

M.M.J.

Her name was Molly, Molly May Juniper, and she was my best friend. Molly wasn't like the other kids – they all teased me for the thick-rimmed glasses I wore and my habit of stuttering – Molly didn't. But Molly was also teased – she was different. She didn't dash out the door at recess and plant herself in the sandbox like the rest of them did, no, she would saunter out with her head held high and walk right behind the school to the dumpster. Kids would say that's where she got her meals from and act like she smelt worse than the dumpster itself. I didn't believe them, so one day I followed her, unsure of what to expect.

Her feet were kicking wildly in the air; she was headfirst in the dumpster. I had to plug my nose with my hands to stand the stench as I inched my way closer. I accidentally kicked a rock and sent it skittering into the side of the trash bin. It ricocheted off the metal emitting a loud, echoing bang. She jerked out from the garbage bin with a banana peel stuck in her hair. She scowled at me and dropped down from the bin, sizing me up.

“Hi,” I mumbled shyly.

“Who are you?” She narrowed her eyes.

“Curtis Robert Smith, Jr.” I held a hand out to her. She wiped her palm on her jeans and shook my hand.

“Nice to meet you, Curtis.” As she walked by I plucked the banana peel from her head and threw it back in the bin. I ran to catch up with her and asked, “What were you doing in there?” She stopped in her tracks and turned to look at me, staring deep into my eyes, brow furrowed.

“Looking,” she simply stated.

“Looking for what?” I prodded. Molly frowned, glanced over her shoulder to the other children playing in the sandbox and grabbed my hand.

“Follow me,” she said.

I let her tow me along, carefully glancing behind me every few minutes. She led me into the school and down the hall, past our classroom. Her backpack was hanging from a hook in the hall, behind her coat which she pushed aside. She pulled something out of her backpack, a large piece of thin, wooden board. She flipped it over to reveal what appeared to be a bunch of random junk glued in a sporadic pattern.

“What is it?” I asked. There were pop-can tabs, bottle tops, twigs, candy bar wrappers and wrinkled pieces of paper glued to it. Molly crossed her arms and told me to take a step back. I did as she said and she held the board up once more.

“Look carefully,” she said sternly. I did and noticed a stream of blue that traveled across the board, in curvy waves. It was made up of mostly old pieces of paper, bottle tops and broken bites of plastic. It made a river. Next to it was a hill of green made with old movie vouchers and candy bar wrappers. In the upper right corner was a beautiful moon which she had used pop-can tabs to create. My eyes widened, and my mouth hung open. She grinned and put it away.

Since then Molly and I had been doing our dumpster diving together, to the laughter of the other children. The rumours spread; we simply bowed our heads, and moved on. The next year, the teach discovered one of Molly's pieces; it had fallen out of her backpack.

“What's this?” Mrs. Small had asked.

“Nothing.” Molly tried to grab it from her hands but Mrs. Small held it high above her head.

“Molly,” she said, voice stern, “Garbage belongs in the garbage can. I don’t want you two rooting around in the dumpster at recess anymore.” She ripped up the trash-art, as we called it, and threw it into the metal can by the classroom door. Molly looked crestfallen and I ran to hug her before she fell to the floor, where she cried gently into my shoulder. From then on we stuck to looking in the streets for trash.

Molly and I became only the best of friends; she said her trash-art was her way escaping this world, of running away. I wasn’t sure what she had to run from, but I soon found out.

It was the third grade when Molly disappeared. The month was June and I’d gone over to Molly’s house to see if she wanted to go and get some ice-cream with me and my dad. I’d never been in Molly’s house; she wouldn’t let me past the screen door, I got the feeling Molly didn’t like her house very much.

No one answered on the fifth knock so I let myself in. The house smelled of age and a thin layer of dust covered most of it. Molly was nowhere to be found. As I turned to leave an old man with balding, white hair, emerged from the basement stairs, “What are you doing here?” He narrowed his eyes. It reminded me of the first time I’d met Molly.

“Where’s Molly?” I rested a hand on the screen door, ready to bolt.

“She’s not here kid.” The man let out a heavy sigh. “She’s at the hospital.” I swallowed the lump in my throat and dashed through the door out into the hot asphalt.

“Hey! Where are you going?” The old man called after me, but I kept running; all the way across the street to my house.

My mother drove me to the hospital. I’d expected her to complain about the head as our car doesn’t have air conditioning, but she must have seen the fear on my face. We drove silently and quickly, she even ran a few red lights – but it felt like we couldn’t get there soon enough.

Molly was pale when we walked in. She looked frail, like she’d crumble to dust if I hugged her, but I did so anyway. She smiled weakly, but the frown still seemed to be there, hidden. Her eyes were encased in dark circles and her cheeks looked sucked in.

Molly reached into the drawer of the night table beside her hospital bed, with its turquoise sheets, and pulled out a piece of foam board. The board was black and half finished, you could make out the edges of the two faces, their fine details not yet glued on. It was one of Molly’s trash-art’s and was made out of napkins, plastic cutlery, pieces of foam cups and paper plates, all supplied by the hospital. The left half of the face was Molly – with her tanned skin, brown eyes and wavy, golden hair, which she had used different shades of golden thread to create. The right half, however, was unfinished; it had brown hair that spiked up, and lighter skin.

“It’s pretty,” I told her. “What’s it of?”

“Me,” she answered with a nonchalant tone.

“What’s this half of the face?” I pointed to the right side. She shrugged and picked at the corner of the foam.

“You’ll see.” She slid the board away and smiled to me. That was the last trash art I ever saw her make.

Molly died August 8th, that year. She’d had cancer since she was seven. I’d cried so hard my momma said I’d drown us all. It wasn’t until September that I saw Mrs.

Juinper, Molly's mother. She knocked on the door, and looked me in the eyes when I came to answer it. She slipped a brown package into my hands and retreated back down my front porch steps, across the street and back into her own house without so much as a word. I shut the door and took the package to my room. I left it there, unopened for fifteen years.

It was raining on my twenty-third birthday. I'd gone to pick up my cake – my mother was far too busy preparing my surprise party, which I wasn't supposed to know about – so I'd picked up the cake myself. The downpour started just as I'd left the bakery and I ducked into the store next door, an art gallery. I'd simply been wandering, when I saw a wooden board hanging off the wall. The picture on it was made of rusted bottle caps, pop-can tabs and shards of glass. There were two small letters written in white-out on the right, bottom corner of the board. They read, M.M.J. I bolted out of the gallery, into the rain and drove off to my mother's house. I found the brown package in my dresser drawer. I ripped off the paper to see Molly's trash-art from the day at the hospital. It was finished now, and the right side of the face was a boy's. I flipped it over to see "Molly and Curtis are one" written on the back with the initials M.M.J.

Marie O.