

Battery Souls.

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It was while visiting my Uncle Jerry's place one summer that I noticed a new pool toy hanging on the side of the shed. Bright yellow and inflatable, it was shaped like Mickey Mouse. The face had been shaped into a carefree, carnivorous grin.

Where its eyes should have been, there were only two blank bubbles of clear plastic. Sightless, soulless Mickey hung like a nailed martyr from the shed, unable to see the children cavorting happily in the pool below.

Mickey troubled me.

In a cardboard shoe box inside the shed, there were dozens of my own old 'hotwheels' cars. A new generation of kids were playing with them; amongst the cars was my own old favourite, a Honda three wheeled truck that I had once painted metallic blue with my first-ever can of model paints. The truck was still being used today, being sent on trips to another world by children who had decided that the porch steps were the edge of craters on an alien moon.

Once the children were gone, I took the truck and watched it for a while. The tiny plastic windshield held reflections in it. It shone in a way that Mickey's blank eyes never had. I thought that perhaps the little toy was vampiric - that it drew nourishment from the children and thus achieved a small life of its own.

Troubled, I pondered on the problem for long afternoons to come. The Toy World nearby seemed a busy place. Trucks delivered toys all day long, always heading out into the countryside. When I walked the shelves of the store, it seemed to me that some toys had the essence of soul, and some did not - and yet many came from the same manufacturers.

Then one morning, I took my son along with me as I followed one of the great grey toy trucks back to its lair.

There, in an industrial park made proud by fields of old dried thistle crowns - there lay the place where the toys were made. It looked rather unlike a factory. Huge barns were laid out like the huts in a concentration camp, and there seemed to be far too much chicken wire.

We were met by a very polite, middle aged man at the gate. They received few visitors here at the toy farm, and he was anxious to explain to us the intricacies of his calling. He let us park in the staff car park, then led us into the buildings - buildings that smelled faintly of barnyard smells and the scent of old dry dust.

The huge barn like structures held row after row of shelves. Upon the shelves were banks of huge bell-mouthed jars. Stored inside of these were the garishly coloured shapes of toy souls, kept here for the convenience of the manufacturing process. essential food products were given to the souls four times a day, their diet being carefully determined according to the best scientific methods.

We asked if the souls were in danger of dying under such conditions. The middle-aged man shook his head. He explained to us that the jars had holes in the lids so that the souls could breathe.

These battery fed souls had been introduced when free range souls proved too expensive to maintain. It was a fair system - very egalitarian. No soul received more attention than any other, and each of them had the same rights to progression and fulfilment as all the others. Approved music was played for the hour before each meal. The lights were kept constantly on so that the souls would not lean to judge things in terms of black and white.

Souls produced juices. The juices drained out into the bottom of the jars. Every evening, men in neat grey suits came to siphon off the fluids. They explained to us that these were used to instil the essence of souls into brand new toys.

Sadly, the days of these magnificent creatures were numbered. To reduce overheads, the souls had been given less individual space and individual time. Souls were a questionable thing at best, and some now produced tainted juices. The soul essence being put into many toys had been judged to be flawed, and the toy farms looked like going out of business.

The men in suits had let a few batches of toys reach the store shelves without being treated with juice. There had been no adverse reaction. Many of the public apparently approved of juiceless products. The few who remembered the old days of 'free range' items were old and silly, and easily ignored.

Now whole newer, shinier ranges of toys were being made. Bright colours covered over their pallid, soul-free auras. This was pleasing. It was more efficient and far less wasteful of resources. Since the souls were no longer needed for production, they could be released into the wilds where they could live in freedom.

As we watched, the soul farmers released all the captive souls from their bell mouthed jars. The souls sat on the floor, uncertain where to go or what to do. They sat like great, sad toads, staring at the dead thistles out across the driveway. As the lights were turned off at long last in the huts behind them, each soul gave a groan like a great, sick owl.

We felt much pity for these poor discarded beasts. My son pointed out that our house was spacious, with many places where souls could nest in comfort. We gathered the souls together in an old blue trailer and brought them back with us.

The souls rehabilitated only slowly. Some made warm nests amongst the dust bunnies beneath our beds. Other liked the cool spaces under the porch, or up in the old lemon tree where I used to climb when I was a boy. The sand beside the back door was another place: here is where ant lion larvae live at the bottom of their little pits, always looking cross and annoyed. Some of the gloomier souls used to tease them with twigs, slowly growing more cheerful as the weeks went by.

Every morning, there on our doorstep like a bottle of milk, the souls would diligently leave a tin can filled with juice. We explained to them that this was no longer necessary, but it seemed to comfort them

When rubbed into favourite old comic books, cars and treasures, it had very pleasing results.

Summer is in full swing. We are very happy with our collection of souls, and they seem to like our house. But they shun Uncle Jerry's place, and will only peer through the fence at his house from the shadows.

The pool toy of Mickey is slowly gaining reflections in his eyes now - but the children's eyes are white and blind. They grow more listless, yet mickey seems to be growing ever brighter behind his codfish grin.

On Tuesday, we will start giving bottles of juice to our friends and neighbours. It seems safest to be kind.