

Seven Minute Molly

By j.l.oneill

I don't remember who or how the game started, but it was always a constant when we were growing up. Seven Minute Molly became a rite of passage. An urban legend entrusted from child to child to child. Maybe we created it. Maybe it was passed between the walls of these old war homes. Somewhere between skinned knees and misplaced barrettes, she became real.

Most days us kids of Napoli Drive were content to itty about until the sun pinkened behind the wily oak and parents flashed porchlights, calling us home. I miss being tuckered out from countless hikes, toy wars, mud pie bakeries, and volleyball tournaments. My favourite games were the ones we made up. Bar-ball. Conan's Tomb. Monster Catchers. Some nights, I was too tired to undress. I would peel dirty socks from blistered feet and sleep with them clasped in my tiny hands. Innocent prayer.

Napoli Drive changed with Seven Minute Molly. We questioned sleep.

I used to play with the Kelly children a lot back then. There were five of them in total – which completed a full third of our core group. My best friend, Erin Kelly, would send the twins over during the summer with a message to meet her under the wily oak. My parents would push me out, remind me to drag my sister, Abby, around with me. Abby mostly played in the dirt with the twins anyway. But she tattled about Seven Minute Molly. 'Night terrors.' Between her sniveling and gulps for air, my parents decided I had filled Abby's head with 'Sabin Minally.' I was relieved Abby was unable to pronounce the witch's name.

When I consulted the other kids about Abby being a tattler, we took a unanimous vote. Save our democratic souls. No one was to go near the eerie Victorian at the tip of Vista Court alone. Especially if Seven Minute Molly was dreamreaching again. A few of the older kids went as far as to draw up commandments. It made sense. Never in the entire history of ever did any kid even live in Vista. Not since Sam Biagi went missing. We agreed, no venturing past the stop sign, no taking the shortcut to Buchanan, never walk

in the afterdark, and most importantly, no one was allowed to look at the house. Erin Kelly, with the pocket knife her father gave her for Christmas, carved an emphatic x in the wily oak. Our reminder.

We lost a lot of balls, marbles, and even a kite to Seven Minute Molly. If we saw outsiders walking their dogs, we'd whisper a warning. Then all us kids would hide behind cars, scramble up trees, and stifle the whimpers of the littler ones. Mortified by the boldness of strangers. If they never returned to Napoli Drive, it was proof of Molly dreamreaching.

The old three-story Victorian where Seven Minute Molly haunted looked so misplaced in its three-acre lot when compared with our cluster of war homes. The rusted chainlink fence encircled the desolate property like the edges of a scab. My parents' house faced the intersecting court, so I always had to bow my gaze when leaving home. Though her house remained the same, the tale of Seven Minute Molly changed with the seasons. But there was a continuing theme: Seven Minute Molly's soul was riven from her body. Eldritch magics, weird science, warlocks, the how never mattered. Hell, Robyn Edgewood once pinky swore there was a cult of high schoolers who abducted kids and offered them to Molly.

Worried for Abby's life, I took it upon myself to protect my sister. I spent my nights, folded in my duvet, mustering the courage to peek over the windowsill as my parents argued in front of the TV. My friend's bedroom lights burned orange in the afterdark. The street was always dead. Molly's absence made the dread worse. I wanted to steal glances of the Victorian behind trembling curtains, but I was a coward. Come morning, while readying for school, I'd cry. Because I felt like I had failed Abby for always falling asleep. When I confided in Erin Kelly about my sins at recess, she said she too had started keeping watch to protect the twins. She, too, was a failure.

To be fair, we tormented ourselves. We tempted Seven Minute Molly.

The game, if it could be called one, was to see who could get the closest to Seven Minute Molly's house without looking. The catch? After seven minutes passed, the witch would reap you. Over the years, every kid on Napoli Drive was declared a chicken-

chicken-pumpkin-eater. Myself included. With each passing year, we snuck closer to the battered house, eyes downcast on the grass, or to the astonished faces of friends, before speedy retreats. I always kept one foot on my bike pedal, hands throttling the handlebars. I had grown uneasy since Robyn Edgewood dared me to stand with both hands on the rusted chain-link fence and look at the tiny fly-speckled window on Molly's backdoor. I managed. But cried the whole time, lying to myself I was brave. For months afterwards, I was haunted by Seven Minute Molly and her dreamreaching. But she never stole me.

The farthest I ever made it was when I touched the foundation so the older kids wouldn't force Abby to indulge in the rite. I scrambled over the fence, bolted to the spalling bricks, slapped the parging, and fled. I was in and out in under two minutes.

The game ended with Erin. She was always the most reckless of us. She was the only freshman at Green River High to play on the girl's rugby team and was frequently seen skitching – hitching a ride by holding onto motor vehicle bumpers while riding her longboard. At 14 she hated admitting that she still believed in Seven Minute Molly. She said it was kid stuff and preferred to talk about boys. But then Robyn Edgewood triple-dog-dared her to knock the backdoor in front of Erin's crush, Peter Inglehart. We couldn't believe it. Knock? On Seven Minute Molly's house? Invite her outside and invoke dreamreaching? The blood drained from Erin's face. When Robyn Edgewood started clucking, Erin was fighting the shakes.

I boosted her over the fence and told her she didn't have to do this. Erin said she did. If she didn't knock, they'd make one of the younger ones. Or worse.

What could be worse than inviting the witch out to play?

The second her feet touched the weeds, we started the timer. The rest of us hid between houses and lay behind thistles along the boulevard. Abby cowered behind the wily oak, too afraid to blink. Peter and I cheered Erin on from the safety of the property line. My chin and cheeks pressed to the rusted kiss of the fence. I wished I had gone with her so I could boost her back over.

Erin never knocked.

She opened the back door. Of her own volition, despite our pleas, with three minutes to spare. She disappeared through the paint-peeled door. Seven Minute Molly's door.

When seven minutes rolled around, we thought she was honest-to-god dead. Worse than regular dead. She was with Sam Biagi dead. Abby tried to run home to get our parents to call the police, and we had to beg her not to, promising everything from ice cream to no chores for a month.

One of the other kids yelled out that Erin was in the window. Second floor. We tried to call out that she had won. The game was over. Come home. Our little lungs heaved but were repelled by the evilness of the house.

One window over, a scraggly woman appeared. She watched us through the glass. Her unblinking gaze severed my grip on Abby's wrist. I was hypnotized by her hex, of how hauntingly beautiful and corrupted her face was. I became only faintly aware of my friends' screechings and footfalls as they retreated to the safety of Napoli Drive.

Erin, in her ignorance, opened the door protecting her from Molly.

I begged for mercy.

Seven Minute Molly waved at me. I swear, to this day, I can hear the snapping of her fingers with each flutter.

I guess what I mean to say is, I've been thinking about my childhood a lot, lately. I haven't seen Erin in over twenty years. Not since we graduated high school. I guess the magic tying us to youth has a way of fraying when we're unaware. I think I miss Erin as much as I miss Seven Minute Molly. I think I miss the magic of being a kid.