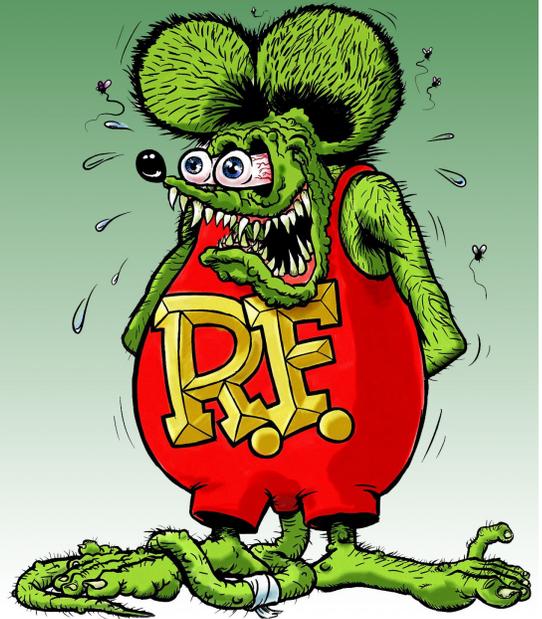


Rat Sass 11

A zine for Rowrbrazzle 139,
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We are now counting down from the second to last issue... The next issue will be the final one, and I presume that the issue after that will be the last issue of Rowrbrazzle that I will receive and read.

Indeed, it was my plan all along to contribute for a short while and then retire gracefully. The only uncertainty was whether I would stick it out for ten issues, or twelve. In the end, what settled the matter was that I had twelve good illos to use for *Rat Sass* headers. I suppose, too, that it was satisfying to finish after three full years.

When I agreed to rejoin *Rowrbrazzle*, it was with the understanding that it was only for a limited time. I wanted to do Edd Vick, who is currently the OE, a favour ... and I admit that I was suffering a bit from withdrawal after I ended fifty issues of *Broken Toys*. Still, it was my intention all along to replace *Broken Toys* with a new, **generally available** fanzine, and I haven't changed my plans. Once I feel the urge again to publish, I will carry on with new issues of *Rat Sass*. It's just too good a title to abandon...

My stay in 'Brazzle has been rewarding, but also a bit disappointing. My efforts don't seem to have made a noticeable change in the apa, nor generated any great rush of new members that was supposed to be the purpose behind Edd talking me into rejoining. On the whole, I'm not sure there was any change at all in 'Brazzle, and my presence doesn't seem to have mattered. On the other hand, I've had a reasonably good time interacting with the members, and enjoyed a small amount of egoboo. If nothing else, I hope that Edd goes on publishing his own Rowrbrazzle zine, that he continues to send me copies separately ... and that perhaps I will occasionally contribute to it.

WHERE DO ALL THE CALCULATORS GO

Lately, I seem to be aware of a lot of artists of my generation dying. And many who have died are actually of a younger generation!

A few were artists I knew from science fiction fandom – Stu Shiffman was one that I counted as a friend. Another was D. West, who I knew only by name from British fandom. A larger number who I met or really knew were furry artists, however. Even a partial list of those would be staggering – Lou Scarborough, Greg Bear, J.K. Morgan, James Hardiman, Doug Winger, Albert Temple – and these are just those I knew who most easily come to mind. There were others. How can this be happening, seemingly all at once?

I suppose it only an illusion that this is happening "all at once," however. Their names have been stricken off the active ledger one by one, over a number of years. Still... we were all young once, and this just wasn't supposed to happen, at *any* age.

But now it has happened *again*.

To be honest, I didn't know Vicky Wyman well. I met her a number of times at her table at various furry cons in the '90s, and likely spoke to her at the parties after the dealers' room closed. But I haven't been to a furry con since around 2001 or '2, and I don't remember a lot. What I do recall is that I bought three black-and-white pages from her when she was likely short of lucre, at a price even *I* could afford! I keep an orderly studio, and knew where to look for a farewell viewing just now.

For the record, I have three pages. Although I kept a record, I'm not very clear which publications they appeared in, unfortunately. One appears to be page 38 of *The Everchanging Palace*, but the page is also notated *Zanadu 2000*. The next page appears to be from *The Everchanging Palace*, number 5, page 13. Finally, I have a page 9 from something I had written down as "Into Golden Skies" ... but the numbering is a bit of a handful. No doubt someone else can sort it out.

From what I have read, Vicky was 65. Having had reason to consider mortality as I have, lately, I cannot avoid thoughts about the passage of time. But unless I give in to bitterness and cynicism, I can only express myself in one way, paraphrasing the mechanoids in *Red Dwarf*:

"If there is no silicon heaven, where *do* all the calculators go?"

THE EX AFTER

*[Every year for the last few years, I have attended the Canadian National Exhibition, known by visitors and natives alike as "The Ex." As with many old institutions, it appears to be in a slow state of decay, not only of the grounds and buildings, but of the institutions themselves. For generations, the Ex existed to showcase the best of Canadian talent, entertainment, industry and technology, but it is increasingly hard to justify such commonplace things as self-defrosting refrigerators, home entertainment centers, vibrating recliner chairs and Jacuzzis. Exciting as such transports of consumer satiation were in 1910, 1940 or even 1960, by the last decades of the century the CNE was becoming passé. People no longer flocked to the Ex just to see a dishwasher or non-stick frying pan. Once popular annual exhibits, such as the car show, fled to larger and more modern venues ... at a higher ticket price. All the same, in recent years I once again began to attend the CNE regularly. That is, until this year, when the cost of admission for disabled people was no longer free! Instead of the freedom to return to the CNE grounds – a short drive for Traveling Matt between the Ex and my home – I could only pay to attend **once**, and only **once**. Hence, this was the Ex after the last one I wrote about ... but hopefully not the last one **ever!**]*

The weather was uppermost on my mind on opening day of the Canadian National Exhibition ... and for good reason. The forecast had announced a 60% chance of precipitation, and the weathermen didn't disappoint. I left for "The Ex" with Traveling Matt late in the afternoon, but only got a few blocks from my apartment ... when the heavens burst a pipe.

I ended up spending more than half an hour waiting in a Tim Hortons for the ducks to be swept away by the downpour. The gully-washer wasn't as bad as the one last week, that flooded much of Toronto's underpasses, but it was still torrential. By then my blood-thinning drugs kicked in, and I ended up ducking back home for a change of underpants. When I finally got underway again, I still had to make a couple of other unplanned stops along the way before I was finally able to pay my way into the Ex.

Under other circumstances, I might have put off the trip to the Ex until Saturday, but admittance was only \$10 on Friday only. The next day, even with a seniors' discount, it would be \$16, so I thought the risk of getting rained on was a reasonable gamble. I was tempted to demand a free pass! Fortunately, I was indoors by then. Given the rain, there were surprisingly more people around than I expected. Perhaps I was not alone in wanting to save money.

Since I had a late start, I skipped the Food Building for the time being, and headed for what is now mainly a sort of open marketplace. At one time, all the buildings had specific venues and names – such as the Auto Show, The Music Building, the Flower Building, the International Market or the Electrical Building. But all the buildings are very much the same now – those that still stand – and most have been given new names that have erased their original purposes. Oddly, though, the Food Building was always the Food Building, and still serves its original purpose – selling take-away food.

I was looking for a list of things to buy that I had bought last year – for example, some jams and jellies to put away for Christmas presents. While it rained yet again, I also looked for some other things ... and, sadly, found that they had vanished this year. As always, the Ex seems to grow smaller all the time.

I moved along to the Enercare Center then, where there was even more of the same old same-old. I was disappointed to see that just last year, the discount books and CDs were missing, leaving nothing behind but sportswear, sunglasses, make-up and enough women's shoes to make Imelda Marcos sick, and – of all things – a display of hot tubs. Yeah ... everyone in Toronto should have an outdoor hot tub for the winter! It was looking as though I would find nothing of interest at all, but I relaxed and fell into a different mood, taking in whatever I found.

I stopped to listen to live African music for a while, and then just began browsing the aisles. After a while, I entered into an interesting conversation about the differences between a genuine Persian carpet and a mere rug. A little while later, I found someone selling Russian war memorabilia. Not surprisingly, given the popularity of Russians at the moment, he looked a bit lonesome all by himself. But I stopped to look through several binders of pre-WWII banknotes, not all of which were Russian by any means. He also had had a few coins that he was happy to show me as well, including an inexpensive five-kopek copper piece that I shouldn't have bought, since I already had one like it. Of greater interest, he had some unusual 1930s toy Soviet soldiers too, that looked just like those crappy plastic ones we used to order by mail on the back of comic books. The Russian soldiers were similarly two-dimensional, about two inches tall and cast from lead, this being long before plastic. I tried on a Ushanka, a Russian army fur cap, wondering how it would look on a cold Toronto winter. I bet it would be warm! I thought it stood out a bit too much, though, with the conspicuous Red Army badge.

In another part of the building I poked through some woolen shawls that I admired. I always thought they would look good on anyone, not just fashion models. To my delight, I discovered they were actually made for *me*. I had always

had a hankering for wear one ... just call it a serape and leave Clint Eastwood's six-guns at home. The seller informed me that they were hand-made, machine-safe, made by the Moose Creek Co. and 100% Canadian made, and had actually become fashionable among men. I was easily talked into buying one in a bluish-grey pattern when I realized that they were priced at a very reasonable \$40.



I can't wait for fall, when it will be cool enough for me to wear it.

A little later I came across another vendor, who a display of Mexican coffee-table brick-a-brack. It didn't catch my eye at first, but then I noticed he had some old toy cars. None were quite anything I wanted, but that developed into a conversation with the seller, who also had some old Canadian paper money for sale ... including a set of 1937 bills from \$1 to \$100, in a glass case. I already had the lower-denomination bills in my collection, but didn't know what the going price was for a 1937 \$100 bill. I would have guessed about \$250, given its condition. I eyed it speculatively, but in truth I

could buy one just like it any time, if that was the going price. I could wait until a better time, I thought. But then again, maybe it *was* a bargain ... after all, \$100 in 1937 should have had much more buying power than a couple of hundred bucks today. Maybe even \$1,000. I may kick myself someday for passing it up...

I turned next to a display of some very businesslike machetes. This made sense for a booth selling Mexican shelf-fillers ... but a *Samurai* sword? Last year I had looked at a few on display with theatrical props, and not been impressed. That vendor hadn't returned this year, but his swords had been little better than pot metal, rather garishly tricked up and as flashy as cheap bowling trophies. Worse, the guy from last year had been asking \$250 *and up!* However, the Mexican guy I met this year showed me a much nicer sword than I'd seen before. I was surprised, too, that he really wasn't asking all that much for it. It was a modest piece of workmanship as far as I could tell – for a sword that I presume was not a real Japanese katana for military or martial arts use – but at least it had a real edge, and a leather scabbard. Wistfully, I said I might come back and look at it again.

But first I wanted to tour the Silk Roads Exhibit. While I had heard vaguely about the tour, I found it more or less by accident, and was easily lured into the dark entrance by the bright, colourful shapes inside. Silk Roads turned out to be a really delightful series of fantasy set-pieces, lit from inside. They were partly animated, and entirely made from real silk. At first, I thought that there were

only five or six scenes illustrated. But as I followed the Silk Road, I was drawn farther and farther in, so more kept appearing around the next corner. I was not expecting to take many photos at this year's Ex ... but I ended up with more than thirty photos!



And, oh, yes... I returned to the Mexican gentlemen with the samurai sword. I offered him \$100 on the spot, and he happily agreed. There was a minor flaw where it hung from the scabbard, that I was able to quickly to quickly set right when I got home. Although I have already mentioned that it was sharp, it is worth emphasizing that it is *quite* sharp. The blade might not shave a Samurai's pate to his satisfaction, but it would do quite nicely to carve up the neighborhood squirrels and cats. I will have to be careful not to lose any fingers while reading more than usually exciting stories. All things considered, it was a welcome break from my usual cheese-paring purchases.

Unfortunately, I had lost track of the time, and suddenly 10 p.m. loomed. Closing time. I was unable to visit the Food Building as planned. So I was not only unable to try any maple-bacon buffalo burgers with truffles and gold leaf, I wasn't able to get anything at all before closing, and I'd had nothing to eat all day. The Midway

was still open, however, so rather than forego the pleasure of being drastically overcharged for some sort of “fun” food at the Ex, I hurried to find a concession that sold deep-fried Mars Bars.

I guess you risk having a too-perfect day unless there is some little fly in the ointment. In this case, I ended up with the runs after that deep-fried Mars Bar.

Alas, thanks to the gratuitous new admission charge levied on the disabled, I won't be returning to the Ex. At \$16 each visit, it will have to wait until next year.



I originally had other plans for this space. Readers who would have preferred to see the Beatrix portfolio I planned, *may* be disappointed, however. It will likely appear in this space next issue. Instead, I was inspired with an idea for a new Fraggles Rock story about Kiki and Darl (also featuring Marjory the Trash Heap) that I have nowhere else to publish. As reasons go, that'll have to be good enough...

Let the Moon Dance

Darl had been watching Kiki with growing interest for the last ten minutes. Kiki appeared to be too absorbed to notice.

She sat oblivious in the dust, not far from where a busy work gang of Doozers were erecting a tower. Kiki reached over for a Doozer stick now and then, and absently chewed on it. Around her feet were a handful of the crystal sticks. She seemed fascinated by them, rearranging them over and over into various patterns ... then throwing them into disarray in obvious excitement. Darl gradually gained the impression that she was discovering geometry!

Kiki was smart as Fraggles went, but any calculation beyond “one, two, many” was more than surprising. It was genius at work!

“Kiki, darling, what are you doing?”

Suddenly surprised, she looked up at Darl and said, “Have you ever noticed that if you make a square, all the corners make the same angle?”

“Of course.”

Satisfied with her deductions, Kiki rose, scattering the Doozer sticks. “But there is something *odd* about it when you straighten out one corner to make a thing with *three corners*, though,” she mused. “I think the length of the sides have to add up somehow.”

My God, though Darl. She has it, and without the benefit of the schooling I got when I was a Silly Creature!

“It’s called the Pythagorean Theorem, and it says that adding the square of the side opposite the right angle is equal to the square of the other two sides.”

“How’s that again?” said Kiki, mystified. “Square angles?”

“I’ll explain another time. It’s really quite simple, but I will have to explain square numbers first.”

She had likely got the idea from the Doozers, who obviously understood some geometry, Darl thought – but still he swelled with pride at her intelligence – she really *was* a genius among Fraggles.

By then, however, Kiki had put aside thoughts about triangles and was more interested in dusting herself off after lolling on the ground.

“That reminds me,” she said. “You have a message from the Oldest Fraggles in the World, Love. I was supposed to tell when I saw you, but I forgot while messing around with the Doozers. I should have mentioned it a couple of days ago.”

A genius among Fraggles she might be ... but Kiki still had a Fraggles’ casual attitude toward time.

—

The cozy hole that Darl and Kiki shared together was no great distance from the Great Hall, and they were still talking about the Oldest Fraggles’ message when they stepped inside.

“Yeah, I remember about the Festival of the Moon,” said Darl. “There’s one every now and then, when you can see it through the hole in the roof above the Great Hall.”

“No, that’s the Gorg’s Moon. That’s altogether different! I mean, it’s pretty enough as moons go, but the Fraggles Moon is far more beautiful. And when the Fraggles Moon is brightest is only on a midnight, when we have a *special* Festival. You remember when you arrived here,” Kiki reminisced, “and you saw Gobo capture the Moon and bring it back from the Gorg’s Garden?”

“Was *that* what all that was about? I’m going to have to explain about the moon sometime, you know. It’s the same moon you see from the Gorg’s Garden. For that matter, it was the same moon in my *old* world.”

“You already told me about all that. I *know* it’s the same moon. But other Fraggles don’t know, and they probably don’t care, because the Fraggles Moon is *our* moon, and is much, much more beautiful than the Gorg’s ... which just sort of hangs there, like a sleepy bat. *Our* Moon swims, just like a Fraggles!”

Darl snorted disdainfully. “Well, so are we due for one of the big festivals again, like the one Gobo celebrated?”

“Yup. You’ll never guess who leads the celebration for the Fraggles Moon this time? Guess!”

“Wembley? Mokey? Red?”

“Nope, nope, and nope.”

“Uh... Willa? Lou? Storyteller? The Herbalist? Convincing John? That guy who cuts hair, uh, Gid? *I don’t know!*”

“You! You big goof!”

—

The news was met with widespread incredulity. Everyone in the Rock knew perfectly well that Darl did not like to sing or dance ... and for that matter, he was not quite comfortable with simply acting silly, which was such a serious drawback for a Fraggles that he was only now gradually learning to be adept at it. But the notion of becoming the center of attention during an important Fraggles ceremony was terrifying! The only thing Darl could think of was to hurry, with Kiki tagging along, to the home of The World’s Oldest Fraggles, and refuse the “honour.”

The World’s Oldest Fraggles was asleep in a rocking chair outside his cave, as usual. Also as usual, it was nearly impossible to wake him from his morning, mid-morning, noon, afternoon or evening snooze. It wouldn’t do to just shake the senior Fraggles awake, since he had a tendency to lash out with a heavy staff that never seemed to be far from his grasp, even in sleep.

There was nothing to do but shake him awake as best they could, once Kiki had set the ornate staff safely aside.

“Who? Who, who’s that?” yelled The World’s Oldest Fraggles, clutching for his absent staff. “I don’t know you. Why don’t you come back after the Moon Festival ... I should be plenty rested up by then.” He yawned and his head drooped.

Darl frowned and gave the Aged One another shake before he nodded off again.

“You asked me here!” Darl shouted into a deaf ear. “You named me to do the ceremony for the Moon Festival. You’ll have to find someone else to greet the Moon, because *I can’t do it!*”

“Eh? What? Well, of course you can’t!” snapped the Aged One. “You already did it last time.”

“No, that was Gobo,” said Kiki. “Gobo conducted the Moon Festival last time, remember?”

“I know that! Gobo greeted the Moon last time, just like I said. Where’s my staff? I want my staff!”

Kiki wisely kept it out of reach.

“Never mind who did it last year,” said Darl, “I don’t want to do it *this* year. Why can’t someone else greet the Moon? Why not Boober?”

“Uh ... that’s no good, Love,” Kiki interrupted. “Boober already did one of the Lesser Moons, where the moon doesn’t come all the way out. I did one myself a few months ago, remember?”

“Oh, yeah, but all you had to do was keep a vigil with a few friends until the moon rose. Maybe I can do one of those, but no singing and dancing, okay? We’ll just watch the moon rise together and go to bed.”

The Oldest Fraggles wasn’t having any of that. “Not so *fast*, young’uns. It’s time for the Greater Moon to rise, and there isn’t anyone who else who has *never* celebrated a Full Fraggles Moon before ... *except you!* So you’ll do it, and that’s *that!* Now, let me get some sleep. *I* have a busy day ahead of me when I get up,” the World’s Oldest Fraggles cackled. “But not as busy as *you* will be if you don’t think up something good soon! You have two days!”

Darl’s groan was loud and clear, and a few of the more timid Blushing Posies growing nearby withdrew into their roots in response.

—

“So what will I do?” asked Darl.

Gobo, Wembley, Red, Mokey and Boober had gathered around the main pool in the Great Hall to offer their suggestions, while Kiki kept a discreet distance. After all, Darl was still inclined to blame the messenger for the unwanted news that he’d have to preside over the Moon Festival.

“Well, I don’t know,” suggested Gobo, unhelpfully. “Just do what most of us do if called on for a Great Moon. Write a song and sing it. Or compose a poem. Or do a dance. It’s what Fraggles do best.”

“But I’m *not* a Fraggles! Not really. I just look like one and I’m hardly more than two feet tall, but inside I’m a 100-percent untalented Silly Creature who could no more sing to the Moon than I could fly around it.”

“Boy,” commented Wembly, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so depressed before. No, wait... there was that time when Gobo lost his Great Uncle Gobo’s old compass...”

“Never mind, Wembley. It’s more important that we help Darl with *his* problem, not an old one of mine.”

The Fraggles gazed out over the pool in the Great Hall. It was a lake of limpid blue water, right in the middle of the cave, where idlers could dabble their toes, swim or admire their reflections on the surface. It was not, in fact, a simple pool. It was deeper than anyone had ever dived. Everyone believed it went clear past the bottom and all the way through the middle of the world! They knew for a fact, however, that it was connected to tributaries that led in all directions into the heart of the Rock. Following them led to where surprising things could be found – hot springs, cold springs, unexpected fountains, dizzying whirlpools that vanished out of sight down mysterious holes and waterfalls no one had ever seen from the top. But the main pool, where the Fraggles discussed Darl’s problem, was for all intents and purposes the main gathering place for Fraggles who were not otherwise busy.

“Well, of course you’re a Fraggles!” cried Gobo, giving Darl a reassuring pat on his back.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Red. “He never did quite convince me. I think he’s a *Gorg*.”

“A Gorg? Oh, now that’s silly,” said Wembley. “I don’t think you’re a Gorg. You’re just depressed.”

“Try to feel more *not-depressed*,” suggested Mokey.

Boober quickly protested. “Hey, I *like* being depressed!”

“And *you’re* so good at it, *too*,” added Red. “It gives you character.”

“When I feel depressed, I like to sing,” continued Mokey, who began to do just that.

“Not *now*, Mokey. Do you want to make him even more depressed?”

“Well, maybe this *isn't* the time ... ”

“I appreciate your trying to help,” interrupted Darl, “but you aren’t helping at all by reminding me that I’m depressed *as well* as untalented. I need practical advice.”

From the background, Kiki suddenly nudged her way into the discussion. “I know where you can find advice.”

—

Kiki led Darl through the Gorg’s Garden, taking pains to avoid being seen by anyone from the castle. Luck was with them, however, and there was no sign that anyone in the castle knew they were there.

“You are in the presence of the unfathomable, inimitable Trash Heap!” chorused the two whaddayacallems that attended Marjory the Trash Heap whenever anyone called on her.

There was nothing to see apart from the two rat-like creatures ... and a wilderness of dead leaves, twigs, wood chips, broken pottery, cracked dishes, empty jars, crumpled paper, soiled rags, worn-out socks, gloves with holes in them, potato peels, banana peels, carrot peels, yesterday’s cold oatmeal, broken garden tools, bed springs, miscellaneous trash and every *other* sort of unrecognizable and unwanted junk, debris and refuse that were strewn around the yard. But no Madam Trash Heap.

Then, before the two Fraggles knew it, the trash began to rise. Margery the Trash Heap was suddenly there, beaming down at her visitors from two impenetrable black eyes and that were as wise as they were inscrutable.

“Hello, liddle Fraggles. Say, have you eva’ notice how the moon seems to hide from the sun when it gets too close? The more close it gets, the more it shrinks to get away! I been thinkink about it, you know...” Majorie shook her bulk to dislodge a few uncomfortable tin cans, and continued. “Bud you don’t want to know *my* problems, do you?”

“Madam Trash Heap?” began Kiki. “We’ve met before, remember?”

“Ov course, I do! You needed my help to rescue your charming frand. I’m very heppy to finally meet you, Darl! You make a very handome Fraggle too, I must say!”

So far, Darl had been speechless, thunderstruck by the appearance of a living, talking trash heap – even though he had known what to expect from Kiki’s description. It was true that, without the advice the Trash Heap had given Kiki, Darl would certainly not have survived to tell anyone how he became a Fraggles. Nevertheless, there was simply no way to be prepared for such a fantastic sight.

“Thank you, Madam Trash Heap,” he finally managed to stutter. “The dream you sent did the trick ... once I was able to understand what it meant. But ... I wonder ... must the dream have been so ... *cryptic*?”

“Was is?” replied the Trash Heap, astonished. “Id is a bad habit I have, I know. Bud I have *confidence* in you, so I was sure you would work it out. Now, whad is *your* problem, liddle Fraggles? Is it yours, or *yours*...?” Her disheveled head nodded from Darl to Kiki.

“Mine, I suppose,” answered Darl.

Kiki quickly added, “We’re both in this together.”

“Very well, den. I like that ven friends share der worries. Now, what is it the problem you *both* have?”

Taking turns, the two Fraggles described how Darl had to greet the rising of the Great Moon in two days.

“But how can I do it,” cried Darl, in anguish, “when I couldn’t sing or dance without shriveling up into a ball and whimpering until the Moon goes down, and the Festival is ruined!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa... who said you can not sing or dance for der Moon?”

Darl’s reply was inarticulate.

“Alright. Not to worry, den. Someday you will find your voice, you may be sure of it, but until *den*...” There was a moment of silence.

“Did you just pause dramatically?” asked Kiki, a bit skeptically.

“Yes, very effective, didn’t you tink? Bud now, listen to me. Maybe now is not the time to find your voice, bud right now you need to find a way to greet der Great Fraggles Moon: isn’t that so? So greet the moon some *odder* way. Paint a picture, mime a story, cook a crayfish dinner for everyone with braised radishes and

double sweetberry pie! Dere *is* something that you know how to do, if only you *stop worrying about* id, and do id.”

And just like that, the Trash Heap broke into a sprightly little song:

“Wan you got troubles, here is whad you do,
Take a liddle sleep, an’ id’ll come to you!
Dream a liddle dream, id’ll tell you whad to do,
Wan you got troubles, dot is whad you do!”

“Wan you got troubles, hep is never far,
Tell a funny story, an’ it’ll make dem laugh.
Play a wordless tune, and it will bring a smile
And soon you find, you will smile along!

“You won’t have trouble long.
You won’t have trouble long.
(*Shake it, booby!*)
You won’t have trouble long.

“Wan you got troubles, here is whad you do,
Take a liddle sleep, an’ id’ll come to you!
Dream a liddle dream, id’ll tell you whad to do,
Wan you got troubles, dot is whad you do!

“If you can’t dance, then take a chance!
An’ see the new Moon dance for you!
Spin around an’ sparkle, you’ll find whad you came for.
Dance the night away beneath the old Moon’s beam.

“You see the trouble’s gone,
You see the trouble’s gone.
(*Wasn’t dat easy?*)
Now, see the trouble’s *gone!*

Marjory looked quite pleased with herself as she began to sink slowly back into the scattered trash at the foot of the Gorg’s Garden.

“Are you being cryptic again?” demanded Darl and Kiki together.

“Dat really does seem to be a bad habit I’ve got dere!” said Marjorie, and then she was gone.

“The Trash Heap Has Spoken!” chorused the rat creatures.

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“Now what?” said Darl.

Back in their hole, he really didn’t feel like doing anything but mope and kick his heel against a chair leg, followed by an “Ow!”

“Not so hard, then,” said Kiki. “You stopped wearing shoe-things ages ago, and you still don’t seem to be used to going barefoot.”

“At least I don’t trip on my tail anymore ... not often, anyway. I even got used to radishes being a staple of my diet ... though I would give anything if I could phone for a delivery pizza.”

“I remember some food you gave me when I got lost in Outer Space, and you found me. I liked the Twinkles, and the Cocacoco that made me burp.”

Darl remembered that lady-like burp that had made him laugh. “They were ‘Twinkies’ and ‘Coca-Cola.’”

He had also fed the adventurous but overwhelmed little Fraggles a dinner of fish and chips and apple pie, and later made popcorn while they listened to his Beatles and Nat King Cole records. How could he have realized that very soon he would – impossibly – become a Fraggles himself?

Unfortunately, looking back on pleasant memories would not help him with his problem. Only hard thinking would do that ... and it encouraged him that Madam Trash Heap had thought a solution could be found. That is, if Darl could only get his mental gears in motion.

But what could he *do*? Leaving aside the possibility of music in any form, just what could Darl do to perform for other Fraggles? What did he *do at all*, he wondered? He had held minimum-wage jobs most of his old life, the worst of which consisted of reciting simple yes-or-no questions from a fast-food menu. The last work he did, before leaving the world of Silly Creatures behind, had been to fill shelves at a large chain bookstore ... and he was darned if he knew how *that* skill could be used to greet the Moon!

In some way, Darl *knew* he was going about the problem wrong. It wasn’t what he did as *work* that he should focus on, but something that he could do as a *celebration of the moon!* But thinking about it only led him back to the same

impasse. What *did* he do that would please Fraggles? Arrange books in alphabetical order? Make a suggested reading list? Read from his favourite writers? Anything like that would be met with incomprehension by the Fraggles, who wouldn't be able to make heads or tails of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

“This is no use!” he groaned. “I don't know how to do *anything* that matters!”

“Come to dinner then, Love,” Kiki said soothingly. “I've set out your favourites. It'll take your mind off the Moon Festival for now, and maybe ideas will come easier with a full belly.”

But it didn't help.

He ate absent-mindedly, picking through the lime salad and hot, aromatic spice rolls Kiki set down for him. Although the dinner was a favourite of his, he scarcely noticed. It was his turn to clean the plates, but he almost left them on the table without washing up, and Kiki had to quickly remind him that grown-up Fraggles didn't *leave* dirty forks on the table ... now *did* they? It was only a few steps from the table to the sitting-room chair, and Darl was soon deep in worry again. He fretted away most of the rest of the evening until Kiki finally announced that whatever Darl did, *she* was going to go to bed.

Darl sat by himself while he let the glow-sticks in the fire slowly fade. He realized that he was tired, tired, tired – and that he was not really thinking of his problem at all. Instead, for the last little while he'd been preoccupied with thoughts of his lost home in Outer Space. How delightful every small detail of his shabby little apartment had seemed to Kiki on the first day he rescued her! To her, everything had been one marvel after another, one more fantastic discovery followed by an even bigger one, and one more surprise even after imagining that another surprise was impossible!

Darl was smiling at the memory in spite of himself.

He had shown the astonished little creature lights that came on as though by magic, moving pictures on a computer, music seemingly from the air, hot or cold water at command. He showed Kiki how to open a can of soup, and how to switch on a cartoon with the television remote. He showed her that Silly Creatures had closets and drawers full of different sorts of clothing. He pointed out, with a certain amount of pride, a row of plastic model kits that he had made himself ... none of which Kiki really understood. She commented on a jar of pennies that were all so perfectly alike, and wondered if his food *grew* in the refrigerator.

Unexpectedly, Kiki was *most* impressed when he filled the bathtub with a warm, fragrant bubble bath! What was merely ordinary to him was such pure delight to the Fraggle that he, too, was able to share it in a way he couldn't experience for himself.

“Wow! A pool that fills itself! And warm, with sparkly bubbles!” she chirped – and, completely unself-conscious, she shucked off her bedraggled shirt and plunged in, sending a splash of suds over the floor.

“Aren't you coming in, too?”

“Ah... no,” Darrell – as he had been, then – averted his gaze. “I had my bath earlier,” he lied. Even with her tufted tail, her odd face and her tiny body, the water that plastered her fur to her slim frame revealed that, while she was not exactly human, she was definitely feminine.

The water on the tiled floor had soaked her skimpy clothes, so Darrell hastily excused himself to go hunt up a long discarded t-shirt imprinted with the Toronto Maple Leafs emblem. By the time Kiki had rubbed her fur dry on a beach towel and emerged from the bathroom wearing the baggy shirt... which reached almost to her furry feet... Darrell had made up a sort of bed on the couch with blankets and an extra pillow. It was very late by then, and both of them were yawning. Darrell gestured discreetly at the makeshift cot, mumbled “Goodnight,” and turned off the lights. He left the door of his bedroom open, so Kiki wouldn't feel alone and afraid in a strange world ...

As it turned out, his discreet gesture was wasted; when he woke up next morning she was snuggled warmly against his back, innocent as a sleeping kitten.

His wandering thoughts were getting him nowhere. It was time for him to be in *this* bed. Kiki mumbled drowsily as he lay down beside her, then her quiet breathing resumed.

Just as he drifted off into sleep, a fleeting thought came to him that there was something he should remember tomorrow – something that might be more important than it seemed.

Unfortunately, he forgot it.

–

Morning came, and there only one day remaining before Darl had to present himself, at midnight, to the assembled Fraggles at the Ceremony of the Great

Fraggle Moon. Despite the rapidly approaching deadline, life went on as always. Kiki was already awake, and just leaving the hole.

“Willa wants me to pose for some pots,” she said. Willa, the stuttering Fraggles whose pottery was prized by everyone, had recently come to believe that Kiki’s striped shirt gave her inspiration. “Did you have an idea about the Moon Ceremony last night?”

Darl couldn’t answer right away. “No,” he finally said in a small voice. But Kiki was already off.

Sighing, Darl realized he might as well start his own day. Who would have thought he would ever become a schoolteacher?

School – such as it was – usually met close to the Story Teller’s home. When Darl arrived at the customary place, there were the usual dozen or two youngsters waiting for him. A few of them had brought well-polished radishes, under the theory that a proper schoolteacher should be offered a proper bribe. Darl wasn’t surprised to see the marks of nibbling on the radishes, either. Young Fraggles are known for healthy appetites.

“Let’s see,” Darl began. “Last time we talked about water, mainly. Why it ran down hill and not up, for example. And I demonstrated how a full cup always holds the same amount, whatever the shape of the cup. That was all easy, wasn’t it?” Only the youngest Fraggles had any trouble following such simple ideas.

The youngsters all nodded agreement, even little Arlo, and a couple of grown-up Fraggles who still found school interesting, even after most Fraggles thought they were too old for it. Those older students were the *bright* ones. Some of them were every bit as sharp as Doozers.

But even the sharpest students were unprepared for Darl’s demonstration of displacing water in a tub to measure the volume of heavy objects – rocks in this case. He ran through the lesson two dozen times, getting everyone thoroughly soaked, before the idea penetrated the minds of most of the youngsters present ... most, not all.

“Unca Darl,” chirped little Arlo, “That’s pretty neat. But why would anyone need to know how big a rock was, when you could just pick it up?”

“Well, yes, you could,” answered Darl, “but you might not know if you could carry a lot of rocks in a cart, say ... and you might want to know before the wheels broke.”

Arlo retorted that it was hard to imagine any Fraggles going to the trouble to load a cart *heavily* enough that it might break. He was a clever little wise guy.

“Since the Fraggles Moon is tomorrow,” said Darl, “Let’s talk about that. Who knows what the Moon has in common with water? You don’t know? There is a connection, though ... ask yourself *why the moon follows the water in the pond?*”

With a flash of inspiration, Darl remembered what he needed to know from yesterday, not only how the water follows the moon, but how the Moon moves around the Earth, and – most important of all – how to lead the celebration of the Great Fraggles Moon Festival.

Very little of Darl’s explanation about the Earth and the Moon made sense to the Fraggles fidgeting around the class, of course. Even Arlo seemed well past “skeptical” on a dial reading from one to ten. Oddly, it wasn’t the difficulty of imagining that the Moon moved – some of them had seen it in the Gorg sky. Nor was it hard to picture the Fraggles Moon moving in the Fraggles Pool. What they were unable to understand was how did the Moon get to the other side of the Earth? And how did the Moon get in the Fraggles Pool, if it was in also in the sky?

Clearly, Unca Darl had gone way over everyone’s head by trying to explain Silly Creature astronomy.

But that didn’t matter much to Darl right now. He could come up with a better explanation some other time. More importantly, he had only a few hours to prepare for tonight’s celebration. Tomorrow began at the stroke of midnight ... tomorrow and a new day!

He had much to prepare, but first he had to return to the Trash Heap!

–

Fraggles had begun to collect alongside the pool of the Great Hall as early as bedtime. They camped out, in a manner of speaking. Those who had bedclothes to stay up late in, those who only owned one piece of clothing for day and night, and those who wore nothing at all, mingled in excitement. There was music, laughter, dancing and a hundred delicious scents of late-night snacks. Gradually, though, the hilarity died away as sleepy Fraggles settled down at the poolside to wait and doze. The Fraggles Moon had not shown its face yet, nor had Darl arrived at the appointed hour to lead the Festival.

The World’s Oldest Fraggles consulted with his Assistant, and *his* assistanting

assistants, in growing concern. “Consarn it! Where is *Whatsisname*, that young whippersnapper?”

“I don’t know, Your Agedness?” answered Henchy, the cowering chief assistant, fearing a hard clout on his nose from the Aged One’s staff.

“Well, he’s *late!* The Fraggles Moon is only moments away from appearing at the edge of the Fraggles Pool!”

With that pronouncement, Fraggles began to rouse themselves, and to rhubarb among themselves over the tardiness of the absent Darl.

“Isn’t that Silly Creature here yet?” demanded an unseen Fraggles in the back of the crowd.

Another Fraggles – who had just awakened from nodding off – complained that Darl had probably fallen asleep, and even forgotten all about the Festival. Moreover, he wished that this was all over with, so that *he* could go to sleep!

“Maybe he went back to Outer Space,” said a worried voice that sounded like one of the Fire Department boys.

Over the growing discontent, Red spoke clearly. “Dry up, you guys! He’s a Fraggles, and nobody better forget it! Isn’t that right?” she called out to her other friends. “Darl would never let any of us down!”

“That’s *right!*” said a very indignant Wembley, who was in as combative a mood as he could manage. “Our friend won’t let us down even if we have to stay here *all night!* And *tomorrow*, too!”

Backing Wembley up, Gobo climbed onto the parapet around the pool, and spoke over the racket of unruly Fraggles crowded around.

“If our friend Darl says he’ll be here, then he’ll *be* here. What’s the hurry? The Moon hasn’t even appeared yet!”

“Oh ... yes, it *has*,” Mokey said.

A shimmering sliver of light had appeared at the end of the Pool. It momentarily darted from sight, and then – as though it gaining confidence – the Great Fraggles Moon serenely sailed onto the surface of the water. It was beautiful.

The collected Fraggles were hushed. But then their sense of awe was broken by the rasping voice of the Aged One, who was impatient for the Ceremony to begin.

“Where is that *slugabed!* Why isn’t that lazybones here already? Where’s my staff, I want my staff to give that Gobo something *he* won’t forget soon!” cried the Aged One, laying about in all directions with the staff that was plainly forgotten in his *other* hand.

“The Fraggles Moon is *here!*” shouted Darl and Kiki as they pressed through the crowd. “And I’m *not* Gobo. They call me *Darl*. *Not* the Silly Creature!”

—

Between then, Kiki and Darl carried a large cardboard box. It had once been a grocery carton of some sort, salvaged from the Gorg’s Garden and painted over and repurposed for Kiki’s kitchen, but now hurriedly put to use for the Moon Festival. While the other Fraggles cleared a space at the side of the Pool, Darl and Kiki carefully unpacked the contents of the box – and then, to the accompaniment of much oo-ing and ah-ing, laid everything out on the floor.

While the World’s Oldest Fraggles watched suspiciously from his platform, Darl climbed onto the box to hang what appeared to be a wooden clothes hanger from the rocky ceiling, as close as he could reach to the Moon’s Hole . From either end of the hanger, he suspended a pair of carefully balanced rockers made from Doozer sticks. Kiki joined in then. They added more rockers at the ends of other rockers, in lower and lower tiers, until the whole thing somewhat resembled a rickety bush, growing upside-down, whose branches and twigs rotated and twirled slowly around the whole. Kiki and Darl sparingly applied Gorg glue to a stack of silvered paper ... helpfully left for them by the Trash Heap ... and attached bits of it to the rockers.

With a quick spin, the new Moon danced into life!

—

The Festival was a stunning success, judging by the sensation created by the make-believe moon. The party went on long after the real Moon no longer illuminated Darl and Kiki’s sparkling mobile, until, at last, only a few Fraggles remained, poking through the left-overs in search for morsels that had somehow been overlooked. Among those who remained were Darl and Kiki, of course, whose night it had been ... though officially Darl’s alone.

“I could never have done it without Kiki. That’s not being modest,” explained Darl. “She went to ask the Doozers for newly made Doozer sticks that we could build with. And, by myself, I think I would have been too afraid of Madam Trash Heap to think of asking for *her* help.”

Gobo gave the twinkling silver mobile a gentle nudge to set it in slow movement again.

“Yeah, she’s gotten us through more scrapes than I think we can count, eh? I still don’t know how you thought of it, though. I wouldn’t have thought of asking Doozers for help, either.”

“Yeah, Kiki is weird that way,” said Red.

“But in a very *good* way, of course,” added Mokey.

Kiki, who had heard her name, looked up from stacking the discarded crockery from the feast for the owners to collect later. “The Doozers love to help! It gives them more to do. I don’t know why we Fraggles take them so much for granted, when they’re such fascinating creatures.”

“That’s because sometimes *you* seem so much like a Doozer!” Red laughed uproariously.

“Shhhh!!!” Everyone hushed her. Arlo was asleep in Boober’s arms ... who was more than half asleep himself.

“Ooooooh ... here,” Red whispered. “I’ll take the little tyke to his home ... and *then* Mokey and I are turning in *ourselves!*”

Kiki had finally finished stacking the empty crockery. As she and Darl strolled off to their hole, she took his hand in hers.

“Well, you are too modest sometimes,” she murmured. “You seem to know a lot about things no one else does, and you are pretty handy with your hands. You even seem to be able to teach Doozers a thing or two about building. Like all those odd things you say you made yourself when you were a Silly ... oh, sorry.”

Darl thought back to those days when, indeed, he *was* a Silly Creature. He had spent many happy hours constructing plastic model airplane kits when he was younger, and hanging them from the ceiling in simulated aerial chases.

“Well, *some* ‘Silly Thing’ skills may just come in handy here in the Rock, sometimes,” he said, pleased with himself. “Just like your interest in the Doozers.”

The green Fraggles shook her black bangs, and yawned. “I guess so,” she smiled at Darl.

They had almost reached the entrance to their hole.

“But that reminds me,” said Kiki, apologetically. “I only just remembered. Do you know what is coming up, just as soon as it can be announced at the Fraggles Horn?”

“Does it have anything to do with filling our hats with radish pudding? Is it Be Good to a Doozer Day? Do we have to wear funny masks, paint our tails with stripes and paste on sparkles?”

“Nope, nope, and nope. And remember, we *did* that last thing you mentioned, when we joined the Secret Society of Poohbahs,” said Kiki, “... but I do like how you think.”

Darl felt a strong premonition that he was out of one jam, only to discover himself in another.

He took his next step cautiously. “Well, all right then, Love. *What* is it?”

“I just remembered that Story Teller said you were never properly initiated into the Great Hall Clan. All Fraggles who leave one clan to join a different one have to go through a ceremony. It doesn’t happen often, so Story Teller only just remembered that until you have been initiated, you are officially still a Stranger. Story Teller can tell you everything you must do for the ceremony, but I recall that – for one thing – you have to grant a wish to all your friends – whatever they ask for – and then...”

But Darl was already hurrying ahead of Kiki as fast as he could, pretending that he didn’t hear a word...



The Ben Folds Five in their video of “Do It Anyway” with the Fraggles

The Hole Story:

the Stories of Kiki and Darl

The questions in this “interview” are real questions that have been posed to me by Walt from time to time. However, we have traded information back and forth for the purpose of guiding the “interview” along desired lines. It is therefore not entirely spontaneous, nor should it be any surprise that the reader will learn exactly what I intend him to learn, and not a thing more.

I first “met” Walt years ago, when he was the associate editor for a magazine based in Oregon. He was also something of a fan, and followed certain small press comics. He was looking for an illustrator for freelance stories that came into his office. I began drawing for the magazine in 1987, producing black-and-white illustrations with a deliberately old-timey look to suit the tastes of the readers. The money wasn’t big-time, but it grew to a respectable rate over time. I enjoyed the work, and Walt even accepted several short stories I wrote. Our relationship as artist to editor lasted 11 years ... and then there was a shake-up at the magazine. The new chief editor didn’t like pen-and-ink drawings, preferring the Art of the Instamatic.

By then Walt and I had become more than editor and artist, but genuine friends – although we have never actually met. We continued corresponding even after he retired from the magazine. And then it was that we discovered that as a *writer*, I needed an editor even more than I had as an artist. At the same time, Walt discovered that *he* needed the aggravation of a writer who can't remember whether it is "farther" or "further." We had forged a *new* working relationship. Walt has been proofreading my writings for years now.

So, when it came to an interview about my current writing obsessions, who could be a better choice for an interviewer than an old friend who is as familiar with my writing as he is with my art?

—

Walt: Taral, I’ve collected your early art and writings for years now, and for a long time you drew pretty girls, science-fiction, cute anthropomorphic critters and suchlike. Some years ago you also did an interesting take on Rocky the Flying Squirrel, even writing a backstory for her (she turned out to be a female), and starting to draw an homage to Carl Barks’ Donald Duck comics. But your latest projects all seem to spin off from the old *Fraggle Rock* kids’ TV show. Why is that?

Taral: You *would* have to be pretty unobservant, not to notice my most recent obsessions. Furrries are old hat. Everyone is doing them, and far too many doing them well. Ponies? I never even thought of it ... not seriously, at least. That sub-fandom exploded onto the scene so quickly that every last niche had been colonized long before I took notice. So I

have arrived where I was destined to stake out new territory, where no-one had gone before ... or, actually where they had left long ago and pretty much forgotten.

Walt: Then you settled on *Fraggle Rock* just because nobody else had staked a claim to it?

Taral: Not at all. But that was okay. Back in the '80s, fandoms for kid shows weren't created as phenomenal hits overnight, like the Ponies. Most shows never made it to spin-offs or tie-ins at all. *Fraggle Rock* had enduring appeal and was almost never entirely off the air, but it had almost no marketing. There was no fandom as such. It was terra incognito for me!

Walt: Well, Jim Henson's Muppets and their production staff always did produce stuff with "enduring appeal." So, did you fixate on it early on?

Taral: I was slow to fall in love with *Fraggle Rock*. It went out of production after a few seasons, and I more or less forgot about it until it turned up again on my TV, when I rediscovered not only why I had liked it at first, but also *new* reasons to like it that I *hadn't* realized before. My liking grew after I was able to watch the episodes at will, having collected the entire four seasons on DVD. From that point, my course was fixed. Being able to watch Gobo, Red, Mokey, Wembley and Boober again and again and again, I could almost tell you what color of socks Gobo wore. (None, actually.)

So, I had for some time wanted to begin writing my own *Fraggle* stories. I hesitated. I procrastinated. I frankly wobbled. But I finally made the breakthrough I had looked forward to, and in 2014 I wrote the first of my stories, "All Fraggles, Then and Now."

Walt: Reading your stories, the personal note seems very strong. One can't help feeling that you identify with "Darl," or Darrell as he was called when he was still an ordinary human or "Silly Creature." Is Darl/Darrell a reflection of yourself?

Taral: I suppose one of the first things to establish is that I am *not* Darl, and Darl is not *me*. I'm not denying that we are similar in quite a few respects, and that I have lived in Darl's shoes, vicariously. All the same, there are quite a few points of variance between us. Darl is relatively young, in the neighborhood of 30, with a background of undistinguished employment. There is little reason to go into his family history. Perhaps the most obvious difference is that Darl is not an artist, nor anyone who regards himself as a "creative" person, nor an "intellectual." All the same, he has a sound and active mind. Although Darl has a few friends, he is close to no one. He is more alone than he knows, and has no important outlet for self-expression. Darl has had no contact with fandom other than that which anyone of his age would have.

Walt: Well, the setting for the stories also seems very real. Of course I know that you like

to draw maps of fictional locales, but the map you drew of Darrell's neighborhood, and the drawing of his walk-up flat, both seem to be very plausible.

Taral: Parkdale, where I live in the west end of Toronto, near the Lakeshore, is in most respects a good stand-in for Darrell's "Sunnydale." It has the same mix of once-genteel old residences and humble working men's row houses, squeezed into numerous blind alleys where unexpected manufacturing plants grumble by day. There are 1930s walk-ups, as well as high-rises built in a rush in the 1960s. "Sunnydale" is bounded by two major commercial boulevards on the north and on the south, by the rusting tracks of the GO Train on the east, and by the gradual change into a posher neighborhood called Howard Park. While the first Fraggie Hole that we know about was discovered by Uncle Traveling Matt, the one found by Kiki might have been fairly nearby.

Walt: Fraggie Holes. Seems that only one was mentioned in the TV series, yet Kiki comes through another and entirely different one to meet Darrell (later Darl).

Taral: Although there seem to have been Fraggie Holes in many places, Traveling Matt appears to have been the first Fraggie to have discovered an opening. He emerged into what he believed to be "Outer Space" through an old work shed belonging to a retired amateur inventor named "Doc," and began his explorations in the world of "Silly Creatures."

In the course of the series, we learn that Fraggie Holes may lead to even *stranger* worlds than the one of "Silly Creatures." The question for the moment, however, is where in "Outer Space" did Traveling Matt begin his discoveries? The show only gives vague clues. We learn that Doc lives not far from the seashore. However, we see little more beyond his shed than a small porch with a rocking chair, and a space under the floorboards. The only other clue to the location of the Fraggie Hole is at the end of the series, when it is revealed that Doc has had to move somewhere out west for the drier climate.

By themselves, the clues are useless. However, when Matt emerges into Outer Space for the first time, his first postcards to his nephew back in Fraggie Rock are all sent from locations around Toronto, in Canada. Every last one! Moreover, *Fraggle Rock* was produced in the CBC studios in downtown *Toronto!* If we must specify a real location for Matt's Fraggie Hole, the most logical choice is T.O.!

However, for the purposes of the narrative, the clues point, rather, to somewhere in Atlantic Canada. But where, precisely? You could pick any number of possibilities, in any of four provinces, but my instinct was toward Nova Scotia, and the largest city in the province, Halifax. Yet Doc seems to live in a somewhat more rustic setting than a large city, so my thoughts then went to a small town not far away. Lunenburg, perhaps, but it was a rather rocky, hilly place, so an even better choice, in my opinion, was Mahone Bay – a small town on the highway, as well as on the sea. Its charming frame buildings provide a perfect setting only a forty-five minute drive from Halifax.

As for Doc's "change of address" in the final episode of *Fraggle Rock*, the "desert" he moves to points to Alberta, and in all likelihood Edmonton or Calgary – but we are only ever allowed to see a walk-up, second-floor kitchen with nothing moved in yet.

Walt: Okay. Now... the fact that the TV series was populated by a lot of goggle-eyed, rather expressionless hand puppets, no matter how skillfully operated, would seem to pose a problem with making them into believable, living creatures. Your drawings seem to have solved that problem by making them quasi-human, with graceful bodies, more human eyes and expressive faces.

Taral: Inevitably, there were problems with adapting puppets to my drawings, and even more so with adapting them to real-life creatures ... who obviously could not have ping-pong balls for eyes, and three-fingered hands. I was unable to draw a credible Fraggles until I had made many preliminary sketches first, but I also had to determine just what Fraggles were made of! The simple answer is "foam and synthetic fibers." But what are Fraggles *meant* to be, taking them at face value? They come in many colours. But while their skin is one colour, their shaggy hair is a different one. There is good reason to suspect that this isn't so, however. The artificial material that passes for a puppet's skin is more likely, in a "real" Fraggles, to be a part of the body that is only *less* shaggy, with short fur in a contrasting hue. The evidence is not apparent unless one has access to the Henson Studio's old development sketches, where small tufts of fur appear on ankles, knees and elbows. There does not appear to be any bare skin at all, which is rather more appealing, in my opinion, than wearing what seems like an old bear skin rug.

Walt: You seem to go on at great length about Darl's inability to sing, this being the main difference between him and the "natural-born" Fraggles. Is this another reflection of yourself?

Taral: If anyone were to ask if I have a secret desire to break out in song, if I had the ability, I'd have to disappoint the reader with the confession that I do *not*. Anyone who suddenly and effortlessly acquired *any* ability would naturally be tempted to use it – including playing chess or being able to fly – but short of that, I have no ability to sing, nor any inclination to learn to play an instrument. In all probability, whatever innate musical instinct I had was erased in me before my tenth birthday, nor have I lamented its loss. In the case of Darl, however, it would make more sense to regard the matter in a *much broader* context, in which any sort of self-expression from Darl emerges against the odds. Seeking to find his voice, Darl makes the difficult act of self-discovery that will eventually liberate him as a full Fraggles.

Walt: Now, while the creators of *Fraggle Rock* could just have fun with introducing a Fraggles into our own world of "Silly Creatures," introducing a solitary human into *Fraggle Rock* would seem considerably more difficult. How could you plausibly fit Darl into such an odd and alien culture?

Taral: In writing about Darl and Kiki, I have carefully mixed both new story lines and already familiar stories from *Fraggle Rock*. For example, I have written one story in which events that occur to Gobo and Cantus are seen from the point of view of Kiki and Darl instead. In another example, Mokey tells Darl how *she* was taught by Cantus to “listen” to the music before she could become a Minstrel. As one more example, in which events are mentioned merely in passing, Kiki reminds Darl how they joined the secret society of Poobahs. However, every story of mine is completely new at its core. New characters were invented, new situations explored and intriguing ideas expanded upon.

Walt: What “intriguing ideas” did you expand upon? Things that were suggested in the TV series, or ideas that occurred to you while watching it?

Taral: One of the interesting challenges about writing for the original *Fraggle Rock* must have been that the stories could neither be entirely divorced from reality, as in a cartoon, nor could they be too closely rooted in reality. The balance is a delicate one. Among other things, I admire how even illness and death were sometimes shown in the original television show. All the same, I wanted to explore the world of *Fraggle Rock* a little more deeply, by introducing details about the Fraggles’ daily lives and how they cope with problems. Despite the theme song, it was obvious that the Fraggles cannot “play in *Fraggle Rock*” *all the time!* It was simply not possible for them to feed themselves without *some* effort, and it is also obvious that other jobs would be essential to maintain life in the Rock, even without repeating that Boober is always doing laundry, or that it is Mokey’s job to steal radishes from the Gorgs’ garden! But what about quotidian details such as where an antique cannon came from in one episode? How do they bake cookies, where does soap come from, who devised clocks with 12-hour dials and why do Fraggles know what shoes and socks are for? There is obviously far more about life in the Rock than we can learn of from the TV series.

Walt: So you are now at – how many? – five stories and counting? Did you have any idea what you were letting yourself in for when you started this project?

Taral: How much of this did I anticipate at the beginning? Probably more than readers will expect. I wrote the first story for Halloween in 2014, and knew even then that I wanted to write more. In a rather short period of time, just a few months, I had thought out a number of story ideas that could be organized around certain central events. The order in which they were written was:

“All Fraggles Then and Now”

“Rock and Yule”

“The First Song”

“Where the Magic Is”

“Let the Moon Dance”

The first three were entirely according to plan, as would have been the next two, “Heroes and Villains” and “Magic Will Find You.” But then I found inspiration for two more

stories that seemed to follow. The next story will probably be the most complex one in the cycle, and I expect it to be quite long, demonstrating how violence might inadvertently be introduced to the Fraggles. The next story I've planned will, in fact, be the *first* in the series – the one that brings Kiki and Darl together and tells how Darl leaves the world of Silly Creatures to find a better one.

Walt: Well, reading the stories as they came out, I must admit I was impatient to see how Kiki and Darrell first got together, and how you might manage to convert Darrell the “Silly Creature” into Darl the Fraggles! Eventually, out of sheer frustration, I noodled out my own story, and imposed it on you...

Taral: Well, that was one unexpected bonus of my project. Your story fits loosely into the canon, though you had a somewhat different take on how Darl and Kiki meet. For the time being, I'd like it to be kept *sub rosa*, so that it does not influence how others will first read my own “origin” story.

Walt: Is there any end to the series in sight?

Taral: Unanticipated ideas continue to boil up from below. “Doc’s Back Door” for example, should be a short and somber piece, before it is resolved on a happier note. “A Voice in the Stillness” has many unresolved points in my mind, but I know that Kiki will suffer a serious illness and Cantus will be unpersuasive, while Darl denies his own voice. I have little to go on for “Dances With Gorgs,” however. *That* one may not come together at all. It is also not at all certain that I have arranged all the stories in their proper order yet. But am I actually finished? I honestly don't know. I almost hope not ... and wish I had begun writing these stories twenty years earlier! Then again, who will ever read them?

Walt: At least *one* reader, for certain.

Taral: Paraphrasing the World’s Oldest Fraggles, “I’m happy to be writing for *anyone*.”



The Ben Folds Five in their video of “Do It Anyway” with the Fraggles

Mailing Comments:

Matt McAndrews – It seems to me that a comic strip (or comic book) is worth as much work as you put into it. Some are simple outlines of talking heads (or talking animals) that milk a gag for a week or more before having another idea. Others are more elaborate, and have plot lines that move briskly. My problem with comics was that I was always tempted to do too much. My first attempt to sell a comic strip to a newspaper (which was rejected) was a science fiction idea with good ideas but corny jokes, and I was told that I used ideas far too fast – I should dwell on a single idea for the entire week before introducing a new idea. I never really learned that lesson, only being half a cartoonist, and half a still life artist. [] I know about Neko girls in a general way, but not so that I could clearly say what they are. Pin-ups, girly girls or something. In any case, I haven't been going to cons since about 2000 or 2001. Competition for space squeezed me out, along with airfares and diminishing earnings from cons. Then by 2005 or so, I was experiencing growing problems with my health. Unfortunately, keeping up a presence in convention-oriented fandom takes money and decent health, which is why I am not around these days. I was able to attend three Worldcons in the last few years, but that was primarily not to sell or show art, although I was the Fan Artist Guest of Honour in 2009.

Robert Alley – I read a couple of days ago that an AI painted a canvas that sold for tens of thousands of dollars ... more than most live artists ever make from their work. The audience that bid on the work knew perfectly well how the canvas was made – largely by digesting millions of images stored in memory, and using sophisticated algorithms to contextualize the images – but they bid anyway. What does this mean? A cynical attempt to cash-in on a trend that may pay off, whether anyone gives a fig or not? Or is it the ultimate verdict on art, that human beings are frankly no longer needed, that algorithms do it better anyway? Myself, I see no point to art that isn't created by human beings – it isn't *art*, and I wouldn't pay much more for it than I would any other sort of wallpaper. Art created by computers has its place in special-effects-laden movies and that sort of thing, but it isn't art. [] As it happens, I will finish my MC's later, but this afternoon I will be attending a coin show. Perhaps collecting contemporary coins will eventually become obsolete, but collecting old, even ancient coins will live on for a long time. It's simple. They are physical objects with intrinsic worth, due to their scarcity and historic interest. Stamps may continue to flourish as well, even though most will eventually no longer be minted or printed. Contemporary stamps and coins may not fare so well, I speculate. The mints have gone overtime to flood the collectors' market with far too many "collectables" that were *never* really scarce.

Edd Vick — There was some pretty heavy shit in the last issue, and there's a bit more in this issue, unfortunately. [] I don't know how you managed it, but the additional seasons of *The Muppet Show* would be very welcome. Eight Gig downloads aren't a lot to store on my hard drive, but it could be a *massive* download at my modest server-speed. It might almost make more sense to send a cheap USB drive – 16 Gigs would likely be fairly cheap.

Kjartan — That's one subject I won't be making any humorous comments on! Every stroke is different, but I got through it as best as I could by sleeping A LOT, but the rest of the time keeping as busy as possible. Undertake the most complex chores you can for now, and keep at it. I remember clearly the day I began to be able to dial a telephone, and it was a **Red Letter Day!**

Jeff Wood — I've no way to time Traveling Matt, but I can easily scoot past people on foot. At a guess, I'd say I can clock between three and five m.p.h. [] Doing Fraggles in 3D animation would be fun, if you could think of the best way to do them. I spent some time thinking about how to depict them as though they were real creatures, not puppets nor drawings such as in the comic books (see interview above). If Fraggles were shown with ping-pong eyeballs and flannel bodies, the result would probably be unintentionally *too* comic. [] I think my favourite parts of *The Muppet Show* were the off-stage turmoil as Kermit tried to produce the show against all odds.

David Bliss — A con that is so centered on fursuiting has nothing for me. That seems to me what furry cons have almost all become. The people I knew have stopped going, and even if the cost and my mobility were not an issue, I would have no reason to be there anymore.

William Earl Haskell — I've had some nibbles at taking my unwanted comics off my hands. My best is a comics dealer on the East Coast who expressed interest. The biggest difficulty I face is carrying boxes of comics back and forth from where I work to where they are kept, and then to sort them out into comics to keep and those I do not wish to keep. Separating them back on their shelves will also be a problem. What I need is something like a library cart that I can push back and forth, and not rely on brute force for carrying – in my enfeebled state it may be more than I can manage. [] Ed Zolna is still around? Good to know.

I remind you that there will be only one more issue of *Rat Sass* for *Rowrbrazzle*. After that, it's anyone's guess...

WHERE DO ALL THE CALCULATORS GO III

Fred Patten is dead. I suppose I should say something about it, and more than the basic fact that he died on the same day as Stan Lee, the 12th of November. It seems as though Fred will be good company going wherever people in his situation go, when their time comes.

But I can't find the words that I think should be said.

Despite the influence that Fred Patten had on Furry Fandom, I rarely interacted with him. We ought to have had much in common, but we didn't seem to agree with each other on much. I did not share his liking for anime beyond Miyazaki and a couple of other films. In fact, the more I got to know the subject, the less I liked it. Although I was in the thick of furry fandom at the time, I was consumed with the creation of comics and art, while Fred seemed more into the costumes and amateur story writing.

Somehow, the twain never met.

I recall one Confurence in which I sought Fred out in order to talk with him about his articles about furry fandom, and in which I discovered that we had rather different ideas on what had mattered in the short history of our fandom, so far. As far as I can recall, Fred's idea was that almost everything of importance in the fandom had happened around Fred ... and I was of the opinion that everything of importance had happened around me and *my* friends, naturally. It was quite a rift, actually. So far as I could tell, I had left almost no trace on the development of furry fandom at all, while from my point of view, Fred did little but write the same article about Osamu Tezuka over and over, for different magazines and fanzines.

So Fred wrote his articles and I wrote mine, which suited us both fine.

The fact is, though, that Fred seemed to have reached a lot of people with his version of things. He spoke to them about getting more and more people involved in the hobby, of ways that people could express their interest in role-playing, animation and animals. My focus was much narrower, concentrating on art and those who created it. In the long run, I don't think there was a right or wrong way to approach the subject of furry fandom, but clearly Fred's approach has left a wide mark.

The comics published by furry fandom have not disappeared altogether. In fact, if you search for them online instead of printed on paper, you will find more furry comics than ever before. But the old way seems to have been completely overshadowed. A few publishers still print comics on paper, but hardly anyone notices, at least not compared to the hundreds – maybe even thousands – who attend furry cons to seek friends, engage in

audience participation events, listen to guest speakers, wear costumes, join in *filk* singing, and in general have a good time.

In that sense, I guess Fred was right, and I was wrong. The narrow interest in creating art is not what brought huge numbers of people to furry fandom, nor what brings them to this day. It's hard to dispute success like that.

All the same, I regret that Fred and I never had a better understanding than we did. We occasionally passed each other like two buses in a busy intersection, each little noticing that one was on the Elm Street line, and the other on Maple. When I noticed that Fred was engaged in editing desk-top books of furry fiction, I never seriously considered contributing to one. My attitude toward amateur fiction is well known, and need not be reiterated here. It also seems likely that Fred was content with whatever was submitted to him, and didn't need to seek for more. So that was one more opportunity that slipped by, which might have bridged the distance between us.

However, Fred did, at last, ask if I would review one of the books he had edited. I was not enthusiastic, since I was dubious about reading an entire collection of fan-written fiction ... and *doubly* so about a collection of fan-written *furry* fiction, which might well be *doubly* painful.

Actually, it wasn't that bad. Some of the stories were fairly good, and the only criticism I was able to make was that the stories had been written with one end in mind – that they be furry, whether there was good reason, or not.

And should I talk, when I have been writing mainly Fraggles Rock stories for the last two or three years?

There I come to an unsatisfying end in my farewell to Fred Patten. We probably should have had more in common, but missed opportunities are a reality of life.

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Before anyone thinks to ask a second time, what *is* the nonsense about “calculators?”

In the British science fiction TV program, Red Dwarf, there is an episode in which the artificial humanoid – otherwise known as a mechanoid named Kryten – refers to a place where all the artificial intelligences go when their usefulness is over and their warranties have expired. This is Silicon Heaven. But Kryten saves the ship and crew by neutralizing a dangerous mechanoid by revealing that there is no Silicon Heaven. The other mechanoid is so confused that he shuts down completely. Ah... but it seems that Kryten *does* believe in Silicon Heaven. But Kryten also knew that he was *lying* to the other mechanoid!

I wish I knew I was lying. But I am not a mechanoid, alas.

ENDIT