

# Rite of Passage

I had intended to renew my driver's license *before* my 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, when it inconveniently expired.

One thing led to another, though, and I put it off, again and again, for more than a week! It didn't really matter if my license was already, in fact, as dead as a Brony's chances of leading a meaningful and productive life. I had reached a decision that I had long dreaded – I wasn't going to renew.

I have never owned a car. Most of my driving had been on long trips to conventions in the States, when I'd take my turn at the wheel. Often, because I was a night person, I'd do the hours from midnight to dawn. On some of the last trips to American East coast, I drove the entire way from Toronto – an 11- or 12-hour feat of endurance over national borders, across rivers, over mountains and through urban agglomerations, my passenger snoozing over the map he was supposed to be watching for me. I sometimes drove cars belonging to my friends, when they were tired of being behind the wheel, or if I needed a vehicle for some good purpose.

But in fact, I don't know if I've driven a car in the last 15 years. No sensible person would loan me their car at this point, and I don't see a rental car in my future. The sad fact is that I don't know if I even *can* drive a car anymore. While my driving skills are probably not too rusty to reacquire in short order, the fact is I don't travel well now. My medical condition is such that I tire in mere minutes when any exertion is involved. Using a steering wheel and floor pedals *might* not tire me at all – but then again, I don't know that. I might have to relinquish the wheel only minutes after turning the key.

## RAT SASS 4

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(Cont.) Still, a valid drivers' license is valuable ID. Had the price remained at \$50 or \$55, as it had been two or three renewals ago, I would probably have just filled out the form, held still for the photo and handed over the money. But the fee had risen steadily with each five-yearly visit, and currently stood at \$95! That's quite a lot of money ... even if it is spread over five years. Given how little use a driver's license is to me, I decided it was time to bite the bullet and let it go. Instead, I'd apply for a government photo ID.



## [Rite of Passage, Cont.]

The government photo ID has all the authority of a driver's license ... in Canada, at least. It may not impress US customs, but then, thanks to George W. Bush's policy to protect America from zealous Canadians who want to blow up Washington, we need a passport to travel to the US these days. I'm not sure if I need a passport to visit the European Union, but to cross over the World's Longest "Unprotected" Border, I do! Since my passport is expired anyhow, I figured that I was no worse off with a mere photo ID than with a driver's license. And the ID only cost 35 bucks!

Still, this is the first time since I was in my mid-twenties that I've been unable to legally drive. Getting your first license is a rite-of-passage, similar to your first shave or first paycheck. Being *without* a license is like deliberately stepping down from adulthood. Imagine throwing away your razors because you no longer needed to shave.

But I'm all set if I'm ever carded in bar, or for a dirty movie!

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## PATIENT OBSERVATION

About a year ago, shortness of breath and a hammering heartbeat whenever I made any effort drove me to my general practitioner, who found I had a lung full of fluids, and water around the heart as well. I was in the early stages of congestive heart failure. A lot of blood tests, echograms and diuretics later, she managed to dry me out and establish that no permanent damage had been done. Nonetheless, it was prudent to keep an eye on my condition. I have been doing follow-up echograms, regular blood tests and frequent visits to a variety of doctors ever since.

Along the way, it was discovered that I have sleep apnea due to some degree of COPD, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, which is a fine how-do-you-do for someone who has never smoked, nor spend much time in close quarters with other contributory factors. So now I sleep with a CPAP machine, which I loathe, purring away next to my bed. Sometimes it helps me get to sleep, but the effort and discomfort doesn't seem to result in a particularly *good* sleep.

Be that as it may, things seemed to remain fairly stable over the following year. But then about six weeks ago, I began to notice shortness of breath again ... and, just as the CPAP was beginning to be of some help, I experienced serious insomnia again. Also, I noticed one leg swelling up, edema being a sign of both CHF and COPD. Fortunately, I was due for a routine appointment with my GP, and her examination quickly spotted the return of fluids in my chest. I was given a choice of going to the emergency ward at St. Joe's for tests, or having them done by the neighborhood clinic while staying at home. I opted for staying at home. "It causes less panic on Facebook when I don't mention 'emergency ward' or 'hospital,'" I explained. The doctor agreed, but directed me to begin a new round of diuretics immediately, and to undergo new blood tests in two or three day's time. I've also had my chest newly x-rayed again, and another appointment made with my cardiologist.

Now that it's beginning to get cold, I don't like all this travel out of doors. But necessity is a back-seat driver that I can't ignore.

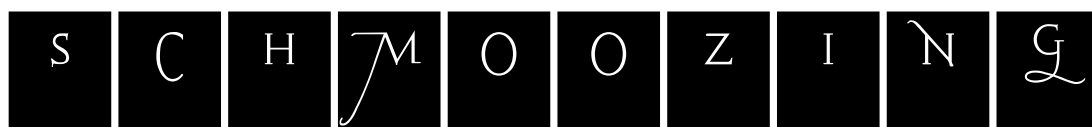
So that's where everything stands at the moment. Stable at present, but with a degree of uncertainty about the future. Will this mean diuretics will become a regular fixture among my already rather lengthy list of prescription meds? Likely, it will. I don't like diuretics much, since they send me to the toilet more often.

And my bladder seems less obedient as well, giving me the feeling that I'm up to my belt in a swamp. Still, it's a small price to pay for the ability to get out of bed without passing out from lack of oxygen.

My last couple of months have not been very productive. I've not shared much art or written as much as normal in that time. I frequently nod off at the keyboard. Even basic chores, such as laundry and cleaning up around the apartment, have suffered. Part of the explanation lies in the number of appointments and other business that has taken me outdoors, effectively using up half the day. But I wonder if low energy hasn't also been part of the problem. My blood oxygen levels have been hovering around 88% for weeks, and it ought to be closer to 96%, if I understand correctly.

But I haven't been totally unproductive, either. I've been getting some drawing done, usually something spontaneous rather than something I *had* to get done. Why no-one has seen it yet is because I haven't felt the urge to spend days scanning into digital format and tweaking the files.

I *will* scan the new art, including finished pages of *Callahan's Island* ... but I won't risk my credibility by predicting when. You'll just have to be patient with the patient.



**Charles Garafalo** – your letter was a pleasant, old-fashioned surprise. Paper and everything... I'm afraid I haven't returned the compliment in the same style ... instead of resisting the urge to print out my reply at the local copy shop, affix postage and mail it from a post office. But winter is here, and it's both impractical and unpleasant to go out in Traveling Matt except when needs must. So I emailed you instead. Your letter included a welcome back to *Rowrbrazzle*. Indeed, it's been a while. I wish I could promise I was here to stay, but my presence here is in the nature of an experiment. I mention it only because the one thing that would most likely hold me in 'Brazzle is a lively interaction with the members. You also sent along a couple of very short stories. I relented enough to read one (so far) and thought *Critic's Choice* held a good deal of promise. I thought that, as the author, you missed opportunities to embellish the story, however, to paint a more colourful account of your troupe of mischievous Christmas carolers and their come-uppence. I'll say no more than that, sparing you a, no doubt, unnecessary critique of your writing. I must presume you have been writing long enough to know what it is you want to do.

Drat... I was afraid this would happen sooner or later, but it's happened much sooner than I expected. I've gone through the entire mailing but it has not occurred to me to make a single comment. I appreciate those who had a few words to spare *Rat Sass*, but my mind is just a blank. Except one remark by **William Earl Haskell**, who said now that I've rejoined I can't leave Brazzle again. Maybe I "can't leave the magic," but this *ain't* Fraggles Rock. Let's not investigate that Fraggles hole any farther because there might not be anything in it.

Instead, I'm going to add an account derived from a FaceBook post about my most recent enforced "vacation" at St. Joe's Hospital.

# News at Nine

Forgive me for not communicating earlier.

As many of you surmised, I was carted off to the hospital again, on what is beginning to seem like an annual pilgrimage.

It was very sudden. I had been growing drowsy on Saturday night, around 11:30, and leaned back in my chair to nod off. When I woke up, more time seemed to have gone by than expected. Also, the computer was acting odd. I logged off in frustration and rebooted, but to my surprise discovered that the password prompt was perfectly meaningless. Nothing would come to mind. I could remember the word, but typing it into the space for it was beyond my grasp! I tried a pen and paper, but while the handwriting might have been a tad awkward, I was able to write normally enough, just as long as it didn't involve a keyboard!

At that point, I began to pack and called the social worker's office downstairs for assistance. Within the hour I was in the emergency clinic at St. Joe's, where I was subjected to numerous tests. I was then parked in the hall, where I spent the rest of the night ... and half the next day. My next stop was the emergency ward itself, to vegetate for another 12 hours or so, with some demented old geezer in the next bed, with only a cloth curtain and four feet of space between his head and mine, who wept, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" half the time. Fortunately, the ear plugs given me were fairly effective. Then, before I could actually go mad, a bed was found for me in the hospital proper. However, I had arrived after dinner, so it worked out that I had nothing to eat for about 36 hours except a turkey sandwich that someone found for me.

The room was shared by two older men, both of whom turned to to be noisy, particularly the zombie. He sometimes called out in the middle of the night, "Come here, come here," because he suddenly took it into his fancy that he shouldn't be in bed, and should be able to saunter out into the street if he so desired. I still had the earplugs, fortunately. Regardless of minor disadvantages such as that, the room was a big improvement over Emergency.

In fact, the biggest problems I had were probably with the telemetry. At least it was wireless, but the sticky electrodes just would not stick. They would fall off if I moved two inches to the right or left, over and over again, but they HAD to be kept in place or the doctors would not have their miles and miles of recorded ECG traces. After about a week, a few hearty survivors finally remained that stuck to me, thick or thin, but by then it was irrelevant. The doctors had decided I could go home.

About time, too. I had brought a small library of books to read, but was down to the final whodunnit.

The food was less than inspiring, as you'd expect, but I cannot fathom why the dietitians kept giving us tea. We got served the world's worst coffee in the morning, but only tea thereafter, despite being told I could ask for coffee. I could understand tea for one of the day's meals – some people \*do\* like it. But why for lunch AND dinner? TEA is the minority taste, not coffee, which is unquestionably the first choice of the vast majority. Then there were the constant servings of dirt cheap vegetables – diced squash, carrot coins, peas, mixed veggies, green beans, etc. I know the diet fascists basically want us to all become vegans, but seeing two varieties of boiled greens and tubers on my plate every day was almost too much to bear. And when did squash become a staple of the Middle American diet? I thought only Indians, southern rednecks and Italian

families ate weird stuff like that! Not that they were terribly offensive – they tasted like watery carrot, actually – but I couldn't take much pleasure in this fare. I actually liked breakfast more – crisp cereals, roll and butter, coffee, cheese stick, fruit and juice. I could do with that every day. But just about half my beef stew for dinner, one time, was a chunk of fatty tissue that no amount of chewing would reduce it to submission.

Of course, none of the above mattered. The real issue was whether or not I had had a stroke, and answers were not forthcoming.

X-rays and MRI had shown the presence of damage done by minute blot clots in my brain. The problem was that my previous ECG readings showed normal rhythms, so the cardiologists couldn't find the source of the clots. They had already eliminated arterial thrombosis from the possibilities, and had decided the clots originated in my heart before roosting somewhere unwanted in the brain. They decided around Wednesday to insert a cable down my throat and into the stomach, to ultrasound the heart from the inside, as it were. But I had to wait for an opening in the OR schedule. So I parked my butt for three additional days, waiting. Finally, however, they found the arrhythmia they were looking for. As expected, a valve was fluttering every so slightly, now and then, and the disturbed blood flow damaged some blood cells that would then roam the body and occasionally lodge in the brain. They already had me on blood thinners – a quick stab to the stomach each time – and thought that it would be enough to keep me out of trouble in future. My prescription thinners wouldn't even need to be injected, just swallowed.

So, it seems I'm out of the woods.

I returned home by cab on Saturday, at St. Joe's expense. When I left home, eight days before, I had been forced to leave my apartment keys with the social workers from the support group downstairs. I hadn't wanted to, but they needed to lock up behind me. I had left them a spare set, previously, but naturally when the need arose, they didn't bring them along! Fortunately, my friend Steven had brought me the spare set of keys I put in *his* hands, so I was able to get into my place. (I also have Steven to thank for a loaner cell phone, and a delivery of much-needed, overlooked items.)

Unfortunately, when I returned to my building, it was only the spare set of keys they offered me back, not the originals. Somewhat hotly, I pointed out that those didn't include my mail box key, the key to Traveling Matt's lock, a pair of folding scissors and other items that I wanted back. Without the key to my mailbox, I couldn't retrieve my mail. No mail, no checks, no pay the rent! I phoned the next shift, who promised to find the original keys, but they haven't returned them yet.

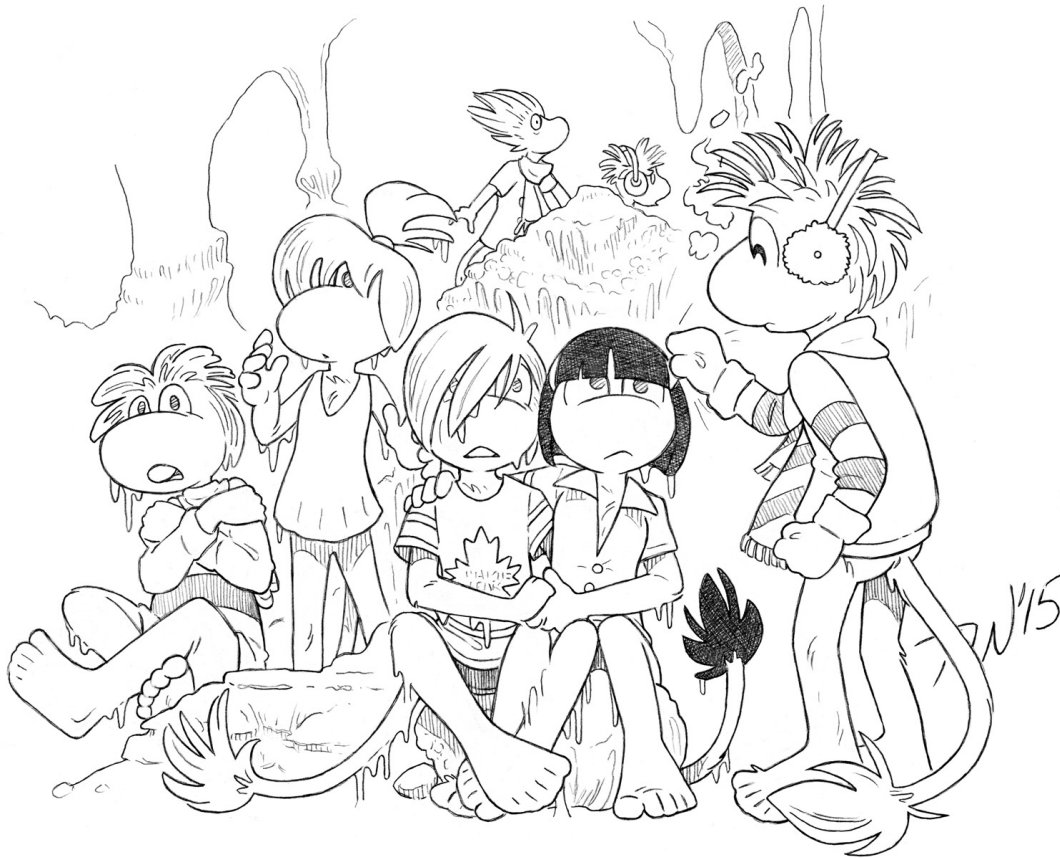
Evidently, I'm going to have to cut yet another set just to give to the social workers at the door, regardless of those already in their "safekeeping."

But I'm home and beginning to sort out the mess the emergency left behind. The remaining slices of sandwich meat are in the garbage, the Brussels sprouts still look good, and even the left-over coffee in my pot was still infinitely better than St. Joe's ... even eight days cold. I've discovered my typing skills are restored ... except in one small, irritating detail. I keep fumbling the right shift key when trying to capitalize some letters, forcing me to stop and fix the typo about a third of the time I start a new sentence. I assume that with further practice, I'll get the hang of it again.

But at least I'm home, and can have some real food before bed tonight.

*NB: This story takes place about 15 months after Darl went to live with Kiki in Fragggle Rock. The flashback, however, took place the year before, which was only two months after Darl became one of the Fraggles of the Great Hall Clan. The previous story, "All Fraggles, Then and Now," took place only two months before. The next story? We'll just have to wait and see...*

*Much of the material in the flashback is a retelling of an actual episode, called "The Bells of Fragggle Rock." On the whole, I've kept the same order of events, and retained some verbatim dialog. But I've also left material out for the sake of brevity. Also, my point of view is entirely different. Rather than telling the story as Gobo saw it, I've told how Darl and Kiki took part in the Festival of the Bells.*



# ROCK AND YULE

## A Christmas Story

It was the second Christmas that Darl had spent with Kiki. Of course, the night before Christmas had been as quiet as a mouse, since no one in Fragggle Rock had the least idea what Christmas was about, and Darl had spent most of the evening patiently explaining to his love about Santa Claus, presents, trees, pudding and Charles Dickens. At last, she seemed to have understood about as much as anyone could be expected to learn in a single night.

“Soooo... a sort of Gorg called Sanna Claws, who wears a red suit and carries a sack of presents, leaves them in everyone’s hole all over the Rock. He has a castle full of Doozers who work all year round to make presents just for Christmas ... *but* there’s a mean creature called a Grinch, who sends three ghosts to steal all the presents back after Santa delivers them on a flying beast that has horns and a flaming nose. Next day, we find out who got presents and who just got a bag of coal, and then we feast on roasted bird under a tree growing in our Hole. Works for me ... *now* let’s go to sleep, okay?”

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In point of fact, Fraggles celebrated the winter solstice after their own fashion – as Darl had discovered the year before.

Darl and Kiki had only been together since the fall, when everyone in the Rock began to feel a bit of a nip in the air. Life in the Rock slowed down, imperceptibly at first, but then more quickly. Fraggles stayed close to the Great Hall for longer periods of time, and spent more hours in their own Holes, close to a fire. Sweaters, caps, earmuffs and scarves were taken out of drawers, shaken out and put on over summer and fall clothes.

It would soon be time for the Festival of the Bells, explained Kiki.

“That’s the time of year when life in the Rock is at its slowest, and almost comes to a stop. But it doesn’t, of course, because we ring our bells and warm the Heart of the Rock with our celebration!”

“What if the bells *weren’t* rung?” Darl felt compelled to ask. “Would the Rock come to an actual stop?”

“I suppose so. It never has happened, so I don’t really know.”

Of course, they were about to find out, since that was also the year that Gobo said the legend of the Great Bell at the Heart of the Rock wasn’t *real*. Ringing the bells, the dance of the Weeba Beast, the carols led by Cantus afterward were all just a party game, Gobo insisted ... and, *sure*, it was fun, but what was it *for*? Where was this Great Bell at the Heart of the Rock? No one had ever seen it! This began in intense debate, as most things do when they challenge a cherished tradition, and then one thing led to another until Gobo brought out one of most ancient, much-creased and very bedraggled maps that had once belonged to his Great Uncle Gobo.

“See? The center of the Rock is about *here!*” Gobo stabbed a finger into the middle of the map. “Yet I’ve looked and I’ve looked, and there’s nothing written here about a Great Bell! Look for yourself ... what do *you* see?”

The writing was hard to read, and there were lots and lots of twisty tunnels and tiny rooms, but right at the center, Wembley said, was “a cave kind of shaped like a bell.”

Gobo, of course, couldn’t believe he had never seen it before, but now that he had, nothing would suit the dedicated explorer but to go and discover the Great Bell for himself ... to *prove* that it existed.



At the Great Hall, Cantus naturally saw no point to seeing something that he already knew existed, because he *felt* it in his heart.

“Well, I’m going to bring back the Great Bell of Fraggles Rock,” Gobo told everyone. “To *show* you all that it really exists, so this holiday will *mean* something. And I want *all* of you to promise not to start the festival until I’m back!”

As Gobo left, Cantus followed the determined Fraggles with his gaze. “*The Heart of the Rock may be farther away than you think ... then again, it may be closer than you know,*” he intoned.

Kiki and Darl had arrived late at the Great Hall. While their friends argued over Gobo’s quest, they hung in the background, listening.

“Does Gobo know what he’s doing?” Darl finally asked, quietly. He hadn’t known the others as long as he had known Kiki, and there were often important things about them that he didn’t know.

“Of course he does,” said Wembley ... “usually. Almost always. *Sometimes.*”

“He’s just being stubborn!” insisted Red. “Sure, he’s sometimes right, but he’s *always* stubborn. I don’t know why Gobo can’t be more reasonable ... *like me, for instance,*” she added brightly.

“What if Gobo doesn’t come back in time?” asked Darl.

“We’d have to ring the bells without him,” said Wembley.

“Either that ... or freeze!” added Boober.

As the evening wore on, Darl thought it grew distinctly colder. Yet the bells were still, the bells were silent. There were large bells that swung from beams, small bells with handles, tiny bells on bracelets, and even tinier bells that some Fraggles wore on their jackets and caps. But, as the Fraggles of the Great Hall had promised, not one pealed or rang or tinkled a note as long as Gobo was absent.

“How long do you think he’s going to be?” Kiki asked.

Mokey looked up from where she was huddled under a blanket with Red, and said, “I’m sure he won’t be much longer. He *can’t* be!”

“Want to bet?” said Boober, and then sneezed.

Mokey had an absent look in her eyes when she added, “Gee, I wonder what it’s like to be frozen forever?”

Clutching herself against the cold, Kiki returned to a shallow alcove where she and Darl had been waiting. They shared a blanket, but it had half fallen to the floor when Kiki got up. Darl was looking a little more blue than usual, and rather glassy-eyed. Kiki pressed tightly against his side,



wrapped an arm around his body and drew the blanket up around their heads. All that could be seen of them were their two faces, one blue, one green, and their breath hanging in the air almost like frost on a windowpane. And it got colder.

Neither paid any mind when, after a long while, Cantas glided off into the tunnels on his own, leaving a Hall full of Fraggles shivering in their blankets and Weeba Beast costumes.

Still no Gobo. A *great deal* of time had passed in which nothing seemed to happen, and no one appeared to notice.

Stillness. Silence. Cold.

The stillness was suddenly broken by a hand on Darl's shoulder, shaking him into wakefulness.

"Are you alright? It was a pretty close thing near the end, wasn't it?" A tall, thin, rather bemused looking Cantus in his shabby, mismatched robes was offering him a bowl of hot soup. He had another for Kiki, who hadn't spoken yet. Actually, she hadn't *moved* yet. An icicle hung from under her chin, and several in a row from her tail.

"She's *fr-r-r-rozen!*" Darl cried.

"And you're still more than half frozen yourself, friend," said the tall Fraggles, rapping a flute-like instrument against Darl's knee. It made a sound like a stick against a lump of ice. "But she'll be all right in a minute ... as soon as she's had a little more time to thaw. She'll be right as rain once she's had a few spoonfuls of hot soup, and so will you! Eat up."

Cantus peered at Darl with an avuncular expression of curiosity. "I haven't seen you here in the Great Hall before," he said.

"I w-w-wasn't here b-before," answered Darl, shivering energetically from the cold.

"That would account for it," agreed the Minstrel. "I'm not usually somewhere myself, so it doesn't surprise me when someone else isn't someplace either. Still, we all have to be somewhere, some of the time."

"Uh... I im-m-magine so."

"You interest me ... but I don't know why, yet. We'll meet again ... when the time is ripe."

It was the first time Darl had spoken with Cantus, but before Darl could ask who or what he was, the Minstrel was already on his way, wandering dreamily among the other frozen and half-frozen Fraggles. But Darl quickly dismissed the Minstrel from his mind, because he had more urgent matters to attend to. For one thing, his and Kiki's legs were locked in a tangle, and her arm was clasped around his waist like a padlock. He was anxious to feed his love some hot soup at the first sign she could open her mouth ... and then get them disentangled from each other.

"So Fraggles can freeze," he thought. "*And* thaw! I feel like a defrosting pot roast!"

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In the end, all Gobo had found in the center of his map was an empty room. It might have been shaped like a bell, but there was no bell in it, nothing to bring back to the other Fraggles to prove anything at all. He and Cantus trudged back to the Great Hall empty-handed, only to find every one of Gobo's friends and neighbors frozen as solid as stalactites! Gobo blamed only himself, for delaying the festival, and finally began listening to the real meaning behind what Cantus had tried to tell him. *Fraggles* were the Heart of the Rock... the *Festival* was "the Great Bell" that kept the Heart of the Rock moving...

Darl had vowed that as far as he and Kiki were concerned, *this* year's Festival of the Bells would be celebrated a little differently, and so he had begun instructing Kiki about Christmas starting at least two weeks early. Some of the concepts had been difficult for his lover to grasp, but not the idea of gift-giving. Fraggles gave gifts all the time, for any reason or for none at all, and would likely have given everything away and lived in bare holes, if everyone hadn't given them presents in return.

When you're giving love away,  
Love will come again to stay.  
What you give is what you gain,  
When you pass it on.

When I give a gift to you,  
I know you're gonna give it too.  
That's why givin's what we do,  
As we pass it on.

Pass it on, Pass it on.  
Pass it on, Pass it on.

So, it should not have come as a surprise that Kiki had scoured the Rock from top to bottom looking for something *special* to give her Holomate for Christmas. Of course, what she found had not come without a price.

Nor was it surprising that Darl was anxious to make Kiki's first Christmas something special. As all special things do, that also came at a price.

When Festival morning came, they stoked the fire a little, rushed through breakfast and preliminary cups of hot bitter-berry, and then Darl formally began Kiki's first Christmas: "This is for you, Hon."

Kiki cradled the package in her hands, savoring the moment. Although she had been given many things in her life, never before had it been anything like this. It was squarish, and appeared to be made of paper. At least it was paper on the outside. And *what* paper! It was hand-painted in dazzling colours, with green triangles and what looked like fat little Doozers in red jump suits. There were mystic symbols also, that looked like white, six-spoked wheels.

"You did this *all* yourself? It's lovely. I'll put it on a shelf right next to the Rollies I got from Red, and my favorite hair brush."

"No, no. That's not the present, Hon! That's just the wrapping. You tear it off in a fit of impatience, and throw the torn-up paper every which way until you find out what's inside! That's part of the game of Opening Presents."

"Oh."

Kiki picked at one corner of the present, then carefully peeled back a flap of the painted wrappings. The next flap came a little easier, and soon she was able to unfold one entire side of the package. As she methodically worked on a third corner, Kiki noticed Darl fidgeting impatiently, and apologized. "I'm sorry, I just can't bear to tear up all this pretty paper. I can fold it neatly and keep it for next time, can't I?"

Darl rolled his eyes in surrender.

"It's a box!" She exclaimed!

"No, Kiki. *Open* the box! The present is inside!"

Kiki did as she was instructed, and lifted out something wrapped in tissue paper.

"No, it isn't the tissue either," Darl added quickly.

Pushing the cups and dishes to one side, Kiki spread a broad leather belt on the breakfast table. It was just her size, with a sturdy buckle made of brass, and leather loops and pouches for all her favourite tools from the Doozers. The belt itself was inscribed with funny pictures of Doozers using hammers, spanners, tongs, chisels and all manner of other Doozerish things.

"I know how much you enjoy watching the Doozers work, and learning their tricks, but just carrying your own tools around in a sack isn't very convenient, so I had Orie, that Fraggles who does leather work for the Winding Stairs Clan, make *this* for you!"

Strangely, Kiki's face went blank for a moment, and then broke into a beatific smile. Darl thought his Holomate would crush him if she squeezed him any tighter, but he didn't mind: Fraggles can hold their breath a *looong* time.

"*I have something for you. I have something for you!*" Kiki went over to the bed to reach under and pull out a simple paper bag that bulged with something inside. She returned to the table and thrust the bag into Darl's hands. It was just a shopping bag, probably scrounged from Outer Space, since only paper sheets could be made in The Rock. In fact, the bag had "LCBO" printed in large letters on one side, telling Darl it had somehow made it's way into the Rock from a liquor store. But inside was no bottle, but something soft and, from what he could see, deep blue, like the sky just before the stars come out.

With a growing sense of excitement, Darl used both hands to shake out a hockey jersey. It must have been made for a child of about eight, because it would fit him perfectly. He admired the gleaming white maple leaf on the front, and the big number **2** on the back. What could be better? It was Frank Mahovlich's number! But then it was Darl's turn to turn blank-faced for a moment before throwing his arms around his Holomate.

"How could you have known?" he asked. "It's *just* what I've always wanted!"

"It wasn't hard to guess. Ever since you joined Red and Gobo in playing Rock Hockey, all you've been talking about is how they played the game in Outer Space in the old days, and how the Leaves and

Kenedians used to beat everybody – except when the Browns or Birdwings or Blackmarks won, because they were pretty good too – and so on and so forth like it was back then. Why don't you get your stick and skates and put it on? I want to see my stalwart hockey champion!"

Darl's smile faded to a sheepish expression. "Oh ... Kiki, I'd *love* to, but ... I can't. Not right now, anyway. Why don't put on your tool belt and fill it with your things?"

Now it was Kiki's turn to lose her smile. "I wish I could, Love, but ... I ... haven't got them."

The two Fraggles stared at each other quietly until Darl broke the silence. "Did you trade away your tools for my sweater?"

"I'm afraid so," she answered with a quavering voice. "I gave them to Philo and Gunge to use to break up junk. They said they found your pretty blue shirt behind Madame Trash Heap ... where she can't see. They said it was for hockey players. While they didn't know how it got there, it was clean and good as new. I just had to have it for you!"

Although she no longer had her hand-made tools to fill the loops and pouches, Kiki buckled on the belt on with obvious pleasure. "It's beautiful. The Doozers will help me make more tools, and soon I'll be able to work just like a 'Doozer does.'" Kiki looked up at Darl. "What happened to your stick and skates?"

"Aw, well, *I* traded them for your belt, of course. Orie had to work a long time on it, but luckily he and his friends want to start up a Rock Hockey team of their own, and needed all the equipment they could get ... in a hurry!"

As he hadn't dressed yet, Darl plunged his arms into the Leafs jersey, raised his arms over his head and squirmed until it fell down around his body. It was just long enough and just loose enough to be comfortable.

"You know," said Darl, "I've read something like this before, in another life. A famous story ... but you would never have heard of O. Henry."

Both Fraggles laughed, shouted "Merry Christmas," and hugged again.

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Later that day, Kiki and Darl noticed the other Fraggles were gathering in the Great Hall, bringing bells of all kinds.

"I guess it's that time," said Darl. "We should go and get your bell if you want to join the others in starting the Rock moving again for another year."

"Oh nuts! We never got a bell for *you*, did we?" Kiki gasped, startled.

"That's okay, I can sit quietly out of the way. I'd prefer not to face Cantus again, anyway. You know how I hate it when he pesters me to sing."

"Well ... he believes you *can*, you know."

"It's not going to happen ... at least not until *I* believe it!"

The two Fraggles left the Great Hall together, keeping close. An observer would have noticed that, not only was Darl's arm wrapped around Kiki's body, their tails were entwined for warmth. In spite of sweaters and mufflers, it was growing colder as the last hour of the year ran out.

"This isn't the way to *our* Hole," said Kiki after a few minutes. "We've gone into the tunnel leading to the Gorg Hole, haven't we?"

"Yeah. There's something I want to see again, and the Gorg Hole is a lot closer than any of the ones that go to Outer Space."

"What could there be to see in the Gorg's Garden?"

"I want to show you," said Darl, guided by something he felt rather than knew for certain.

"I guess everyone else can ring in the New Year without our help," Kiki conceded.

In a few minutes they came to the steep part of the tunnel, beyond which they could see a bright patch of sky through a screen of overhanging moss and weeds. They climbed to the brink of the Gorg Hole and parted the scraggly growths.

"Oh my goodness!" exclaimed Kiki. "What's *that*?"

There was snow everywhere. Snow buried the Gorg's garden, the court in front of the Castle, the turrets and crenellations of the Castle itself, and, in fact, pretty much everything, in a featureless blanket of white.

"Snow, Kiki, *snow*!" Darl sat himself down on the lip of the Hole and swung his feet back and forth like a kid. "I never used to like it much. It's hard to walk through and it gets in your shoes to make your feet wet and cold. But I haven't seen any in a couple of years, and it sure is pretty when it's freshly fallen."

Kiki stared out at it in wonderment. "It falls? Where does it fall from?"

"Up there," answered Darl, pointing up to the sky.

"Oh! The sky is all white! Is there snow on the sky, *too*?"

Darl laughed. "Well, no, not exactly. It just forms up there and falls down here. Of course, you don't have snow or rain in a cave. That's one of the things I miss by living in Fraggles Rock. There's no weather. No sun, no wind, no clouds, no rain and, of course, no snow."

"Are there a lot of things you miss about Outer Space?" asked Kiki.

"Sure there are. I miss watching movies, eating pizza, drinking *real* coffee, not that bitter-berry stuff – though it's all right – and of course all my old friends... I guess there *are* some other things, too. But I don't miss them as much as I'd miss *you* if I went back to live in Outer Space."

Kiki sat down next to Darl. The ground was hard, and cold, and not at all comfortable, but neither of them seemed to notice. They wound their arms around each other's waists, and tangled their feet and tails together for warmth. It was even colder out here at the brink of the Gorg's Garden than it was in the Great Hall.

“I love the shirt, Kiki. I’ll just make a new stick and trade something for another pair of skates when I can. Maybe Red or Gobo has some I can borrow until then. After all, the season begins next week when the Great Hall Grizzlies play the Deep Water Doozers, and I’m a Forward.”

“I can’t wait to see you play. Thank you again for the beautiful tool belt. The old tools were just crude copies I made from the Doozers. I’ll ask them to teach me, and I’ll make much better tools for my new belt. I bet the Doozers will think the pictures of them are wonderful, too!”

As they sat quietly, a few snowflakes drifted down from the sky. It wasn’t long before falling snow filled the air. The two Fraggles watched in fascination as the snowfall turned gradually into a blizzard that hid the Gorg castle and garden from sight.

“So beautiful,” said Kiki. “I’m glad you brought me here, but I think it’s much too late for us to go back before the others start ringing their bells.”

“I suppose it is,” said Darl. “What do you suppose will happen to us, out here?”

Kiki didn’t answer, just snuggled closer.

“Well, in that case, there’s no one I’d like better for it to happen with,” finished Darl.

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Their friends found them the next day – frozen together just as they had been last year, when the Fraggles celebrated the Festival of the Bells. Gobo ordered Wembley and Red to run back and fetch warm blankets, matches and a hot tureen of radish soup. He and Boober collected wood to build a fire to thaw the motionless Fraggles from their frozen state.

“You know,” said Mokey, “It’s almost a shame we have to thaw them out, and spoil such a pretty picture. They look so serene together. But I suppose we must.”

Gobo looked at Mokey. Sometimes she said the strangest things. “Yes, we must.”

“But they’ll only just do it again next year, don’t you think?” Mokey began humming a wordless tune from which discernable words only gradually emerged

Hmmm mm mm mmm hmmmmm, la la la la laah...  
Pretty as a picture hung upon the wall,  
Framed by Mother Nature, artist of us all,  
Side by side two portraits rendered as in life  
Of true love eternal, expressed as living ice!

“Just look for wood,” said Gobo, “and let next year look after itself.”

As of course, in its own way, it would. But even though nothing important ever really changes in Fraggles Rock, nothing is every quite the same, either. At least that sounded like something Cantus would say ... and *he* usually knew.

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