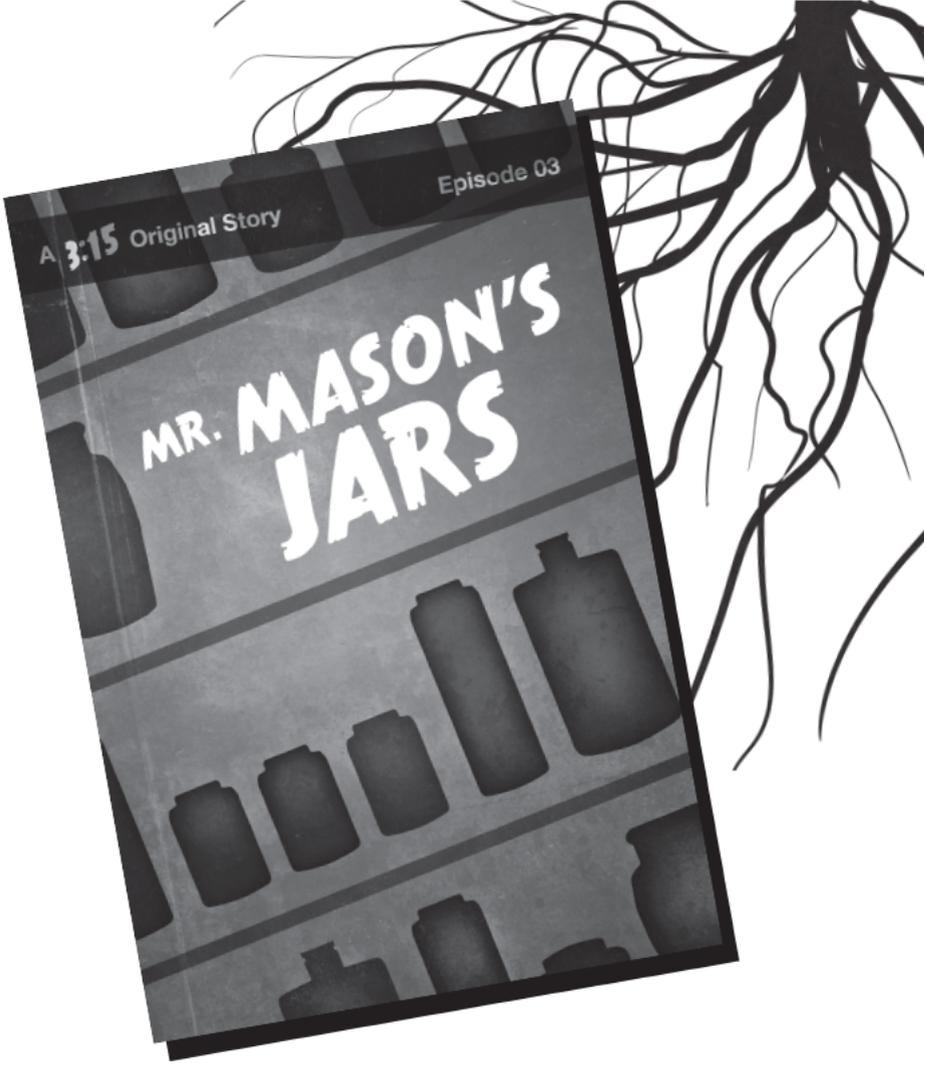


A 3:15 Original Story

Episode 03

MR. MASON'S JARS



FOR AN AUDIO INTRODUCTION TO THIS
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PASSWORD: WESTMONT



Most middle schools have at least one teacher who students avoid at all costs. The reason for the avoidance is usually one of three things:

The teacher is horribly mean and grouchy.

The teacher is so boring and monotonous that a forty-five minute class feels like forty-five days of mental torture.

The teacher is a very close talker with monstrously bad breath.

At Westmont Middle School, Mr. Mason is that teacher. And what's worse, he is all three of these terrible things wrapped up in one extraordinarily awful person. Students scatter when they see him coming down the hall in his musty wool sweaters, hoping not to be breathed on.

“Is that him?”

Molly didn't answer the new kid. It was bad enough she had Mr. Mason's eighth-grade science class, and she sure didn't want to draw any attention to herself as he walked by. Unfortunately, it was too late.

“Is that who?” Mr. Mason said, stopping behind Molly and the new kid, leaning down in their direction. Mr.

Mason was also tall, with a woolly-looking gray beard and sharp eyes. He gazed down at Molly as his breath nearly melted her face off.

“Hi, Mr. Mason,” said Molly. “This is Troy. He’s new.”

Troy was a rambling talker and had the misfortune of not realizing Mr. Mason hated talkative kids.

“Whoa, cool beard, Mr. Mason! I wish I could grow one of those. Maybe someday.”

“You’re annoying. And loud. Please say you don’t have third-period science.”

“Oh, I have it all right!” said Troy, holding out a package of Life Savers. “Mint?”

Mr. Mason snatched the roll of mints from Troy in one quick motion and scowled down at the boy. “These are not allowed in my class. No candy, gum, or *talking*.”

Molly started to drift away as slowly and carefully as she could, but Mr. Mason’s gaze landed on her and she froze in place.

“I’ve got my eye on both of you. I smell trouble.”

“I think that might be your breath, Mr. Mason. It’s really the only smellable thing in this general space.”

Mr. Mason's face went white. His teeth moved inside his head as he ground them back and forth, and his eyes began to bulge. Just as it looked like he was going to blow his top, he turned violently and walked away.

"What did you have to go and do that for?" said Molly, punching the new kid on the shoulder.

"You punch like a girl," said Troy.

"I *am* a girl, you moron! And do yourself a favor: Don't get on Mr. Mason's radar. He's creepy. And he hates kids like you."

"Mr. Mason hates cool kids?"

"Ha. Ha," Molly said, backing toward her next class as the bell rang. "Don't say I didn't warn you. Guys like you take his class and they're never the same after."

"What does that even mean? And more importantly, would you be my girlfriend?"

Molly rolled her eyes, but she also couldn't help smiling a little. Troy was cute and she'd met him first, before any of the other girls could claim his attention. Her smile fell away as she thought about Troy provoking Mr. Mason with his goofy sense of humor.

“Just be quiet in Mr. Mason’s class, okay? I mean it.”

But Troy was already heading in the other direction, waving at her and saying, “Relax, girlfriend. I’ll buy you a soft pretzel at lunch. Meet me?”

The question hung in the air, then Molly nodded and smiled back, a bigger smile this time, and she turned into a sea of kids racing between first and second period.

When Molly arrived in Mr. Mason’s class an hour later, she tried to sit next to Troy in the back row.

“You,” Mr. Mason said from the front of the room, pointing a long finger at her. “Up here, in front.”

The front row of Mr. Mason’s class was the worst location in the entire school. Stale coffee breath hung on every word Mr. Mason said, and every one of those words was world-class BORING.

“Yo, Mr. Mason,” Troy said from the back of the class, raising his hand but not waiting to be called on.

Oh no, thought Molly.

“What kind of cool stuff do you keep in those jars?” Troy asked.

Everyone in the class sat quiet and still. No one made a sound as Troy pointed to a row of glass jars sitting on a table behind Mr. Mason. They were the old kind, mason jars, with gold tin lids. Each jar appeared to be filled with goopy liquid of one color or another.

A strange and unpleasant smile crept onto Mr. Mason's face.

"If I don't call on you, you don't speak," he said, walking between the desks until he stood in front of Troy. He leaned down close and breathed into the boy's face. "Understood?"

"You should really try those mints you took from me, Mr. Mason. They taste pretty good."

A few of the boys chuckled softly, but Mr. Mason stood bolt upright and glared in every direction. Silence enveloped the room.

"I demand order in this classroom," he bellowed, then stared down at Troy.

"I gotcha," said Troy. "Order it is! No more disorder from this guy. I'm *Mr.* Order. You can count on m—"

"Not another word!" said Mr. Mason. He rubbed his

temple, feeling a migraine coming on, and in the quiet of his black heart, he planned to deal with *Troy* in the usual way he treated this particular kind of student.

Mr. Mason walked back to the front of the room, all the while looking at his glass jars.

When class was over, Molly waited for Troy in the hallway, then they walked to the lunchroom together.

“You are one dumb kid,” she said, shaking her head. “I told you not to do that! Why couldn’t you just play it cool?”

“Awww, you worry too much. But you’re darn cute, so I’ll let it slide.”

Molly blushed. *Darn cute?* She liked the sound of that. Molly pulled Troy down onto the floor in the corner of the cafeteria where they could talk privately before anyone else joined them.

“Troy, listen to me,” she said softly. “You have to cool it in that class. I mean it.”

“Why would I want to do that?” asked Troy. “I’m like his favorite student already. He digs me.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because,” said Troy, standing so he could go get two

soft pretzels. “He said so. He even invited me to stop in and check out his secret jars after school.”

Molly pulled Troy down hard — in fact, she was a little concerned when she heard his shirt rip a tiny bit.

“Sorry, that’s — my bad,” she said, but Troy just smiled as she pointed to a guy walking across the cafeteria. “You see him? That’s Dale. He used to be a lot like you. Then he stopped by Mr. Mason’s class after school.”

Troy looked up and saw an eighth grader moving slowly toward the bathroom. He looked a little like a zombie — or, possibly, someone who was half asleep.

“He looks tired,” said Troy.

“He’s not *tired*. He’s just — *different*. He’s super-quiet all the time. But he never used to be like that. He was a loudmouth in Mr. Mason’s class. Like you.”

“You’re saying I’m a loudmouth?”

“Well, yeah, kind of.”

“How cute. Our first fight. Let’s celebrate with some soft pretzels!”

Before Molly could stop him, Troy was up and away, bounding across the cafeteria until he met up with

really-tired-zombie-looking Dale. Molly watched as Troy stuck out his finger and poked Dale gently on the shoulder. Dale mumbled hello and kept walking as Troy looked back at Molly and mouthed the word *weird!*

Molly spent the rest of lunch trying to convince Troy not to visit Mr. Mason's class after school.

But it didn't matter.

Troy was Troy, which was to say, he wasn't going to miss a chance to check out those jars.

"Whoa. That is one stinky jar of *something*. Puts your breath to shame."

Mr. Mason twitched at the insult.

"Doesn't it, though?" Mr. Mason agreed. It was killing him to be nice to Troy.

The two had been opening some of the jars together for a few minutes.

"What's in there? No, wait, don't tell me — it's a human finger floating in a pool of fish guts!"

"You're a very imaginative young man, Troy. Has anyone ever told you that?"

“All the time. But seriously, what’s in there?”

Mr. Mason put the jar back where he’d gotten it.

“Let’s just say what’s in that jar will melt the gum off the bottom of a chair in a matter of seconds.”

“Cool.”

“But not as cool as what’s in *this* jar,” said Mr. Mason, reaching back and picking up a glass jar filled with something sloshy and purple. “This is the *real* stuff. My own scientific blend of . . .”

Mr. Mason deliberately let his words trail off. He liked to let his unruly students guess at the contents.

“Your own blend of *awesome*, right?”

A typical answer, full of annoying vigor and void of any intellect. Mr. Mason touched his temple, a very bad headache having moved behind his eyeballs.

Not to worry, he thought. *This, too, shall pass.*

“The thing about this one . . . ,” said Mr. Mason, sliding the jar in front of Troy, who was eager to get his hands on it. “Well, the thing is, what’s inside will escape if you leave it open too long. You have to be careful about opening it.”

“You have a live little dude in there?” asked Troy.

Mr. Mason nodded conspiratorially.

“Yes, a live little dude.”

“Like a frog or a giant swimming bug?”

“Something like that,” said Mr. Mason, using his friendliest voice even as Troy was annoying him half to death.

“You’ll need to get close, open the jar just a little, and peek inside. Carefully. Do you think you could do that?”

Troy grabbed the jar and slid it close to his face.

“This close enough?” he asked, so excited he could barely stand the wait.

“Maybe . . . a *little* closer.”

Troy moved his face a little closer.

“Has anyone else ever seen what’s inside this jar?” asked Troy.

“Absolutely not,” said Mr. Mason. “You’ll be the first.”

“Wow. That’s like the coolest thing ever. You’re already my favorite teacher, Mr. Mason.”

For the blink of an eye, Mr. Mason thought better of his plan. Troy had seemed so annoying, so loud and

obnoxious. But now, at the moment of his undoing, Troy had said something rare to Mr. Mason.

You're my favorite teacher.

Mr. Mason hadn't heard those words in . . . well, he'd *never* heard those words.

But it was too late.

Troy had opened the jar and peeked inside.

The deed was done and it could never be taken back.

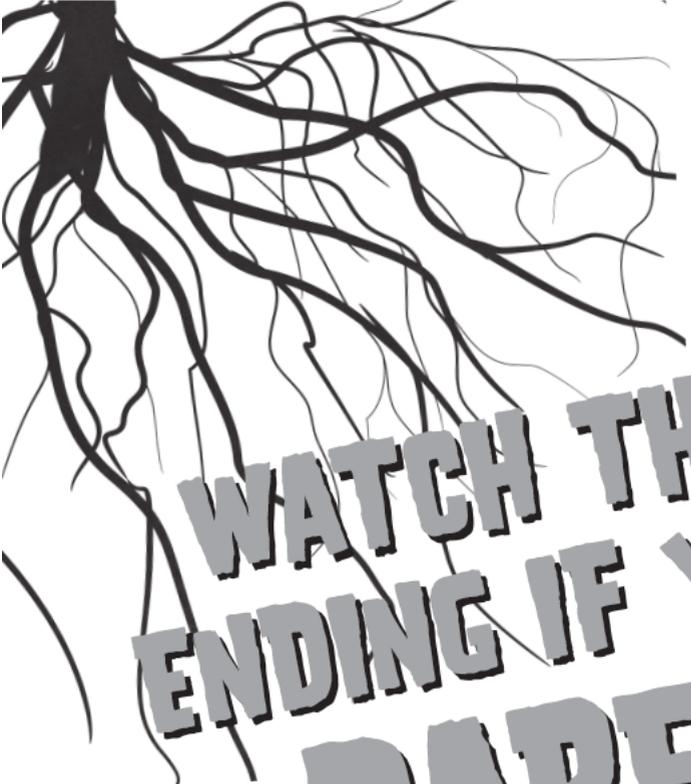
Molly, who had come to wait by the door in the hallway outside, heard a loud and frightening sound.

She'd heard it before.

They all had.

And somehow she just knew.

When she saw Troy again, he wouldn't be the same person.



**WATCH THE
ENDING IF YOU
DARE!**

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