

# Molly's Most Un-Favorite Christmas Gift

By Norma Welty

A short story spin-off from her novel  
**THE DIRTY DAYS**

It was a few days before Christmas, 1935. On the school playground the buzz among the three best-dressed girls from well-off homes was all about the Shirley Temple doll that looked like the beautifully dressed famous child movie star by that name. Nine-year-old Molly and most of the girls in her class wore dresses made of flour sacks, and they liked that doll, too. But they pretended they didn't hear them.

Truth was, most parents, Molly's included, couldn't afford to buy *that* doll, and neither Molly nor her friends talked about it, not at school anyway. But at home Molly spent a lot of time gazing at the Shirley Temple doll in her tattered Sears catalog, and she fantasized the doll in her life. She knew, however, she shouldn't allow herself that level of excitement.

But it was excitement that woke Molly early on Christmas morning. She was coming out of a dream in which she was searching for an oblong box somewhere in her family's small living room. Finally, she spotted the box with a cellophane cover. A beautiful doll smiled back at her through the see-through cover and said, "This is not exactly my favorite place to be, so it's all right, Molly. Go ahead. Please take me from this box."

Molly woke up just as she reached to open the box. Then, not wanting to disconnect the dream from her real life, she slid from her warm bedcovers and tip-toed into the cramped living room. She allowed her eyes to scan the few narrow, empty spaces of the room for the box holding her dream gift. But, sadly, she didn't find a box.

No box. Her disappointment swiped away the remainder of her sleep fog, and her wide-awake mind spun from one thought to another: *the dream and my real life are definitely separate; Mother would say real life makes you strong, not dreams; but still, maybe there could be a much smaller, less expensive version of my special doll; yes that's it—a smaller version.*

Her wishful thinking had won, and she permitted her eyes to drift back to where a moment before she had glimpsed her stocking hanging on a hook in the shadow of the potbellied stove.

Only faint light from the kerosene lamp in the kitchen stretched through the open doorway, and even less light reached behind the living room stove. Careful not to brush against the hot stove, Molly

bent for a closer look, and it took a moment of squinting for her to realize that an odd-looking doll's head drooped over the top of her stocking. *What's this, what's this*, she thought as she cautiously lifted the stocking up to her eye level for a close-up view.

Imagine her dismay when she saw a cloth-face doll with painted-on flat eyes, lips, and cheeks. Worse, the doll had straight, black yarn hair pulled back and pinched into a little puppy-dog tail at the back of her head. She had neither naturally pretty features nor a mass of soft blonde curls like the doll that Molly coveted so much! She wondered if the doll's dress could possibly look a little like the little actress' dresses, but then reminded herself that this was real life, not a dream.

Glancing furtively toward the kitchen, she saw her mother sitting with her back to the doorway. She was churning cream into butter for a special breakfast of buttermilk pancakes and store-bought maple syrup that would replace the usual molasses, at least for the Christmas breakfast.

Molly was glad her mother's attention was on her butter-making chore. She needed a little more time in order to get used to the so-called doll before her parents would see her response to *it*. She presumed her daddy was finishing up the milking. So the coast would be clear for another minute or two.

Still not fully prepared for how disappointing the rest of the doll would be, she pulled her from the stocking for a better look.

The doll's dress was dark and shapeless, and she had exceptionally long, skinny legs encased in red and black horizontal stripe stockings. The unusual stockings came all the way up to her bloomers—which were greatly different in style from what we would later know as underwear. Her floppy, over-size feet wore high-top black shoes laced with thick, red strings. No doubt about it, she didn't measure up to the very life-like doll Molly had longed for—a pleasingly plump and pretty doll dressed in the latest style. She was sure the rag doll would be her most un-favorite Christmas gift of her entire life, and she felt her shoulders sag and her eyes tear up.

Fortunately, she heard her mother's footstep at her side, and she told herself to be strong and to take control of her feelings. It worked. Molly swallowed her feelings quickly enough to look at her Mother when she said, "I know you've heard the girls at school who're from the well-off families who live on the large farms talk about the child movie star, Shirley Temple. I'm also pretty sure they talked about the little actress' movies that their folks have taken them to see, too."

"Yes, but..." Molly began, but her mother continued with: "And you've told me that they've shown pictures of the blonde, curly-haired movie star and pictures of the doll made in her likeness, too. I suppose they said that they would be getting the beautifully dressed doll for Christmas."

“Well...,” Molly said, pausing to search her brain for the right words to ease her mother’s fretting—maybe also her disappointment in her daughter.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed, Sweetheart,” her mother insisted, “I know nothing could make you as happy as that movie star doll would have. I saw the look on your face a couple of days ago when you traced her entire face and her dress with your fingertip while looking at her in the catalog. I should have told you then that we couldn’t buy that doll for you, but I figured you knew that.” Molly felt ashamed of herself for being selfish. Her chin dropped and she fought back tears again.

“But, your daddy didn’t know anything about all that, and when he took the cream and eggs to sell in town yesterday he bought this comical-looking doll for your Christmas gift. Then with some of the money he bought the smallest-size jar of maple syrup and a scant load of coal. He saved the rest of the money, such as it was.”

“Saved?” Molly asked, knowing they needed so many things, but wanting even more to toss out her selfish wishful thinking, forever.

“Yes, saved,” her mother answered. “You’re going to have a new baby sister or brother in a few months, and we have to save enough by then to pay the doctor for the delivery. So you see, Honey Girl, that funny-looking doll is as good as we could afford.”

Molly’s mind did a flashback to her baby sister Lettie Ruth who had died when just a baby, but that bad image was instantly replaced with one of her new baby brother or sister. And after that microsecond flashback, a wonderful happiness washed over her.

“Yep, good as we could afford,” said Molly’s daddy, who had entered the room just in time to hear his wife’s final words and to sense Molly’s upgraded spirit. “But I figured you’d like that silly doll,” he added, smiling from ear to ear while setting the bucket of coal by the cook stove and the bucket of milk on the kitchen table.

Molly couldn’t help noting that his broad smile had almost wiped away his usual worried expression and again her mind spun : *A broad smile, milk to drink, butter to eat, cream to sell, coal to warm our drafty house, a doll as good as we could afford, a new brother or sister.* With her recognition of those blessings all together, her happiness meter notched up a little more.

“I love her,” Molly said in her delayed response to her daddy’s comments and smile, while holding the silly doll against her face. And she was surprised to feel only slight resentment toward the feel of the doll’s coarse yarn hair on her cheek. “She looks like Popeye’s girl friend, Olive Oyl!” she blurted, suddenly realizing the similarity.

“You like Olive Oyl?” her parents both asked at the same time.

“Oh yes!” she answered. “Remember, I always read the Popeye comic strip in the old newspapers Mrs. Williams gives us?” They nodded, and she said, “Yeah, I really like Olive Oyl. You think she’d mind if I name this doll after her?”

Molly was sure that’s what adorable Shirley Temple would have said.

Before long Molly’s baby brother became her fascination and her longing for the beautiful Shirley Temple doll dimmed greatly. As to how the rag doll fit into Molly’s life, it wasn’t hard for her to figure out. She played with the comical-looking doll until her baby brother was old enough to sit on her lap and do patty-cake and other feats his big sister taught him.

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When Molly was a teenager she found Olive Oyl at the bottom of her mother’s quilt-storage box. She was wrapped in yellowed comic pages that included the Popeye strip. At first Molly felt sad that she only vaguely remembered putting her there, but after a moment she recalled clearly how thoughtfully and carefully she had wrapped Olive Oyl in those particular pages when she placed her there years before. But then she felt sad again because Olive Oyl had been wearing the ugly dress all those years.

Not long after Olive Oyl was set free from the quilt box she was wearing a slim-fitting, red polka dot dress Molly had made for her soon after she found her. In the years that followed, Molly fondly remembered her teacher in high school sewing class back then saying, “The red polka dot dress goes clownishly well with Olive Oyl’s boldly striped stockings.” Molly also proudly recalled that the teacher gave her an *A* for her workmanship on the dress.

These days, Molly’s most un-favorite Christmas gift, the rag doll in a polka dot dress, striped stockings and clumsy-but-cool shoes enjoys the limelight. She sits on a bookshelf in Molly’s comfortable retirement condo where she gets plenty of attention from Molly’s great-grandchildren when they come for visits.

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