



Rat Sass I

I find it really hard to turn down requests, so when Edd asked if I'd rejoin *Rowrbrazzle* I suppressed a groan and said I'd consider it. Usually, that means "no." But then, like a pro, Edd mailed me a spec copy of the 129th mailing to lay an obligation on me. What finally made up my mind, though, was that I couldn't resist this title – *Rat Sass*. Don't expect too much, though. I have a million things to do, and I'm not motivated by the best of reasons. Yes, this is **Taral Wayne**, everybody's favourite grouchy critic and dedicated skeptic. I can be reached at Taral@bell.net or 245 Dunn Ave., Toronto, Ontario, M6K 1S6, phone number (416) 531 8974. I'm starting this on June 8, but only finished on **12 June 2016**. This is Kiddelidivee Books & Art 309, proving that some people never learn from their mistakes.

I browsed through the mailing of *Rowrbrazzle* that Edd supplied, and was not terribly impressed. It had been a long time since I had seen a mailing. Probably the last one I had seen was in the 70s... or maybe earlier. The last one in which I was a member was 31.

Of course, I've kept in occasional touch through Edd. He'd send me *Pawz*, and I'd send him some fluff to pad it out ... but the remainder of *Rowrbrazzle* was a dark continent of speculation. Now that I've seen it, I notice that the roll call seems much as I remember it. There's Edd, of course, whose contrib was the highlight of the mailing, as they have probably been the highlights of most mailings. There are a couple of other members who it will be nice to catch up with. But the rest ... ah, well, best not to be judgmental. I'll see how this goes first ... and *then* get all judgmental!

The right question to ask right now might be, "what have I up doing" since *Rowrbrazzle* 31?

Well, tons. It has practically been a lifetime since 1991 ... specifically, my mothers. After she died, I left Willowdale, in north Toronto, to move into my own apartment near the lakeshore, in a part of Toronto called Parkdale. There are quite a number of "dales" in this city for some reason. The change in my lifestyle was abrupt and dramatic, but in retrospect I seem to have navigated through the hard times pretty well.

I was making my living by freelancing art, and I continued to build up my clientele at furry cons through the rest of the decade. There were the two (or three, depending on how you count them) issues of *Beatrix* that I did with Steve Gallacci, and a number of lesser appearances in other furry comics. But at the end of the decade, everything I had built seemed to unravel. It became impossible to make suitable arrangements for further issues of *Bea*. Cons began to arbitrarily shut their doors on dealers. Sales were falling in any case, but the number of artists selling their work grew exponentially, and prices fell like a rock. Then came 9/11, and paranoia tightened up the border like a sphincter full of ice cubes, further limiting my access to cons.

As if life wasn't tough enough, I began having inexplicable health issues. Back and leg pains to begin with, then a drooping right eyelid that made seeing difficult. Eventually, I was diagnosed with Myasthenia gravis, a condition that isn't usually life-threatening, but weakens the muscles to varying degrees. I didn't have it too bad, but it was worsening year by year. By 2009, I was unable to walk any great distance – say a hundred yards at most, and that only with extreme difficulty. No longer able to make a living from cons or commissions, I ended up on welfare. To make matters worse, my GP at the time was a useless dick, who only wanted my to come in once a month so that he could check my blood pressure and then bill the government for an exam. He was unwilling to do anything else. When I confronted him with my urgent need to see a neurologist, or apply for a disability pension, he flatly refused to fill out the necessary paperwork.

I got another doctor, who immediately began to fix things. I've been on a rocky but generally uphill trajectory ever since.

With one or two detours, anyway. A little over a year ago, I started to have trouble sleeping. My doctor made the alarming discovery that one lung had filled with fluid, and fluid had built up around my heart as well, driving me to the brink of congestive heart failure! Over the last few months I've been drained of fluids, my Myasthenia medications increased and I've begun taking a new prescription for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease – a catch-all for congested bronchial tubes. I've been breathing, getting around, and sleeping much better since the start of the year.

Despite that frightening list of health issues, I'm actually in pretty sound shape. My blood pressure isn't bad, my heart itself is quite sound, I don't have diabetes and I still have a full head of hair!

Another big step forward was my acquisition, through the Ontario Disability Support Program of an electrically powered mobile chair that I call "Traveling Matt." With Matt I can drive all the way downtown, and back, at a pace faster than most people can walk. It's almost *better* than walking! The only drawbacks are that Matt is useless in snow and very cold temperatures, and I can't get into some stores or restaurants. It also makes travel outside Toronto a nearly intractable problem.

The last few years haven't *all* been about health, fortunately. There have been "ups" to go along with the "downs." In 2009, I was one of the Guests of Honour at the 2009 Worldcon, in Montreal. It's one of the two highest honours a science fiction fan can aspire to ... the other being a Hugo award. I've never *won* one of *those*, alas, although I have been on the short-list for a fanartist Hugo ... eleven times. It probably won't happen again, given how fandom is changing, but it was swell while it lasted.

On the other hand, my cat and longtime companion, Sailor, died two years ago, slowly and heart-wrenchingly. I keep meaning to find another, but worries about the practical details of looking after a cat have made me reluctant.

During the last four years I've been publishing a personalzine titled *Broken Toys*. The final issue, number 50, will be coming up in August. The decision to end it with 50 stems from a desire for a change of pace. I hope to spend more time writing fiction. So far I've written maybe 50 stories over the decades – only one was ever meant for professional publication. It appeared in an anthology of dark fantasy stories from *Oldstylepress* a few months ago. Technically it's a "sale" but I wasn't paid anything, so I'm ambivalent about calling it "professional." I've also been writing stories set in the fantasy world of the 1980s Jim Henson show, *Fraggle Rock*. I think the two I published in *Broken Toys* are quite good, but they are a little bit more adult than the television show, and I've added new characters to the original cast. I have mental outlines for at least three more *Fraggle Rock* stories before I move on to other subjects. I may or may not run them in *Rat Sass*.

The following article was written for Broken Toys 49, but at the last minute I decided that I had already bitched about furry fandom too often to run another piece on the same subject, so I submitted it to another fanzine, published in Vancouver. I knew, too, that it could be recycled for Rat Sass.

Mediocritters

A little while ago, I had finished a long night of revising a piece I had written. It was time to shut down the computer, get a bite to eat and go to bed. Yet I was still rather wound up, and couldn't bring myself to just shut down without unwinding for a little while first. As I sometimes do, I went to the *Cracked* Website to read a few humorous pieces until they stopped seeming humorous. To my surprise, featured on the front page that day was "We Draw Furry Porn: 6 Things We've Learned On The Job."

"What the hell?" I thought.

Has furry porn really grown to be important enough to be noticed and ridiculed on *Cracked*? I had thought not, but apparently this is now the case. The article was posted on the same day I saw it, March 26.

If you must read it for yourself, here it is: <http://www.cracked.com/personal-experiences-2060-were-professional-furry-porn-artists-6-on-the-job-lessons.html>

I was unfamiliar with the six artists who were interviewed for this piece, and who draw furry porn for the money. I felt a brief burst of proprietary jealousy, but that faded quickly. The day when a handful of insiders "owned" furry fandom or had the sole "right" to talk about it is long, long past. Today there are hundreds of similar artists who are grinding out furry porn to meet the growing demand, and who know just as much about the ins and outs of catering to the strange tastes of their customers as anyone can. It's not rocket science, after all.

In fact, I found nothing in the article at which to take umbrage. The artists accurately described the business of drawing a blowjob or a forked penis *just the way the customer wants it*, and talked about it in a good-humored way. I will only complain that while it was "good-humored," the article didn't actually seem very *funny*. But let's face it, being a comedian takes entirely different skills than drawing an hermaphrodite with eagle wings, unicorn horn and porpoise tail.

But it really drove home how alien furry fandom has become to me. Do the artists who were featured in this *Cracked* piece even *like* furry art, I wondered, or do they draw portraits of horses, Celtic spirals and colicky babies on alternate weekends ... that is, whatever helps stretch the household budget? Are they furry fans themselves, or merely hard-working freelancers? Does it matter? I suspect that way too many artists working furry fandom these days will take *anyone's* money, so why even speculate?

I remember when everyone understood the "Erma Felna-crowbar" joke. One day a fan approached Steve Gallacci and wanted him to draw Steve's signature character from Albedo Comics for him ... but she had to be "doing it" with a crowbar. The idea of approaching *any* artist with such a peculiar request, and expecting him to prostitute his brainchild in that way, was so goofy that you could only laugh.

Today, I suspect nobody would see the joke.

But that was furry fandom back when the creators were enthroned in their own little worlds, and were celebrated for their outstanding achievements. Now, artists seem to be just a pair of hands to aid in realizing increasingly absurd, chimerical characters for fans who seem to have no imagination of their own, but can only mix and match various animal or fantasy bits to create a persona that is adequate to gain

them entry to game spaces and role-playing circles. In its own way, this is a very democratic evolution. Why should a few snobbish artists *like me* expect to be the stars around which *all of you* negligible little dust motes revolve? Yet, undeniably, the change toward mass self-expression has also created a great deal of mediocrity in furry art. It's the mediocrity that I have misgivings about. Why should anyone be expected to look at it, or waste his or her attention on it? It benefits the game players, but not the spectators who expect professional-level play.

It is not as though many artists working in furry fandom are not excellent craftsman. My fear is that they have devolved from creators to mere *realizers* of other people's fantasies. If they are not drawing to order, they are drawing generic pin-ups and stroke art. However well done, it doesn't really serve any creative purpose. The fandom today is all about *fursonas*.

I also get the same sense of alienation when I hear of furry conventions. At one time, there was only one. Then three or four. Then close to a dozen. Even so, they were recognizably the same sort of conventions that SF cons are. They attracted people with a wide variety of interests, and featured programs, dealers' rooms with all sorts of things for sale, art shows, game rooms, costume events and parties at night. You saw a few costumed fans role-playing during the day, but, frankly, they were regarded as peculiar, maybe even a small nuisance. I hated it when some guy in a blue doggy suit or triple D-cup Bambi costume came up and mimed something unintelligible ... or, worse, wanted a hug. What the hell was a normal person supposed to do, under the circumstances? This *wasn't* accepted behavior in furry fandom in the 1980s, any more than it would have been in the street.

Now it is. In fact, you have furies parading in the streets, seeking hugs from the straights, and the photos of furry cons that I've seen have no one in them but fans in furry costumes, preening around and demanding to be accepted as "Flashbright Twinkletoes" or "Silvermane Nightmage." The under-thirty generation seems to have no problem with creating fictional persona they use on-line, and never questioning the other fictional personas that they encounter on-line ... but I grew up thinking this sort of thing silly and childish. I like to talk with real people – not some idealized or fantasized image they want to project at me.

"Look at me, love me for who I'd like to be, not who I am."

Is this a fandom, or just a very large group hug?

Oh, it's not to say that I don't have broadly similar fantasies. But my interior fantasyscape is one I am careful about exposing to the world. I have no intention of pulling on some baggy drawers and sticking a blue wig on my head and doing a half-assed job of being one of my fictional creations. I won't do it. You know why? Because it *can't* be done well! Once again, I have no love of mediocrity. The day I can walk down a street and people turn to look and say to themselves, "My god, that's a real Kjola or an actual Teh Langgi or a genuine Fraggie" is the first day I would even *consider* doing it. In fact, you might have trouble getting me *out* of a costume like that. I'd even take my baths in it.

But it ain't going to happen, on *so* many levels!

What I do, instead of putting on a foam head and velour pajamas, is work out my fantasies on paper. I sometimes use pencil or a pen. Sometimes I resort to a word processor. I create drawings, comics or stories that capture my innermost dreams and longings exactly as I want them. No droopy-assed costume could give me remotely that much satisfaction.

And I am judged by how good I am at it ... not simply because everyone deserves a hug.

And that brings us back to what furry fandom once was.

And to regret what it has become. Role-playing and costuming have leveled the fandom to mediocritters.

SUBJECT:
DARL FRAGGLE

THE PROPER NAME IS "XSIPRIT", BUT SINCE THEIR LANGUAGE IS UNDERSTOOD BY EVERYBODY, NO ONE HEARS XSIPRIT, THEY HEAR WHATEVER "FRAGGLE" IS IN THEIR LANGUAGE!

BOTH MALE AND FEMALE BODIES ARE RATHER ANDROGENOUS. GIRLS HAVE A SLIGHTLY THINNER WAIST, AND A FLUFFIER BUST, BUT BREASTS ARE ALMOST FLAT, WITHOUT VISIBLE NIPPLES.

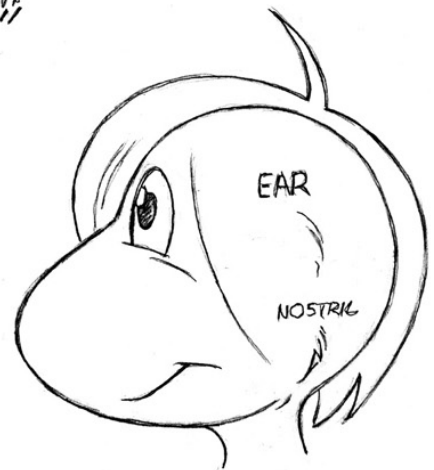
FUR ALL OVER, BUT IT'S LONGER & MORE LUXURIANT ON THE BODY, SHORT ON THE LIMBS.

FRAGGLE
ANATOMY

WITH DARL

THE
BILUVIOUS
(FUNCTION
UNKNOWN)

AVERAGE
HEIGHT
~30"



THEY DO HAVE EAR HOLES UNDER THEIR HAIR. MORE UNUSUAL, THEY BREATHE THROUGH SLIT-LIKE NOSTRILS UNDER THE CREASE OF THE JAW.

SHORTER FUR ON ARMS & LEGS.

BOTH GENDERS HAVE SEXUAL ORGANS, BUT VERY DISCREET. BOYS HAVE A BIT OF A BULGE WITH THE "WORKING BITS" INSIDE IT EMERGES ONLY WHEN NEEDED. GIRLS HAVE ONLY A SEAM IN THE FUR.

TW/10

[I've made no attempt to stick to the original designs of the puppets from the Henson TV show. I've seen artists do that, but the result always looked like puppets to me. Instead, I tried to draw living creatures.]

ODD FACTS: FRAGGLES ARE VERY LONG LIVED, TYPICALLY ABOUT 200 YEARS, BUT SINCE THEY ARE NOT VERY CALENDER-MINDED, THEY CAN'T ANSWER THE QUESTION PRECISELY.

MORE FRAGGLE ANATOMY WITH KIKI

EYES ARE USUALLY BLACK, BUT GREEN OR BLUE ARE KNOWN

FRAGGLES DO HAVE A FULL SET OF TEETH.

BODY FUR IS NORMALLY TWO-TONED. LIGHTER ARMS AND LEGS, BODIES DARKER. THEIR TAIL TUFT AND THE HAIR ON THEIR HEAD IS USUALLY A CONTRASTING COLOUR.

THE FEMALE GENITAL OPENING IS WELL CONCEALED BY FUR, AND NORMALLY NOTHING IS VISIBLE BUT A SLIGHT RUFFLE.

ODD FACTS: A FRAGGLE CAN BE FROZEN AND THAWED LIKE A BAG OF PEAS. THEY CAN ALSO SWIM UNDER WATER FOR LONG PERIODS - UP TO 15 OR 20 MINUTES.

FRAGGLES HAVE 5 FINGERS AND TOES, WITHOUT NAILS, BUT PALMS AND SOLES ALSO COVERED BY FUR.

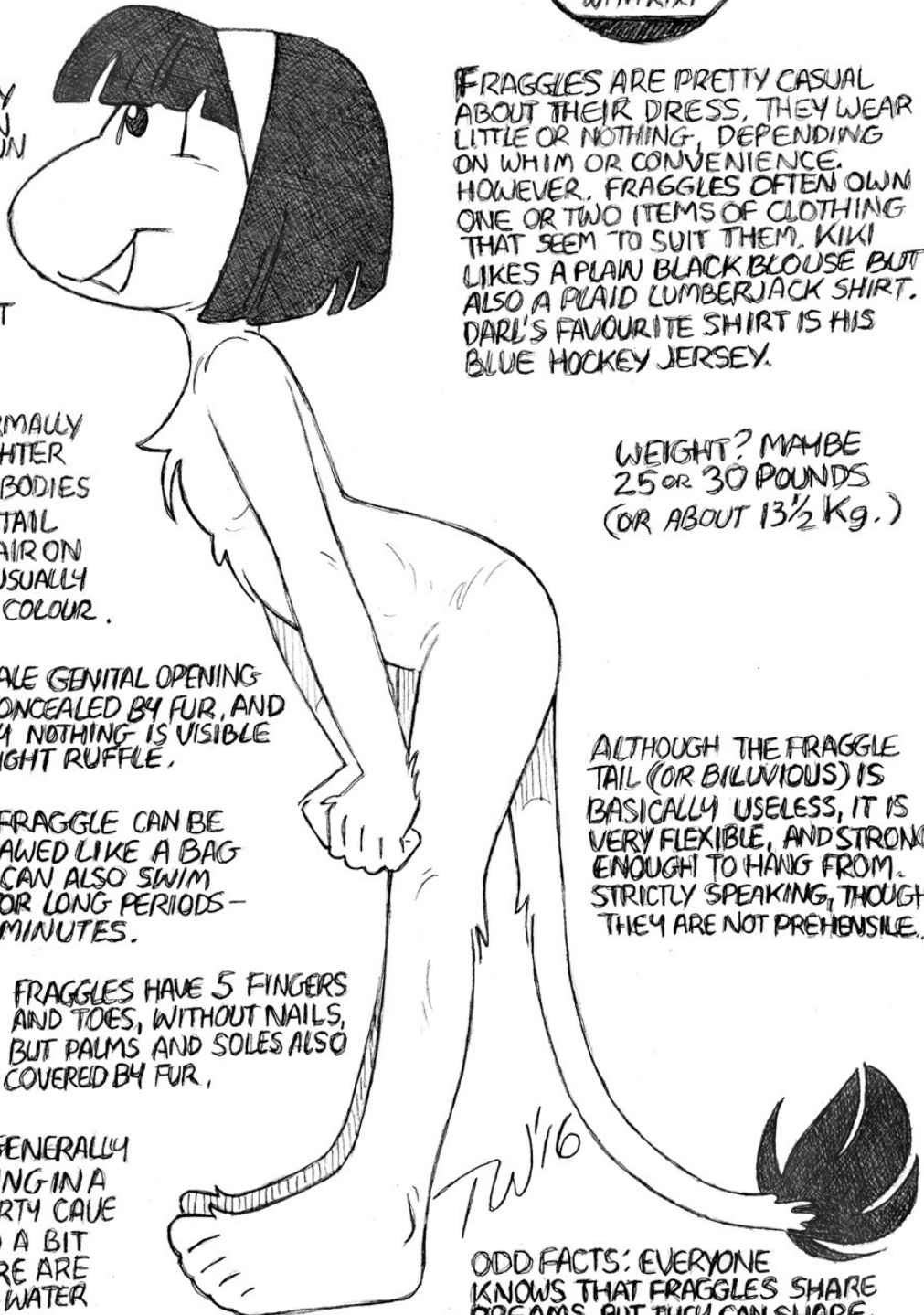
FRAGGLES ARE GENERALLY CLEANLY, BUT LIVING IN A RATHER DUSTY, DIRTY CAVE THEY DON'T MIND A BIT OF GRIME - THERE ARE PLENTY OF FRESH-WATER POOLS AND MINERAL SPAS TO WASH UP IN.

FRAGGLES ARE PRETTY CASUAL ABOUT THEIR DRESS, THEY WEAR LITTLE OR NOTHING, DEPENDING ON WHIM OR CONVENIENCE. HOWEVER, FRAGGLES OFTEN OWN ONE OR TWO ITEMS OF CLOTHING THAT SEEM TO SUIT THEM. KIKI LIKES A PLAIN BLACK BLOUSE BUT ALSO A PLAID LUMBERJACK SHIRT. DARL'S FAVOURITE SHIRT IS HIS BLUE HOCKEY JERSEY.

WEIGHT? MAYBE 25 OR 30 POUNDS (OR ABOUT 13½ Kg.)

ALTHOUGH THE FRAGGLE TAIL (OR BILUVIOUS) IS BASICALLY USELESS, IT IS VERY FLEXIBLE, AND STRONG ENOUGH TO HANG FROM. STRICTLY SPEAKING, THOUGH, THEY ARE NOT PREHENSILE.

ODD FACTS: EVERYONE KNOWS THAT FRAGGLES SHARE DREAMS, BUT THEY CAN SHARE, THEM WITH SILLY CREATURES.



[It isn't clear from the TV show whether the arms and legs of Fraggles are skin or fur. Certainly they are less shaggy than Fraggles bodies ... but Jim Henson's own sketchbook suggests they are completely furry.]