



Misbehaving Toys

It's toy time folks, and as the song goes, "You'd better watch out!" The bleeding thumbs and *tons of assembly required* so popular on past Christmas eves have been updated, so here's fair warning.

You might say I have issues regarding my kids' toys, and it all started in the middle of the night long after one Christmas revelry. I awoke hearing voices in the dead of night, a conversation going on in my living room. Naturally, I panicked and was soon wide-awake. My intruder turned out to be Cookie Monster, and he was being rudely interrupted by Elmo.

Cookie would say, "Cookie Monster here, Cookie see you." Somewhere in there, Elmo's squeaky voice would cut him off with several rounds of "Let's play." The fight would go on for a while, then stop, and then start up again hours later. I would walk into the living room and from the direction of the toy basket hear a gravelly, "Hey, scam," followed by Oscar's scariest laugh.

While I admit this feature could actually prove useful for clearing the stoop, we could never count on it, except to speak up when it felt like it. I last heard from the gang as I passed a sack in the garage bound for the local Goodwill, destined for another soon-to-be-sleepless house.

It's funny how these talking toys seem to go off at just the right or wrong moments. Consider this recent report: an acquaintance of my wife bought a talking one-eyed Mike of "Monsters Inc." fame. You no doubt remember the character from the movie; he's essentially a green ball with one large eye and sounds a lot like Billy Crystal.

Anyway, Mike was stashed in the master closet, secreted away for Christmas morning.

Fates crossed when Grandma came to visit and at one point excused herself to the bedroom to change. At some point of undress she heard a strangely familiar man's voice in the closet greeting her with, "I've got my eye on you."

We understand Grandma did not require medical attention – even after hurdling a queen-sized bed – but her opinion of Billy Crystal did go down a notch. I suspect Mike has already made a pass through the Goodwill cycle.

Of course, many of the toys under the tree these days not only talk, but they also listen and respond to our commands – rather like real pets. I'm very impressed with two such creatures my girls have on their shelves; they respond exactly like our Schnauzer – which is to ignore all of my commands. Oh, I have managed to get them to beep and jump around a bit and flash their LED eyes, which shouldn't surprise me, since the Schnauzer raises a ruckus and jumps like crazy without any commands from me.

I could go on. There was the dollhouse that came with several realistic sounds for your typical household, including a crying baby that, yes, went off in the middle of the night. Then there was that cool toy bank that did all sorts of things, even more than was advertised on the box. I came downstairs one morning to find my young daughter asleep on the couch. I found the bank, buried in blankets, beeping non-stop in her room.

What manufactures don't do, the enterprising engineer can fix up at home. My friend, let's call him Bruce, felt such a call. His mission was to fix the professional malpractice of the Big Wheel people. His son needed one of those plastic three-wheel bikes, so Bruce scoured the toy stores but all he found were bikes with rotating wheels, no gadgets, lights, or sound.

So Bruce went to work. Long nights and endless requirements changes caused the usual challenges, and then there was the escalating budget. But after the holidays, Bruce reported a successful on-time Christmas delivery. A dream bike it was. This is what tricycles were meant to be. LCD readouts, turn signals (with multiple lights), speedometer, public address system, siren, and sound synthesizer – fortunately for the neighbors, lasers had yet to come down in price.

Bruce went on to produce another version of the bike, taking advantage of technology advances and of course, lessons learned. He offered his innovation to the manufacturer. They responded politely saying it was too complicated. Funny thing though, I came home recently and found a new tricycle in the garage. As I picked it up to move it, a stern woman's voice said, "This is mommy. Don't go near the street!" This was followed by the sound of a neighing horse. The tricycle was well into a cute little jingle about butterflies by the time I closed the door.

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