

Rat Sass 6

A Fanzine for Rowrbrazzle 135

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Getting Reacquainted

It's been a bit more than two years since I first became acquainted with Traveling Matt, in December of 2014. It seems it must have been longer ago than that, but a quick check of fingers and toes adds up as it should. The tricky part was that the two-years-and-a-bit were spread over *three winters* ... and three winters somehow seemed ever so much longer than two years.

The last two years were even more surprising when viewed subjectively. So much has happened over the past couple of years that it almost seems like a lifetime ago. While acquiring Traveling Matt changed my life for the better in many ways, at the same time there was a progressive deterioration in my health that defied my expectations. As my readers have followed, I reported swelling legs, then increasing sleeplessness, sometimes lasting two or three days at a time, until I finally resorted to sleeping upright in an office chair ... since lying down had become impossible. From this, it was discovered – to my physician's surprise – that I had a lung filled with fluid. No wonder I couldn't sleep, and the least effort led to exhaustion. I was retaining fluid around the heart as well, which was not immediately recognized. Later, as it became obvious that I was not responding to diuretics as I should, I was taken by the hospital, because I was in a situation of congestive heart failure in progress.

And I was still not out of the woods.

In response to medication, things had begun to improve over the next few next months. Unfortunately, the reprieve was temporary, and the swelling in my legs returned. Tests with a cardiologist produced negative results, indicating that the heart was not the cause of my condition. It was declared that my heart was fit as a fiddle – all I needed was to pump the water out of my lungs and the lining the around the heart.

That was when I had the first stroke, near the end of February.

I was not very seriously affected. I felt almost normal within a couple of days, in fact, and was released from the hospital after less than a week. But now I had an *arrhythmia*, which no one had noticed until that moment. It had taken days of monitoring the valves and heart action to reveal the sneaky little bugger. It had apparently occurred only sporadically, lying in wait for the right moment.

So, I was prescribed some “magic pills” that would cause the arrhythmia to go away. It was a very effective medication, I was assured, and my life would soon be back to normal. Unfortunately, I was one of those unlucky one-in-five who didn’t respond to the drug of choice, and the *second* stroke was a lulu. I was back in the same hospital in less than two weeks, and this time the measures taken to deal with the damage were far more extensive. I was placed on a different medication that is just as effective, but requires regular monitoring ... because small changes in my blood chemistry could conceivably kill me. Had I been put on Warfarin from the start, I would probably not have had the second and more serious stroke. They didn’t bury my doctors’ mistakes *this* time, but it was near enough.

The long and the short of it, though, is that I actually have been feeling far better since February, when I began the gradual recovery from my stroke. Almost all the swelling in my legs is gone, I sleep regularly, I’m not subject to as many aches and pains that impede movement and make rest more problematic, I’m more active than I can remember being in a long time, I appear to have more appetite and I seem to be coming slowly up to speed with my writing again.

Inevitably, I still have some work to do. Notably, I can lose my fine control when excited, or tired, or at loss for a word. I also seem to have rather little interest in drawing ... although, ironically, it was drawing done while in the hospital that showed the least effect on my abilities. Finally, I *sleep* too much. Everyone tells me it is therapeutic, part of the healing processes, and I should indulge myself. Before, I was just called a lazy bum, but I decided that I could easily live with that.

In a supreme irony, the Warfarin prescribed for my arrhythmia prevents me from eating my vegetables! I am strictly forbidden to make any sudden changes in my diet ... so if I’m accustomed to eating hot dogs, burritos, pizza, donuts and ice cream, then that’s what the doctor orders! Any do-gooder who wishes I would eat a healthier diet is liable to kill me.

It might be said that I took Traveling Matt to the hospital with me, but it is as true to say that Traveling Matt took *me*. I managed to collect my gear when the magnitude of the disaster sank in, locked up after myself and drove the half-mile to emergency admittance. Whatever happened, because I had my own wheels and could look after myself, I would be alright. As I gradually recovered from the worst effects of the stroke, Matt was a pillar of strength during the ordeal. But to my consternation, I began to fear that Matt itself was ailing ... not performing as well as it ought to. It some time before I became sure of it, and that my doubts were not merely reality conflicting with a faulty memory. All too many things seemed not to be working in my head as they should ... not the least of which was Traveling Matt itself. Was it my imagination on the way home from the hospital two weeks later, or had I only enough juice in the battery to drive home from St. Joe’s? I was certain that Traveling Matt once had enough power to drive all the way to the mall and back, without showing any loss of pep. I was equally sure that the trip

back home was far slower than before. I feared that Traveling Matt was slowly losing its ability to carry me.

But had it *always* been that way ... or was it a case of crucial neurons not fully awake yet? I was utterly confounded by the bread maker, for instance. With uncertainty at every step, I measured oil and water, added powdered milk, sugar, salt and finally yeast ... and I ended up with a something like a small cannonball. It took two more attempts before I was confident enough to reproduce edible results consistently. Similarly, not the devil himself could have made head or tail of the microwave oven. It was so far from intuitive that I had the social workers downstairs come in to look at it for me, and *they* were also unable to unlock all the mysteries of its operation. We had to settle for such simple procedures as turning on the power, and for how long. It was nearly a month before I could attempt sophisticated operations such as lowering the power settings, or even programming *two or more* power settings.

But nothing came close to the sheer confusion, dismay, frustration, anger and tears brought on by my attempts to operate the wide-screen television. It seemed like it should be a simple matter ... turn on the set, adjust the stereo amplifier for sound, then select the appropriate screen format to view the picture. Easy as pi. But it turned out to be unexpectedly complicated, and I somehow made frequent mistakes with the remote that defied explanation. I was coping just fine for a time ... but then everything went two ways from Sunday, and the TV set rapidly approached a state of apparent uselessness. Panic-stricken, without *either* television or movies I could play, I phoned my sister, only to be offered the ancient wisdom that television sets *do* wear out or break down. She would help me shop for a new one over the weekend if it was an emergency – and it was, trust me. Nothing to do without TV or movies? Unthinkable!

Fortunately, I was able to phone a friend that same night, and he offered to drop by next evening to sort out the trouble.

Oh, and was my face red. To be honest, I had so thoroughly mucked up the settings on the remote that I think I may have penetrated time-and-space and have been receiving gravity waves from intergalactic space instead of regular programming. But at the bottom of the trouble was that the batteries had died, and it simply didn't occur to me that this was the cause of the trouble.

As for the computer, I couldn't seem to remember from one moment to the next the passwords I wanted to type in, and I would repeat my errors endlessly. I was only able to go on line with the supervision of my friend, Steven, who patiently copied or dictated messages to the outside world for me. I remember vividly the first time I successfully logged on myself, with no-one there to supervise. Then, in the weeks that followed, I slowly learned to make sense with words again. Only simple statements at first, then gradually more complex ones, and finally weaving my way through more difficult syntax to express more sophisticated ideas.

As my confidence with words increased steadily, my concerns about Traveling Matt were only temporarily abated. There was something definitely wrong with Traveling Matt. Over a startlingly short time, Matt was barely able to return home from down the street. Reaching the bank or the supermarket would soon be impossible.

Clearly, the situation had become critical enough that it became my first priority to contact Traveling Matt's maker, even though I had not found the means to cover repairs. No one seemed to have any advice at all about how Traveling Matt's upkeep could be transferred from the Ontario Disability Support Program to my government pension. In fact, initial indications seemed to suggest there was no way! But I wasn't able to do without mobility for a number of weeks while the matter was sorted out. The manufacturer of the chair told me the replacement batteries cost \$300 ... a cost out of my own pocket that I was not glad of, but that I could bear. For a year's worth of useful work from them, that seemed almost reasonable. I called the service rep, who said he would make the call within the week. What I had no hint of was of that the chair required *two* batteries, not merely "batteries" in a collective sense. *Two* separate batteries, which *together* cost \$800 ... and no-one breathed a word to this to me. Apparently it was the most ordinary thing in the world for me to reach into my wallet and take out three or four extra C-notes as though everyone did this without even thinking about it!

I was almost reconciled with that, but the service guy was eying the right front shocks with a speculative eye, and listening for squeaks. To be fair, the squeaks were quite audible, and had already become a cause of mild concern. On the street, I sounded like an old gas buggy on a corduroy road. It was the service guy's opinion that the fault lay in a design flaw, the result of two different metals in the shocks that corroded, and sooner or later failed. But there was no telling whether they would fail next week or next year. His recommendation was to replace the part immediately, rather than wait to find out.

Well, naturally – why *not* be safe when you have two-or-three thousand dollars to replace the part, and *not* be sorry – especially if it is the customer who pays for it. As soon as the repairman was gone, I was already phoning the medical supply company to complain about the surprise about the batteries, but I now also had the shocks to worry about replacing. However, no one was able to quote a price from a list. I had to wait another couple of days until I found a message on my answering machine, which would reveal whether the repair would take another few hundred dollars ... or whether I was likely to be lining up in soup kitchens for the next few weeks.

I made it clear, fast, that unless I found some kind of assistance for the disabled on a *very* fixed income, there might not be any repair. I complained to anyone who would listen that it was beginning to seem as though maintaining a mobile chair was going to be damn nearly as expensive as owning a used car! *Surely* it can not make sense for the government to provide Traveling Matt in the first place – through the Ontario Disability Services Program – and then have no plan to keep Matt it repair once I transferred from ODSP to the Canada Pension Plan ... but instead just let him sooner-or-later break down, wasting the previous investment for "the lack of a nail?"

So now I had to figure out how to get the government involved once again – and do it before I needed any *more* supposed repairs. Once the government has paid for *anything* it has not already agreed to pay for, you see, the money will *never* be reimbursed. That is a law of nature as inviolable as the laws of thermodynamics.

The bottom line was that I might take able to take one solid \$700 hit to the pocket, but not one that might conceivably cost me *an extra thousand or more*.

Technically, I hadn't even paid for the batteries that were installed, let alone a costly repair. Until I'd sent in the bill, I hoped there was still a fighting chance that the company that made Matt might be persuaded to re-bill the government. I knew not to count on it, though. Businesses are usually very cautious about how to bill, and frown on creativity. If there is any prospect it will be me who foots the bill, I had best start counting my pennies.

Nor under any circumstances did it seem a viable alternative to take my chances with deferred repairs. What alternative was there? Mobility was not an option. Yet I could easily be reduced to eating franks-and-beans or spaghetti for five days a week again ... instead of the "new wealth" from my retirement that I had just become accustomed to.

There is nothing like mounting bills, worrisome decisions and growing headaches for having a stroke. You should try it.

But we must look at the bright side, since once the necessary government action is in motion, it may all work out in the end. I have already been told that the replacement shocks are not as costly as I first expected. Only *another* \$150 ... and that will include *another* \$100 service charge, of course. But compared to what has been already spent on Traveling Matt, it could have been far worse. And if the battery life is good for another couple of years, I should be trouble-free for a while. It may be best to chalk it up to the cost of mobility.

I was assuming that the story ended at this point, but of course some stories *never* end, and there are already more twists and turns in the plot ahead.

To keep *this* story from getting any longer, I will only add that Matt was in the shop for a whole week, but the work was never begun. Instead, I was left waiting for them to call, only to be informed – finally – that the repairs which had not yet started would require \$2,000 *more* to complete ... "and when can we begin," I was asked? I made the brutal observation that under the circumstances it was not possible to begin repairs at all, that Traveling Matt would just have to break down when the silly old bugger could no longer carry me, and I would then spend the rest of my life on a walker, within a few blocks of home.

At this point, I was convinced that I had become involved in a car repair scam from a TV sitcom.

My luck may finally have turned, however. I was given a number to call to put me in touch with the city's Emergency Assistance Program, and – for once – there was a living human being on the other end of the line, who had actual information to help me. In a single afternoon we blew through all the red tape, established a written estimate quote for the repairs, and I will be visited by a case-worker in a couple of days. *Assuming* all goes well with the interview, it should be only be a matter of time before Matt is as good as new, and "the world begins again" ... even though a weekend in Vegas would have cost almost as much.

It will certainly be good to be free to travel the distance downtown again ... and not have to struggle up particularly steep hills an inch at a time.

Summer is coming round again!

Whenever winter ends, it's as though the world begins all over again. Trees come to life, drink the rain and shake the bark off the freshly awakened greenwood. Of course, my summer isn't

what it used to be. There are a hundred things I can no longer do, a hundred places I can only go with difficulty. A lot of places I'm unlikely to visit, again just because it has become far more trouble than it is worth. I will certainly never again sit by myself in the middle of the night on one of the massive blocks of the breakwater where Lake Ontario ends, wondering whether the end of the world is really at the end of the black water. I don't expect to see the moon rise over the ruins of a certain Edwardian fountain that was purposely abandoned in a wild place, or stand by while my backpack is ransacked by rowdy young raccoons in a North York public park. Nor am I likely see a Santa Claus parade in the falling snow again, or row a longboat from the base at HMCS York to the nude beach at Hanlan's Point, where downtown Toronto grows almost quicker than they can deliver the concrete. There are secret ponds, mysterious wells, buried mansions and entire streets by the Don Valley River that have been entirely forgotten and swallowed up.

There is also the small swath of ground under which my mother is buried, and which I have only seen twice in my life.

While Traveling Matt will be repaired – with new batteries and parts – I have been revitalized as well, by medications. I hadn't felt this good for so long that it had become normal to be wracked with stiffness and pains, to be incapacitated from lack of breath at the slightest effort and to sleep sitting up in up bed. I had begun to forget what "normal" could be. In fact, I am far from normal – something people have facetiously reminded me of for years. Even now that I have become totally accustomed to slumbering upright, I recall that I have always been fond of sleeping in the seat of a moving car, for some reason. At this point, a large part of my eccentricities may be due to my unwillingness to experiment with habits that work. But the difference between habit and revitalization is a crucial one. I move around the apartment in an almost normal stride ... barring the unfortunate need to dodge around the bottleneck of Traveling Matt in the hall without spilling my coffee.

If there is a great deal that I don't expect to see again, I have gained a tremendous amount of freedom compared to only fairly recently. It is as though I have shaken off the snow-clad branches after a long, harsh winter and begun to move again. For the first few weeks, there are too many places calling me to decide where to go next. I must see High Park again, lay in a few pounds of fresh coffee beans at the Farmer's Market, renew my acquaintance with Sunnyside Beach, visit the neighborhood festivals and pointlessly take all the same photographs all over again ... just because the good weather is fun and exciting. Later, as the dog days of high summer begin, life forgets a lot of the hectic urgency of August, and one seeks a book to read in the shade instead ... and to turn up an efficient air-conditioner.

Then, all too soon, you begin to think about the shorter hours of Autumn ahead.

But time enough for all that later. Instead, Traveling Matt will soon be up-and-at-'em again, and then the two of us will be getting reacquainted once more.

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All Things Pass

God must love artists ... because he made far too fucking many of us ... and so we “starve.” Maybe that just proves that God actually hates us. There was an old Islamic saying that “God destroys Christians by making more of them to destroy each other,” and in a somewhat similar fashion we artists all fight each other to make a buck. Of course, all this assumes there is such a thing as a god, which seems highly improbable to me on the evidence available. But God is as good a starting point as any.

Recently, I read the problem one old-timer had been having with getting a dealers’ table at the cons he attended. That reminded me of why I dropped out of Anthrocon, a long time ago. The concom switched from a first-come/first served policy to a “lottery.” Dealers could only submit a *request* for a table, to be informed later if their name had been drawn at random. Or so the concom said – in practice, such a system was prone to obvious abuse. How easy to grant tables preferentially, and only assign the rest according to the luck of the draw! Whether that was the case or not, I’m in no position to say, but you can hardly blame me for my suspicions.

For the dealer, the trouble with this approach is that you can’t plan your attendance around a *chance* you may have a table next year – not even a *good* chance. You may be depending on that income, which then becomes subject to a roll of the dice. You can’t buy airfare soon enough to get a good discount. You may not be able to reserve a hotel room far enough in advance to get the con rate. You can’t make plans to share a car or a room with others. To be blunt – you don’t know if you’ll be going to the con at all ... and even if you do, it will cost more and you may end up losing money.

Of course, to the concom, the reason people attend is because their con is such wonderful fun that anyone would be happy to be there, even without a chance to earn back the cost of going. From the point of view of a dealer, whether you enjoy the con or not is entirely beside the point. Few fans can afford to spend upwards of a thousand dollars for a fun weekend more than once or twice a year. If you live along the East Coast or in Southern California, you may have more options – there will be a larger number of local or regional conventions that are within a day’s drive, or a short rail trip. A bunch of fans can decide to attend at very much the last minute, and by sharing costs, spend only one or two hundred dollars each. But most dealers have to carry stock, filling trunk or van space, and need to travel to the more distant as well as near-by conventions.

This argument did nothing to dissuade the people who ran the con I had been attending from its very beginning. Having no choice, I put my name in the draw, and a couple of months before the next con I got a message that I wasn’t getting a table. They did offer the forlorn hope that a table might be vacated, and then eventually I was told I could have a half-table. Tsk. By then, I would be able to get no breaks in my travel arrangements, and have had nobody to stay with. Furthermore, even a *full* table was rather small for my needs ... I couldn’t imagine how to make do with half the space.

Of course, the reason the concom had given for such draconian measures was that there are too many artists, all of them wanting space to sell their name-tags and fill sketchbooks, and thus pay for their McMeals and their share of crash space. Unlike most fandoms, furry fandom seems to be almost half artists, and only the other half to buy what they create. What venue short of a major convention center could provide enough dealers’ room space for so many eager new faces?

For that matter, where did all those furry artists come from? Partly from the growing phenomenon of role-playing, which is sweeping *all* fandoms as far as I can see, displacing older activities to one degree or another. But I suspect that the reputation that furry cons have as good art markets has drawn freelancers

from everywhere. Fantasy and science fiction are becoming increasingly mainstream, and it is a rare artist who will not do elves, giants, unicorns, druids, kittens, dragons, warriors, aliens, wildlife or anthropomorphic characters to flog at as many shows as they can find. Furry fandom is still a bit far out for the mainstream, but as far as those starving freelancers out there are concerned, it's fair game.

The more I thought about it, the less I even *wanted* to go to the con. Typically, all the enjoyment came from the dealers' room. I saw everybody there, sooner or later, and spent most of the day talking with them. Once the dealers' room closed up, though, the hotel evacuated. Everyone was out to dinner, and unless I had made arrangements earlier, I was unable to find a dinner party to join. Often, I found myself going to the Big Boy or A&W with whatever other dealer was left in the room ... not always my first choice of companionship. More than once there was nobody, and there was nothing to do but sit around the lobby for a couple of hours, without dinner, waiting for people to return to the hotel.

Not that much happened after they returned from dinner, either. Unlike SF cons, furry cons I've attended have not offered much night-life. There were parties, but half of them were a group of youngsters sitting around the TV watching videos of *Tiny Toons* or some anime or other. That held no appeal for me, since I watched enough of the same crap at home. Now and then a few old hands would get together in a room to confab, but I often found those gatherings strangely boring. Some artists would sketch wordlessly in the corners, someone else would sew eyes onto a costume head, or count his inventory, and the rest would sit around and smirk while they made vaguely lewd jokes that led me to think they were all slightly drunk. Some nights, time dragged pretty badly. I'm not saying there were never any good parties, but they are hard to remember after fifteen years, while the number of times I wished I had been at home – instead of LA, Seattle, Memphis or Philadelphia – are easy to recall. When it became obvious that my business as a dealer had come to an end, I realized how little I actually enjoyed furry cons. Apart from the money, being a dealer was all there was in it for me. I didn't go to them for fun anymore.

I gather that a lot of other old-timers have had this same epiphany since I had mine. It's a pity. We artists, writers and dealers created this fandom, developed it, gave it its reason to be, and provided the draw for furry cons for many years. And now, anonymous panels tell us we are no longer needed. Our *money* is wanted, if we have any to spend as ordinary attendees, but otherwise we are anonymous faces in a line at the registration desk, meekly waiting for admittance.

Why did we ever create furry fandom, if only for it to be taken over by such ingrates?

But I guess all things have their time, and then pass. The early furry cons were what we wanted them to be, and if the fandom has evolved into something else – which it certainly has – they can't take away what we once had.

In fact, if us old poops were younger, we just might begin it all over again.



Let the Fraggles Sing

The camera follows Gobo Fraggles through a tunnel and into the Great Hall, where the multitudes of happy Fraggles dance and sing.

Isn't that what Fraggleship is all about? Dancing? Singing? An endless celebration of the joy of life from the moment you wake until you drift off to sleep at the end of the day?

Clearly the Fraggles believe so. From Cantus the Minstrel on down, Fraggles make statements such as "music is life," or "we are the song" with monotonous regularity. It has even shown to be literally true, in episodes where for one reason or another the Fraggles have stopped singing and playing, and the Rock slowly began to grind to a still and silent stop!

Darl is a character about whom I've written twice so far, and have made notes for future stories. He has come to live in Fraggleship Rock from "Outer Space" – our world. For him, the greatest challenge of fitting into life in the Rock is song ... because Darl *cannot* sing! Not a note. And since song accompanies almost every aspect of Fraggleship life, Darl's inability to sing is plainly a liability of a major order. Other Fraggles look at him oddly, and some go so far as to say he cannot be a true Fraggleship after all. Cantus is visibly annoyed by Darl's repeated assertions that he not only cannot sing, he will not even *try*.

This problem has not been worked out in the two stories I have written. In fact, it has not really been introduced as an important issue yet. But I have four or five other stories loosely sketched out, and the matter *will* be explored at the appropriate time.

By now, assiduous readers – I'm assuming *some* of you didn't just turn up your noses at the two published stories – will have had the suspicion that Darl and I are one and the same. I've denied it, but maybe it's time to be fully honest. It's *half-true* that I am Darl, because many of the circumstances of his life at the time he becomes a Fraggleship *do* mirror my own. All the same, there are differences, too. He has led a fairly different life than mine. As well, the issue of whether I am him, or he is me, is essentially irrelevant. The stories stand on their own merits. However, there is no denying that the underlying issue – of how a misfit fits into a society he desperately wants to belong to, and whether this is even something he *ought* to desire – are highly relevant to my own experience.

Yes. Stories set in the imaginative world of a children's television puppet show *can* have serious themes, and yet not violate the essential innocence and flights of fancy of the original. But, then, *Fraggleship Rock* was itself like that. It was a children's show in which illness and death struck, where loss and gain were a fact of life even among creatures who led an otherwise idyllic life of music and play. *Fraggleship Rock* could never be dismissed along with the likes of a *Care Bears* or *Pokemon*.

Here's the rub: while the stories I write may explore Darl's place in his new life, I am myself at total odds with the Fraggleship world. I don't think I could tolerate life among Fraggles for as long as five minutes before I would heft the nearest heavy stone and brain the nearest furry little singing bugger.

Don't get me wrong: I love music. I have collected it on vinyl and CD for years, and must have several hundred disks. What I don't like is *amateur* music. At conventions, I've avoided folk-sings like a virulent plague, nor have I ever formed a taste for all that ersatz Celtic folk music to which fans have a – to me – inexplicable attachment. I mean... why *Celtic*? What has Irish got to do with anything? My disapproval of home-made music isn't limited to science fiction fandom, either. I recall a monthly party I attended,

quite a few years ago. For two or three months, a small number of self-styled musicians had been turning up and sequestering the front room. One would plug in his electronic keyboard, another set up his bongo drums, and next thing you knew they were performing loud enough to obstruct conversations everywhere. Even in the back room, working my way through the cheese and chips laid out on the table, it was too often difficult to make out anything other people were saying. After two or three months of that, I lost my temper and shouted into the other room, “Shut the hell up, will you, we can’t hear ourselves talk!”

Dead silence followed ... which was fine with me. I don’t think they came to the next party, either.

I didn’t feel at all badly about this. In fact, I felt entirely justified, even though it wasn’t my party to be laying down the law. Making a din like that without asking if it was all right with the host was as much of a presumption, surely, as my outburst of temper? Well ... I was never reprimanded for it.

I myself never sing, and cannot play musical spoons, much less any sort of instrument. More than once I’ve wondered why that was. In my youth, I don’t think I had any such inhibitions. Quite the contrary, I remember sometimes singing as a child, carried away with the sort of exuberance we tend to become strangers to as we grow older. Yet there is a memory that sticks in my mind like the poisoned dart in the neck of Batholomew Sholto!

I was quite young, still of an age where children were taken to drive-in movies in their pajamas by their parents. That way, when the child grew weary of watching Richard Burton’s Antony woo Elizabeth Taylor’s Cleopatra on the big screen, he or she could quietly fall asleep in the back seat. What the film was that particular night, I have no idea, but obviously it didn’t hold my attention, because I was sitting in the back seat with a blanket over my head, singing some damn thing or other to myself. Then, like a bolt from the blue, I suddenly felt incredibly foolish. I didn’t know why. Worse, I didn’t know why I had never felt foolish about singing before that moment. I clammed up instantly, and I have few memories of ever opening up my mouth in song again.

Worse, in those days it was a maxim among educators that children had to be persuaded, manipulated, shamed or strapped into an appreciation of a long list of things such as sports, languages, literature and music ... for their own good! Whatever psychic damage was done in the process of forcing some foreign taste on the hapless child was considered a small price to pay. When I stopped singing, one of the earliest casualties of the school curriculum were the morning exercises, which then included a dispirited rendition of “God Save the Queen.” No matter how they threatened, I would not open my mouth. Not for teacher, nor for Queen – after all, *I* had never met the lady, and owed her not a note.

Music classes went much the same. While everyone else sang like mismatched hatchlings in a nest, I clamped my lips shut so tightly that a tire iron would bend trying to open my mouth. Teachers would order me to sing and I’d squeeze shut all the harder. No mere teacher was going to defy my will! It didn’t help at all that all music in grade school was infantile, if not downright imbecilic. I still have painful memories of some inane Polish ditty whose words went, “Stodala stodala stodala pumpa, stodala pumpa, stodala pumpa pump pump pump.” That still makes me want to upchuck.

The day came when they tried to teach us to dance, too. After threats of dire punishment, they got me to move as though each foot was embedded in a pail of concrete and I was shackled to a corpse. I scowled at the miserable son of a bitch who demanded this humiliation as though I would gladly watch him being disemboweled with an axe. I probably would have done it myself!

To be fair, I treated my Phys Ed instructors with the same stubborn resistance. Nobody, but *nobody* was ever going to force me to do *anything* and expect me to like it! It didn’t matter whether it was “Flow

Gently Sweet Afton” or touch football, their souls would burn in hell first.

Of course, if we have any sense at all, we re-examine ourselves as we grow up, and when I reached my twenties, I was pushing my boundaries in all sorts of directions. I discovered that I actually liked cheese, as long as it wasn’t processed slices or that orange powder on pre-packaged mac and cheese dinners. Then, I even began to drink alcohol, despite having dismissed it as the vile poison that had destroyed my family and alcoholic father. I did draw the line at pot – although in a room so full of haze it looked as though the sofa was smouldering, I suppose it hardly made a difference whether *I* smoking it or not.

Once or twice, I managed to overcome painful inhibitions to join in a song or two – and provoked only raucous laughter from certain people. For many reasons, those people are no longer counted among my friends ... but at the time it hurt, so any flickering spark of song was extinguished once and for all. I knew I never going to try to sing again.

Never? *Never* ... but if, in his stories, Darl can find his voice, so can I. I will never make a sound, but I have been slowly learning the lyrics to songs that make me feel glad to be alive, sad for what I’ve lost, or grateful for the rather amazing life I’ve had.

“Feel the water flowing,
Feel it coming, feel it going,
In the river, in the rain and in the sky.

“Just like water flowing,
I know where I’m going.
Look beneath your boots and I’ll be there.

“One day it’s an ocean,
One day ice in motion,
One day it’s a teardrop in your eye.

“It’s just a dream away.
You’re got to leave to stay.
We’ll meet again someday,
Just a dream away.”

“Once I wasn’t here,
And then I suddenly appeared,
And now I seem to be at home in earth and air.

– “Gone But Not Forgotten,”
Fraggle Rock, episode 90

I can sing them inside, to the only audience that will listen – myself.

Maybe Darl and I are more alike than I want to admit. We both feel outside the charmed circles that other people seem to inhabit. We both lack the voice to claim membership in one. I still draw the line at listening to filk singers, though.



Schmoozing!

Gary Fields

It's certainly been a while since I've seen a page by Gary Fields. I'm not entirely clear what the message is, but I think we can all agree that bacon is *good!!!*

Schirm

I don't see why we don't see more of that "Schirm" guy... What are we, chopped liver?

William Earl Haskell

Wallace & Gromit both gone? Where will we get our Wensleydale? For that matter, what the heck does it taste like? If it's like Stilton, I may have problems with that.

Robert Alley

"I hope your life has stopped giving you such interesting things to write about." Not yet, I'm afraid. Dealing with doctors, social workers, the city and the workshop that is supposed to repair Traveling Matt have nearly replaced my social life... [] The O.Henry story in question is "The Gift of the Magi," and it one of the writer's best known. [] Are Fraggles acquainted with snow... that was a tricky question because it was hard to see who they could not be familiar with cold weather and ice. The story my version of the story is based on presupposes it, and I there is no way around it. However, I realized that cold weather and ice do not necessarily add up to having seen a snowy landscape. Of course, in the Henson canon such inconsistencies are ever present, and you can only work around it as best you can. For example, Fraggles seem to eat apples, but where do they come from? They never heard a radio before, but they seem to be familiar with the game show format that Convincing John uses. However, it is worth noting that the hole that leads to the Gorg's garden was only discovered when Uncle Matt was avoid it, and the Fraggles general avoid. It was Mokie's particular job to sneak into the garden to steal radishes from the garden. [] I have a pretty good idea where all my Fraggles stories will go in the end, and they do follow the theme of Darl's self-discovery in his new life. It ought the read as a series of connected episodes, or a loosely constructed novel. I would be working on it, in fact, but prolonged writing wears me out and I don't quite feel up to the job yet. Unfortunately, it can take a long time to fully recover from a stroke, and I've had ample evidence that I'm not ready yet. In fact, it's always possible I'll never fully recover, in which case I might as well just watch TV the rest of my life, and see how many jelly donuts I can eat in twenty years. I'm hoping for the best...

Ken Fletcher

Nice to see you stuff in 'Brazzle. Although I've seen it before, it's always nice to see it again. I never understood why you completely stop submitting your drawings to fanzines. You may have left it too late ... I think the art form is endangered and can't have many years left to it. Then again, I've all given them up myself.

Edd Vick

Why spend good money to renew a license when I hadn't driven a year in years? In spite of knowing, I can't think of anyone who would loaned me a car, either.

E.T. Bryan

An old folk song preformed by many bands, including *Steeleye Span*:

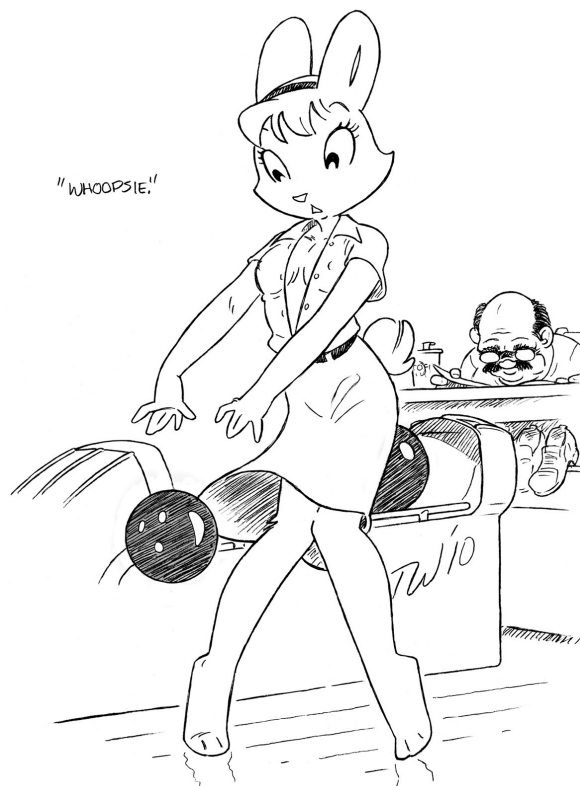
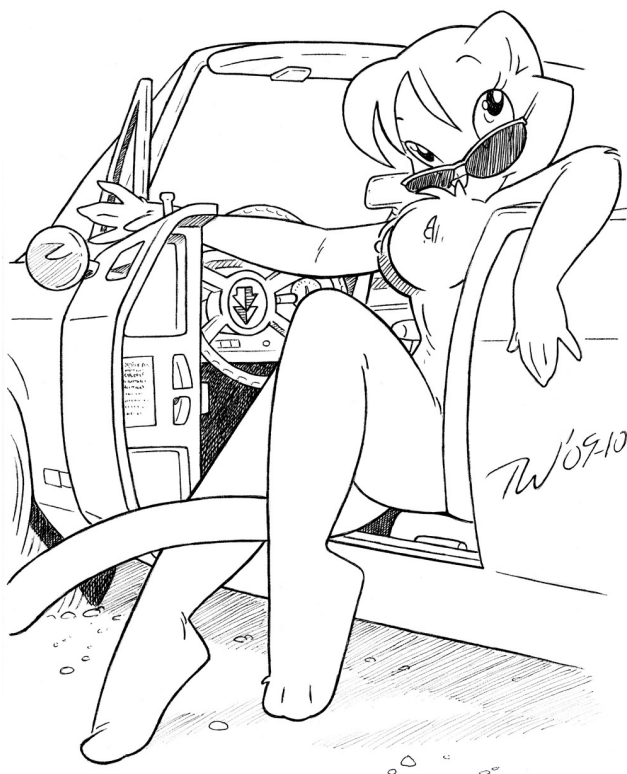
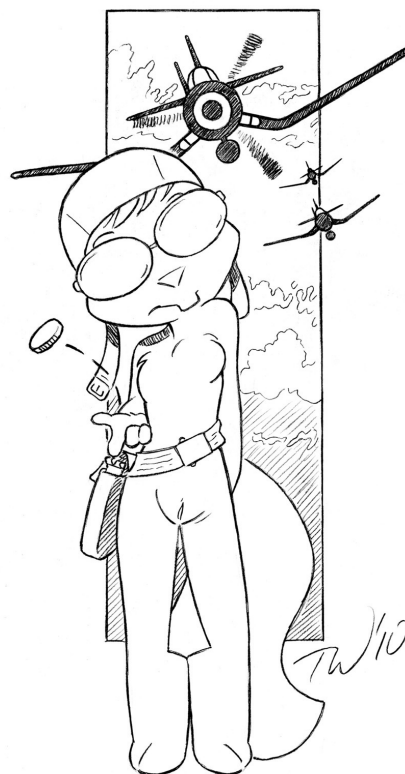
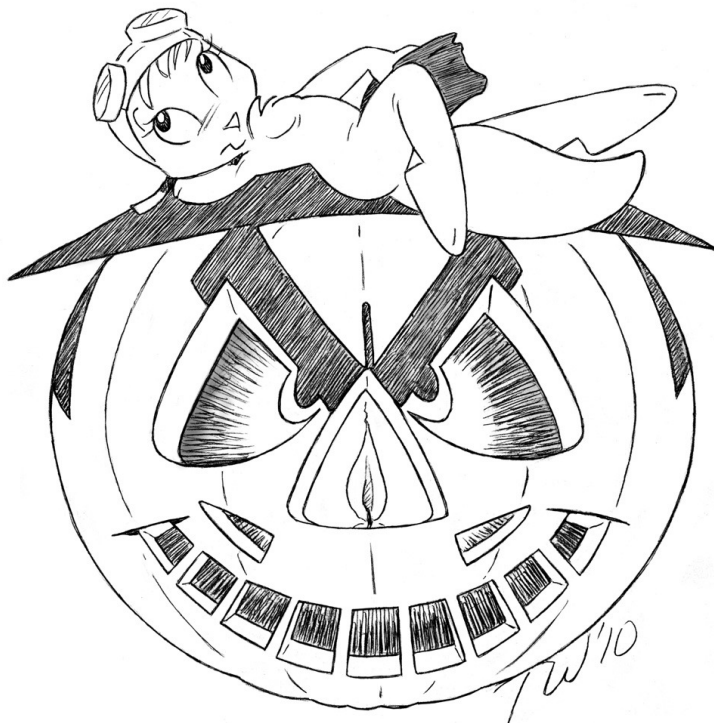
Young women they run like hares on the mountain
Young women they run like hares on the mountain
If I were but a young man I'd soon go a-huntin'
With me right fol-de diddle de-ro right fol-de diddle-day
Etc.

Steve Gallacci

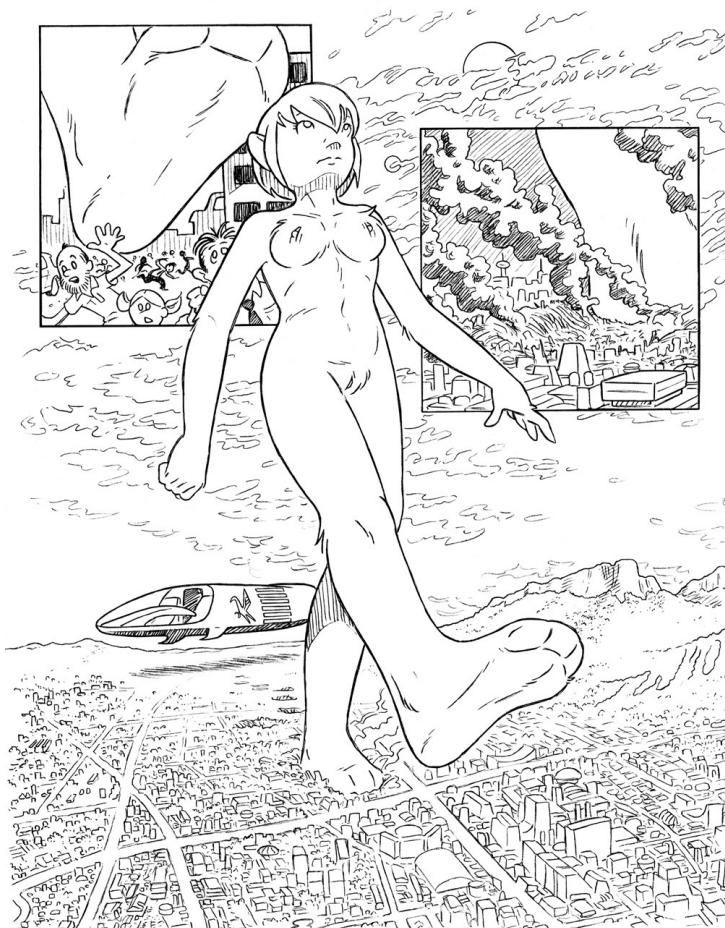
I certainly enjoyed the film, but other than picking up some discounted Zootopia toys from the Dollarama store, I haven't gotten heavily into it. I did not a couple of minor points about the plot, though, that didn't seem plausible – the plants driving the animals wild seemed to have no cause ... and then suddenly some people knew about it. But if that's all I had to complain about, I guess I should be grateful.



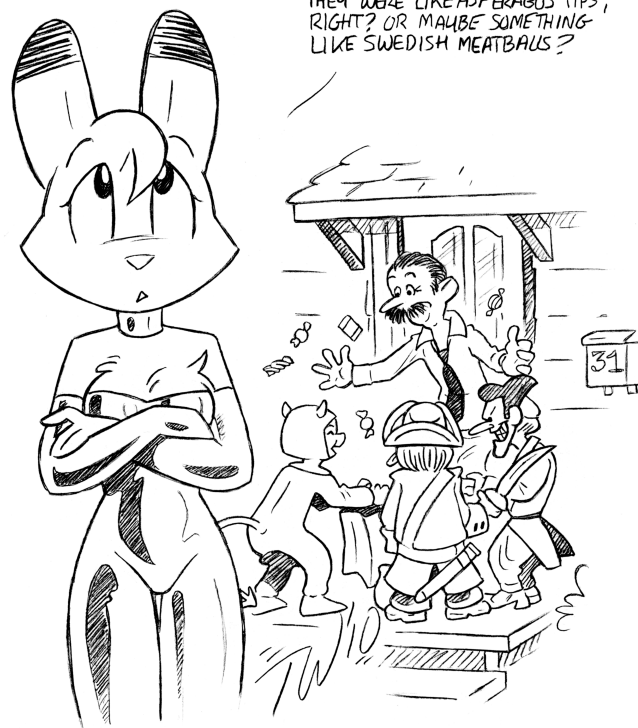
A Potpourri! (from 2010)







I REMEMBER THE TASTE OF BUTTERSCOTCH CANDIES FONDLY. THEY WERE LIKE ASPERAGUS TIPS, RIGHT? OR MAYBE SOMETHING LIKE SWEDISH MEATBALLS?



-Endit-