

## Collecting My Last Happy Meal

Seven years before Morgan Spurlock released his experiences of eating nothing but McDonald's fast food everyday for thirty days in a hit documentary film called *Super Size Me*, I had encountered something strangely similar. Only four days into my binging, I had already believed I was breaking down: my mind, my stomach, my liver, my kidneys, and my heart had begun to change. I no longer felt human. I had become something else. Sweaty, shaky, nervous, and nauseated all the time, I dreaded the feeling of hunger because it meant stuffing my mouth with that awful waxy-paper and cardboard taste of fast food that I was slowly becoming desensitized to. Still trying my best to disguise it though, I used every condiment in the fridge: mayonnaise, mustard, pickle relish, sauerkraut, BBQ sauce, sweet and sour sauce, soy sauce, maple syrup, but somehow that powerful chemically engineered tang broke through the masking. It would later be revealed in Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* that McDonald's sold over 100 million Happy Meals during a ten-day period in April of 1997, and I'm almost positive I ate at least a third of them.

My family had given up on trying to figure out why my mom had such an intense obsession with collecting "stuff." She always had it, but where did it come from? Our cluttered garage was crammed with so many unmarked boxes that there wasn't even room for a car. It had become a pack rat's paradise, but we were forbidden to say the "j" word, junk. But that's what it all was: just junk. She had everything: vintage Coke bottles, an endless universe of Elvis memorabilia, Cabbage Patch Dolls, classic Barbies, old McDonald's Happy Meal toys, and Beanie Babies. Beanie Babies were definitely the

worst because of the amount of stress, labor, and travel it took to obtain these priceless works of junk.

Since most Beanie Baby slingers only sold the newest and most exclusive animals at one per customer, I'd have to wake up an hour after falling asleep at night in order to accompany my mom on a however many hour-ed drive to the Long Beach Convention Center, the Barstow Outlet Malls, Fremont Street in Las Vegas, Phoenix, Arizona just so we could be the first people at the door when some arts and crafts expo, rare antique dealer, or collectible shop in the middle of nowhere opened its doors. My mom would justify this kind of insane behavior with an overly enthusiastic 2:00 a.m. voice, "Come on, Rick! Don't you want an Erin Bear?"

"Well, I guess." This was always my weak twelve year old response, but what I really wanted to say was, "Umm...no. I'd much rather go back home and back to bed." I don't care about an Erin Bear! It's a little-eared piece of green felt stuffed with pinto beans and a white shamrock embroidered on it, and besides I'd always have to hand over my Erin Bear, my Holiday Bear, my Freedom Bear, my Victoria Bear to Aunt Sandy or Grandma. My family, however, was not the only crazy one because early was never early enough: the early bird catches "Inch the Worm" I guess. Overweight, fanny pack and visor wearing soccer moms and elderly garage sale frequenters were always camped out days ahead of our arrivals. As under rested and overly frustrated as I always was at these things, I got my own little kicks from how similar all these maniacs looked and sounded regardless of what town we were in. I often got stuck behind that one obnoxious lady who thought she knew just a little bit more about this garbage than everyone else. In a smoker's raspy voice she'd hack, "Ya know, in Alberta, Canada the malls are just full

of Victoria Bears.” I’d roll my eyes. *Great, how long of a drive is it to Canada from wherever we are now?* Luckily, we just flew there.

Our little adventures were always referred to as “family bonding,” but I never saw my older brother and sister, or my dad at these collectors’ congregations. I was always the only one to get dragged across the continent to these things or wake up before the sun in order to stand in line outside of some department store to get the early-bird free-be. Part of me thought my mom chose me for these duties because I was special, but I mostly think it’s because I was the most aggressive out of her children and could stand my ground if some chaotic and unruly collector person tried to snatch my latest addition to the Beanie Baby galaxy in the garage.

McDonald’s quickly caught on to this Beanie Baby mania and exploited it as they announced its Teenie Beanie Baby Promotion. Once I heard about it, I knew we’d be stopping at McDonald’s fairly frequently, but I had no idea what I was in for.

My mom swung our front door open with such vigor and declared with an afternoon energy, “Hey! I got you a few cheeseburger Happy Meals with Sprite!” Oh man, was that my favorite back when I was like five! But on that day I had developed quite an appetite from a hard day of seventh grade and my walk home, so I was eager to take some of those burgers off her hands. They weren’t bad, but I thought eating three whole Happy Meals was unnecessary, and for the rest of the day I had a mild stomachache.

As I grimaced and groaned on the couch my mom started thinking out loud to herself or maybe to me in a hopeful voice, “Ok. I got one for me, one for Kelley, one for Sandy, and one for Grandma. Do you want to go to the McDonald’s on Alabama? Because they have Snort the Bull today. I got these from the one on Redlands Boulevard and they had this bear.”

Shocked but too sick to shout, I moaned with a face full of pillow, “You mean you’re going out for more Happy Meals?”

“Well yeah. Don’t you want to get ‘em all? I’ll get the cheeseburger ones with Sprite, and I’ll just put them in the fridge so you can heat them up for dinner.”

“Sure.” But what I wanted to say was, “Umm...no. I’m Happy Mealed-out. May I please have something else for dinner? Something with nutritional value.” I used BBQ sauce that night to give the cheeseburgers a little zest and smothered the microwaved French fries in those tiny green packets of sweet and sour sauce to bring them back to life.

During this phase, lunch time at school was painful. I would often play pick up games of basketball with my friends, but my best friend Larry noticed at that time I wasn’t moving too well. It was because the night before, the McDonald’s on Judson had Chomps the Shark, Stripes the Tiger, Patches the Panda, or some cutely named creature poking at my guts. Sometimes I had Larry come over after school to help me digest the stuff my mom was bringing home every afternoon. In his gravely voice he’d assess the situation, “You mean you get to eat Happy Meals everyday because your mom wants to collect the prizes! Man, that must be so cool!”

I was quick to bring the reality of the situation to his attention, “Dude, it’s not really as neat as it sounds. I’ve had that ‘oh my god I’m gonna throw up’ feeling this entire week!”

“Because of Happy Meals?” Larry debated.

“Do I look like they’re making me happy?” I snapped back.

After the McDonald’s on Yucaipa Boulevard had Gurgles the Stomach Ulcer, Rocky the Kidney Stone, or Lucy the Loose Liver, I had felt like some boxer had slugged me in the gut. By fifth period Algebra class, the goal of the day was not education but survival. I couldn’t focus on anything, so in order to save myself from embarrassment, I packed up my things and apologized to my teacher as I walked out the door without explanation. I was only about a block away from the campus and a third of the way home when I threw up dark orange chunks of hamburger patty and bun in some hedges on Ford Street. I started to think rationally again and decided whatever Happy Meals my friends couldn’t finish off were going in the trash.

By the end of this journey, everyone had a complete set of Teenie Beanie Babies, but I’m sure if I were to ask the women of my family today where they are, they wouldn’t be able to find them among all the unmarked boxes of GI Joes and Barbie clothes.