

January 2018



Rat Sass

A Fanzine for Rowbrazzle

Tara Wayne, 245 Dunn
Ave., Apt. 2111, Toronto,
Ontario, M6L 1S6 - (416)
531- 8974 Tara@bell.net

Last October I published a short story titled “Every Good Neighborhood Has One” in the Halloween issue of my fanzine. I thought no more about it until a few days ago, when a magazine editor used Facebook to call for submissions to a Halloween anthology. I sent him the story from my fanzine, and it was accepted.

That would be the second short fiction of mine to be professionally published.

It was in a real publication, called *The Yellow Booke* – you can order that issue from Amazon for about \$12. I doubt the publisher sells many, if only because Dark Fantasy is not a hugely popular genre. The publisher says *The Yellow Booke* is a labour of love, intended to promote the authors, both past and present. He doesn’t pay for published material. Bummer. He even send a contributor’s copy to the writers... but he does offer free .pdf downloads from his inventory.

Unfortunately, I have no interest in his inventory, since I only *write* dark fantasy. I don’t read it. Ironically, I don’t even particularly enjoy the genre. But I find it easy and amusing to write.

The first fiction that I wrote for publication was “The Canaries in the Dark,” a pastiche of turn-of-the-century writer, William Hope Hodgson’s “Carnacki the Ghost Finder” stories, by a turn-of-the-last-century writer, William Hope Hodgson. In his relatively short life, Hodgson left a indelible impression on the genre of supernatural fantasy. Some readers would unhesitatingly name *The House on the Borderland* or *The Night Lands* as his masterpiece. Myself, I find his more ambitious stories to be too recondite, particularly *The Night Lands* – a long, archaically

written, philosophical tome. By comparison, the Carnacki stories are brisk little adventures that quickly repay the reader with surprisingly vivid fantasy images. I would never have considered writing a pastiche of any longer work, but these short pieces, with their vaguely Sherlock Holmes-like narratives, appealed to me.

To my surprise, there seems to be an entire school of non-canonical Carnacki stories written after the fashion of William Hope Hodgson. Who knew? Well, anyway, *I* didn’t, and here I thought I had done something special.

For my second published story, I broke fresh ground. I never had any intention of writing another story like the Hodgson one, so I wrote one for Halloween instead. I wrote it out of that special

feeling I get from remembering the holiday when I was a boy, and the magic that persists in my imagination when skeleton trees rattle their limbs, and the moon plays hide-and-go-seek through tattered clouds. It naturally had to have a haunted house, neighborhood bullies to put in their place, and a wistful visitor.

When I got a note from the publisher that he would print the story, his exact words to me were, “I truly enjoyed your charming story! It is a cheeky but devotedly sentimental homage to my favourite holiday, and I deeply appreciate that you thought to submit it to *The Yellow Booke*. We love return authors, especially those who were well received in past editions, like you. If you are still willing, I would be honored to showcase your art in TYB, and I think it would make a charming addition to the stories we have so far collated ... and I send you my thanks and appreciation.”

The Yellow Book still doesn't pay a dime for contributions, but with the stars in my eyes, I barely noticed the omission.

I still had to buy my own damn copies from Amazon, though.

As a minor afterthought, I also sold a poem, “The Devil's Riddle,” to a start-up internet magazine. I had to split the byline with my friend, Walt Wentz, but it was a credit ... little as it was. The publication was so obscure that it would take heavy promotion to raise public awareness of it up to the level of zero. I can hardly bring myself to add it to my resumé.

But that was *last* October! *This* October I had a new story to flog. I was asleep, and perhaps I had the thought, somewhere in my mind, that I'd like to write another short story. As sometimes happens, being asleep can be an advantage if it unconsciously arranges odd narrative elements into a useable work of fiction ... which was what happened, and “Extended Duty” barely needed any help from me. All I recall having to adjust was the right moment when the incident occurred. Like “Every Good Neighborhood Has One, the new story was written to amuse the reader. The story is about a classic Chevy hot rod, its passengers and a crooked cop who had one donut too many.

I haven't had any good ideas for a follow-up, unfortunately. While I want to write more Fraggie Rock stories, I obviously can't sell them ... not even to a publisher who can't even pay me in copies. Who knows, maybe I'll even try a new Carnaki story after all. But whatever I choose to write next for publication, there is little danger that Robert J. Sawyer will have to move over – I won't be awarded the Order of Canada in *this* lifetime.

BIG IDEA IN SMALL BYTES

Every now and then, someone asks me about *Off-Colour* and *Animal Magnetism*, probably the earliest large-scale efforts to reproduce furry art in the digital medium. After so much time, there is probably a lot more misinformation available about those discs than there are facts. There are so many questions about the marketing and the nature of the products that even I cannot begin to answer them. I tend to think that much of the rationale behind Kevin Duane's grand schemes, like those many would-be visionaries, lay beyond the realm of common sense.

The disks were all produced under the name *Animal Magnetism*. There were 12 under that name (and one free sampler). But the *first* disk that Kevin Duane produced was not part of that series,

so it must be counted separately from *Animal Magnetism*. The appearance and contents of *Off-Colour* were solely under my control, though produced by Kevin. The following 12 discs (and one free sampler) were entirely produced by Kevin, under his direction, and editing. My only contribution to those disks was a dozen-or-so images, included in only *some* discs. So, while *Off-Colour* and *Animal Magnetism* were technically labeled as *Digital Impudendum* products, they shouldn't be confused, despite their sibling relationship.

All 14 discs – mine as well as Kevin's 13 – were produced to sell and earn royalties for the artists. How well they succeeded is a moot point. I made a fair-to-middling amount altogether from *Off-Colour*. The agreement that Kevin and I had was that the entire expense came from Kevin's half of the copies made, while he sold his half. So while sales were not exactly brisk, I probably made several hundred dollars over the long term.

However, I can't speak authoritatively about the terms for the other discs. I usually received a small payment from every disc I contributed to, but I contributed to no more than half of them. Payment was small – I think \$20 or \$25 – but every artist contributed a dozen, half-a-dozen or even more images. Every attempt was made to ensure that every artist was paid what was owed ... though disputes inevitably arose.

I think it fair to say that the potential for the *Animal Magnetism* disks may have been misjudged. The technology changed extraordinarily rapidly, and within or year or two it was impossible to suppress unauthorized copying – either of outtakes or of the entire discs. Consequently, the window in which the disks could be produced and sold profitably was remarkably narrow. Despite customers who were prepared to pay the \$20 or \$25 for a legitimate copy, the number who probably saw the art for the first time as bootleg copies grew faster. I think both Kevin and I were optimistic about the long-term outcome of the digital revolution.

Although I certainly benefited from my arrangement with Kevin for *Off-Colour*, I suspect that Kevin lost money in the end.

At this point, all this probably water under the bridge ... but it remains an insurmountable problem with any attempt to reissue the *Animal Magnetism* disks. All the material is copyrighted in that form, and requiring the rights from the artists is a impractical legal obstacle. If the disks were copied to the internet as such, the risk that someone would take exception and seek legal recourse is a real one.

Of course, much of the art has by now been released by the artists to the net, and is freely available. But other artists still jealously protect their work, and permit only watermarked or low-resolution copies to be exposed online. Who simply posts their work, and who protects their art as a business, is a entirely a matter of their personal choice.

I still sell one or two copies of OC every year. So while I have no objections to showing the art, I don't allow the material *or* its packaging to be reproduced in its entirety.

There had been artists who copied disc of their art one at a time, but I think Kevin was the first in fandom to produce furry art by commercial means, in print runs of 500 or 1,000 copies. By the time he had produced two or three, a number of other furies had begun making their own ...

before the spread finally of the technology made it unprofitable. But in all probability, those early disks that Kevin and I worked on – *Off-Colour* and *Animal Magnetism* – were the first in furry fandom. For whatever historical value there is in that, perhaps I've at least set the record straight.

Sometimes just a whole lotta nothin...

While I continue to grow stronger after last February's stroke, it sometimes seems like it's just a whole lotta nothin'. If I get better, what good does it do me? I'll still getting older, and I'm at an age when the next stroke can't be long in coming. What good does it do for to squirrel away artwork for another dozen years, so that a few handfuls of fans can "collect" free? Where was my car, my home, my vacations, my savings while all you guys collected my art? Most artists on FurAffinity guys may bitch about how they never make any money, but I've been not making it since about 1970!

Yeah... I turned 66 two days ago, and who even knew it? I celebrated by myself, by buying a couple of apple pies, marked down at WalMart because they were out of pumpkin.

While I *can* go to the mall with Traveling Matt, I never seem to go anywhere else, because anywhere else is too far away. I never see my friends because the fuckers all live in the suburbs, beyond public transit, and for some reason that also makes it too long a drive by car. I'm beginning to feel indifferent about whether I see them or not. My pecker doesn't work and I change shorts three times a day. My eyes are troubling me, I have to take pills all hours of the day, I give blood on demand and my doctors are picking me apart like a carcass by the roadside.

Yes, life is shitty. And then it will be over, and the art work will end in the dumpster. If I can't have it, why should you? *Apres moi le deluge.*

And if that isn't enough, Donald Trump, who can have anything in life except the Apple in the Garden of Eden, and *that fucker* complains that HE has it hard! I guess life is relative after all.

Other than that, how was your day? Mine was not too bad either.

The fact its, I have to keep busy, and so the best I can. Over the last two or three months, this has added up to a moderate amount of writing. and even enough drawing that it was finally worth using the scanner. I don't stick to things like I used to, but at least I'm doing more than just watching movies, eating and sleeping. I've even begin catching up with some art I have promised people ... though progress has been *very* slow.

Most of the art over the last few months has been from the last few months. I had done some drawing while in the hospital, but it was labored and tiresome, so I took a long rest. I began to get more feel more motivated by mid-Summer, but I still didn't have enough incentive to do any scanning. Inevitably, though, I was unable to put it off any longer. Although the drawings aren't clean and tidy, they are at least presentable enough to upload them for the time being. I

may undertake a clean-up of the more ambitious pieces, later, but some of it was of a more provisional nature to begin with, and would not repay returning to it. There's a shit-load more that will be prettier to look at when I have the energy to do serious work on. All that will have to be scanned ... but thankfully, some other time.

Also, I've written a considerable amount of personal journalism over the last couple of months. There were three separate articles -- "Getting Reacquainted," "Traveling Woes" and "The Last Ex", which form a sort of trilogy. I've also managed to keep up my Rowrbrazzle schedule, by using both original and reprinted material. There's also a number of short bits of smut that I wrote to experiment with my narrative powers -- I uploaded them a couple of days ago, since I have no reputation here that could conceivably be damaged by the readers.

All the same, I often have trouble staying active. It would be so easy to give into watching my huge collections of movies and TV shows, and not longer worrying what anyone will think.

I just learned that a comic store in Toronto had a huge amount of *Lucky Luke* comics that were recently published. *Lucky Luke* is one of the classic French/Belgian comics like *Asterix* or *Tintin* that I've always admired for cartooning. Oddly, contemporary French comics in the shadow of Mœbius have left me cold. But although there had been an enormous number of *Lucky Luke* in French, I had had real difficulty finding them in English. After more than 20 years of searching I had found 9. It was easy to find *editions Francais*, but they were very little use to me, since my understanding of French is minimal.

And like that, I was counting the new issues I found on the shelves. One, two, five, ten, twenty ... I began to boggle at that point ... twenty-five, thirty... Geezus. There were 32 issues I have never in my life suspected before, and didn't the three or four I already had. And what was even more mind-blowing was that there were exactly one of each! I ended up buying all 32 ... and at the last moment discovered a brand new *Asterix* from a new artist and writer, which two more to find! Be careful what you wish for, is an old saying, but it never applied more truthfully than it did that moment. This was an astonishing amount of money to spend on comic books. They were *not* your cheap *Marvel* or *DC* monthlies. However, that was exactly why I save money, so that I could buy 32 *Lucky Lukes* and another couple of *Asterix*s if I wanted them.

So, if I had a miserable birthday, I have at least acquired an awful lot of new comic books to read.



The First Song

“It’s pretty easy,” said Wembley Fraggles. “I didn’t know *what* I wanted to do for the longest time. Then it just came to me that I wanted to work for the fire brigade!”

Darl looked skeptical. “There’s a fire brigade in the Rock? What could catch fire in a rock?”

“Oh, all sorts of things,” said Wembley. “Some blankets. Gobo’s guitar. A basket of radish fritters. A wooden ladder. Um... a... Gobo’s guitar. All sorts of things! Ah... no. No, not actual fire ... not very often, but we *do* drill a lot.”

Darl had been living in Fraggles Rock for only a few months, but he had grown tired of having no job of his own, and – when The World’s Oldest Fraggles informed him that it was time he had one – he was looking forward to it. But what should he do? At first it seemed like a sensible idea to ask The World’s Oldest Fraggles for a suggestion, but all the venerable but cranky double-octogenarian said was, “That’s for *you* to find out!” – for which useful advice Darl earned a knot on the head.

Perhaps it was not the best of luck that the next Fraggles that Darl met was the perpetually confused Wembley. He was never without a loss for words, despite having much to say.

“My job is to be the siren! Boy ... is that ever fun! Whenever we have a drill, the others run and get the ladder, buckets, the ax ... we get to wear our helmets, and line up at attention. I stand in back and go ‘waaaaaw, waaaaaaa-aaaaaw’ ... and then we break for ripe melonade and fritters.”

“I don’t think it’s my calling to be a fire-fighter,” said Darl. “Maybe I should ask someone else for advice. Storyteller seems to know a lot about *everything* that Fraggles do in Fraggles Rock.”

And that was how Darl began teaching what he knew about Outer Space to the young’uns at school.

“It’s pretty easy, most of the time,” Storyteller explained. “Kids are naturally curious about almost everything at this age, and we don’t make them read about Gorg kings or mystical lost caverns any more than they have to. There’s always been a few young’uns who were like me, who are naturally bookish, and learn the stories. They tell them back to the other kids – or to anyone who is interested – so it seems to work for everyone.”

Storyteller Fraggles’s real name had apparently been misplaced in everyone’s memory over the years, and – for whatever reason – she wouldn’t reveal what it had been years ago, before she *was* The Storyteller. Perhaps for the same reason, The World’s Oldest Fraggles also didn’t seem to have a proper name anymore. Darl hoped he would not

grow old and be known as “Storyteller” himself, someday. He’d already been through enough unsuitable jobs when he was a Silly Creature.

Storyteller had not only a very important job, as the sole teacher for the clan, but she also lived in what amounted to an actual *house*, with walls and a roof. At least, it was a house with three sides ... the back disappeared into the living rock. It was particularly ancient, and had been constructed, by the Fraggles of ages past, to house the shelves and shelves of books, documents of all sorts, diagrams, maps, deeds, scraps, scribbles – and anything else of note – that someone had once thought worth preserving. It was rare for another Fraggles to look for any of these treasures once committed to posterity, but that had been known to happen. Gobo, for example, was a frequent visitor to the dustier drawers and shelves of the many rooms in the farther recesses of Storyteller’s home ... as had been his famous explorer namesake, Great Uncle Gobo, and his somewhat less illustrious Uncle Matt. In fact, it was not altogether clear just how many rooms there were in Storyteller’s home, as quite a few appeared to have been shut up and forgotten over the years. No one really knew how many rooms had not been opened in a Gorg’s age, or how deeply the house receded into the native Rock. The impression of great age and long-forgotten lore had impressed even Darl – who wondered whether or not the library in the care of Storyteller might not be every bit as large as those in Outer Space ... if only Fraggles had any idea of such things!

Fraggle children gathered outside Storyteller’s home whenever they wanted lessons, or whenever Storyteller felt like teaching them. To Darl, education in the Rock seemed to be a very casual affair. But, surprisingly, lessons were taught for at least a part of almost every day. Indeed, young Fraggles did have a very keen sense of curiosity ... before they grew old enough to judge that they finally knew enough. That was what mystified Darl. At some point, to most Fraggles, it seemed as though the world was complete, and after that point was reached they were satisfied with their friends, good food, having fun and – most of all – song.

And that was the worst part. If there was anything that Darl could not fathom at all, it was music. Of course, he had enjoyed listening to it a great deal when he was still a Silly Creature. But either then, as a Silly Creature, or now, as a Fraggles, he could not sing a note ... could not bear to even try, much to Kiki’s despair. She sang to him every easy tune that she could think of, to no avail. He also could not make up words, and forgot lyrics almost faster than he could listen to them. For a Fraggles, those were very large liabilities.

Naturally, Darl’s silence in song was very nearly the first thing to come up on his first day of teaching.

He had begun his first day as a teacher about as awkwardly as could be expected. He had never *been* a teacher – though he *had* conducted a night-school class in appreciating popular books. That had not been a success, since his pupils had mainly been interested in discussing television science fiction. However, Darl was warming to his subject for today, “The Strange World of Silly Creatures,” when his young charges suddenly broke out into a laughing song *about* Silly Creatures.

If I was a Silly Thing, I'd wear a hat to bed,
To keep my mind from wond'ring till it wandered from my head.
I'd like to be a Silly Thing, because they make me smile,
I'd like to be a Silly Thing, but only for a while!

If I was a Silly Thing, I'd worry all the night
About the Sky-thing falling, that would give me such a fright!
I'd have to work the livelong day, and that would be so vile,
I wouldn't be a Silly Thing, not even for a while!

If I was a Silly Thing, I'd lay in bed all day
Until the moon came up, and chased the sun away,
But then I couldn't see a thing, because it was so dark!
I wouldn't be a Silly Thing, not even for a lark!

It was all the more strange to Darl that he had never heard the song before, and that his students had created it entirely spontaneously!

Amid general laughter, Darl sat and fidgeted while the song ran its course.

“Um... as I was saying, everything in Outer Space is *outside* – which might seem strange to you, but it would seem just as strange to Silly Creatures to live surrounded everywhere by Fraggles. Just as Outer Space goes on forever, you might suppose that the Rock goes on forever too. But as far as I know, this can't be...”

“Unca' Darl?” said one of the younger Fraggles, who Darl thought to be was about eight or nine years old.

“What's that, Arlo?”

“Why didn't you sing with us?”

Darl sighed. It was inevitable the question should come up, as he knew it would. In the Rock, it had been the subject of conversation with almost everyone as soon as he met them. He had no idea of what to say to *Cantus*, of all people, if the magical minstrel discovered a Fraggles who couldn't sing ... not if his life depended on it.

So he simply said, “I didn't know the words,” and hurriedly began to explain how high the sky was.

“Unca' Darl?” the young Fraggles persisted. “We made up the words, like everyone does. How come you didn't make some up with us?”

Darl had, of course, seen daily the incredible ability of Fraggles to devise lyrics on the fly ... and was miserable about in his own total inability to rhyme “moon” and “June” together, or carry a tune in a pail.

The Twins piped up next – as usual, in unison. “Yes, we heard you can’t sing!” The effect the Twins always made by speaking together was somewhat spoiled because one of them lisped from a missing baby-tooth. But clearly, the Twins were scandalized.

Darl made several more attempts to change the subject, but without luck. He thought for a moment, then abruptly changed tack.

“I once heard about another Fraggles who never sang.”

“Go on,” said several young Fraggles ... who clearly didn’t believe their new teacher.

“Do you want to hear the story, or not?” Darl demanded.

An impromptu debate ensued between the young Fraggles, and eventually Arlo was appointed to speak for the majority. For the time being, they would *believe* their teacher...

“All right, then,” Darl began his tale. “Just as Fraggles have always sung, there was one small girl who – from her youngest memory – had never sung at all. The Storyteller told this story to me, and I believe it must have happened hundreds, maybe even thousands, of years ago ... not long before the history of the Rock began...”

“Elzie was not a happy Fraggles. Although she was normal in every other way, and did all the same things that other Fraggles did, she was different in one particular thing. Other Fraggles laughed and played. They told jokes and played tricks. They enjoyed games and poked their noses into things where they had no business being. They ate too much and slept too long, and almost never skinned their knees. Elzie did all these things too. But all the same, Elzie was different. All the other Fraggles loved music, and sang all day long ... all *except* for Elzie. She never sang at all, and hadn’t for as far as far back as anyone could remember.

“Other Fraggles were full of song, and sang silly songs, songs about beauty, boastful songs, songs about friendship and getting up in the morning, songs about mismatched gloves and breaking dishes ... in fact, very nearly everything anyone *could* sing about. But there was one thing that no Fraggles ever really had cause to sing about, and that was a *sad* song. What reason had any Fraggles to sing a *sad* song?

“*Except* for Elzie. As Elzie grew older, other Fraggles realized – more and more – that she really didn’t fit in very well. The less well that fit Elzie in with other Fraggles, the less well they felt that they fit in with her. Eventually, Elzie came to spend most of her time by herself, lonely and unhappy. Bad enough as that was, Elzie could not find her voice, with which to sing her unhappiness.

“Instead, poor Elzie wandered away to caves that other Fraggles rarely visited, only returning when dusk fell – or sometimes even staying overnight – when she discovered strange and fascinating caverns, that kept her mind off the emptiness she felt inside.”

“Unca’ Darl?” asked Arlo.

“What is it? You won’t like the story? It isn’t finished, you know.”

In fact, Darl nearly had the children mesmerized. While every one of them had been unhappy now and then, the idea of a Fraggles who was always so unhappy that she had never sung – never in her life – was almost scandalous. The children had bunched up close to Darl, the younger ones almost sitting on his feet. Even one or two grown-up Fraggles had grown curious, drifting over to where the children sat, and looking around with half a mind to find a seat themselves. Even Large Marvin seemed curious, and *he* was as dim as a Headless Patterpillar.

“It’s like this, Unca’ Darl,” questioned Arlo. “I mean, you live in Fraggles Rock, you have Fraggles all around. Why didn’t Elzie’s friends *teach* her to sing?”

“Oh. Um. Some people just can’t learn, you know. It’s like not being able to climb rocks, or swim well. Or paint like Aunt Mokie. Or make pottery, like my friend, Willa.”

Behind Darl, the curtain over Storyteller’s window twitched, revealing that she was watching surreptitiously. The aged teacher and librarian flashed a smile that Darl caught from the corner of his eye.

He said, “Shall we just continue with the story, then?”

“Even while other Fraggles continued to sing and play, they worried about Elzie. But there was little they could do for her, and their worry gradually faded with time. Only occasionally did they miss their wayward friend. Instead, they returned to what Fraggles do naturally. There were moments when they saw everything clearly – such as where laughter comes from, or where the dew goes in the morning. Yet, when the moment is over, Fraggles stop asking difficult questions that they have no answers to. So, of course, Elzie’s friends dismissed their concerns easily.

“After a long time by herself, Elzie came to a cavern that was so far from her usual wanderings that she had never visited it before. It was a rather large cavern, that came to a sudden end in a very high wall of tumbled rocks. Elzie looked up at the barrier for a long while, and thought to herself that it didn’t look right at all. It seemed as though there might be an opening, high up near the ceiling of the cave, that might lead to the other side. Perhaps, she thought, there had been rock-fall ... but, if she clambered up to the very top, she might find a way through.

“It was a difficult climb, full of sliding rocks and false trails, but at last Elzie stood at the top of a steep climb that was so near the ceiling of the cave that she had to stoop. To her disappointment, there seemed to be no way through. But Elzie was stubborn, and – bending low – she carefully investigated every crevice and crack at the top of the rock slide. At that, Elzie very nearly didn’t find the narrow passage between two loose stones. By pushing and pulling, however, Elsie rolled one rock aside, followed by the other, and then there was space enough for her to squeeze both arms through, and begin moving even more rocks aside.

“Almost before she knew it, Elzie was in the cavern on the other side.

“She stood on a long slope of loose rubble, even taller than the wall on the other side. She saw that the floor, far below, was also made from fallen rocks of all shapes and sizes ... and in fact there were fallen boulders of enormous size just about everywhere she looked. Broken ledges, fallen pillars, mountainous piles of debris and smashed-up rock formations lay everywhere ... and rivulets of black water that disappeared into sudden holes wherever it found an outlet.

“Elzie took care as she made her way to the bottom of the cavern, where she realized that – once upon a time – there must have been a *tremendous* cave-in. The ceiling of the present cavern had collapsed, destroying orderly streams and rock formations that had been built up over millennia. Even stalactites that were as big around as a house had broken and fallen to the ground amid the calamity. Elzie stood in sheer awe of the destruction that she saw everywhere.

“Elzie must have spent most of the afternoon trying to find her way through the maze of ruined rock. Every inch of it was a new discovery, and every direction a trail full of surprises. Rocks had turned upside down, or formed by accident into semi-orderly piles. Some stalactites had fallen on their sides, some lay in piles, while others were scattered higgledy-piggledy. It was possible to wiggle between two or more large leaning pillars, and discover hidden rooms that couldn’t be seen from outside.

“But everything was barren, and all of it buried by eons of musty, grey dust. There didn’t seem to be anything more of interest to see, so finally Elzie decided it was time to turn back toward home.”

—

“Unca’ Dar-r-r-l?” piped the Twins, their imperfect unison marred by one lisper.

“...Uh, yes?”

“If Miz Elzie didn’t sing then, why didn’t Cantus sing for her when she got back?”

“Didn’t you hear me say this was millions and billions of years ago?”

“Uh-huh.’

“Cantus is pretty old, but I don’t suppose he was born *that* long ago!”

Arlo and one or two of the other young Fraggles stifled a laugh at the Twins’ embarrassment. There may even have been a quiet chuckle from the curtained window.

—

“Elzie began to work her way back up from the floor of the cavern, winding her way around the more difficult obstacles, until she stumbled over something different. For the first time, she found something that appeared to have been *made*, and was not

merely rock and debris. So surprised was Elzie that she bent over to examine the object more closely. It was definitely something that had been made by Fraggles hands, and it looked quite a bit like a very old wooden door sill, broken into several pieces. Moving aside more rubble, Elzie found parts for other things – broken tables, chairs, spoons, dishes, buckets, stools, shelves... in fact, almost anything she could imagine – if she looked hard enough for it. But everything was so badly damaged that it was all but unrecognizable. It was all buried under the ruins, but – as she searched – it became obvious to Elzie that there was enough wreckage scattered around for an entire village.

“It wasn’t until then that Elzie realized what this meant. There *had* been a village here once ... but *now* there was no one.

“Elzie wandered this way and that, feeling numb with shock, picking up bits and pieces of wood, only to drop them again. She found the signs of the ancient disaster wherever she went. Finally, she decided it was time she returned the way she came, and go home. Exhausted, she collapsed over a massive block of stone to rest. Then, something underfoot caught her eye. After so much climbing and crawling through the rubble, her feet were naturally dusty and nearly the colour of the rocks beneath, but there was no mistaking that she stood on something different ... something soft.

“When she looked down, what Elsie saw looked like a dirty thatch of straw. But when she moved her feet to look more closely, it seemed more like a handful of wool was trapped under the rock. There was hardly any shape to it, only a sort of a bundle at one end, and divided at the other. She tugged at it, and the rotted end of it, trapped under the burden of rock, pulled apart. But Elzie had freed enough of it to see that it had been – a little girl’s dolly.

“It was only then that she realized the truth. This was not merely a village that had been merely abandoned. Fraggles had been living here when the cave had fallen in.

“Elzie shot upright in horror, and for the first time in her life a sound came forth from the very bottom her Fraggles soul, a sound that she had never made before.

Darl now had the undivided attention of everyone in the room – not only of the children, and the grown-up Fraggles who had gathered around the children, but also the speculative gaze of the Storyteller.

“As the other Fraggles played in the Great Hall, a simple note rose up from far away. It was so low and quiet, at first, that no one could tell where it came from. Then it grew louder, and then suddenly broke into the most sorrowful song that any Fraggles had sung for as long as anyone could remember. It sang of loss and grief, of a world crushed out of existence in a instant ... a song, finally, of a long-lost child’s doll ... which had lain unseen underneath the unforgiving rock since the world ended.

“Far away, all the other Fraggles stopped where they were ... For Elzie had sung.”

Darl looked out over the children. They were still spellbound, and didn't seem to realize that Darl had stopped speaking. Gradually, they seemed to come out of their daze, and only then began to talk in hushed voices as they wandered away.

Arlo came up and asked, somewhat sheepishly, "Unca' Darl? Is that a true story?"

"Perhaps not, strictly speaking," Darl hedged. "I'm sure I've heard something like that somewhere before, though I may have fleshed it out a little. Besides ... you asked a question earlier ... about me. Perhaps the story answers that question ... *in part.*"

Arlo was a very intelligent Fraggles, much more thoughtful than most, and he gave Darl a long penetrating look that pleased him more than he expected.

"Okay," Arlo replied, slowly. "But I hope someday I'll hear you sing ... and when you do, you'll know how wonderful it is."

Darl smiled as young the Fraggles scampered off to join the others.

The Storyteller approached silently, having finished with her eavesdropping.

"That was a good story," she said quietly.

"I fudged it a lot," Darl admitted. "In fact, I made it up entirely."

"That's often the best kind," said Storyteller. "I think you may have a real gift for this, you know. You should definitely take up teaching – maybe even two or three times a week."

"Unfortunately, I hardly know anything about life here in the Rock, and telling stories about Silly Creatures may be fun for the kids, but it can't be much use to them here."

"Nonsense. The story you told just now about Elzie's First Song wasn't about Silly Creatures ... nor even about Fraggles. It was about something much more important – it was about life. Teach what comes from inside," said Storyteller, "and you'll always be right."

"And someday," she added, "someday, when it comes time for me to pass the job on to someone younger, *you* might become the new Storyteller!"

Darl sighed.

NB: I'm grateful to Walt Wentz for duty above and beyond mere proofreading. When I was fatally stuck for a Fraggles song, Walt delivered one that was eminently suitable, though protesting that it was modest doggerel. However, I can only aim for doggerel if I set my sights considerably higher. In fact, having a model to emulate, I actually did add a third stanza at the end that will hopefully hold up my end.

SCHMOOZING?

When I first read the current mailing, I had to confess that no comments came to mind. Now that the issue has been put to bed, I'm hoping that I may have some last-minute thoughts. Then again, I only have half-a-page to fill, and – if I'm not careful – I might end up with more than I bargained for. So let's just take it one step at a time, shall we?

To begin with, I received a swell custom card from Schirm (our founder). I also got some odd little cards, from Joe Strike and Karno, that promoted their (sort of new) comic. I got a letter from Charles Garafalo, who said hello from Jerry Collins. I think I intended to write back, but my good intentions went missing. I believe a card arrived from Robert Alley. E.T. Bryan and Liz also sent me a card. I've known E.T. and Liz for way too many years to number ... but I believe they are new members. Nathan Kaiser was kind enough to send me a tiny little starship from Star Trek ... even though he is *not* a member but this is as good a time as any to acknowledge a thoughtful gesture.

It begins to look as though mailing comments will be out of the question, after all. Even the thought of trying leaves me aghast. Although I finished the new Fraggles Rock story for this issue, I have yet to deal with the new art. But even then, I'm very short of time. If I cannot deliver new art, I have art from my last issue of *Broken Toys* that will serve in a pinch, and deserves the exposure.

On the bright side, I have most of the material to compose the next issue all ready to go.

Perhaps more sobering is that I now prepared to begin on the fourth Fraggles Rock story. I have thought about this for well over a year, and feel recovered enough to attempt a much longer, more ambitious story – “Heroes and Villains.”

