



CHRISTMAS ISSUE - 31 DECEMBER 2015

Owing to the fact that the last issue was a few days late, this is the second *issue* of *Broken Toys* in December. It's the holiday season, so why not indulge a little? This will be an unusual issue in other ways as well, but you'll read about that below. For the record, this is *Broken Toys 45*, written, designed, edited, published and © by Taral Wayne, who is solely responsible for the libels, half-truths and outright make-believe therein. I dwell at 245 Dunn Ave., Apt. 2111, Toronto, Ontario, M6K 1S6, Canada, but can be reached by e-mail at Taral@bell.net. All issues of *Broken Toys* are available to download from <http://efanzines.com/Taral/index.htm> or from <http://fanac.org/fanzines/BrokenToys/> This is Kiddelidivee Books & Art 304

SEASON'S BLEATINGS

This is an unusual issue. It is the only one, other than the first and the Halloween issue (#36), not to have a letter column. There are two reasons for this. First, I was late with the last issue, mailing it in early December. If I wanted a proper December issue only three weeks later, it would have to be simple to edit. Secondly, I had special plans for *Broken Toys 45* – it would be another Christmas issue, but, like the Halloween issue, it would consist mostly of a work of fiction.

Oh, yes ... I can see that lip curling up in a sneer over there. I know how you uber-cool, oh-so-fannish sophisticates feel about fan-written fiction! Especially, when it's not fiction about fannish fandom! Worst of all, such nicey-nice fiction! No one is put in his place, there isn't a cynical jibe to be found anywhere, and the world does not appear to be a colder, bleaker place at the end of it all. What's the point, you might wonder?

Well, sometimes I feel like I'm drowning in that sophisticated world of skeptics, cynics and realists. There is a raging beast deep down inside me that demands a chance to be *nice* once in a while, and

look at life as something worthy of a little joy. Some people turn to Jack Daniels for this, others to Jesus ... I've turned to Jim Henson.

It's a curious thing. Although I've spent most of my life spinning out imaginary worlds and fictional characters, none of it has been very suitable for telling stories. For decades I thought I just didn't have the story-telling gene. In my sixth decade, however, it seems that I must have it somewhere in my genome, and it was only lacking the right enzymes to activate it. Of late I have written a number of stories, which, it seems to me, weren't half bad. Maybe even a little good ... even if not "serious" in any way.

Of late, I have written three or four "parables" and "God, The Devil and an Irishman" that were all quite short (fantasies), "Fly on the Wall" (comic-horror-fannish), "Why They Race Horses" (fannish), "The Nametag" (horror-fannish), "Every Good Neighborhood Has One" (comic-horror), "Cutting Edge" (fannish), and "Canaries in the Dark" (horror), which I have actually sold and/or had published.

The gene is out of the bottle, and I'm finding the fumes intoxicating.

Of course, there has been less than satisfying feedback from fandom. I expect this. Fanfiction is not the first thing I read in a fanzine, either, and I understand the caution a seasoned reader must exercise when approaching amateurs bearing tales. Even when dealing with professional writers, one has to be picky ... since there are too many for *any* one person to read more than a select few.

But I'm writing these stories for *me*, not for you churlish Philistines. I was hoping that allowances would be made, of course ... after all, I've been writing for fanzines for 40 years, and by now it would be reasonable for other fans to know what to expect from me. Surely my skills would not desert me entirely the moment I added a fictional character and inserted a plot? To be fair, there has been a *smidgeon* of positive comment. This isn't the fandom of 1975, though. We're all older and "tired," and we've seen it all before. We hoard our energies for our own activities. So, a smidgeon of comment is just about all *anything* written for a fanzine today is likely to produce – unless it's about Sad Puppies, or some other tiresome controversy. I think I will have to take that smidgeon and cherish it for whatever warmth it gives me – like the last match in an underground labyrinth.

For a few issues I've been beating around the bush about what I intend to do when *Broken Toys* has reached its 50th and final issue. I trust I've answered that question now?

I don't really expect to begin a career of professional writing, though. I think it is too late for that. I don't understand the market anymore. It is full of self-publishing and on-line publishing and publication-on-demand and, I don't know what any of it means. Without a check in the mail, books in the store and reviews to read, none of it seems real. Besides, I'm 64. It probably takes about ten years to establish a career. My health could be worse – Myasthenia Gravis rarely kills – but though I might easily live another 20 years, it's nothing I care to wager on.

And, surprisingly, I don't seem to write *science fiction*. I don't know why. It's all the more strange since I read very little of the sort of stories that I *do* write. SF has been variously defined, including "the effect of change, particularly technological change, on individuals and society." I just don't seem to have anything to say about this.

What do I want to write about? For one thing, I think I have a foot in the door to possibly sell other “Carnacki the Ghost Finder” stories. There was an unexpectedly larger market for such stories than I expected – that is, greater than one ... or even *none*. I had only planned the one that I wrote, “The Canaries in the Dark,” but have material for another one or two, should there be any call for it. Writing more Carnacki stories is entirely contingent on having a publisher for them, however. I’ve already satisfied myself that I can do the job.

For now, I seem to derive a good deal of enjoyment from writing about Fraggles ... a subject that I have no doubt sets your skin crawling. Even those of you who willingly read Young Adult fiction are probably skeptical of stories set in a make-believe world from a puppet show, and aimed at an arguably even younger audience. Yet I find the world of Fraggles and the characters who inhabit it to be full of wonderful tales that have yet to be told. Much of this has emerged from the addition of characters of my own, whose roles in the Rock seem to raise all sorts of questions about which I feel more strongly than whether nanotechnology will invade our bodies, or if terraforming Mars might result in a die-off of undiscovered life forms.

Like it or not, I’ll be writing more Fraggles stories. I already know what most of them will be.

The next will be “Heroes and Villains,” and tell what happens when Darl brings undesirable ideas from Outer Space to Fraggles. After that, it would be logical to write “Magic Will Find You,” to tell the readers how Darl and Kiki first meet, and how he goes to live with her. “Doc’s Back Door” will be about whether Fraggles should be a refuge for *anyone*. “A Song For Darl” is about overcoming a final obstacle to acceptance, both by others and by himself. “Dances With Gorgs...” ... *that* one hasn’t completely come together yet, I admit.

If I really do all this writing – and that’s a pretty big “if” – I think it stands to reason that I cannot publish a monthly fanzine. That was another reason to put *Broken Toys* to rest. I do still want to publish, but at a *far* more leisurely pace. I may be able to do a little fanzine writing on the side, but not at the volume that I was a few years ago, when it was hard for readers to get away from my by-line.

The funny thing is, despite so much writing, and a fair proportion of it being fiction in the last two or three years, I don’t think I have any reputation as a writer. I don’t know if I ought to have one or not – but among the profuse number of little writer’s groups in Canadian SF, including the local ones, I don’t think I appear on anyone’s radar screen. Perhaps this is as it ought to be, but I know of numerous “writers” with no significant writing credits – small magazines that few have heard of, or a Web page that would be hard to find even if you were looking for it. Yet *they* are “writers.” To tell you the truth, I’ve long been a bit self-conscious about this. It seems personal, as though the Club Rules have a list of who may not belong *only because they are on the list*. Oh well ... moving right along.

It must have occurred to the reader that there is something almost divinely self-defeating about writing in a genre owned from top to bottom, Gorgs to Doozers, by the Walt Disney Corporation. These are the people who sue day-care centers when a gifted teacher paints Tinker Bell and Peter Pan on the classroom wall. What will they do to me, if they find out what I’ve been doing – putting nearly-adult ideas into the mouths of their valuable intellectual property? Answer? Until I cost them money or harm the value of their franchise, *nothing*. I have no illusions about being able to reach an audience. Yet, if it should ever become possible to publish any of this, I have a Cunning Plan. (That always works for Blackadder!)

My Cunning Plan is to rewrite the whole damn thing! Fraggles aren't the first little magic people to live in holes, or between walls.

But I began this as an editorial, to explain why there is no letter column in this issue. Does that mean that all the letters written on *Broken Toys 44* have been used to roast chestnuts on the open fire? No, no. I have already edited them into a letter column that will be published in *Broken Toys 46*. It will be a large issue, by the looks of it, since *Left Over Parts* is already 24 pages by its lonesome, and that includes no comments that are yet to be made on *this* issue.



A CHRISTMAS ALBUM

1976 The previous few years had been almost unspeakably vile. I mean an alcoholic father, family violence, losing our home repeatedly for lack of means to pay the rent, dropping out of school, no work, sometimes nothing to eat in the pantry, sisters in a foster home kind of vile. But by 1976, the gaping rent in my life had begun to stitch together. I had a job, rented a large enough apartment that I could provide shelter to my mother, who was then able to get both sisters back from the foster home because we had a place to live again ... and from that solid foundation we had been fast-laned through Toronto Community Housing into a subsidized, city-owned townhouse. We were a family again ... though thankfully *without* the baleful presence of the man who had broken us up in the first place.

We were myself, my mother, her mother (my grandmother), and my two adoptive sisters Christine and Karen. They were not quite nine, and had lived through experiences at the foster home they would never be keen to talk about.

Our first sight of our new home was a few days before Christmas in a very cold December. There were already great heaps of snow on the ground as I remember, though we spent so many winters in Willowdale after that first Christmas that trying to remember any particular one is like picking a Maraschino cherry from a bottle. The townhouse had three bedrooms, which was a bit of a concern, considering that there were three adults and two children. I needed only a glance at the basement to see the possibilities and claim it for myself, though, so Granny got her own room.

Christmas was upon us almost before we could get settled in. I had to remove several large green garbage bags of just plain dirt from the cellar floor before I could arrange my bed, desk and bookshelves. The move had been as difficult as they usually are, and I was not much in the holiday spirit that year. I don't think I even participated in putting up the tree. Yet I still remember that first Christmas ever in Willowdale. Outside the windows was darkness, and the kind of cold that makes black ice on the roads, stops your breath, and freezes it into hanging clouds in front of your face.

Inside, the tree filled an entire corner of the living room, from floor to ceiling. The bulbs burned fiercely, illuminating glass ornaments in refulgent colour. Lights reflected by angel hair and tinsel filled the room with a warm glow. Around the foot of the tree were the presents we had managed to scrape together.

For the first time in years, I felt like I was home.

The 90s Mom had been dead for a year and a half when I finally left Willowdale for my new place. My sisters had left, and I couldn't stay in a city-owned townhouse meant for a full family by all myself, so I faced transfer to a one-bedroom apartment. I didn't like the first apartment offered me, at the farthest corner of northeast Toronto. Due to its isolation and lack of amenities, no one lives out there unless they work close by, cannot afford higher rent, or live in one of the Toronto Community Housing projects. We don't talk about those neighborhoods as ethnic slums, but that is more or less what they've become. I did not even have to see the building to know I didn't want that to be my new address.

Luckily, I was entitled to one refusal, and the next building I was offered was in a neighborhood I knew well, and entirely favoured – Parkdale, which is where I live to this day.

Both my sisters were married or living on their own by this time. I heard little from Karen, but kept in regular touch with Christine. She was determined to keep the family together as best she could by hosting Christmas dinner every year. If not for that, I doubt I would have seen Karen again, she had become such a remote creature.

I had my own tree at the new place, of course, a rather large one that I put up and arranged a few meager presents around, just to remind myself of the holiday spirit. Most of the gifts were for my sisters and nephews, naturally, but I was in the habit of buying myself a much-wanted doo-dad, or a bottle of Kahlúa ... and one other present that I always wrapped in impeccable aluminum foil and wistfully labeled "to Saara Mar." The only other celebrations observed at home were to watch the Alastair Sim "Christmas Carol," "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," "A Christmas Story" and perhaps one or two other seasonal classics.

The real Christmas in those days, though, began the night before. On Christmas Eve Christine picked me up at the lobby door of my building, and we drove the many miles to her bedroom suburb just outside the city limit. The kids would be abed already, and the house lights turned low. I'd hand over a small shopping bag with my modest gifts in them, and then presents galore were dragged out of hiding places around their house – from the closet, from the basement, from behind the couch or the hidden storage space in a footstool. They were toys for my two nephews, of course, who were only one and two years old the first year I spent Christmas at my sister's place. None of the toys were wrapped yet, so we'd all sit on the floor with tape dispensers, scissors, rolls of paper, ribbon, bows and gift tags spread out like the debris from an explosion in one of Santa's workshops. For half the night, we'd wrap action figures, simple puzzles, games, toy cars and other gifts suitable for the very young. I don't know why I enjoyed it so much, but I did.

In later years, as the two boys grew older, their toys grew more sophisticated and grandiose. Jigsaw puzzles were replaced by electronic games. Articulated action figures acquired elaborate accessory kits. Pokemon cards became Monopoly boards, with Simpsons playing pieces. Among the many delightful surprises for the kids was a toy car, large enough for them to sit in and drive, and powered by a real car battery. I wanted very much to get in it for a spin, but contented myself with assisting in assembling it. Although I had long outgrown such toys myself, I delighted in wrapping them in the small hours of the morning ... as though it was a *pre*-Christmas just for me.

Chris and her husband Dave would go to bed at last, leaving me to read for a while, or watch a portable VCR in the basement. Then I'd catch what sleep I could on the basement couch.

The routine changed slowly over the next few years. The long drive was a burden to my sister, so she began sending a taxi to my door instead. It would roll up to my lobby at 4 in the morning – normally the darkest part of the night, just before the dawn – but as luck would have it, most Christmases in those years seemed to bring snow, so there was a cotton-candy-pink city glow reflected everywhere. Nevertheless, it was always very cold and silent. The drive to Outer Suburbia would be serene and surreal... except for the year the cabbie got lost, and I had to somehow navigate our way to a destination of which I had only a vague idea ... not at all helped by the blinding snowstorm that year.

When I was dropped off by the taxi, I'd arrive at the family home just when everyone was out of bed and more or less wakeful. Breakfast of bacon and eggs would be sizzling away on the stove, toast a-poppin' and the smell of fresh coffee wafting into the living room from the kitchenette. I was no longer helping with the gift-wrapping on Christmas Eve, but on the other hand, I was no longer trying to snatch three or four hours of sleep on a couch that was two feet shorter than I was before Christmas morning, either. The kids were already emptying out their stockings even before I claimed the last brittle slice of bacon.

Christmas morning itself had changed little from the first years. The kids were under slightly more self-control than before, and did not have to be physically restrained from simply tearing off the wrappings of every present before even bothering to open the boxes or packaging inside. Another difference from the earliest years was that I had no more idea what the kids got for Christmas than they did, which was a pleasure deferred from the previous night, but well worth the wait. Now past the toddler years, they were playing with Transformer robots, remotely controlled helicopters and hand-held games.

I usually felt a little embarrassed by the presents given to me. After all, I could only give my sister's family the best I could find in thrift shops, or marked down at Wal-Mart. It was never much. But over the years I was greatly benefited by a bread machine, an electric razor, a fully articulated office chair, new pots and pans and many other things I lacked.

When the orgy of present-opening was over, I'd go upstairs and grab a few hours of kip in one of my nephew's bedrooms until dinner.

The dinner nook was dangerously crowded when the table was stretched out to its full length. I was seated at the head of the table, as I suppose I was the senior male of the family. (What an odd distinction for a shiftless ne'er-do-well like me!) My aunt and uncle were seated to my left, Chris to my right, the two boys farther down the table and my brother-in-law David at the other end. As you would expect, the table nearly groaned under its burden of turkey, ham, potatoes, vegetables, cranberry sauce, gravy, rolls, napkins, cutlery, glasses, coffee pot, egg nog, juice, wine, party bangers and family elbows.

At the end of the evening, Chris would pile me and several shopping bags of gifts, candies and leftovers into the car with Aunt and Uncle, and drive us all home. That might seem a little anticlimactic, but I would be too tired and too full to give it much thought. Like a lion replete on too much holiday zebra, I found it was enough to fill up the rest of the evening with a movie before I turned in.

... to Present

Ineluctably, Christmas began to change in the millennium. I don't know when, precisely, but it seemed that my nephews shot up from teenagers to young men almost overnight. They were no longer unwrapping new cartridges for their Game Boys or a Wii on Christmas morning. They were getting

quality-made automotive tools, and brand-name clothing. Adult things. Things *I* could certainly not afford to buy them, yet what point was there to giving cheap toys to two young men who already had girlfriends and were in community college? Then my uncle died, and a year later, his wife, my aunt. I was suddenly the sole member of my mother's household who was still alive, and that gave me a feeling as though I was approaching the end of a plank over an abyss.

Worse was to come. My nephews finished school, then found jobs. I wouldn't object, except their jobs demanded they work on the holiday, so they were no longer free to be home on Christmas. A couple of years ago, my sister Christine scheduled the family dinner on a different day than the 25th. I think it was also the first Christmas dinner with neither my aunt nor uncle present.

However, my sister Karen, to everyone's surprise, adopted two little girls, who were now with us at Christmas. Once again, there are toys wrapped and waiting under the tree ... although, I admit, not the sort of toys that appealed to the "big little boy" in me.

As well, I suppose it is only a matter of time before my nephews bring great-nephews or great-nieces into the world. I may yet have another chance to see a young boy's eyes light up as his first sight of a bright red Ferrari with opening doors and steerable wheels. By then, it may drive itself and generate the authentic Ferrari roar.

It will never be quite the same, though. Those unearthly taxi rides in the falling snow, the marathon wrapping sessions, the fits of cramped sleep before I was aroused by the mouth-watering smell of turkey roasting, and all the hundred other details of Christmases past ... leading all the way back to my own childhood. I had been born early enough to open presents that yielded silk-screened tin toys with razor-sharp tabs that could slice open a careless fingertip *just like that!* Endless repetitions of "The Little Drummer Boy" had not yet driven people to implacable rage. Frosty, Rudolf and the Grinch had not yet brightened the tiny black-and white-screens of the televisions of my youth. Christmas was also the time for the Great Adventure of going downtown to see the Santa Claus parade, and being dragged around department stores by an oblivious mother. Can I forget when I was only three or four, I was given a heavy steel pedal-car with fire ladders! Naturally, as soon as it was lifted out of the package, I scrambled into the cardboard box! Well, it's all over now ... except for the memories.

Without a doubt, I do get a little maudlin at this time of year.

But in two day's time is another Christmas ... my 64th, as I said, and each one is pure and fresh as the new-fallen snow.

Well ... that'll teach me to speak too soon. After all that rhapsodizing over Christmas, almost everyone came down with the flu except me! Christmas dinner was cancelled.

Here's to New Year's Eve!



NB: This story takes place about 15 months after Darl went to live with Kiki in Fraggle Rock. The flashback, however, took place the year before, which was only 2 months after Darl became one of the Fraggles of the Great Hall Clan. The previous story, "All Fraggles, Then and Now," took place only 2 months before this one. 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 Fraggle 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 Fraggle 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 the 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?"

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 cove 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 discarded 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, he 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!*"

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* Festival of the Bells would be celebrated a little differently, and 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 Holemate 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 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. I had Orie, that Fraggie 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 Holemate 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 said LCBO on one side, telling Darl exactly where it had come from. 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 Holemate.

"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 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.

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 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 the end of 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.

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.”

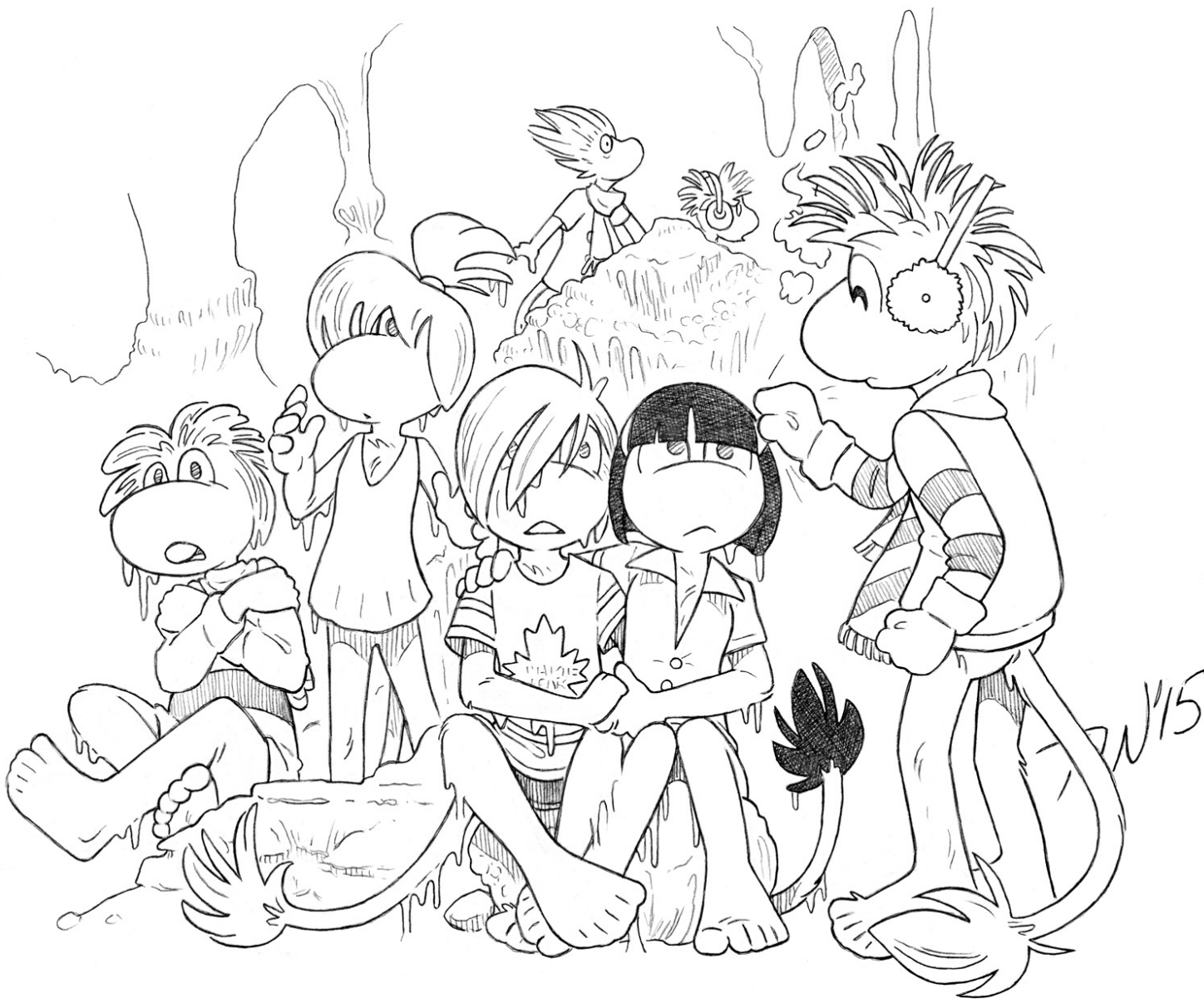
Gobo looked at Mokey. Sometimes she said the strangest things. “Yes, we must.”

“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 hmmmm, 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.



Happy New Year