

The Balooobius

... a Troi

A one-shot should not be three, but there it is. My intentions were to publish only the single issue, but here I am inaugurating a third. May it be the last, for I had other plans than for a parade of risible, bobbing baloomium!

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245 Dunn Ave. Apt. 2111, Toronto Ontario,
M6K 1S6, Canada. Phone (416) 531-8974 –
Taral@bell.net **Contents** may have settle in
package: 1. Life After Fandom. 2. Home Is
Where Your Stories Are.

Is There Life After Fandom?

Fan politics. What could be more tedious. Or more precisely, where do I stand on the issue of fan politics at the moment? For most of the fans who might read this, I suspect that business is very much as usual. It might only be me, standing outside in the rain, while everyone else is partying down. I'm not very sure of much of anything, however, and have always had a contrary streak.

What I see of fandom in the new decade is a fading memory of what it was. Most of the fans I know have kept their ties, but in the same way that any other group of aging old geezers on FaceBook keep *theirs*. They talk a lot. Other than the cons they attend or their FaceBook posts, however, what do they do? How much "fanac" is there really in the "fanoverse?" Only a few years ago, eFanzines was swollen with listings of new titles and issues every week. By and large, though, I can think of only six or eight of any consequence – good, solid selections of superior writing or insight. Curiously, the most noteworthy fanzines in the last two or three years seem to be collections and retrospectives of old fanac, archived for our future veneration.

But fandom has changed, even if many like myself have not. *O tempora, o mores!* More or less, that means I don't have any idea what's going on anymore. If it isn't about the downloaded apps, gender politics or vaping, I must have lost my way while time-binding. It all happened so suddenly, too! One day I was on top of it all, knew the cool bands, had opinions about new authors, spoke the lingo ... and then suddenly I had "junk," and was



“OK, Boomer.” When did it happen? Why did it happen? Is anyone out there listening to me, or am I finally fit for nothing but a pension to prove that I’ve lived this long?

Hardly anyone reads fanzines anymore. Why bother, when it can be produced live, acted out in amateur productions, or created with sophisticated graphics programs? Connect with people in print? How droll, Boomer. It also has to have sound and movement, and production values, or it’s just 20th century.

But everything has become too large a topic for me to deal with in my present state of apathy. The subject of fandom has become interconnected with everything, and has become overwhelming. My thoughts about fanart are closer to home, and my impressions fresher.

The more observant among you have probably realized that, for some time now, I haven’t been contributing fanart. Of course, I have been continuing to receive votes in the FAAn awards, so perhaps people have *not* noticed, and are voting out of habit. I hadn’t given up entirely on drawing for fanzines, but only a handful of illos have appeared in the last couple of years, and I believe only two covers. What happened to me?

The answer I can give you isn’t as simple as I’d like it to be. Of several reasons for languishing as an artist, a period of uneven health has been an important one. In itself, it would not likely have much impact, but I’ve also experienced a professional burn-out from years of appeasing a certain audience. While this *did* create a small amount of paid work, for the most part I was working mainly to keep up a reputation. Yet in the end, the critical tipping point is the pervasive sense that the fandom I knew has become a pointless exercise. Does anyone really *care* about fan art?

More to the point, do we really need *fanartists*?

By any objective measure of the art to be found in most fanzines today, most of it is stolen from the internet, photographed or scanned from magazines. In fact, there is not much original artwork being drawn at all. The number of active fanartists is very small. Those I can readily name include only Al Sirois, Ulrica O’Brien, Harry Bell, Allan White, Marc Schirmeister, Brad Foster and Ross Chamberlain. I’ve likely missed one or two, but my point is made. Few are prolific. For the most part, their work is spread thinly through a small number of old-school fanzines, typically contributing one or two illos to a favourite. Schirm’s output appears almost exclusively in *Alexiad*, for example. O’Brien’s has appeared in *Drink Tank* and the recent Randy Biers collection. Alan is found here and there. This seems to be the new normal. To have art published more often seems to be exceptional.

Why do we imagine we need fanartists?

Clearly we don’t. The earliest fanartists imitated the professional illustration that was seen in prozines. Typically, they drew barbarians in leather kilts, guys in “futuristic” military uniforms and women in tight stretch-pants with a fish-bowl helmet. As time went by,

however, the artists began to explore humorous ideas that made light of the subject of science fiction and fantasy. They also began to create art that was aimed at the fans, who were themselves experimenting with novel material. This is what made both fanwriters and fanartists something special as the '30s and '40s wore on.

To be sure, there has been fanart that presents art *as* art, that highlights the beautiful, the striking and the strange. But arguably, it was the self-referential quality of fanart that made it unique. George Barr or Jack Gaughan would have had successful careers even if there had never been a fan press. But would there have been a fan press as we knew it without the prototypes who followed, such as Steve Stiles, Stu Shiffman or Dan Steffan?

Unfortunately, every indication is that the need for fanartists has passed, and the role they once played is today filled adequately by digital technology. Now here we are ... with an aging troop of barely active fanartists who are infrequently seen by the readers of a print medium that is *also* in danger of gradual extinction.

But fandom goes on in new forms, and in new hands, even if obsolete forms fall into disuse.

That's where I am, and there's no point in my trying to care. I don't carry a torch for science fiction and fantasy anymore, nor have I kept up with changes in the field. I don't read the new authors, and I can't bring myself to follow digital magazines, semi-prozines, pod-casts or streaming. I've simply lost my interest.

During the past 25 or so years I drew an amazing amount of art, mostly to appeal to furry fans, who would pay for the privilege. Little did I know that the effort would progressively erode my will to draw. Only a few years ago, I was still experimenting with novel backgrounds or settings, but finally I was only knocking the stuff out as best I could. Even the market – such as it was – had gone, and I was mostly going through the motions of having a presence. The effort of drawing wasn't so bad, but processing the drawing in Photoshop later was a painstaking chore that I dreaded. Increasingly, it also badly strained my eyes. Over the last couple of years, I began to actively dislike concentrating on more than a little sketching.

I doubt I've given up drawing altogether, but I think there is little point in trying to explore the possibilities any further. I suspect I have likely exceeded my limits as an artist. Not only do I doubt I can do better, I wonder if I could even do as good as I *have* done. In any case, finishing what I start may be the defining challenge I face. I have several thick folders of unfinished art that is not getting any more finished while I look at it. It has been easy for me to start something ... but do I have the will to return to the work the next day, or the next, or the next, until it is done? Please don't ask me questions like that!

On the other hand, the written word continues to intrigue me. I am far from having discovered the possibilities that lie open to me, nor have I measured the abilities I might possess. A friend of mine who writes for a living once said that it was as though the written word was a foreign language, that I had imperfectly learned. He meant nothing by it, and

doesn't even remember saying it. For that matter, I may have misconstrued his meaning. Nevertheless, it has given me a lot to think about. I realized that his words were exactly what I felt whenever I tried to write creatively.

I was the usual sort of gifted child who can be tripped over at every convention room party, pontificating about carbon sequestering, medieval crossbows, trans-fats or Druid rituals ... but *especially* about writing science fiction. Although I am one of that tribe, I've also learned to recognize them as pests, and often have little patience with them. Like a lot of such fans, I learned to read at an early age, when my mother read the funny pages to me. I listened and I learned. By the time I was old enough to attend kindergarten, I had no trouble reading the books my peers struggled through letter by letter. To this day, I remember encountering the name "Bartholomew" in a book. I wouldn't know that it was a book by Dr. Seuss, or what the book was, until much later in my life. But I remember reading in kindergarten just as well as though it were yesterday. I wasn't able to pronounce "Bartholomew," you see ... and the teacher said I should just call him "Bart."

So yes, I was an early reader, and it emerged that I was handy at using words as well as making pictures. Nevertheless, I quickly found complexities of language that did not come as easily as drawing – spelling, for one. Another was the arbitrary nature of tenses, cases, agreement and other finicky conventions. Much as I found a great deal about writing agreeable to me, the rest was like learning where to place all the forks on the table, and about as intuitive.

Imperfect though it was, the record proves that I wrote anyway. I thought of myself as an artist rather than a writer, but it was by no means clear which I would decide I was until I was a young man. It was some time around the turn of the century when I began to slack off on my art, beginning to feel a need for a change, and began to put more effort into my writing. I discovered powers that were previously undeveloped, and ideas that were once hard to come began to flow more naturally.

In a conversation on another occasion, I observed that I might have some aptitude for writing ... but the stories I needed were not there.

I had ideas that expressed themselves as landscapes, histories, technological hocus-pocus and – to a degree – characters. But I was unable to fashion all of this into usable stories for a very long time. Now and then, something would surface unexpectedly, or be forced by necessity. They were usually short little pieces that I would toss into an issue of *Broken Toys*. Now and then they were full stories that I had been incentivised to write for pay. Payment may be the most powerful incentive to write possible, but I was slow to appreciate it. I was too eager to show my cleverness to people who I should have known would rather be reading Neil Gaiman or Terry Pratchett. Unfortunately, it is now much too late for me to learn from my lesson, and write what people might pay to read!

I can hear the voice of protest even now: you're *never* too late. But I think it is, for me. I now longer understand the field, and don't think I have the stuff to fight for recognition in

a highly competitive field where your personal presence is as important as the one you make in print. A personal appeal is essential to beguile the reader into buying your self-published stories or novel. The modern writer needs to make an impression in a crowd, promote his work and generate enthusiasm!

Enthusiasm? Me? Pessimism *personified*? The kid that the school yearbook committee perpetually picked as most likely to play Eeyore for the annual presentation of “Winnie the Pooh?”

Alright, perhaps I am a little hard on myself. But when I stopped traveling, due to growing problems with my mobility, it drastically limited my opportunities to pursue a career promoting myself as a writer...

I don't think it is just me, either. One of my other writer friends established *his* career back in the 1980s, when it was a rather different world. He had sold a small number of short stories, and when his editor got a better job with a large book publisher, he was asked if he had been working on a novel. As it happened, he *had* been. By no means should this diminish the accomplishment of selling a first novel almost out of the blue, but there was a well-greased groove in those days, which ensured that suitable manuscripts were found and moved up the chain of editors, so that a minimum of roadblocks hindered the essential duties of a writer ... which is to *write*.

My friend's career has been established for decades, and he is in no danger of being dropped from the Mid List, but he told me that if he were to start over again, he might never have gotten a start at writing professionally. He said he simply wasn't cut out for attending as many conventions as possible while he promoted his work. Every bit as important as promoting *himself*, he was afraid he would have to promote himself! Suppose he hadn't the stamina to publish his own work, and attract attention through a bewildering number of competitive media that may have simply ignored him? As far as he was concerned, his work ought to have been over when he corrected the proofs. The rest should have been rightfully delivered on a flying carpet by an army of professionals in the publishing field.

Nor is it even clear anymore whether a book *was* or was *not* published. Whoever has money to spend can *appear* to publish a book ... but is it a book, or merely a vanity press pretense? There is no answer to that question anymore. The difference between vanity press and self-publication has vanished, and everything has merged into a continuous gradation of semi-pro, small-press, print-on-demand and downloadable documents! My friend confessed he was glad he would not have to face any of that if he were forced to start over again.

I do not have that advantage, I'm afraid. If I want to write, I'm afraid I'll have to be prepared to compete like any 25-year-old, and sell myself like a parcel of real estate that's been on the market too long. Like other older writers I've known, they are mostly content to write and leave the rest to expert book publishers ... but I think it is too late for *me* to

follow in their footsteps. Once you own up to the unfavorable odds, however, one's prospects improve enormously!

I can write whatever the hell I want!

I don't have to please an editor – not even a wet-behind-the-ears, wanna-be editor who has no reputation to trade on, only a dated copy of Word. I don't have to worry myself over sales or promotion. I don't even have to have *readers* ... although it would be gratifying to believe that I might have three or four ... but there is a kind of freedom in not knowing. There are legions of wretched amateur writers who pass in the night with their navigation lights off. I'm afraid I am but one of them.

Yet on FaceBook ... one can dream.

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*Since I seem to be on the topic of writing, there is no better opportunity to inflict the latest of my Fraggles Rock stories about Kiki & Darl. This one is less of an "adventure" than others, and mainly attempts to flesh out the early life of Kiki, who had not yet been fully developed into a real character ... which, of course, was entirely **my** fault. Hopefully, this story will make up for the lack.*

Home is where Your Stories Are

"What have you got there?" asked Kiki. "It looks like something you'd peel radishes with."

"Very astute," said Darl. "Actually, it's something I found top-side that was thrown away. It's what my fellow Silly Creatures use for peeling potatoes, but it will do as well for radishes. You won't nick your finger with a peeler."

Kiki examined the rickety old tool, turning it end over end, and managed to prove she *could* nick her finger – twice – before getting the knack of it.

"You were up in Outer Space again? Don't you *ever* worry about dangerous animals ... like squirrels or pigeons?" she demanded, sucking her hurt finger.

Darl had once tried to entice a squirrel into taking a peanut from Kiki's hand, but one look at the eager, bushy-tailed creature that scuttled up to her knee was enough to scare her out of her wits. Compared to a Fraggles, the squirrel was the size of a Labrador with enormous buck teeth.

Lord help Kiki if she ever came face to face with anything as aggressive as a *seagull*! She clearly did not approve of Darl taking risks she thought were unnecessary ... not even for handy gadgets, such as this radish peeler, that he occasionally brought back.

"I wish you wouldn't keep going back to Outer Space," she continued. "You have a home now with me, and you've said yourself that you're happy with it. You said you don't miss the place where you used to live."

"Well, I don't," Darl said firmly. "Sometimes I'm reminded of things I was fond of, like ice cream or the smell of after-shave, but I've found something better than any of that. Someone I can teach how to use a potato peeler to make dinner, for example."

But Darl wasn't thinking about radishes or roasted potatoes just then, with his chin buried deep in the fur of Kiki's breast.

Dinner was late that night...

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Darl pushed aside the scraps of a meal of malted oat cakes, and cinnamony greens.

"You know ... I don't disown my past, but I suppose I *talk* too much about it," he mused. "And I guess you can be forgiven if you feel a little jealous of my having originally lived in Outer Space as a Silly Creature."

(In actual fact, if anyone was jealous of Darl's life in Outer Space, it was obviously Gobo's Uncle Matt.)

"Jealous? Not a bit," said Kiki, finishing the last of her squeezed lime juice. "I just don't have a very exciting life. For that matter, I never intended to. I don't think I *ever* intended to."

She got up, gathered the dishes, and was gone for a moment. There was a natural basin around the corner (really only a fissure in the cave wall, just wide enough to allow a Fraggles inside) where there was running water for cooking or cleaning. Many Fraggles Holes did without running water, and simply used the Pool at the Great Hall, carrying their water home in jars. But Kiki's Hole lacked none of the comforts of home, Darl realized. It was a hole meant for a family.

"*You* may think you've never had an exciting life," Darl called after her as he wiped off the table. "But everything about you is important to me. We've been together for three years, more or less, and yet in all that time I don't think you've ever said much about yourself."

"Well ... you know my friends, particularly Willa, who I've known since I was a little Fraggles Also Debb." Kiki thought for a moment. "You remember Debb? A little flaky. She has screwy ideas, and since you met her she thinks she must have been a Silly Creature, too, in a previous life."

"How could I forget Debb?" groaned Darl. She was more than suggestible – she didn't know the difference between a budgie and an elephant, but only needed Darl to mention either, and she would immediately imagine that she once raised them in cages, where they would sing like canaries, in four-part harmony.

“And Chi-Chi, you remember, who flirts with everyone?” added Kiki.

Darl couldn't very well forget Chi-Chi. Soon after they were introduced, she had practically invited herself into their bed for a sleep-over, and was only persuaded to go home with a display of firmness.

“I remember *her* very well!” Darl admitted. “She was the one who got into trouble with Tomorrow's Mirror, wasn't she?”

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“Let's get back to *you*,” Darl persisted. “You tell me that you lived a dull life, but I don't know how you can say that. Hardly anything I've seen in the Rock is ever dull – much less Invisible Gargoyles, Singing Mee-Mees, Skeeks, Pufferrooms, Rubber Rock, Creepy Grass, The Raining Cave, Puppet Birds which can take over your mind, Iron Bees ... barely a week goes by without some fresh surprise to flabbergast me.”

“Unlike huge, speeding beasts,” countered Kiki, “That hurtle from one place to the other, not caring if you get out of their way in time? Or blasts of freezing cold water that suddenly soak you from a harmless-looking patch of grass? Or doors that open-and-close magically, and leave you someplace you never saw before? Deafening howls that suddenly start when you get too close to one of the metal monster waiting outside? All quite ordinary to Silly Creatures, I suppose, but scary enough to *me*.”

“Touché,” Darl admitted. “But about *you*? Not your friends, *you!*”

Kiki looked wistful for a minute, and reluctantly said, “There really isn't much about me. I'm just an ordinary Fraggles, like my fiends, my family, everyone I know ... “

“Start there, then,” demanded Darl. “When you were born!”

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As Fraggles went, Hobart Fraggles was a restless soul – a trait that he undoubtedly passed on to Kiki. He met the love of his life at an annual pickle festival that was held by a neighboring Fraggles clan. While he was reaching for a stuffed dill-and-smoked-fish-fillet on sourdough bread, he accidentally took hold of the same sandwich as another Fraggles. Between bites of the shared sandwich and sips of bubbly drink, Ginny Fraggles agreed to move to the Great Hall, where they would live together. Hence, Kiki was born in due course.

“I remember growing up in this big old cave of my father's. I even had a place of my own where I slept, and didn't just sleep on the end of the bed like most kids. I think this cave has been in my family for ages ... but, you know ... no one pays much mind to anything that happened more than three or four generations ago. Unless it can be found in some old book in Storyteller's library, anyway. Also unless someone goes looking for it, and that doesn't happen often.”

In fact, the cave was unusually spacious by the compact standards of most Fraggles Holes. Kiki spoke glowingly of her parents' parties, when she was allowed to sleep on the big

bed, so that the grown-ups could talk while she pretended to sleep. When it got late, Kiki would drift to sleep without knowing, of course, and Mom and Dad would carry her quietly to her own small bed in the parlor, and tuck her in. Then, when the day broke, the world would begin all over again, with a morning full of surprises. It was a very happy childhood, in other words – full of the usual frolic, music and Fragglish adventures.

Like her father, however, Kiki seemed to take an unusual interest in things that most Fraggles did not. As often as not, she grew up chatting with Gibb the barber while he cut hair, learned odd tunes from the Whistling Stalactites, and watched, mesmerized, as the tiny Doozers busied themselves with building whatever mysterious things they built.

“Did the Doozers take you into their confidence?” asked Darl. “Did they try to teach you algebra or mechanics? Were you able to ask them any questions? I notice that they don’t seem to pay much attention to Fraggles ... as long we don’t trip over them.”

“Hmmm... no. Doozers almost never notice Fraggles, and we hardly ever pay attention to them, either. When I was much younger, I asked them plenty of foolish questions, but almost never got an answer. Usually just, ‘Watch out for that,’ or ‘You’ll hurt yourself, young Fraggles.’ They were always busy, and had no time for Fraggles getting in the way. What a Doozer loved most was the satisfaction when a job was finished, and then how pleased they were when Fraggles ate it! I always wondered why that was!”

Darl laughed dryly. “It’s simple. At the rate Doozers dooze, they would fill Fraggles Rock from end to end in less than no time, unless we ate what they made.”

“I thought of that. But I don’t think most Fraggles do. They’re satisfied that Doozers dooze, and their doozing is delicious.”

In fact, when not playing with her friends, young Kiki had spent a lot of time with the Doozers. They fascinated her, not least because the busy little creatures were always occupied, but also because Kiki dimly sensed a logic behind their activities. Things were built in certain ways, because if they were not straight or level, they would fall down. Things that had four sides made a square, four squares created a box, and boxes could be stacked one on the other to make strong, tall structures!

Nor were towering structures *all* that every Doozer could make by instinct. Kiki watched the little green builders make ramps to reach higher caves, bridges to leap chasms and dams to channel water. To what end Kiki had little comprehension, but she clearly saw purpose in everything they did ... a sense of purpose that communicated itself to the young Fraggles.

If only she understood what it was all for!

“I used to watch the Doozers working, and asked questions all the time. What was this for, what was that for. And they would patiently show me how to use an angle-thing to measure squares ...”

“A set square, Love. We call it a set square.”

“One time, another Doozer showed me how to dangle a weight from anything to show what was exactly underneath it. I remember being surprised about such things, having never thought about them before. I learned a *lot* of things from Doozers that I never thought about before.”

Most Fraggles never did, of course ...

On the first day that Kiki attended the teaching circle taught by Storyteller Fraggie, she made new friends to add to those she regularly played with. Among those who became most important were Gobo, Wembley, Mokey, Red and Boober. There were also the usual scrum of rambunctious youngsters – Feenie, Rumpel, Tosh, Moof, Gustaf, Lou and others of their age. Naturally, Fraggie learning tends to be very unstructured ... and arguably very little was learned ... but a great deal of fun is had by all. If anyone learned anything, it was all to the better. And Storyteller did try *very* hard to teach caution, and how to avoid hurting one’s self ... and perhaps even a few manners. Inevitably, a small amount stuck after school, despite everyone’s valiant efforts to ignore any semblance of actual study.

“I made friends easily,” Kiki continued, “and readily joined in with the rest of the gang. But I also liked to wander off by myself at times. Watching Doozers, Iron Bees and the like is apt to give people the impression that you are bit odd.”

“I guess I had attended school for about as long most Fraggles, since I began to notice how much shorter some Fraggles were than I was. It was a bit of a shock, but apparently I was growing up. Around about the same time, my Mom and Dad had grown moody – looking at old pictures and brick-a-brack, removing old treasures from the chest, or putting them away. I was fifteen or sixteen winters, and didn’t know what to make of it. Then, one day, my folks said that they wanted to move away from our home and the Great Hall. Although my dad’s ancestors had dug our Hole and enlarged it for ages, Mother was homesick for her own friends and family. So the two of them decided they would go to live among the Candy Rock Clan.”

“I had a lot to think about that night on my cramped little mattress next to Mom and Dad’s bedroom. Now that I was coming of age, I could choose for myself whether or not to go with my parents to live among a strange Fraggie clan. At first I thought it would be an exciting adventure. But then I began to feel that I could never bear to leave the Hole where I had lived all my life. First I’d feel one way, then the other ... my emotions were at war with one another.”

Kiki looked away from her lover, thinking only about the two Fraggles she had once loved above *all* others. After a moment the distant look in her eyes faded, and Kiki was back in the present.

“I was very lonely for a while, and to this day I sometimes wonder if I shouldn’t have gone to live in a whole new Fraggles Cave among the Candy Rock folk. I might have had all sorts of exciting adventures ... but I guess I’ll never know. I was too afraid to leave the only home I’d ever known. When Mom and Dad finally went, I stayed by myself in my familiar old Hole ... but one that suddenly felt so very, very empty.”

“But it’s not empty now,” said Darl. “Is it? Now *we* live here.”

Kiki smiled at Darl’s wink.

“Yes, that did change a lot of things, didn’t it? I had my girlhood friends still. I puttered in Willa’s pottery workshop, getting about as much clay on me as on the work that Willa set out for me to do. I spent a lot of time watching Gibb the barber cut hair ... where, as a girl, I used to love having my own hair cut. I continued to pester my Doozer friends – Drill Bit, Slide Rule, Cotter Pin, Dr. Tonic, Gear Shift – and sometimes try to build something on my own that wasn’t too ramshackle to let anyone see. The Doozers were nice enough not show that they were amused with my clumsy efforts.”

After a moment, Kiki said, “I wasn’t sad *most* of the time. I really missed Mom and Dad being around, though. The big bed that belonged to my folks was mine to sleep in, but I didn’t feel right about it. I continued to sleep on the old mattress that I had outgrown.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Darl. “On my first night as a Fraggles, I thought that was your regular bed ... and that you had made up something for me on the spur of the moment, by spreading a blanket over an old chest. When you later invited me to share the bed, I supposed you had taken pity on me ... what with one leg on the floor, and the other stuck up in the air!”

“No, love,” Kiki snickered. “That was *my* first night in the big bed also. I thought you realized?”

“I was clueless as a newborn Tumblekitty ... what did you think? I was too busy looking for the instructions to my ‘baloobius’ to worry about where I was going to sleep that night. Go ahead and laugh!”

Kiki laughed good and hard at that.

Suddenly serious, Darl asked, “How long did you live alone before you became lost in Outer Space? *Why* were you even fooling around in Outer Space ... considering how nervous I know you are about it?”

“For a couple of years I was on my own, going through life without having my heart in it,” Kiki continued. “My friends said I was moping. Willa tried to get me interested in helping with her pots, then Red wanted me to take up sports. Boober – of course – said I should find new meaning in the art of washing and folding laundry ... well, everyone had a suggestion. But while I had no idea what I was looking for, I knew that I was in bad need

of *something*. That was when I sneaked into the Gorg's Garden to visit the Trash Heap for help.

"It was my first time to see Madam Trash Heap, so you know how disorienting that can be. Whatever she says or does is likely to be unexpected, and it *was*."

"She said there was nothing wrong with me at all, that I was only a little afraid. I wasn't afraid, I said, and Madam Trash Heap said 'of course you're not. You just think you are, that's all.' And then she sang a little song, which I remember:

"When you don't know what to do,
And your thoughts are in the air.
Even last chances come to naught.
that will surely let you down.

"Just don't think about it!
That's right,
Don't think about it!

"Any time you think have the answer
Common sense will only steer you wrong.
Know your heart; let it find the way –
It knows just what to do.

"Just don't think about it!,
That's right,
You knew it all along!"

"Then she said, 'Bud of course, you did. You knew it all along, too! Clever Fraggles! So, when I have important work to do, why are you all the time coming here to ask me silly questions? Do you know where my hat is?' I thought that was an awfully strange question, since it was as plain as day that Madam Trash Heap wasn't wearing a hat. 'Exactly so,' she said, and before I knew it, those rat critters of hers were proclaiming that she had *Spoken* – and she was settling majestically out of sight amidst the other clutter and trash, and was gone!"

"And then *you* knew just what to do?"

"Are you kidding? I had no idea," Kiki declared. "However, I thought perhaps I should try to do what I normally did, and I spent less time thinking about what I *should* do. It

seemed to help. Funny how often that seems to be the best way to work a problem through.”

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“It was about then that Gobo was making regular trips to Outer Space to fetch his Uncle Matt’s postcards. Though I had little interest in Gobo’s errands at the time, I began to wonder how much more there was that Fraggles didn’t know anything about. For instance, everything that I had learned by watching Doozers, that most Fraggles never give a thought to. I began to ask my friends among the Doozers if the world was very much larger than I believed it was, and they laughed themselves silly! ‘Of course, you big dumb Long Tail!’ they said. ‘Fraggles don’t even know whether it is a rest day, or a work day, because they think every day is a day for playing!’”

Of course, this was most unfair for the Doozers to say, since Fraggles certainly do gather roots, greens, berries, radishes, mushrooms and other food, wash dishes, clean up the clutter when it grows inconvenient, make chairs and musical instruments when inspiration strikes, watch after the young’uns to see they don’t wander into pits, and even now and then chase away wildlife that has grown entirely too bold for its own good. A Fraggles life isn’t *entirely* play. Only *mostly* play.

“So one day, I asked my Doozer friends where could I discover something new and exciting ... and I knew in that moment that I wanted to find a Fraggles Hole just like Gobo’s. The Doozers scratched their heads for a while, until Cotter Pin and Torchie stepped forward and said that they kept clear of any place where it was at all likely that dangerous monsters might live. But I pleaded with them to tell me everything about Fraggles Holes. I had resolved to find one of my very own!

“Unfortunately, the Doozers had no useful suggestions, only confused notions about whether Fraggles Rock went everywhere, or whether indeed it had an end *anywhere*. Such theoretical notions clearly had little appeal to practical Doozers. That left me little choice but to ask Gobo about Fraggles Holes.”

Darl was absently-mindedly toying with Kiki’s fur as he listened,

“But all Gobo would say was, ‘Aw, you don’t want to go near there, eh? It’s really *scary* up there.’ I believed him, but I wanted more details. I had no idea then what *outside* really meant, or how immensely-impossibly-huge outside could be, imagining it only as ‘big’ by comparison with the Great Hall, or the Moaning Grotto. Gobo described a great, hairy beast that later turned out be only Doc’s dog, Sprocket. But to me, it sounded as though he had six jaws with teeth in all directions, each of which was bigger than a full-grown Crevice Creeper. And then there was Doc himself, as big around as the Fraggles Horn, blustering and bellowing as though he had swallowed a nest of Screaming Geezles. To be fair, Gobo wasn’t trying to frighten me – I think he was really nearly as terrified of Sprocket and Doc as I was, and trying not to admit it to himself.”

“In time, Gobo *claimed* he had gotten used to exploring Outer Space, and could handle it. He even boasted that he had become clever at outwitting the Silly Creatures that lived in

Outer Space. He became so overconfident that he was annoying *all* his friends with his adventures, escapes and those dratted postcards ... particularly Red. Red and I would laugh behind Gobo's back, you know, and talk about exploring Outer Space ourselves. It was just bravado in Red's case – the truth was that she could handle Gorgs okay, but wanted nothing to do with exploring anything as *creepy* and *mysterious* as Outer Space. And then Gobo decided that it would be 'irresponsible' for him to bring unfamiliar Fraggles into the vastness and danger that only *he* was capable of navigating."

Kiki made a derisive noise.

"Gobo can be something of an ass," Darl smiled.

Kiki broke into an old patter song she had failed to teach him to sing:

"When you think you have all the answers, and your answers all have questions,
Then the questions are the wrong ones, 'cause there are no easy right ones... "

"So, you went out to look for your own Fraggles Hole," said Darl, "by poking your bulbous green nose into nooks and crannies you would never have thought about before, right?"

"Bulbous? Fraggles have elegant, delightfully proportioned noses by comparison with those little tiny dimples that Silly Creatures breathe through!" Kiki punched his shoulder for emphasis. "It's a wonder you can find them in such a weird place."

Darl had once thought that breathing discreetly behind his ears to be at least as strange.

"When I found the hole, I got lost right away," continued Kiki. "I should have been watching where I was going, but almost everything confused me so much I didn't know what it was. Practically the first thing I saw in Outer Space was a child-like thing the size of an Ambling Doofus. It charged up to me with a war machine making deafening noises, and tried to run me over!"

"Merely a plaything for children to push, to make pleasant popping sounds," as Darl reassured her. "... *if* you are only two-years-old."

"Next, I was attacked by even more monsters, a whole grove of them, with whirling arms that tried to drown me!"

"I already told you about lawn sprinklers for watering the grass in the park."

"What about the creature I heard that was trapped in a small metal box, that screamed hideously for its life?"

"Just recorded music. Though I admit that Frank Zappa doesn't sound like any kind of music you'd have heard before. You *know* all this, now. I've explained it all before."

"I know, silly," said Kiki. "But I didn't know that *then*, when I was confused and lost. Once I realized that I didn't know where I was, I spent the better part of an hour blending

in with some stuffed toys standing in a doorway on the street. I wish I had known that Silly Creatures almost never even *notice* Fraggles when face to face with us,” said Kiki, sheepishly.

“That was when you found me!” she added, with a tight hug.

Whether or not Kiki had ever been hiding among a group of plush toys or whether that was merely a story she liked to tell, Darl was never sure. When he discovered the lost Fraggles, she had been running, weeping, and so close to exhaustion that he feared she would collapse at his feet. Instead, she had run smack into him, and then convulsively clung to his legs. It had been a shock to both of them that each recognized the other was neither a fairy tale nor a monster. Kiki's had spilled out her story to the Silly Creature in a rush, and with a plea for help.

What else could Darl have done but take her home, offer food and finally prepare a bed for her on his living room sofa?

Nor could he possibly have imagined that the search for Kiki's Fraggles hole would lead to such enormous changes in both of their lives. Not the least of those changes nearly ending in terrible consequences for Darl himself. Had Kiki not been found by him, she could never have invited Darl to visit *her* in her home. He wouldn't have tried to follow Kiki through an increasingly smaller hole, and only then discover that his way *out* was also blocked, that he was trapped alone in the dark ... and, until he understood the magic that made it possible, he could never have taken up his new life as a Fraggles. Even looking back, it still seemed impossible that it could all have happened.

For a moment, Darl thought of how Kiki's arms had felt around his legs when he was still a Silly Creature, and also how they felt here in Fraggles Rock! He'd liked how they felt when she was a tiny, waif-like creature who needed his help, but he liked her arms around him even more now.

“So that was the story of my life,” Kiki. Concluded. “Not much to it, was there?”

“You are too modest, Love. Think of how brave it was of you to live by yourself, when your folks went away. You have always had an independent mind, and – needing a challenge – you searched the Rock for your very own Fraggles Hole. You actually went into Outer Space and faced countless dangers that you had never imagined, and escaped from them one after another! And *then*,” said Darl with a grin, “you were smart enough to recognize me for the person who was about to begin a new chapter in your life!”

Kiki stuck out her tongue, and protested. “Tease! What makes you think you were more than a footnote!”

Having put away the dishes, and with a busy day shaping up, the two Fraggles left for the Great Hall, where they – and everyone they knew – would greet them, and draw them into the day's activities.

“What do you think we should do today?” Darl asked. “We could go to the crayfish races, or look for crystals. Also, parti-colour pufferballs are in season. We could throw them at each other until we’re all sticky and need a swim?”

“Um... no,” was all Kiki said.

“Well, yesterday, Gobo said that anyone who wanted could join him in a game of Float Ball and Poppers.”

“No ... not that.”

“Do you want to wander over to see if Mokie has been painting?”

“No. I’ve had enough of the same old thing for the time being,” said Kiki, decisively.

“If you don’t *want* to do any of that, Kiki love, then what *should* we do?”

Wisely, Darl allowed her time to pause for an answer.

“Don't get me wrong,” she said. “I love our entire lives here, but there are times when I feel we are taking the trip to the Radish Garden too often.” This was an allusion to foraging vegetables from the Gorgs, a risky but largely routine exploit that most Fraggles have performed.

“So what should we do about it?” queried Darl.

“A Silly Creature who turned into a Fraggles should be the last person to wonder what we should do. If all our old adventures have grown familiar,” Kiki said in a solemn voice.

“Of course we will just have to have *new* adventures.”

With any luck, today’s would be a doozy.

