

**Try to Be Normal**

## 1. Introducing Jeanie

I got this diary because I stopped talking. My mother took me to another new doctor and he says when I don't feel like talking, I can write things down. He says no one will read it. He gave me this notebook, which is yellow, which I don't like. I'm not in my yellow phase anymore, but he doesn't know that. I wrote in my yellow notebook (the one I am writing in right now)

### *What should I write?*

and I held it up for him to see. He said, "Your name is a good place to start." Anyway, my name is Jeanie and it doesn't matter, because nobody calls me that – they all call me Birdie and this is why... (dots mean, to be continued.)

## 2. Introducing Birdie

Sometimes I have too many words in my head and I can't think fast enough about which one to choose so I get them all mixed up and they come out funny and kids laugh. Like in grade one this girl at school, whose name is Larissa, which is a really pretty name and who is also really pretty, said that her dog died. All the kids were giving her sympathies and I wanted to give her a sympathy too. So, I didn't know what to say – I thought of saying "Oh my God!" like my sister Bridget would say, but then I remembered you shouldn't say God's name unless your talking directly to him. So then I thought I'd say "Oh my word" like my mother says when she's trying not to say "Oh my God," or I could say "Oh brother." But what happens when you think of oh my word and oh brother is your mouth combines them before your head and what came out was "Oh my bird." All the kids laughed and from then on every time I walked into a room they'd shout out

“oh my bird!” Eventually it turned into Birdie. I didn’t mind so much because my best friend is a bird.

### 3. Introducing Seven

I found a way to get around the talking. When I don’t know what to say – I make a bird noise like this - Ka-Kaw! I don’t know why but it makes my head feel better. It makes it feel like it’s still. I learned it from this bird I know. His name is Seven. Bridget says that’s a dumb name for a bird. I didn’t name him. His mother did! Bridget can be really dumb sometimes. Seven used to come to my window and he would say “Ka-kaw” then I’d say “Ka-kaw” back. We would have long talks because he never got mad about what I said and he also never got mad about what I didn’t say. Seven came to my window every day, but then one day he flew into the window when it was closed and fell to the ground. I ran outside to see if he was okay. Seven laid there real still, staring up at me with one eye open. I went in the house to tell Mother, and when we went back outside Seven was gone. Mother said that he probably got stunned, just needed a rest, and when he was ready he flew away again. But I haven’t seen Seven in a long time. Ka-kaw! Ka-kaw!

### 4. My Reasons – Big and Small

People always like to ask me why I stopped talking. They think I have a really big reason. I just have small reasons.

1. I can’t think of things to say.
2. I say things that get me in trouble.

3. I don't know what they want me to say, so I get all worried that I'll say the wrong thing and then #2 happens.
4. People ask too many questions. Especially how is your mother holding up?
5. Sometimes when I talk people ask me who I'm talking to. Which is a really stupid question.

5. Things that are wrong with me:

1. I'm not normal.
2. I don't know how to be normal.
3. I like to divide my food into four sections and take one bite from each section like I'm going around a clock.
4. I am afraid to sit down on toilets, but if I spin around three times I'm okay. Also standing on the rim works.
5. Things itch me more than most people.
6. I have pigeon toes.
7. I'm a bit of a silent sam. Whoever he was.

6. Not Me

My mother tells me that I talked late. I don't know if she means I talked when I was older than other kids or if when I got asked a question I was late with the answer, because that still happens. It is very hard for me to come up with the right answers and I don't know where answers are supposed to come from. My mother also tells me that I had a strange first word. It wasn't Mama or Dada like other kids it was Help. She also said

that I called her Mother, not Mom or Mama or Mommy and I called Dad “not Mother.” She also says that I called my sister Bridget “Not me.” Eventually I learned their names, of course. I’m not a retard. Which is not a nice word. I know this, because I’ve been called it. Sometimes when Bridget and I walk home from school the kids sing “Extra, extra read all about it, Birdie’s retarded, no doubt about it!” Bridget hates it when they sing that. Sometimes she yells at them, “It takes one to no one.” Sometimes she says, “Just cover your ears, Birdie.” And sometimes she won’t walk home with me. I asked Mother if I was a retard and she said I wasn’t. She said I was just different. I asked Bridget what it means to be different and she said “Not normal.”

## 7. My Yellow Phase

This was my first phase. My favorite song was “Yellow Submarine.” I played it over and over and over and over and... well, you get it. I played it so much that it drove my Dad crazy and he told me to pick a new song. Instead I just hummed it. That also drove him crazy. I wore only yellow, but it turns out there are many different kinds of yellow and that is why Bridget said I looked like a fashion disaster. Also she said I looked like I puked up a canary. Mother said I looked like a ray of sunshine. My Dad rolled his eyes at this. My Dad also rolled his eyes at my yellow food. I had lemonade for supper and banana’s, corn on the cob, yellow beans and lemon jello all on a yellow paper plate. The rest of the family ate normal. My dad asked my mother how long she planned on indulging this behavior. My mother said if he’d like to go to the doctor’s appointments with us then he could have an opinion. My Dad decided to eat in front of the TV that night. Now he’s used to it and doesn’t say anything much about my phases.

## 8. Ways I can be more normal

1. Try to act like my sister.
2. When I don't know how to act think, "What would Bridget do?"
3. Make a friend, a real friend this time.
4. Politely ask my imaginary friend to leave. This will be easier, because I can write it on a page of my yellow notebook and hold it up for her to see. Last time I asked her to leave, someone heard me and it was what you call awkward.
5. If she doesn't listen try closing my eyes real tight and see if she's gone when I open them.
6. Don't scratch myself so much. Or at least stop before bloods come.

## 9. Things I did good

I made a friend of a girl at school. Her name is Mary and she is blind. Teacher made me her special helper. I lead her around places and make sure she doesn't bump into things. At recess I put things in her hands so she'll know what things feel like. I made a snowball and put it in her hand – I wrote in my notebook

### *How does it feel?*

Which was really dumb, since she can't see. So, then I whispered in her ear. She said it felt cold. Of course the teacher found out I whispered and now mother and dad and pretty much the world is jumping for joy at my friendship with Mary. The good thing is if I don't feel like talking I can just stay away from her and she doesn't even know I'm there.

## 11. Introducing Mildred

Now that I have Mary – I don't need Mildred. Mildred is my imaginary friend and I asked her to leave. At least everyone thinks she's imaginary. Bridget says Mildred is a terrible name. It's not like Bridget is the greatest name in the world. Besides I didn't name her. Blame her mother. Mildred says she can't leave, because she has nowhere else to go. I wrote in my notebook:

*Maybe you could go on a vacation*

She laughed at that. Or she laughed at me. I can never tell the difference. It hurt my feelings so now Mildred and I aren't speaking. Or at least I'm not speaking to her. As usual Mildred won't shut up.

## 10. How to act more like my sister:

1. Try to spy on how my sister sits on the toilet. I'm pretty sure she lets her bum touch, but one can never be sure.
2. Make cross-eyed faces so kids will laugh. Also fart noises under the armpit seem to be a hit.
3. Stop cutting my own hair.
4. Learn how to skip rope better.

## 11. A very bad day

Today was a very bad day. It doesn't even get one star. Well, maybe just one.

Mary asked teacher for a new helper, just because I walked her into a wall. It was an accident. Sheesh. And also because I put a dead bird in her hand and she didn't like that. Now I don't have a friend. I might need to make up with Mildred.

## 12. How Mildred Died

Mildred says she died when she was six from a blood disease. I wrote in my notebook while Mom was making me green jello, because I'm now in a green phase.

*Mildred died. Do you want to know how?*

Mother said, "Not particularly".

*Do you want to know when?*

Mother sighed. "Would you like broccoli or peas for dinner?"

*She died when she was six. She was really sick.*

Mother hung her head. She went to the bathroom. When she came out her face was red.

*Are you embarrassed?*

"Am I embarrassed of what, Jeanie?"

*Your face is red.*

"That's because I was washing it," Mother said.

Bridget says I should stop making things up because it upsets Mother. At supper I pointed to the page about Mildred dying to my Dad. Sometimes I reuse the pages so I don't have to keep writing.

He said to my mother, "How long are we going to keep up this charade?"

## 13. Doctor's Visit



My new doctor's name is Doctor Kaminski. He said I could call him Dr. K. I'm not calling him anything, because I especially don't like talking to doctors. He said we were going to play a game. He would hold up a word and I would write down the word it made me think of. He gave an example like if he says black I might say cat. Except I would never say cat if he said black. He said there were no right and wrong answers and every answer was okay. I wish normal life was like that. This is how it went.

Safety = Mother

Hate = Noise

Love = Mother

School = Sad

Dirty = Hands

Yellow = Submarine

Hurt = Broken

Home = Strange

Dolls = Friends

Emergency = Mother

Happiness = Quiet

Birds = Free

Bridget = Normal

Hospital = Bridget

14. How I Learned to Fly

Yesterday was such a bad day that I don't even give it a single, lonely star. It gets zero stars. Seven came back – he invited me out onto the roof and told me I should try to fly. So, I went to the edge of the roof just like Seven and I flapped my arms til I got good speed and I flew. Only I don't have the hang of it yet and I broke my arm.

#### 15. My Black Phase

I started a new phase, because I broke my arm and because Seven has gone away again and I miss him the most out of all those who go away. My new song is “Black Bird” by the Beatles. I don't just play the song, I sing it. Mother is very happy that I'm singing words, since singing is close to talking. What she doesn't understand is that singing is different from talking, because the words are already there and also they are someone else's words. Mother doesn't like my black phase though – she says I can't survive on black licorice and she's running out of ideas and can I please just give it a rest. Dad says I look like a widow and that it's “morbid.” I don't know what that means.

They told me to pick a new song *or else*. I never know what the *or else* is. So, I picked “I am the Walrus”, also by the Beatles. I especially like the whole goo goo ga joob part. It's just like Ka-kaw – when you say it, you feel better. Somebody shot John Lennon last year for no good reason. He isn't going to write any more songs. I wonder if John Lennon said “goo goo ga joob” when he saw the gun.

#### 16. All My Friends

Bridget told me I should try to act normal and make more friends.

***I have lots of friends.***

She says I'm lying, so, I wrote all of their names.

Mildred who you've met a million times.

Daisy

Isabel

Sonia

Jeremiah

and Rosemary

At least they were my friends before they all went away. I haven't seen anyone but Mildred in a long time. I even showed her how many people signed my cast to prove the point. She said no one signed my cast. Bridget must need glasses.

17. My Dad is super mad

Last night my Dad was getting super mad about a lot of things. First he got mad when he came home from work and tripped over my shoes that I forgot to line up nicely. Then at supper he was mad that I had a plate full of black olives and blackberries. He asked my mother how long this was going to go on. She just ignored him. Then he got mad when he asked me how school was and I also ignored him.

Then he said, "Is no one in this goddamn family going to talk to me?"

So Mother asked how his day was. And he said how do you think it was? Mother didn't answer, because I don't think she knew the answer.

Then my dad said "The only person in this whole goddamn family who made any sense was Bridget." I looked at Bridget and she stuck her tongue out at me, but of course no one noticed. Then mother started to cry because I think Dad hurt her feelings. I hate

seeing mother cry. I tried to just stare at my plate and eat my blackberries, but my hands were shaking and I dropped a blackberry and it landed on the floor. Dad thought I did it on purpose. He yelled at me to pick it up and I was trying to, but I knocked the plate over when I was leaning and everything went flying and then Dad picked it up and smashed it against the wall. Mother was crying, “Stop it Harry!” I couldn’t hear her because I started I started to scream and bang my ears. Sometimes that helps quiet my head and calm down all the talking, but it gives everyone a headache. Usually when I do that mother holds me real tight until I calm down, but this time she just walked away. Dad started to yell louder than my screams and told me to get a hold of myself. I was trying to, but I was used to Mother getting a hold of me. Then Dad grabbed my fists and I didn’t mean to scratch him that hard. I even got a bit of his blood under my fingernails and had to wash my hands twenty times. Or course I got sent to my room.

#### 18. What to do when people are angry

1. Say sorry for what you did
2. Say sorry even if you don’t know what you did
3. Say sorry even if you aren’t sorry

I came out of my room before I was allowed to. I saw Mother and Dad sitting at the kitchen table talking about something. They were talking quietly and they seemed sad and also really tired. I walked up to my Dad and wrote:

*I’m sorry*

He grabbed the notebook out of my hand and ripped the page out – crumpled it and threw it. He then told me to march back to my room. Mother started to cry.

An hour later I came out again. This time mother was sitting on the couch with her hands on the sides of her head like her head was itchy and Dad was pacing around the room.

*I'm still sorry*

Dad didn't look at me so I brought the notebook closer and closer to his face. I could see my scratch mark up close. It was starting to heal already. He pushed the notebook away from me. I kept pointing to the page. Dad sat down and said, "It's not about being sorry."

*What's it about then?*

He didn't answer. I don't think he knew the answer.

Later that night, Dad came in my room and he said in a calm sort of way.

"Jeanie, I want you to talk."

I shook my head.

"Why won't you talk Jeanie?"

Then he wasn't so calm. "Goddamn it, Jeanie! I know you're in there somewhere! We know you can talk! We've heard you! Say something for Christ's sakes!"

The more he yelled, the less I wanted to talk. I just shrunk deeper and deeper inside of myself like I was crawling to the bottom of a sleeping bag.

Even later that night, Mother came in the room. She crawled into bed beside me. I was in a tight ball. She tried to pry my hands loose, but I wasn't letting go of myself.

So she wrapped herself around the ball that I was in and said, “Come back, Jeannie. Don’t go away.”

19. Things I do when I’m afraid:

1. Count to 20, but you should always skip 13. It’s unlucky. I’m not sure why, but I don’t want to risk it.
2. Talking to my dolls, helps. Well, the nice ones. Remember not to talk to Betsy. She is the worst one of all. She has big blue eyes that never blink. Sometimes she stares at me all night and I can’t go to sleep unless I blink four times really fast. It’s hard to blink four times, you should try it. You accidentally blink five or six times and then you have to start all over again.
3. Pretend you’re somewhere else.
4. Also pretend you’re someone else.
5. Close yourself into a tight ball and hold onto yourself real tight

20. The Game of Life

Bridget and I were playing the Game of Life after school. Bridget always wins. She wins every single game we ever play and she says I’m a sore loser, but I think she’s a sore winner. Today she had twin girls and named them Mildred and Jeanie. I wrote in my notebook that I didn’t want her to name the babies after us. She wouldn’t listen and then she took us out of the car – these dumb plastic pink sticks and said “Goodbye Mildred. Goodbye Jeanie” and ran the car over us. I got angry and I picked up the game and threw the pieces everywhere and then I stomped on the box. When Mother came in

to see what all the racket was about she was not pleased. She said that when Dad got home I was going to get a licking, but Dad never came home. I told her it was Bridget's fault and she said, "Why couldn't I have had a normal child?" I wrote:

***Bridget is normal.***

21. Good News

Seven is back! He came to my window last night and tapped his beak on it 3 times. I let him in the room even though I'm not allowed to let birds in my room anymore. He and I talked a long time, until mother banged on my door "Would you please stop making that incessant noise!" Also, mother is too tired to take me on doctor visits.

22. Bad News

Mother seems to be getting more and more tired.

She doesn't get out of bed until Bridget and I get home from school.

23. Where Did Dad Go?

Bridget says Dad isn't coming back and that's why Mom is always in bed. I wrote,

***Why, is she sick?***

Bridget said "No, dummy. She's sad."

***Why, are you sick?***

I asked that because Bridget is sick a lot. The sicker Bridget is, the sadder mother is.

"No, she's sad about Dad leaving."

***Where did he go?***

"I don't really know," Bridget said.

#### 24. Seven has a Bad Accident

Seven flew into my window again. This time he hit his head really hard. I ran out and waited for his rest to be over. I waited and waited. I told mother and she came out. She looked at him and she cried. She cried really, really hard. The sort of cry that steals your breath and sometimes leads into hiccups.

Then she kept saying “I’m sorry, so, so, so sorry.”

*What for?*

She said, “Because I don’t know how to help you.”

*With what?*

She didn’t answer. I don’t think she knows the answer.

#### 25. Seven is Dead

Seven didn’t get enough rest. He never got up and flew again. Mother said there are some things we just can’t recover from. So, I put him in a shoebox and he’s under my bed.

#### 26. Where Did Mildred Go?

I haven’t seen Mildred in a long time. Mother asked about her. She said it’s good she’s gone. Maybe things are starting to look up. Then Mother asked me if I thought Mildred might be gone for good this time. How am I supposed to know? Bridget said she thinks it’s stupid that Mother goes along with my imaginary friends. Mother has always said I have a very active imagination. Mother used to like that about me.



27. Where Did Bridget go?

Mother took all my dolls away. She said I could have them back later. It isn't her fault. The doctor told her to do it. He thinks that if I don't have the dolls to talk to that I'll start talking to people. He's wrong. Now I have no one to talk to. Not even Bridget. I'm not sure where she went, but I haven't seen her for days.

28. I Like Birds

I've been opening my window and letting the birds in. They fly around my ceiling, circling and circling.

29. Where Did the Birds Go?

The birds aren't coming anymore so I drew birds all over my walls. Mother was not pleased.

30. I Miss Bridget

I haven't seen Bridget in a long time. Sometimes when Mother and Dad fight she lets me crawl into bed with her. She draws pictures on my back with her finger and I guess what they are. Then, when she is feeling too sick and tired to lift her hands I draw pictures on her back. I always draw birds and she always draws stars.

I wrote to Mother:

***Where is Bridget?***

She didn't answer me. I kept pointing to the question, but she still didn't answer. She said I was making her tired.

***You're always tired!***

Then she said "Please Jeanie. Don't push me right now." I wasn't even close enough to push her! When I was calm, I pointed again to,

***Where is Bridget?***

She said, "You know where she is."

***Is she in the hospital again?***

Mother began to cry.

***Can we go visit her?***

"No, sweetheart we can't."

***I miss Bridget.***

Mother said, "I do too. I miss Bridget and I miss Dad."

***I only miss Bridget.***

31. My Sleeping Mother

I'm really getting worried about mother. She sleeps all the time now. It's like she took a sleeping potion or something. I can hear her crying through the walls. I slipped a note under her door

***Mother? Are you OK?***

She didn't answer me so I slipped another note

***Dad and Bridget might come back, just like Mildred. They go away for awhile and just when you stop missing them – there they are!***

### 32. My Strange Mother

Mother is acting stranger and stranger. She doesn't talk hardly at all anymore and last night I had a bad dream that I was pushing Bridget on a swing, but she fell off and wasn't moving. I kept trying to shake her to get her to wake up, but she wasn't waking up.

### 33. All the Lonely People

Last night we had pizza. Mother hadn't even gotten out of her bathrobe. I think she must be coming down with something. I wrote on the pizza box.

*Are you sick?*

She shook her head. I think she doesn't want to talk anymore. I think this house will be awful quiet if neither one of us talks.

### 34. My Mother's Bedroom Door

I spend every night outside of mother's bedroom door. It is the only way I can be close to her. She is tired a lot and goes to bed as early as I do. As soon as she thinks I'm tucked in – I take my blanket and pillow and camp in the hallway.

Last night I heard her talking to someone on the phone. This is what I heard:

I'm sorry.

How could...

You don't just...

What about Jeanie?

I can't do this by myself.

Fine.

Fine.

Fine.

Bastard.

Then I heard her start to cry so I sang her a lullaby like she used to sing to Bridget and I. “Hush little baby, don’t say a word. Mama’s going to buy you a mockingbird.” Then I sang Eleanor Rigby “all the lonely people where do they all come from?” Except I’m more curious about where they all go. And when they are coming back. When I stopped singing, mother opened the door but crawled back into bed. She lifted the covers up so I could crawl in with her. I lay against mother’s chest and I could hear it beating. We didn’t speak and now that mother doesn’t speak I don’t like the not speaking so much anymore. I wrote in my notebook:

***I can hear your heart beating deep inside you.***

Mother didn’t answer me, but held her hands out for my notebook. Mother has never written in my notebook before. She wrote:

***Once upon a time I could hear your heart beating deep inside me too.***

“But how?” I said out loud. Mother laughed and my hand flew to my mouth in order to hold the rest of the words in. She took a pillow and stuffed it under her nightgown and stroked her fluffy, feather-filled belly. I laid down on her odd-shaped pillow belly and wished I could crawl back inside of her.

I wrote in my notebook:

***Do you think Dad is coming back?***

***I don’t know. I hope so.***

*Where did he go?*

*He needed some time away.*

*Away from what?*

*Away from sadness.*

*Why is everyone so sad?*

Mother put the notebook down and looked at me really hard like when you're trying to find something.

*Do you think Bridget is coming back?*

*No.*

*Where is she?*

*She went where Seven went.*

*In a shoebox?*

Mother smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "Did you put Seven in a shoebox?"

I nodded.

"I think you better go and look in the shoebox."

I went and got the shoebox out from under my bed and brought it into mother. She told me to open it. So, I did. She looked inside and asked me to look inside too.

"Is Seven in there?" She asked me.

I shook my head. The shoebox was empty. Mother let out her breath as though she'd been holding it for a long time.

"Do you remember when Seven fell and needed a rest?"

I nodded.

"Bridget was very tired honey. She needed a rest too."

I wrote:

***But he got back up and flew away again. Maybe Bridget will get back up and fly away again too.***

“Yes, Jeanie she already did. She flew far away where we can’t reach her.”

I could feel the noises in my head getting louder. I balled up my fists and curled my body tight. Mother wrapped herself around me and I felt my fists release. She began to sing, “Hush little baby, don’t say a word.”

