar.*

With wide, eager eyes Jenny caressed the rough brown walls. She came across the lawn and put her hand upon them. She stood beside the poplar, listening. *Forever and ever. Ever and forever.* And for an instant it was Daddy chanting the words in a voice that came towards her from far away.

She went to sit on the smooth top step of the porch and she found

Edie there, half hidden by the trailing vines. A thick packet of letters lay in her lap. She had been sitting on the step for a long time and her eyes were full of Jenny.

They did not talk at first, and Jenny sat there listening to the secret-whispering tree, feeling the brown wooden arms of the house around her. She closed her eyes and for a brief moment she looked back at herself and Edie, sitting there on the porch step like people waiting.

With troubled eyes Edie looked at Jenny. She fingered the letters in her lap.

"You love it very much," she asked suddenly, "this little house?"

Silently Jenny nodded. She locked her brown hands together.

"More than anything, almost," she answered finally. "But it's not quite real."

"Not real, Jenny?"

"Not without Daddy, it isn't. When he comes today it will come alive again. It used to talk to me, you know, when he was here. It's waiting for Daddy, Mums, just like us." She rested her head on Edie's shoulder. "I wonder if it gets awfully tired waiting, Mums."

"I think it must be tired, Jenny," she said. "A very tired little house."

Jenny leaned forward and peered up and down the street.

"I think it would be easier waiting, Mums, if I went to school at noon. He might be late, maybe . . . ."

"That's a good idea." Edie turned the letters over in her hand.

"Maybe he'll be here when I get home."

Edie did not answer. She picked up the letter that lay on the top of the packet. But she didn't say anything. She just stared at it, her teeth sinking into her lower lip, and after a while she put it back.

"Are those Daddy's letters?" Jenny asked. "I've read them all, haven't I?"

"Yes, I think you've read them all, Jenny. All but the last one."

Jenny stood in the parlor. Her hands were clasped behind her back.

She saw the blue overstuffed chairs, the big fat one that was Daddy's, and the rug that was blue and flowered. She stood very still and looked on all the beloved shabbiness while the sunlight drew a slow-moving finger across the floor. It was Time moving on the rug, but Jenny was forever and she did not see. She walked about on tiptoe, feeling the things that she loved, the fragile porcelain figurines on the mantle, the

ivory keys of the piano, the rose bowl that was so roundly smooth to her touch. She traced the bright bird patterns on the curtains and when at last she laid a finger on the thing that was forever, she heard the fluttering of wings and a cry far away.

Through the open door she saw Edie watching her from the top step of the porch with a strange, uncertain look upon her face. For a fleeting instant Jenny paused there, questioning. Then she moved out of the path of the sunlight and went upstairs to change her dress for school.

Edie stood in the empty parlor holding her letters in her hand. She saw the shaft of sunlight withdrawing across the floor. She knew that it was Time moving on the rug. When it was gone, leaving the room in shadow, she shivered. Beneath the window a great silver dish glittered with a final brightness on the table. She put the letters down where the inscription read, "Edie and Ben . . . 1929."

When she heard Jenny's footsteps on the stair she turned from the window. She saw the child come through the doorway with her brown straw hat on, a book under her arm, wearing the credulous and shining look, Jenny forever. Edie sagged slightly against the table, suddenly limp before the luminous face, and her hands jerked forward in an agonizing gesture of love. She went to her then and kissed her gently, straightening the wide brim of her hat.

"Goody-bye, darling."

"Bye, Mums. Tell Daddy not to sweep the leaves in the yard until I come . . . ."

"I'll tell him, dear."

"We always had such fun doing that, you know."

"Yes, I remember."

"And tell me what he says about the poplar. He'll never believe it got so big."

"No."

"Nor that I'm so big, will he, Mums?"

"I should say not."

"Bye, Mums."

"Good-bye, Jenny . . . ."

Edie watched from the window until Jenny had turned the corner. She stood by the table where the letters lay in the silver dish, and in one hand she held a little box of matches. Now and again she struck a match

and sometimes she waited until her fingers were scorched before she blew it out.

After a time she took the top letter from the packet and drew the scrawled sheets from the envelope. As she read it the corners of her mouth twitched and the skin around her mouth became gray.

"It is too late now," he had written there, "to come back. I have begun a new life. I want to be free; I want to marry again.

"I know now that nothing lasts; forever is only a word on a piece of paper. Keep the house for Jenny . . . . She will forget me soon, if she has not, as I imagine, forgotten me already. Tell her about me, Edie, so that she'll understand how it is with me. Let her forget me, but don't let her hate me. . . ."

"Keep the house for Jenny. . . ." Edie thought of the poplar tree swaying so gently against the brown walls whispering the secret of forever. "Forever is a word on a piece of paper." If there was to be a new life for Jenny, the roots of the old life must be destroyed.

Edie struck a match and held the letter to its thin yellow flame. Then she set the letter down with the others on the silver dish. The crisp curtain with the bright bird patterns on it drifted back and forth over the tiny tendrils of fire.

Edie closed her eyes against the sharp, familiar outlines of the room. When she opened them again the close circle of darkness fell away and she saw the tongues of flame upon the curtains, a twisted, golden vine. She stood there until the heat burned upon her throat and arms and the smoke was bitter on her tongue and in her eyes. She turned away then and went out the front door very quietly, closing it behind her.

Edie was sitting on the curbstone when Jenny came home from school. Already the poplar was a ghost of a tree swaying against an emptiness of sky, and the little leaves, brittle with death, were fluttering away on the wind.