

Faux Pause 1

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Colour '21



faux Pause!

The eve of Gotterdammerung may be upon us, but is no excuse to put off a fanzine. It is especially not a reason to delay one that I have been planning for so long, for which I have purposefully aside so much material and over which I have procrastinated until the iron was nearly cold! It is time to begin again, if for no better reason than to stop publishing the previous title, a mere place-holder that I never meant to continue for as long as long as *five issues!*

This is old enough to be almost primordial and embarrassingly confessional. But considering the topic, it was **apropos**. It also seemed to me a suitably light topic to begin the issue.

You're Only a Virgin Once



Trust me: you'll know when you stop being a virgin. But you may not recognize your change of status at first.

In my case, I thought I had failed utterly, and only learned of my mistake from my friend Bob. Bob was already an old pro. Of course, I am talking about his status as a *writer*. What did you *think* I was talking about?

Bob had been writing assiduously since he was a fan, and succeeded early by selling his first story to *Analog* in 1975 ... much to the astonishment and cheers of his friends. There was less cheering when it took him several more years to sell a *second* story. But he persevered, and in the 1980s Bob sold several *more* stories, published his first novel, and established himself as the model of a successful midline writer. Therefore, I looked to Bob for inspiration in my own attempt to jump out of amateur status, and into the rank of professional writer.

Unfortunately, my effort to rise above amateur status was a failure ... but that is at the end of my story.

The beginning of the story is when I was illustrating articles for a magazine called *Ruralite*.

Ruralite is a magazine with an outsized circulation, but which nobody is likely to know about. It is published free to the members of various electrical co-ops, mainly in regions of the Pacific Northwest Coast, and at that time was received

by three or four hundred thousand people. That's a lot, actually. To put that in perspective, in those days *Analog* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction Magazine* were perhaps read by thirty thousand. Potentially, then, *Ruralite* was a major market. The reality was less impressive, however. It's doubtful that most readers ever spent more than a few moments scanning its pages, and many may never have bothered to read it.

The majority its material was composed of personality features, tidbits, articles on fly fishing or collecting curious old bottles, changes in the rates of electrical service, a photo page, children's drawings, updates on community events, a letters page and so on. I think you get the picture. Many of the members who received *Ruralite* did, no doubt, eagerly anticipate the latest issue every month ... but I suspect that quite a number of copies were tossed into the wood-stove almost immediately, hardly before the ink had dried on the newly printed pages.

One of the assistant editors of the magazine was Walt Wentz, who was looking for illustrators. As I recall, the artist of choice had other commitments, and so he referred Walt to a serviceable replacement. That was how Walt got my address.

Walt give me my first assignment in 1987 ... a trial run, in effect. The job I turned in was exactly what Walt was looking for, and more assignments soon followed. The pay was not exceptional by the standards of *Colliers*, or even *Mad Magazine* – I think sixty or seventy-five dollars – but the work I had been doing for fanzines paid nothing at all. The size of the checks slowly grew until they were in the neighborhood of an even hundred for every published drawing. Walt requested a little tweaking on one or two, but none were rejected outright. If nothing else, I was now undeniably a professional *artist*.

But not yet a professional *writer*. This is only the middle of the story.

I was certainly not making a living as an artist. *Ruralite* only published monthly, and twelve issues a year scarcely added up to a successful career. However, Walt approved as many assignments as he was able during the eleven years that I worked for *Ruralite*, and I had work more months than not. In the end, I was able to turn in sixty assignments.

Most of the drawings were a lot of fun to do, honing a different set of skills than my usual fan work, and gave me unexpected pleasure. The subject matter ran from rural electrification to wills for elderly retirees. The articles I illustrated had

titles such as "Grammy and the Big Foot," "The Day the Turkey Flew," "Beware the Chair," and "The Moose Wash."

Now and then, I picked up extra work from readers of *Ruralite* who needed an artist. One such job was for a book store. The proud new owner wanted a drawing of an old-fashioned spinning wheel to hang over the entrance. A more unusual request was from a lady in Alaska, who sold cross-stitch patterns, and wanted a series of animal-based cartoon patterns to sell at flea markets and crafts fairs. A typical cartoon illustrated a "Polar Knight," and another the "Bear Facts." I like to think that my drawings left her devotees *in stitches* for many happy hours.

Inevitably, Walt's boss retired, and the new editor-in-chief thought that ink drawings were old-fashioned, photographs were more professional, and he absolutely wouldn't approve any more pay for hand-drawn art. He flatly rejected the last assignment that I turned in, paid the "kill fee" and ended my professional career as an illustrator just that suddenly.

Walt left the magazine himself, shortly afterward.

The finish of my story is also about *Ruralite*.

I had been writing for science fiction fanzines for quite some time, gradually gaining confidence in wordsmithing. I published "The Ghost on my Bed" in one of my own fanzines, in 1986. *New Toy 1* was to be my flagship title, and was followed up by a second issue about a year later. But for reasons that seem inexplicable to me now, I didn't publish the third issue until 2010! Worse, despite the wait of yet another ten years, I still haven't published the *fourth* issue!

"The Ghost on my Bed" was about a cat called Scratch.

When I was young, my family raised any number of different animals – dogs, cats, parakeets, rats, ferrets, squirrels, skunks, tropical fish, mynah birds, monkeys and more others than I care to remember, even briefly a horse – and for the most part, they caused me nothing but intense annoyance. They barked and smelled and broke things. They left unmentionable things on the floor. They humped my ten-year-old leg, chewed on my model kits and peed on my drawings. On one memorable occasion, while we were away from the evening, two of the mutts took a dislike to one another – with fatal consequences for one

of them. Our upstairs flat had become an abattoir!

Yet, somehow I wanted a pet of my own. I had a hamster once, a waddling, greedy little creature that was disgustingly cute. We really didn't get along. I had a couple of guinea pigs too, but owning them was merely making the same mistake twice ... this time in a larger cage.

My heart went out for my cat, however. One direly cold winter when I had been out sledding, I had started for home when I realized that a cat wanted to follow me. When he was examined later, it turned out he had had a dislocated leg for some time, and the tip of his tail had been frozen. He was large, grey and rather ugly ... and I flat-out loved him.

Scratch would never stay indoors for long, but would come in when I called him in, often galumphing in through my window ten or twenty minutes later. In summer afternoons I would search for him, and usually find him in the bushes and wild dandelions along the creek. We shared many small adventures in the years that followed.

But cats *will* get old. As I grew up, my family moved into an apartment, and it was impossible for Scratch to come and go as he pleased. He never adjusted well to being an indoor cat, and mooned around the door, growing fat and lazy. In a rekindling of his old hunting habits, Scratch found a bird's wing that I had preserved in formaldehyde. He *ate* it. Although he survived, the poison did him no good, and he slowly grew paralyzed.

One weekend while I was away at a science fiction convention, my mother decided that it would be a kindness to let him go. She was probably right, but I never quite believed it.

A few years later, I revived Scratch's memory for my new fanzine.

I'm in the dark, in bed, and there's a heavy weight at the foot of the bed pressing against my leg. I tentatively change position, sending a tremor through the mattress. The weight moves too, sending the tremor back. I'm awake! More and more, in these dreams, something is reaching back across the years to curl up at my feet. But when I sit up and look, the cat who sleeps with me is gone.

It's always a better morning, though, for his having been there.

I probably spent a week on printing the pages of *New Toy* on my

mimeograph machine. Next came collating the thousands of sheets of paper, then stapling them into two-hundred-or-so copies, slipping the assembled issue into hand-addressed envelopes and then finally mailing them as quickly as I could afford. In those days, there was nothing as satisfying as gloating over stacks of finished fanzines that were my own finished product, from beginning to end.

It was only some time later that it occurred to me that there were greater opportunities, if only I thought outside of fanzines. I had a story, and I had a willing publisher, and it would be practically criminal not to take advantage of the situation.

I sent Walt the article, then waited impatiently for the inevitable rejection.

I wasn't disappointed. "The Ghost on my Bed" was returned to me with appropriate words of encouragement ... but it was *no sale*.

A few days later, I broke the news to my friend Bob. I had a chance to visit a few days later. Feeling a little masochistic, I handed the envelope with my rejection letter to Bob.

"See?" I indicated the letter. It was *not* a short and curt letter, as you might expect of a rejection, and Walt had much to say. But all that I could see was that he wasn't going to publish the story.

Bob read it over while I waited. Surprisingly, he read it a second time, and said, "What makes you think the editor rejected it?"

Then it was *my* turn to do a double-take. "But Walt said he couldn't publish it. It was rejected."

I wouldn't have been surprised if Bob had said, "You big dope," but he probably said something a lot more like, "No ... that means it was *accepted!* Your editor merely wants a few small changes!"

As anticlimactically as that, I had become a pro! Now that my story is through, my problem was what to do for a sequel...

"The Ghost on My Bed" was purring sleepily on the end of my bed. []

I am possibly committing a horrible breach of protocol by publishing this cartoon. While I can't picture Steve would ever have objected, I knew perfectly well that Elaine should have the final word. Unfortunately, I had no easy way to contact Elaine. In the internet age, I no longer kept up stone-age things like addresses or phone numbers, and to reach even fans through the grapevine would have been like the game in which you are only ten steps away from anyone else in the world. So I am begging for forgiveness in advance. I had already spend a year and a half writing this, and I was afraid that I might procrastinate for another year before my shiny, new zine was published!



Always in Style: *Steve Stiles*

A great many artists have left their mark on fandom during the great days of fanzine publication. It's fully in character for fans to argue over who were the most important, to draw up lists of the best five or ten or twenty-five fan artists, but – whatever the number – there is little likelihood of general agreement. Does Randy Bathurst belong on that list? How about Joe Pearson? Or Bob Shaw? Bjo Trimble, Steve Fox or Jack Wiedenbeck? Pick any unbiased panel of fans, and the odds are they will disagree with nearly half the names an any list!

All the same, I believe I can list three fanzine artists who stand out *so far above the*

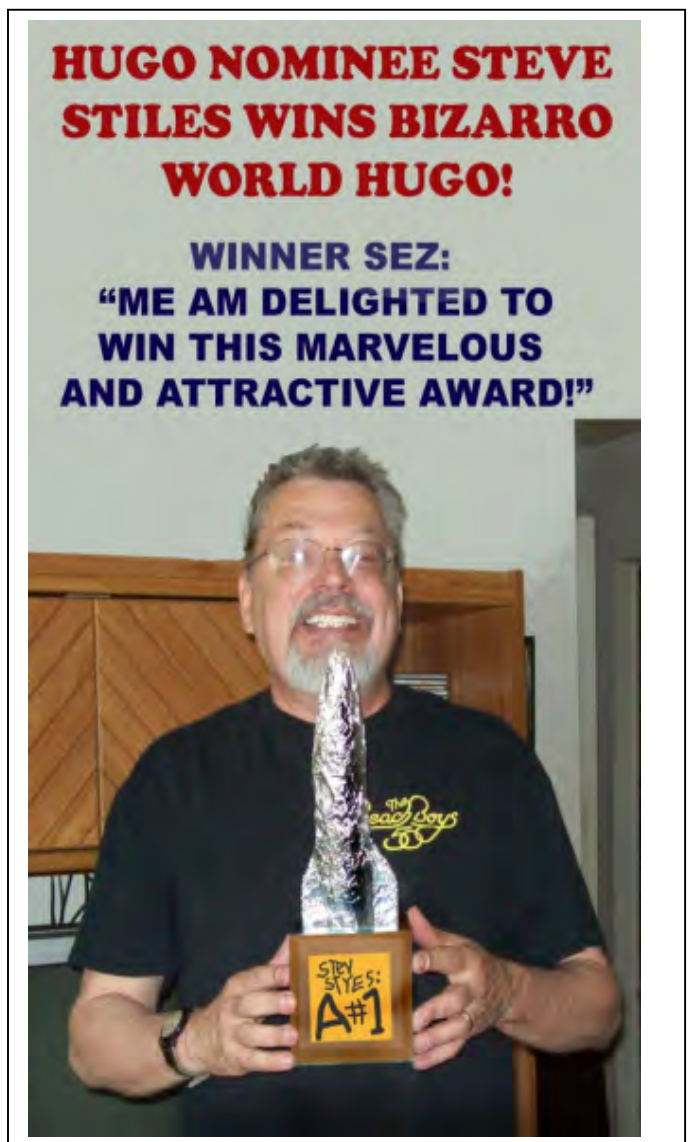
rest that it would be a mark of perversity indeed to disagree.

Bill Rotsler surely belongs on that very short list. For two decades, his wit and sense of design superseded all but a select few, and his name was nearly synonymous with the fannish school art well into the 1970s.

Arguably, Arthur Thompson was every bit a match for Bill Rotsler for nearly as long, and produced some of the most attractive and distinctive fanzine school of art until his retirement in the 1980s.

But I'd like to suggest that Steve Stiles was the greatest of them all.

This is an extraordinary claim that is not easy to substantiate. Call it a gut feeling. Nevertheless, Steve was a fan practically since birth, having begun submitting cartoons for publication in fanzines in his teens. He rose into prominence in the 1960s, and won The Trans Atlantic Fan Fund 1968. Other honours followed, such as being named the guest of honour to Lunacon, Disclave, Balticon, Capclave, Confusion and others, as well as being chosen the guest of honour of Corflu 50. Steve eventually won 15 FAAn Awards for Best Fan Artist, and was also nominated 15 times for the Hugo as Best Fan Artist. In 2015 he was given the title of Number One Fan Face by Corflu, and in 2019 he was presented with a Special FAAn Award. And by no means did his accolades end with winning a Rotsler Award ... the *first* Rotsler award to be presented to the long line of recipients that followed, a special honour in its own special way.



Honours, however, can be a fickle thing. A more compelling argument is made

by the many years in which Steve generously contributed gems of the finest water. Other fan artists have made notable contributions over the long haul before. What sets Steve's artwork apart from others was the sheer scope of his work: not only simple filler art, but complex graphic stories and stunning covers. At any given time, you were likely to find several fanzine covers recently posted at eFanzines were the work of Steve Stiles. A list of fanzines to which he contributed artwork would be long enough for a sizable fanzine in itself – a page-by-page listing would rival the recent *Outworlds 71!* in size. To be sure, simply filling space (like so many plastic packing peanuts in a box) is one way to ensure your place in fan history. But Stiles did it with *style*.

There was another quality that Steve's art possessed that was difficult to define – *it's quintessential fannishness*. It had a character that is distinct from the merely science-fictional. His work was quite definitely not only artistically accomplished. Nor was it merely humorous. Artists abound with either of those qualities, but the one in which Steve excelled was harder to find. His art was imbued with the ineffable quality of *fannishness*.

What makes art fannish is the property of self-reference that distinguishes it from other imaginative art. It was the departure from other illustrations in the professional magazines that made fanzines themselves ultimately different from mere imitations of *Amazing*, *Astounding* and *Azimov's*. SF art in the professional magazines was no stranger to illustrations of menacing aliens, monsters, unknown landscapes, unthinkable gadgets and heroic deeds, giving readers serious matter to think about. Fannish art, on the other hand, gave light-hearted license for fans to laugh at themselves and their own behavior. It provided commentary on fandom itself, as well as its absorption in the subject of science fiction. This was a point of view not native to the prozines – indeed, I believe it had to be learned from the fans!

And this was what made Steve arguably the best fannish artist of all time! There have been many other funny artists in fandom, many who were technically impressive, others who were mind-numbingly prolific, and some who have unstintingly contributed art for forty or fifty years ... but none who were, by evident self-definition also, the master of fannish art!

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I likely met Steve for the first time at a convention sometime in the 1970s, but I no

longer remember at all clearly when. It might have been one of the *Worldcons* I attended, or any of a number of larger East Coast cons such as *Balticon* or *Disclave*. My impressions from those days are scrambled and specific, like undated snapshots. I have no trouble recalling events such as bad weather on the road, my first taste of soft-shell crab, or finding an old tombstone propped against a wall in the hotel ... but the chronology is very far from clear. As a result, I'm unable to say when I first met Steve, and it is likely that he was simply in the background until I had seen his face often enough to take notice.

Not that his appearance was easily forgotten. He was a genuine, honest-to-goodness hippie to my unsophisticated eyes, with shoulder-length hair, dressed in cap, scraggly goatee, paisleys, winkle-picker shoes and bell-bottom trousers. At least that was how I remember him. To be quite honest, I'm not sure whether I remember Steve as he was so much as how he depicted himself in his art! Perhaps that's the best way to remember Steve, in any case.

It is wrong to think about Steve because he's gone: it is right to think about him because he was a vivid, genial, accessible friend. I've known many fan artists on a first-name basis, including Dan Steffan, Randy Bathurst, Frank Wu, Brad Foster, Al Sirois, Jim Barker, Phil Foglio, and Derek Carter among others. There are other artists I only know by little more than reputation, but the list is nowhere nearly complete. In many cases, our meeting of minds was brief, hardly begun before it was over. As is often the case, we never met again. Of all the artists I could say I knew well, I think there were only a very small number who I considered actual *friends*. Among them I include Stu Shiffman and Marc Schirmeister ... and Steve Stiles.

Yet I'm struck by the fact that I hardly knew Steve at all! Most of what I believe I know was learned from Steve's own essays, occasional fanzine locs, as well as from brief convention bios ... little of which I ever committed to memory. Was Steve born in New York, or did he only move to Baltimore later? Did he ever live in D.C.? I seem to recall he was in the armed forces, but did he serve in Vietnam? I could look it up, but I see little purpose in repeating second-hand knowledge.

What I remember best about Steve were late nights at convention parties, lying on a rumpled bedspread, crowded on a couch or squeezed together in chairs, heads together like wagons circled around a fire. Inevitably, he was wearing

something loud and covered with badges ... usually one of the dozens of t-shirts he had designed for eager con committees. At other times, Steve might have been seen scrolling a mimeo stencil into an old typewriter, adding his contribution to a one-shot. I was among the privileged viewers at a private party when he set up his easel, and presented his popular "How to Be a Fan Artist" talk.

Still, I wouldn't have gotten to know Steve Stiles only through his fanzine appearances, or his convention presence at conventions. At some point, the two of us began to correspond by e-mail, and the practice of exchanging confidential views rapidly created a degree of familiarity that wouldn't have been possible otherwise! Our exchanges were somewhat sporadic, depending on news and events. The FAAns were likely to excite a few scurrilous comments, and even *more* did the benighted Hugos. Mutually raised eyebrows were a sign of minds in agreement, more often than not.

Of course, we had disagreements. Steve was a big fan of Jack Kirby, and I couldn't stand those blunt little fingers and rat-trap mouths. But we could agree on great deal more, particularly about fans and fandom. (Little of which bears repeating, either.)

But there is one magnificently gentlemanly gesture that Steve performed in 2009, which was almost without precedent!

Steve and I had an informal rivalry over our Hugo nominations. Steve began years before I had even had a single one, when he was nominated for the Fan Art Hugo in 1967, and then again in 1968. Thereafter, he was for many years lost in the wilderness, and the voters didn't find him again until 2003!

I also had a brief brush with glory in my younger days, about the same time when Steve's popularity as a fan artist was soaring, and as often as not we found ourselves neck and neck, dragging the rear in the Fan Artist category of the Hugos. It might have been a competitive relationship, but it wasn't. Fortunately, we recognized each other as someone who was repeatedly overlooked in favour of one flash-in-the-pan artist after another, or else the same old same old. There was little we could do about it other than resort to bitter humour, and bitch like right-wing radio talk-show hosts about the deficiencies in judgment of the average Hugo voter.

Steve took to posting amusing photo caption cartoons on FaceBook. In retrospect, perhaps they don't seem as funny now as they once did, but they aptly expressed what I believe was Steve's real frustration and disappointment with the Hugos. I know I felt much the same way. I also took it out on the hapless "average voter" with acid humour. Resorting to even more twisted humour, I created fake "photo evidence" which proved that he had actually won a number of Hugos under assumed names. Meanwhile, the two of us continued to be passed over for younger, fresher faces. The clock was relentlessly ticking down on our relevance to the modern science fiction community.

One year Steve and I were tied. We each had 11 misses at the time. As a reminder of how many times we had been nominated, I Photoshopped a row of Hugo awards and printed two badges, one for each of us, to wear at the Worldcon.

In spite of diminishing odds, Steve showed himself to be a gentleman of the first water in 2009. The Worldcon had selected Montreal that year, and as it was a Canadian Worldcon, the committee chose an obvious Canadian fan as Guest of Honour. I was also a nominee for the fanartist Hugo again that year. As both the Fan Guest of Honour *and* a nominee, I hoped it would be a combination that might be unbeatable, and my best chance of finally winning a Hugo. Anyone else who was in the running that year might have just wished me luck – and crossed his fingers behind his back.

But that wasn't Steve's way. In an impressive display of magnanimity, he announced that he was withdrawing his nomination in 2009 to improve my odds.

Unfortunately, it was *not* enough. The previous year's winner walked away with a second Rocket which, to this day, I regard as *my* rightful Hugo.

Steve and I remained neck-and-neck in the Hugos for another few years, until my name disappeared from the nominations for the final time. Steve soldiered on, eventually collecting several more nominations, making him the uncontested holder of the record for most Hugo losses up to that point. If Steve didn't win soon, it was clear that he would never receive his richly deserved Hugo.

But with his 15th nomination, the miracle happened at last. With the help of a fanzine fandom that was united in its desire to see one of the last Old School fanartists overcome a divided field of "Sad Puppies" and "Woke" Millennials,

Steve finally *won* his Hugo. It was very likely the last fan artist Hugo that will ever be won by any of the Old School of fan artists, and it was incontestably the one most long overdue.

It was a bittersweet victory, unfortunately.

The Hugos began a fifty-year-long losing streak for Steve that began in 1967, when the first Hugo was given for fan art, and only ended when Steve won in 2016. He would even be nominated again in 2017 and 2018. There were no more opportunities for him to beat the odds, however, since he had been diagnosed in 2016 with a cancerous tumor on his lung. Surgery had been successful, but later tests revealed that the malignancy had not been stopped. In late 2017, Steve reported to friends that he likely had only months to live. In the event, he was taken not in months, but almost in days, in early January, 2018.

To say the least, it was a shock. Even knowing that the outcome was inevitable, Steve's death so soon was unexpected. Not only was he a valued friend to many, I think his passing marked the end of an era ... an era of fan art as we knew it.

There are still some fan artists of the Old School. Speaking as one of them, I think they are all much diminished by the loss of the one who probably represented what was most distinctive about fan art. There is *still* fan art in fanzines ... but there is no longer a real need for it. A quick search of fanzine sites makes it obvious that the role of fan art has been largely taken over by internet cartoons, convention photographs and whatever space filler satisfies the whim of fanzine editors. Fan art is over, fanartists are a dying breed, we were kidding ourselves to think we still matter. Time to get over it.

For one shining moment, however, we were finally able to applaud one who was not only the *last* significant fan artist, but arguably the *best* among us. []





Not far from where I live is an old storefront. It was built as a private home in the days before World War I it had been, so it is tall and narrow, as was fashionable with late Victorian town houses. Eventually, it was converted to a variety store – I knew it as Willard’s Smoke Shop. It was typical of its time. The large front room, which had once been a family parlor, was lined on both sides with shelves for merchandise. Down the middle was a centerpiece that consisted of a magazine rack and still more shelves. On one side of the room was a long glass counter, where the clerk at the cash register lay in wait for the customer’s dollar. When I was a small child, the wooden shelves towered over me. When I ducked down the dark tunnel of the far aisle to browse through the comic books, I felt like a whitewater rafter shooting the rapids under the towering walls of the Grand Canyon.

I didn’t live anywhere near Willard’s back then. The only reason I was ever there was to visit my Grandfather. Grampa Mac was a barber, you see.

The barber shop itself was in the back of Willard’s. You reached it through a door in the back that led through a small storage room, then through a *second* door into an attached building. It *might* have had its own outside entrance ... but I certainly don’t remember one. Where an outside door could have been, I remember instead a line of cheap chrome-tube and maroon leather chairs, a table with magazines, and sometimes a sleepy old man waiting for his turn. The other side of the shop was a wall-to-wall counter and mirror.

There were two barber chairs. My grandfather worked for another barber, who owned the business and paid the rent on the room ... but, despite having my hair cut there many times, I have no recollection of the other man. When I sat in the big chair, I seemed to be about ten feet from the linoleum floor, littered with scattered locks of hair – it was like surveying a tiny kingdom from a throne. My grandfather moved around me like a liveried courtier, combing and snipping, first here, then there. My gaze moved around the shop in lordly leisure, taking

royal note of the counter and sink, a jar of combs sitting in a bath of amber coloured alcohol, a stack of clean towels, a leather razor strop hung from a hook, a row of straight razors used for shaving, modern electric clippers for cutting hair, their black rubber cords in neat loops, a cup and brush for mixing shaving cream, jars of pomade, and – most intriguing – a file of ornate glass bottles. Some were cut in a diamond pattern. Some were tall and thin, or wide with tall necks. Others were tapered or shaped like hourglasses. They were lined up against the mirror, so that the reflection looked just like a second row of bottles behind the first. All of them were filled of brightly coloured contents that I longed to explore. When I asked about them, Grampa told me they were colognes and tonics, to sprinkle on the hair to make it stay in place or smell nice. Of course, I wanted to try every one of them. But the most I was ever treated to was one at a time. I didn't understand, then, that they were probably 25 cents a sprinkle.

My grandfather was a florid man, big of belly, with a somewhat bulbous nose and brown hair. He looked like the drinker he was, with grog-blossoms on his cheeks and nose. I have never been happy that I resembled him rather than my father – who was trim, dark and handsome. My father was a drunk also, but somehow escaped the stigmata. I was under ten at the time, and I didn't see the resemblance between us then, but maybe my grandfather saw it. In any case, he loved to give me the same haircut he wore himself.

His own hair was cut in a butch cut (as he called it), but was more accurately a flat-top. It was alright on him – it was *his* hair after all, and I didn't care what *he* did with it. But I absolutely *hated* it on my own head! Grampa also gave me a cap in the same “flat cap” style he liked to wear himself. I hated that even more. Hat and haircut made me feel like a pet poodle being dressed up. I vividly remember the day I broke the news to the grizzled boozer that I did *not* want to look like a chip off the old block. He grew redder than ever ... and I don't remember many free haircuts after that.

The thing is ... I loved haircuts. There was nothing that gave me more pleasure than boosting myself up into the huge, ornate, nickel-plated, leather-seated chair – the curule seat in the Roman senate could scarcely have been more magisterial. Nor has any throne swiveled or tilted like a barber chair! Then came combing, to set my hair in order before the actual cutting. Each stroke of the comb wrangled my hair firmly into place, titillating my scalp with an unfamiliar touch and building the sense of anticipation to the edge of losing control. And then ... the first snip of the scissors! As I felt the keen edges of the tension-sprung steel blades shearing tightly, one smoothly against the other, it was as though the tactile sense extended beyond my head to the scissors themselves.

Then the next snip. And the next. The “snick” was so close to my ear that I *felt* rather than heard the sound of my grandfather's barbering. Small locks of my own mousy brown hair fell to the tiles one at a time, as though they grew out of the linoleum. But, perhaps it was the hands moving over my head that felt best of all. They caressed and pampered the hair, titillating my scalp without every going so far as to physically, grossly touch it. After my grandfather was satisfied he had accomplished all he could with his scissors, he put them down and took up a heavy, dark brown, Bakelite instrument that looked disturbingly like dildo found in the dresser drawer of a moderate-sized ogre. A flip of his thumb snapped the

switch, producing a loud buzzing. The head of the electric razor vibrated with furious power as my grandfather trimmed the back of my neck and around my ears. I was almost certain my head would be cut off in a single, exhilarating moment of power unleashed ... but the threatening instrument of execution remained under the perfect control of my grandfather's hands.

At least once, he trimmed my neck and ears with the straight razor, treating me to the ritual of mixing soap in a cup, patting foam that was still puffing up like a living thing onto my skin and then carefully shaving away the soft hairs in a ceremony that was as old as pot-bellied stoves and handlebar mustaches.

Finally a dash of cologne, or a dab of gel rubbed between Grampa's hands and then massaged vigorously into the newly shorn hair, shaking my head like a rag doll. He'd part my hair with a small comb, turn the bang back over into a wave and, all too soon, he was done. If it had taken twice as long, it would have been over too soon. All that was left was the vanishing tingle of alcohol-based tonic, and a feeling of being inhumanly *neat*.

At times, I wonder whether my grandfather was a mere barber or an unconscious erotic worker.

As I grew older and had to pay for my own haircuts, I stopped going to barbers. At a time when I often had to budget to the last dollar, commercial grooming cost too much. I also abandoned the artificial, lacquered hairstyles of my youth and allowed my hair grow until it was too long to suit me. When my hair reached that point, I simply trimmed it myself. I wore it somewhat long in front and back, and all that I wanted was to keep it from hanging over my nose and ears. I never lost my love of having my hair cut, though. I discovered that I could use a sharpened pencil to simulate some of the sensations. But it was never really the same. Combing my own hair or rubbing hair conditioner into it fails as even a bad metaphor for auto-eroticism. But, at fifteen, twenty or more dollars a cut, visiting a barber is just too much of a "clipping."

Now that I'm Grampa Mac's age, I find myself wondering more often about his own youth. Where did he come from? Who were his family? What did he do? Unfortunately, I asked far too few questions when he was alive and could have answered them.



Gananoque, Ontario

I know that he was born around 1902 as Morris MacDonald in Gananoque, Ontario – “Gateway to the Thousand Islands.” Gananoque is a small town on the St. Lawrence River, just where Lake Ontario empties into it. The river is shallow and lives up to the name of “The Thousand Islands” because of the literally thousands of granite islands, islets and plain old *rocks* in the water that turn the head of the river into a dangerous maze. It was a favourite haunt of rum-runners during Prohibition, and I am told I had at least one relative who drowned when he fell off the boat (not the wagon) during a delivery to the American side. Gananoque is pronounced “**Gan-an-awk-wee**” in English, probably something like “Gawn-awn-ock” in French, and was plainly an Iroquois name originally. It had a main street with one Chinese restaurant, exactly like every other small town in eastern and northern Ontario. It was famous for only two things as far as I know: fishing and wooden nickels.

I’ve only ever been there once or twice, and have driven by it any number of times while on the way to the Thousand Islands bridge to the U.S.

Befitting his hometown, my grandfather was often photographed sitting in bathing trunks or in boats. In old family photo that I vaguely remember, he was fairly athletic as a young man, and even into his middle age appeared to be a solidly built, chunky but fit male. He grew his hair thick, slicking it back, as was the fashion in the 1930s, and grew a pencil mustache just like Ronald Colman’s. Like all small-town Canadians, he immoderately liked his beer ... and wasn’t adverse to harder drink either. Unfortunately, this is why he had fallen into an advanced state of obesity by the time I knew him, with broken veins in his nose and both cheeks from too many years of too much alcohol. It was his shitty but inevitable destiny to become diabetic in his 60s, and finally succumb to a heart attack in bed before I was long out of my teens.

As a young man, Morris owned a boat. Not any old boat, but one of those wonderful wooden motorboats with multi-cylinder engines under a hatch in the rear, all shellacked and polished to a fine lustrous finish, with upholstered seats, a split windshield and a sprightly banner flying from a flagstaff at the bow. If you have any memory of the motorboats in *Some Like it Hot*, you know the kind I mean. By contrast, today’s pleasure craft are tawdry, fiberglass shells with molded-in seats and all the romance of a bathroom sink. Whoever my runrunning ancestor was, he must have thought that Americans across the river were crazy when it came to Prohibition, but viewed them as a way to earn a few easy bucks doing what comes naturally – crossing the river in the dead of night with a load of whiskey under a tarp in the back of the boat. Another story I heard about relatives on my father’s side is that they were alcoholics to a man ... and one *woman*, who managed the surprisingly difficult feat of drowning herself in a sink while under the influence.

My grandfather married a woman named Vona Fenton. I know nothing at all about the Fenton family, but remember seeing Great Granny Fenton *once* ... when I believe I was only one or two. I had been taken by train to Gananoque by my parents, and I recall looking up out of my perambulator at a frightening creature all in black. In memory, she still looks like Queen Victoria – if Her Majesty had been a bloodthirsty vampire – leaning over me in the pram. Far above, there was the smoke-darkened ceiling of the railroad station. I rather think

that the Fentons may have been a member of the town aristocracy – but this is an *impression* only, and probably unfounded. After my father was born, Vona divorced Morris. I don't know why, but it isn't hard to imagine that his drinking, his vulgar language and crude manners had much to do with it. Still, Mac's second wife, Beatrice, thought he was enough of a catch to marry him.

Bea was frankly a bitch. She was the only grandmother on that side of the family I knew when I was young. I had met my father's mother, Vona, but had no clear idea who she was or why she kept turning up. *Bea* was the grandmother I knew. It's strange that she ever married my grandfather, though. She was as prudish as she was shrewish, and she complained about *everything*. I'm not joking when I tell you that Granny Bea believed that men farted just to be crude. Whenever my grandfather broke wind, she'd screech, "Jid! *Must* you do that?"

"Jid." We come to that, finally. It was my grandfather's nickname. Granny Bea never called him anything else. According to him, it had been *his* father's nickname, so he became "Jid" as well. Perhaps it was a Gananoque tradition – as the father was known, so shall be the son. However, nobody knew what "Jid" meant, or where it came from. Grampa Mac had merely inherited it from his dad – like a old suit that didn't fit very well – and it didn't seem to matter whether it was apropos of anything or not .

To my utter astonishment, some twenty years ago I ran across the word "Jid" in a book on the Second World War. The word was Ukrainian, closely related to the Polish and Czech words, all meaning "Jew." Yid. Jid. Both meaning "Jew." I don't think it was a coincidence.

So, my grandfather's nickname was "*Jew?*" Or, more specifically, his father's nickname was "*Jew?*" Did I have a bit of kosher on the family menu, then? With a family moniker like MacDonald, I'm not sure how to explain that – perhaps a Jewish great-grandmother added some *schmaltz* to the MacDonald family haggis. I think a less charitable explanation is likely, however. Remember the era in question – 1900 to the 1930s – was about as far from unbigoted as most times in history. I strongly suspect that my great-grandfather was merely a *cheapskate*.

He did have Scottish ancestry, after all... But, since someone who understood what "Jid" meant must have given the old boy his nickname, my great-grandfather must have had a Polish or Ukrainian crony. I suppose I'll never know.

My mother just called him "Mac," from "MacDonald," and I was told to call him "Grampa Mac."

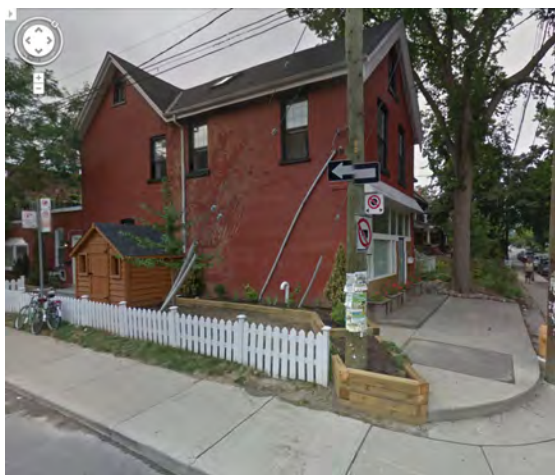
When Jid (or Mac) died, his second wife blew the country as fast as she could.

Her own family hailed from Hazelton, Pennsylvania, a coal town in the Alleghenies that I've only visited once. When I was 10 or 11, I had never been away from home for more than a few hours. Much against my will, and after much screaming and pleading to be allowed to stay home, my grandparents dragged me away on a car trip to Bea's family seat. I was beyond anxious ... I was one step from terrified. It didn't help that my grandfather drove a tiny car meant for two. It was little bigger than most contemporary car trunks, and looked like a lunch

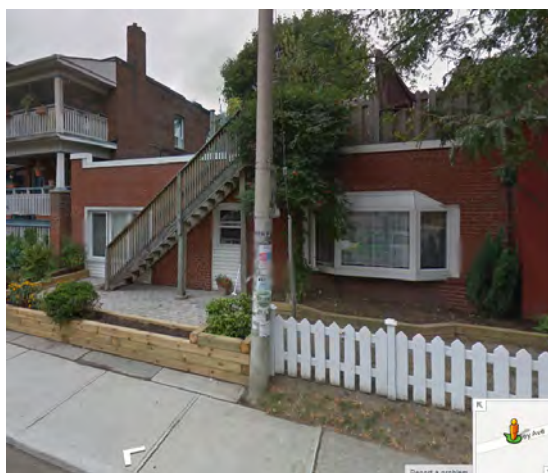
bucket. The seats were rubberized fabric that was sticky and comfortable. I probably had to sit with my legs straddling the gear shift for the entire journey. Just when I thought I *might* get used to being so far away from home, we went through customs and were on the American side of the border. Granny Bea suddenly startled me when she broke out singing the American national anthem in a cracked voice. "Oo-oh, say can you seeeee!" She might have been a demon shrieking delight on her return to Hell! Even if it was for only for a few days, I guess she was that happy to be away from a British possession and semi-socialist state. What I remember of Hazelton was an old frame house on a street on a steep hill, where all the houses seemed to lean over and be about to tumble down the slope. There was a tremendously noisy thunder and lightning storm one night. I had seen storms at home, but nothing like that one. For that matter, every storm that I've seen in that part of the country *after I was grown up* exceeded those in Toronto for sheer ferocity. Many years after, I was still having recurring nightmares about a midnight circus parade in a ghostly, abandoned Hazelton, Pennsylvania. How the circus got into the act, I still don't know. It was Hazelton, though, without a doubt. But - as I said earlier - when my grandfather died, Granny Bea hiked up her knickers and headed for Hazelton as fast as she was able to pack her bags.

We never saw nor heard anything from her again. She took *everything* with her as well, only leaving Mac's Masonic ring for my father, and for me a wristwatch that turned green and stopped running after a couple of years. She took the old artillery shell that was hollowed out for an ashtray, the Atomic-era TV set, the collection of mustache cups, the hand-made captain's wheel clock, the photographs, the Melmac kitchenware, the uncomfortable fiber rug, the prismaticly-coloured aluminum cups and caddy, the budgie that Bea plainly loved more than her husband and his family, the collection of rusty license plates from the garage, the BB rifle, abso-fucking-lutely *everything* with her to Hazelton-goddamn-Pennsylvania. Even the rubber spider that hung in the hall at the head of the stairs.

Why did Jid the barber leave Gananoque, I sometimes wondered? He had apparently learned his trade there, and worked for another barber. Perhaps there wasn't enough trade for two barbers in town, or he may have hoped to open his own shop in Toronto. Whatever his reason, he ended up just as he had been all along - working for another barber.



Willard's Smoke Shop on Sorauren today.



The Barber Shop & Garage Out Back, Today

The shop behind Willard's is still there. Willard's has long since ceased to be a smoke shop, though. It had originally been a residence converted to retail use. Like all urban Victorian homes, it was red brick with steep eaves, so narrow you could barely have parked a large car under the roof, and it had probably once had a bay window. The front of the house had been torn out at some point and a glass store front put in instead. Upstairs was a rented flat, possibly even two. Then, sometime in the 1970s or 1980s, it was converted again, this time back into a single-family residence. The store window remains, but is curtained. The barber shop, back store room and a garage were blocked off from the main house and renovated into tiny rented apartments.

A few years ago – when I was still ambulatory and spent many happy hours wandering around the neighborhood, to a distance of some miles – I happened just for the pleasure of it, to go by Willard's at a moment when the current owner was reading a newspaper on a bench out front. I eagerly engaged in conversation. Perhaps I was expecting too much to imagine he would want to hear all about the past life of his happy home. Much to my disappointment, however, he was not at all interested. I haven't had the opportunity to buttonhole any of the occupants of the rented rooms that were the barbershop, but must suppose they would be equally indifferent.

My grandfather lived and worked in Parkdale, where I live today. While it has become a solidly respectable, slightly upscale neighborhood in recent years – particularly the more affluent north end – in my grandfather's day it was blue-collar at best, much of the housing occupied by well-settled Germans, Poles and Ukrainians. The south end, known as Sunnyside, was a step down from that. Its formerly grand old houses had been divided up into rooms years ago, sheltering an unstable population of pensioners, transients and street people. Later still, when I moved to Parkdale in the early 1990s, the population had shifted mainly to recent immigrants from Southeast Asia, India, Africa and the Caribbean.

I remember those times I stayed overnight at my grandfather's place. As you might expect of a barber, he didn't own his own home. He and his second wife rented a second-floor flat in a house on Grenadier Road, several blocks from the barber shop. It was on the other side of Roncesvalles Avenue, the snootier west side where some very large and lavish homes can still be found, if you know where to look. The owner was a Mrs. Sexton, an aged dowager so white-haired and bent over that the few times I saw her she looked every day of her 90 years. The hall had dark wood wainscoting, Victorian wallpaper and, even with the light on, it was gloomy as an after-hours funeral parlor. There were light switches such as I had never seen before. Two rubber-like nubs stuck out from the faceplate. Press one in and the other popped out, switching on the light ... for all the difference it made. Press the other in and the first popped out, turning the light off again. There were art prints on the wall, heavily framed in ornate carved wood. One of them stuck in my memory so firmly that I never forgot it.

By one of those curious coincidences that make you believe life is a bad play written by Woody Allen, I once came into possession a picture whose frame I wanted. The picture was just some rubbish that I threw away. Behind it, though, was a folded sheet of newspaper carrying a story about the Japanese victory over the Russians in the Tsushima Strait ... a naval battle that occurred in 1905. And behind the newspaper was another print, the *same one* that I saw in Mrs.

Sexton's hall whenever I visited my grandparents! I have since learned that, around the turn of the century, a copy of it hung in the homes of every second or third family. The artist was the now largely forgotten Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski, who died in 1915. Every indication was that the print I found was an original edition, and must be worth a small amount of money ... if only I knew who collected late romantic art. It currently hangs in a "place of pride" over my knife rack in the kitchen.



Jid & Bea's Flat on Grenadier Road



Alfred Wierusz-Kowalski 1849 - 1915

The front hall led off in several directions, each of which was highly intriguing to a small child. To the immediate left was a tiny parlor that was usually as dark as pitch. Now and then, the old lady would be sitting there with the television on. The TV was barely larger than the screen of a modern laptop computer, and light from the washed-out, black and white picture flooded the cubby hole like a flare in a war film. Directly ahead in Mrs. Sexton's hall was another dark room, this one quite a bit larger than the dark parlor.

There was enough light from the yellow overhead fixture to reveal the end of a very expensive, carved wood, formal dining table. The few times I saw it in daylight, I realized that Mrs. Sexton must have at one time been accustomed to a far superior lifestyle than the one she was then living. There was the mandatory, worn Victorian carpet underfoot, a heavy linen table-cloth, doilies under a cut glass bowl, and wax fruit. Wax fruit? I had no end of trouble trying to understand the purpose of wax fruit, and loved to pick up the heavy, oddly sticky objects, weighing one then putting it down to weigh another – first an apple, then a pear, then a peach, then finally the cleverly modeled grapes, all in a bunch with realistic leaves. What in the world were they for? Why not a bowl of *real* fruit?

Farther on, the dining room gave way to a shrunken sun room. Since the entire upstairs of the house was rented to my grandparents, Mrs. Sexton slept in the tiny space where, as a young lady, I imagined her once knitting and crocheting to pass the time of day. Now it was her bedroom. Sad, really. I never knew what become of her husband or whether she rented the upper floor from a need of money, or because it was far more room than an old lady living alone knew what to do with. Since I was only about twelve, I was too incurious to ask questions that I now wish I had.

If I turned to the left, instead of entering the dining room, there was another short hall that led to a large, old-fashioned kitchen. I spent no time there, so just about all I remember was a

counter and sink along one side, and acres of tiny, black and white hexagonal tiles that made up larger six-side patterns. The same tessellation covered the floor of the bathroom upstairs, as well. By the 1950s, the fashion had largely become institutional, to be found only in train stations or prisons. Like the wax fruit in the other room, the tiled floors fascinated me. When I sat on the toilet I would stare at the small, black, center tiles until they appeared to float several inches above the white tile background. I knew all about “trippy” a decade before drugs appeared in high schools.

The house held other secrets. There was a basement with a packed-earth floor, for instance. I believe I only saw it once or twice. Gramma Bea did her laundry down in there, in a washing machine that resembled a white, enameled barrel, with a mangle attached by a swivel to one side. “Don’t get your hand caught in there,” she cackled, gleefully, “or it’ll be squashed like a pancake.” The image of my hand becoming flat as a pancake haunted my imagination for months thereafter. Oddly, I hardly remember much about the basement other than my grandmother telling me about a Steve Canyon comic strip that she followed in the newspaper. “And then Steve discovered that the cockpit glass was smashed and his best friend had *frozen to death* at the controls.” Looking back on it, I have to wonder about that woman’s morbid sensibilities.

The way to the basement was through a shed built against the back of the house. As was common with many homes in older parts of Toronto, at one time the basement would have been accessible only through an outside door, and a shed was later built over the steps leading down to it. The shed also led to a backyard that was just about large enough to park a stretch limo in and still open the doors. There was not enough space to do anything such as hold a barbeque in it, or play with lawn darts, but a short path of cement flags led to a tin-clad garage at the other end. This was my grandfather’s haunt. Inside, it was crowded, dank and dark. It smelled of grease, gasoline and old rags covered with oil and gasoline. At one end swung a bare yellow light bulb under a tin shade. Grampa Mac would reach up to snap it on, and a space about ten feet across would come into a shadowy existence. For a minute, the light fixture swung back and forth on the pendulum of its own cord, creating the illusion that it was the room that was swaying. There was a workbench of sorts, and a seat next to it. I recall a folding carpenter’s rule and flat-sided pencils and other tools that never seemed to have moved since the previous time I saw them, that were buried in fuzzy coats of greasy dust, like caterpillars. I think all my grandfather did in his garage, actually, was sit on a dilapidated couch in the corner and drink beer. The wall over the couch had been decorated with a couple of dozen metal license plates he had hammered up with nails. Some were merely old black and white Ontario plates, others were orange and blue, or brown or red or whatever, and had come from far-off places like New York State and Ohio! At the other end of the garage was Grampa’s miniscule car, a Nash Metropolitan convertible.

It was like no other car I had ever seen. It was half the size of any I knew, and it was painted a lovely aquamarine and white. It was a convertible with a rubberized canvas top that folded down behind the front bench seats. Technically, there were seats in the back as well, but even a twelve-year-old had trouble sitting back there without jamming his knees under his chin. The seat material was rubberized, and felt horrible in all weather. They were either blazing hot in summer, or as clammy as a corpse on a waterfront whenever it was cold or wet. Either

way, you stuck to them like a cheese slice on a formica counter. The Metropolitan was an early experiment in American compact cars. It looked like an electric toaster and while the reviews in automobile magazines were positive, the concept didn't catch on for another three decades. Today, of course, it is prime Atomic-Age kitsch and there is a dedicated fandom for Metropolitans.

To make matters stranger, about a year ago I contacted an online club for Metropolitan enthusiasts. I showed them the one existing photo of my grandfather's car and they went *nuts* ... no one had ever seen one quite like it! Mac wasn't handy with tools that I knew of, so my guess is that he bought the car from someone else, who had modified the trim to suit himself.



Grampa, me & the Nash Metropolitan Christmas at Gredier Rd. with me & Granny Bea

In a dark corner of the hall of Mrs. Sexton's house was a heavy wooden stairway that led upstairs to where my grandparents lived. It went in three straight segments that I had to climb with one hand on the banister's handrail and lift my feet almost to the knee. The landing at the top led to a front room where the TV sat, and where I sometimes spent the night on the couch. It wasn't really a small room, but it seemed crowded all the same. An extant photograph shows a fireplace that I don't recall ever being lit. It was lined with glossy black tiles that were a stylistic anachronism - a 1930s intrusion into the turn-of-the-century. At one corner of the fireplace stood a tall brass artillery shell, converted to an ash tray. The television set was old-fashioned even for 1957. It wasn't often on. My grandmother seemed to think it was for re-energizing her Christian spirit, and tuned into the *Billy Graham Crusade*. Even at that age, I found her display of outward religiosity repellant - a less Christian soul than Bea's I never wanted to meet. Grampa Mac watched TV for more understandable reasons: *Hockey Night in Canada*. I also remember, blazing out from the set in the darkened room:

"Have Gun Will Travel reads the card of a man.
A knight without armor in a savage land.
His fast gun for hire heeds the calling wind.
A soldier of fortune is the man called Paladin.

"Paladin, Paladin

Where do you roam?
Paladin, Paladin,
Far, far from home."

The most curious thing about the living room was a sort of wooden ledge that ran along all four walls, a foot or two below the ceiling. There's bound to be a word for that, but I'll be hanged if I know what it is. You can't type, "wooden shelf under ceiling" into Google or Wikipedia – I know, I just tried – and expect to find anything. So unless someone *tells* me, I suppose I'll have to live in ignorance.

I've just learned that it's called a "*plate rail*." Whatever it was, Mac kept a fascinating assortment of oddities on it ... well out of my curious reach. I stared at them endlessly, and now and then asked if I could see one close up. There was an odd yellow doghouse, made of ceramic. A sort of slide protruded from the front opening. To this day, I have no idea what it might have been for. I recall a cheap plastic Kewpie doll on a base. Intriguingly, there were clear plastic bulbs in front and behind the standing figure. When I asked what it did, Grampa held the rear bulb between thumb and forefinger. After a minute, the air in the bulb warmed and expanded, driving a small amount of liquid into the other bulb. As the air warmed still more, the liquid in the bulb in front of the Kewpie began to bubble – it appeared to be pissing in the water. Grampa also showed me a narrow shack with a half moon cut in the door. He squeezed the attached rubber bulb and the door sprang open. Inside, a gaping "pickaninny" whirled around with his pants down around his ankles!

Not all Grampa's notions were as crude. He had a plastic replica of a Model T-Ford. I only recently discovered that it was one of the *earliest* Revell model kits, and sold in the early 1950s for a mere 69¢. Like the real Tin Lizzie, it was black all over ... including the driver. There were also old-fashioned beer steins up under the ceiling, the kind with caps and a lever you worked with your thumb. Even odder were the mustache cups. I wonder who remembers mustache cups? The were all the rage in the Gay Nineties, when every dashing young dandy wore a mustache to put any Turk to shame. Soup-strainers that luxuriant had their drawbacks, though – they got in your tea. The obvious solution was a sort of cross-piece on the rim of the cup that fit over your 'stache to protect it from dunking. I remember other oddments only dimly. Glass flasks and bottles, I think, mainly, some with metal spouts for a dash of hair tonic ... or perhaps bitters for mixed drinks. Plates. All gone to Hazelton or the Devil, I presume.

Beside the doorway to the living room was an almost-always-closed door that led to a bedroom; a sanctum I rarely saw into, and, when I did, was altogether too pink and satiny to be my grandfather's doing. In the other direction a long hall led to a walk-in cupboard that I thought of as a mysterious, "secret" room, and then finally to a large, tiled bathroom. The toilet was an antique even in 1958 – I wonder that it didn't flush with a chain – and the bathtub had legs. Under a small, eight-sided window there was a sink on a fluted pillar. To run the taps you twisted celluloid handles that resembled stubby baseball bats with brass fittings. It was all very much like being in a movie about boxers and bread lines.

Even more mysterious and secretive was a truncated stairway that led ... nowhere. A solid

wood trapdoor blocked the way up in mid-step. I only got to see what lay beyond years later. There was a third floor to the house, after all, with a pair of tiny rooms just large enough for a bed and a dresser. I lived in one of them for a short time, when I was on my own. But, as they say, that's another story.

To one side of the bathroom hall, a final door led to a large kitchen. It was somewhat more modern than Mrs. Sexton's kitchen downstairs, but not by much. The stove had a semi-detached control pod with Deco fluting, and black cellulite knobs that lit the gas with a phoo! I had never seen gas at home, so watching the blue flames puff into existence and out again was like watching magic performed. My grandparents ate off a cheap Formica table, though, with matching seats made from chromed tubing and plastic-covered cushions.

Meals were disappointing. As often as not, my grandmother served tuna fish salad, which was a disgusting slop made from canned tuna, chopped onion and mayonnaise. Thinking about it nauseates me to this day. I decided that there must have been a conspiracy about mayonnaise, in fact. Whenever I traveled in the U.S. in those days, you had to carefully stipulate to waiters that you wanted *no* mayonnaise on your order, otherwise it would come drowned in the wretched goo. Americans must have taken up the habit to rid themselves of the billions of tons of corn grown every year that nobody had any use for, but had to buy so that the farmers wouldn't go bust. I was *half* right, it turns out. American agriculture *is* heavily subsidized to grow food nobody wants. I'm no longer as certain how this explained mayonnaise on everything from soup to nuts, though. To add to the mystery, it no longer seems that Americans desire egg-and-corn-oil-slop on their meals. In my adult travels, I've had little problem with it appearing unwanted on my sandwiches or burgers. Today I have to watch out for *Thousand Island dressing* ...

But if hot food at my grandparent's place was inedible, the junk food opened my eyes. They must have loved Hostess Sno Balls and cupcakes, because there were always some in a cupboard. I didn't care for the Sno Balls – they were pretty, pink and sweet, but I decided that I didn't like the chewy shaved coconut on the outside. There was always 7-Up in the fridge, as well. I don't know why it seemed like such an exotic treat. 7-Up must have been sold in every store where Coke and Orange Crush were, but I seem to have only had it when I visited my grandparents. What made it particularly special was that I was never served my pop in a bottle – for some reason, Bea always poured it into a brightly coloured aluminum cup. I'd never seen anything as wonderful as those cups, and would commit almost any crime to obtain a set of them today. They were metallic gold, silver, sapphire, emerald and raspberry, and seemed like a Rajah's treasure in their chrome rack. The aluminum vessels were so cold when filled with 7-Up right from the fridge that they sweated diamonds of condensation, and could only be held for a few gulps before it had to be put down.

Funny the things you remember. My grandparents' place was sometimes very hot, and even at the age of 12 I tended to sweat. There was one time when I wanted to use a towel to wipe the sweat from my face and dry my hair, but the old witch who was my grandmother said I'd go bald if I dried my hair that way. I suspect she just didn't want to launder the towel.

Behind the kitchen there was a sun porch, enclosed with screen windows all around. It was

more shady than sunny, and in summer, Mac and Bea slept out on the porch because it was cooler. There was a bed that took up most of the space, but there was also just enough room for a chair or two and a small table. From the porch I could look out over the back yard and garage, and observe the network of back lanes stretching in all directions like a secret kingdom. I could also see that Mac's hide-away, the garage, was roofed in a once-fashionable oriental manner, with overlapping tiles and prominent eaves. The sides were tin sheets, hammered up over the wooden frame and painted a dark rust colour. The effect was that a crematorium. Just beside the door into the garage there was a birdbath that never held water to my knowledge, and a rusting birdcage stand that had never held a bird cage, either. Jid used to take pot shots at them with a BB gun from the sun porch. I badly wanted to try my aim, but for reasons Grampa never made clear, I was never allowed.

My recollections have become too many at this point, and resist any attempt to organize them.

Was Mac a good grandfather? When I was young, I certainly did *like* him, even if he was bad-tempered and his cheeks rubbed like a shaved porcupine when he hugged me. As I grew older, though, he just seemed bad tempered and little else. He hollered, he used bad language, he didn't take me anywhere such as movies or hockey games and I don't recall that he was ever interested in anything I wanted to show him. I suppose that, *no*, he wasn't really a very good grandfather. He was merely fascinating ... like watching a bear in the woods take a crap.

Sometimes, I wonder if he was a better *father* to my father. My father swore about the old man, but seemed strongly tied to him even at the worst moments. And it was just as plain that Mac was just as strongly tied to my father. I suspect Mac resented my mother for taking his handsome young son away from him, and, whatever dumb-ass stuff he did, it was *her* fault – young Ronald could do no wrong.

When my mother passed away, in 1991, I found among her papers a curious old letter. The yellowed paper had been torn into several pieces for an unknown reason – probably anger – and then taped together again. It turned out to be a note from Mac to my dad. It had been written when I was only about five, and shed an entirely unexpected light on a dim memory of being taken from home by my mother, to spend at least one night in a strange bed. I recall vividly a low, slanted plaster ceiling, yellow incandescent light, and some sort of altercation when my father arrived and hollered at Mom and *her* Mom about I-had-no-idea-what. Of course, as I grew up, I learned “what.” Dad had been caught out in a lie of some sort ... supposedly being away from home as a brakeman for the CPR, but in reality he had most likely been playing cards, drinking and seeing other women. Mom had found out, or at least had reasons to suspect ... and had fled home to *her* mother.

So far as I can interpret the handwriting, the letter from Mac to my dad read:

“(Thursday night.) Dear Ronald,

I'm terribly sorry about all the sordid affair.

Joan [my mother] finally got in touch with us, but can't get to first base with a talk with me [?].

*She has been to the Family Court, but don't forget she walked out while you were having your holiday.
[drunken debauch with the boys?]*

*Now please get in touch with us as soon as you read this because I'm still your father & love you &
want to help you all I can.*

Your Dad.

*P.S. I sure [?] we'll [?] feel kindly toward Joan all my life when she wouldn't tell me when I could see
poor little Wayne [that would be me] on his 5th birthday."*

Mention of my birthday would date the letter to 1956.

Somehow or other, the situation was resolved and life returned to normal, but looking at Mac's letter to my Dad after so much time had passed, and after all the people involved were gone, was one of those experiences that put you momentarily in a timeless state – in which past, present and future all seem concretely real.

I didn't see as much of my grandfather in his last years. His six-pack-a-day habits caught up with him, and obesity led to diabetes. He went on a strict low-calorie, low-salt diet that never seemed to make much difference. Then one night his snore turned to a strangled grunt and he died in his sleep – acute myocardial infarct, coronary thrombosis, or plain old bum ticker. My father inherited a ring that Mac always claimed was his proof of membership in the Masons. I had my doubts. What Masonic lodge, I wondered, would have a common barber of rather low repute and questionable character as a member? It looked genuine, so perhaps I overestimate the Masons. I think it more likely, however, that he picked the trinket up at a pawn shop. My keepsake was a watch, mentioned earlier, that turned green and stopped working within a year or two. There may have been a few pair of socks in the deal as well.

I recall the funeral for Mac. It was in a small parlor at the north end of Roncesvalles Avenue, and it had a very small turnout. Before the service my dad and I looked down at Grampa in his final resting place. I had never seen a dead person before, and wondered out loud what it would feel like to touch him. My dad poked him, and we watched the dimple in Mac's hand slowly rise, like bread dough. He was garishly made up, resembling a china doll, with a pink complexion, rouged checks and ruby lips. What were the morticians *thinking*? Did they imagine anyone who knew the old bastard wouldn't miss his grog blossoms and beard stubble? During the service, a preacher of some indeterminate denomination lied like a trooper, calling my grandfather a fine man, the soul of generosity, a gentle spirit possessing a rare sense of humour. The eulogy was so preposterous that I was amazed the corpse didn't burst out of the coffin to accuse his defamer right then and there. And then the box was gone, waiting its turn for cremation. Grampa Mac, Morris, Jid ... was gone and pretty much forgotten.

It amazes me that so much of the scenes of these reminiscences are confined to an area less than a mile on a side, and are all within an easy walking distance today. The former smoke

shop and barber shop lies north and west of my present home by about a dozen blocks. Another ten blocks takes the walker from Willard's to where my grandfather lived. Farther north is Turner & Porter, the funeral home where he was sent off.

Taking the walking tour, much of the scenery is just the same as it was more than 50 years ago. The corner groceries along Sorauren Avenue have largely vanished – signs taken down, drapes hung in shop windows, properties reverted to residential use. On Roncesvalles the Polish delis are now Asian dollar stores. Darkened restaurants have taken the German menus out of the windows and replaced them with Thai or Serbian. The S.S. Kresges that we used to call “the five and dime” is now a Dollarama or a medical clinic. The classic cinema marquee over the “Roncey” fell down years ago, and it hasn't shown first-run features in decades. Today it is a modest review theatre. Out front, the parked cars still line both sides of the street, but they are no longer Studebaker Commanders, Ford Skyliners or Chevy Bel Aires. Today the cars are from all over the world – BMWs, Toyotas, Rias, Fiats, Hyundais and Smart For Twos. There's been a spate of recent development, but for all that it's still much the same old Parkdale neighborhood.

Did Jid the barber ever make much difference? The people who live in Willard's knew nothing about the smoke shop or the barber shop that had operated in the back room. I once spoke with the people who live in Mrs. Sexton's house on Grenadier Road. They were not interested in its past. It's doubtful that Mac is remembered by his second wife's family, and I'm the only member of my father's family alive who would remember anything about him. Apart from a few nicks in my ear, the only mark Jid seems to have left on the world is what I've written.

I can only wonder whether the impression *I* leave on the world will be any less transient.

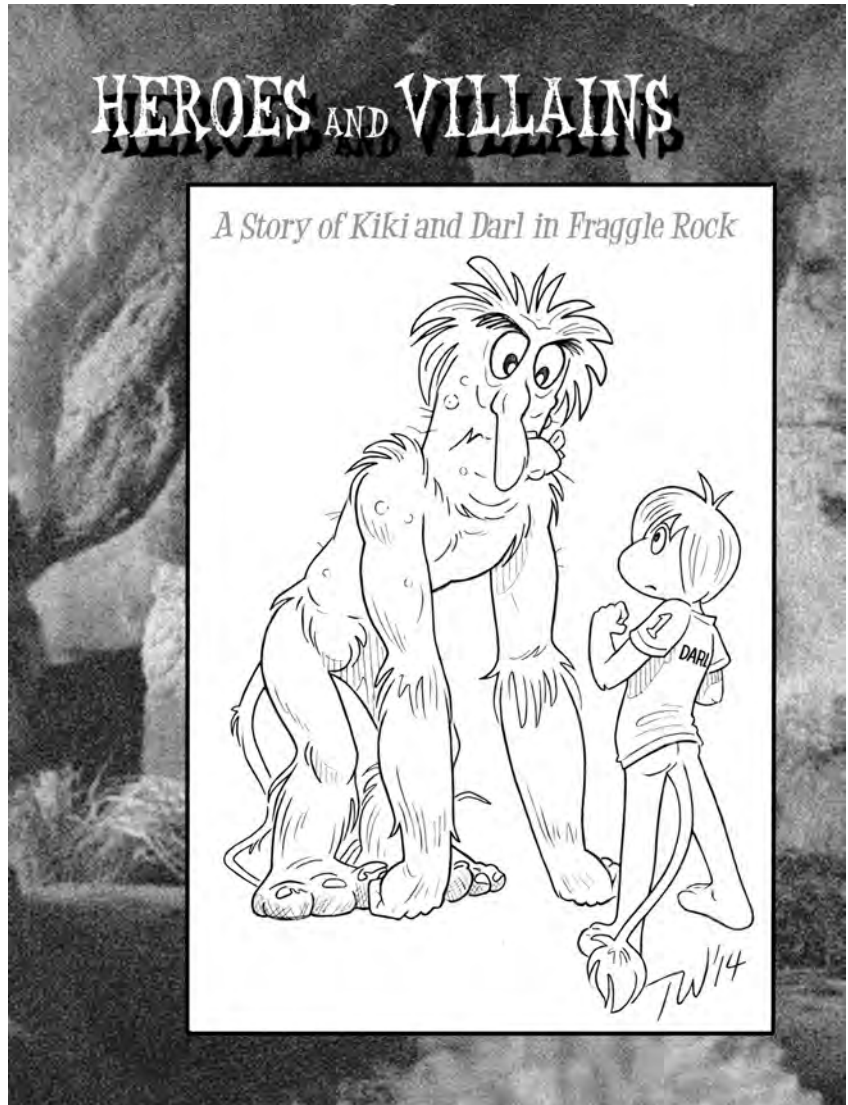


Morris “Jid” MacDonald



His grandson

[]



Prologue: I took my time over the writing. It's been revised, proofread and tweaked. I showed the story to three or four people for comment (none so far). So what do I do now?

For the time being, I've picked about a dozen more people from my address list to show the story to. Ultimately, I will probably publish yet another issue of my "one-shot," *The Balooobius*, and publish it for a slightly larger audience. But, for the moment, I don't feel up to publishing another fanzine. Maybe around Christmas or in the New Year. I ought to add some drawings, and – in a way – that's why I'm so unenthusiastic about drawing. I would need to create time to undertake new drawings. This year, I've so done little drawing at all, and most of the starts I've made were never finished. Maybe next year will be better? (Could it be worse?)

The story is *Heroes and Villains*, a 17,500 word story that I think is fairly lively, and should not be difficult to read. The major difficulty with finding readers is the nature of the story itself. Between serious writing and humorous writing there is a grey area I call "whimsy." It is not entirely either, and some readers seem unable to, or unwilling, to read whimsy. However, whimsy is precisely where the nature of Fraggle Rock most comfortably lies. *Heroes and Villains* involves two Fraggles named Kiki and Darl, as well as the entire cast of characters that were brought to life during the Jim Henson television show. Kiki is a rather more intelligent than usual Fraggles who became lost outside in what Fraggles call

“Outer Space,” and where she made friends with a “Silly Creature” who lived there. During the events of a story yet to be written, turnabout becomes fair play, as “Darl” becomes lost in Fraggle Rock. The events that follow this beginning are long and complicated, touch upon tragic ... and discover magic instead, when Darl takes up a new life by becoming a Fraggles himself. This must sound like the most painful cliché in history, but you have to bear with me. For now, accept that Darl – whose Silly Creature name is mangled into “Darl” by Kiki – faces daily challenges in order to adapt. Hopefully, you will be able to follow all this without too much eye-rolling.

Writing these stories has been a pleasure, and a source of new experiments. It is a mistake to stray too far in the direction of either serious writing, or in the direction of humour, without striking the wrong tone. There is a lot of silliness in Fraggles, but on occasion there are issues of life and death. I’ve chosen to err a little farther in the direction of making Fraggles into a *real* sort of place – there are rules for not dirtying the water in the Fraggles Pool, for example, and Fraggles *do* eat more than merely radishes and “Doozer sticks.” It’s all well and good that Boober Fraggles likes to do laundry, but it was necessary to explain where clothes come from in the first place. Also, how do Fraggles make a fire, or tell the time? At one time or another I’ve tried to provide explanations. (Not all in the same story, of course.) But if there can be danger in Fraggles, or sometimes anger, it will not be in my mandate explain where babies come from in any detail! In that direction lies unwanted “serious” writing.

It’s hard to say how many of you will read any of this – I understand that many people have been unable to read the first chapters of *Lord of the Rings*, since it is too saccharine at the start, and are unable to read any of the darker, more frightening events that follow. At least I can assure you that the boogiemens that appear in *Heroes and Villains* are somewhat less formidable. []



HEROES AND VILLAINS

It all began because Wembley Fraggle got into a scrape again.

And *that* happened because Red and Gobo were in an argument over which Fraggle was the better explorer. Without question, the spat should never have begun, since everyone knew that Gobo was not only the best explorer in the Rock, but also nearly the only one among them who had any interest in poking their noses into unfamiliar corners of the World-as-They-Knew-It. Yet, once again, the two friends were stubbornly pitting their wills against one another in a contest!

"C'mon, eh," said Gobo, "You know *you* never go exploring."

"I have so! Lots of times!" snapped the hot-tempered Red.

"Not unless I *dared* you. Even then, half the time you turned back. And you quaked like a Trembling Stink Lily every step of the way."

Red's demeanor nearly bristled with electricity. "Gobo Fraggle, you take that back!"

The other Fraggle held his ground, however. "You've never even followed me out into Outer Space. Not once! You've chickened out every time that you've followed me up to the tunnel outside!"

Red wasn't having any of that, this time. "Outer Space doesn't count! That place is just plain *weird*, and there's nothing important there anyway!"

"Nothing important!" Gobo sputtered.

"Well, *is* there?" Red drove her point relentlessly onward. "What did *you* ever find in Outer Space?"

"Well ... nothing but the Silly Creature and the Monster," Gobo admitted. "I only sneaked as far as the trash bin where I find Uncle Matt's postcards."

"Aha!" exclaimed Red, triumphant.

That was not the end of the argument, of course.

Red and Gobo bickered for several more minutes before they decided on a

contest – a not-unusual outcome for the two contentious Fraggles. The rules of the contest were simple. They would find partners – partly for help if there was trouble, but also as witnesses, to verify that they had found an “important” discovery. Naturally, Red would call on her best friend, Mokey, for her second.

In such situations, Gobo normally picked *his* best friend, Wembley. The problem was that Wembley had gotten into a scrape.

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“I don’t believe it! How could you do this to me!” cried Gobo in their shared Hole, as he wrapped Wembley’s leg in bandages.

“Well, I don’t know,” answered Wembley, apologetically. “I was just minding my own business when I was suddenly in the way of that big meanie Jenkis, who told me to get lost. Then I sort of ... stumbled ... and next thing I knew, I hurt my ankle.”

“You mean that Jenkis pushed you, don’t you!”

“Um... I think so,” admitted the little green Fraggles.

Of course Jenkis had pushed Wembley. It wasn't at all normal for Fraggles to be mean to one another. Now and then, however, one like Jenkis might become bolder, and ruder, when another Fraggles was a pushover ... and Wembley was almost the dictionary definition of a pushover.

Jenkis was a visitor from another Fraggles clan some distance away, and was in The Great Hall for some business that he never made entirely clear. Perhaps he had worn out his welcome where he came from ... or even the place before *that*. In any case, he had appeared one day in The Great Hall, and made himself unpopular from the start.

He did annoying things, such as muddying the water where it was only meant for drinking, not swimming or washing, or picking a place for a nap that was someone else’s favourite spot. He was quite large as Fraggles go, so few were willing to confront him. Yet, he would never step so clearly out of line that he might earn a rebuke from other Fraggles. Wembley, unfortunately, seemed to tempt Jenkis into outright *mean* behavior. Instead of merely annoying Wembley, as he did the other denizens of The Great Hall, he harassed the guileless little Wembley at every opportunity.

"One of these days, Wembley, you have to stand up for yourself, you know," Gobo said.

"Oh, he's not *that* bad. Maybe a little clumsy. And rude ... and large ... "

Gobo shrugged. "If you can't help me beat Red in our contest, then I'll need someone else to be my partner. Who do we know who is good at exploring? Not Boober. He's afraid of his own shadow, unless it's dark ... but he's also afraid of the dark!"

"Gosh, I ... I don't know. Large Marvin? Rumble? No, no, how about Pedley? He's always taking trips to find inspiration for painting?"

"That's a good idea, Wembley," said Gobo, finishing the home-made bandage. "Unfortunately, Pedley is away somewhere, *painting!* We have to find someone else. And I think I know *who...* "

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"Who, me?" said Darl, incredulously. "Why me? I'm new to being a Fraggles, and barely know not to stand downwind from a Pop-Bladder full of pollen. I learned it the hard way, too, so I was still sneezing three days later!"

Kiki leaned in through the archway to the cookery, where she was preparing a late lunch. "He's not kidding, Gobo. I *told* him not to touch that."

Gobo had been invited to share in their dinner, and was sitting in one of the chairs in the small nook where Darl and Kiki ate. Although small, the dining space had an impressive view through a gap in the rock, over the Goblin's Garden that led down to the Great Hall.

Gazing out at the scenery, Gobo tried to appear nonchalant, as though his contest with Red didn't hang in the balance, but in fact he was quite anxious. Even at the best of times, he hated to lose bets or contests, and a challenge to his mastery of exploration by Red could not be ignored. So, he tried a new tack with Darl.

"When you lived in Outer Space, you must have seen a *lot* of fascinating places," he said casually. "Not only your own home and neighborhood, but all sorts of strange, distant places. Didn't you say you had even traveled in special carts that move by themselves, and gone so far away that it took *days* to get there?"

"Oh," said Darl, resignedly. "That's true ... I did mention before that I've driven

in a car. Even flown.”

“That’s right,” said Kiki, bringing in lunch. “I’ve even seen the frightening contraptions! What’s this about flying, though? You *never!*”

Not unexpectedly, the meal included freshly sliced radishes, a green salad, with thinly sliced raw fish and a tangy herbal dressing. For dessert, there was a plate of sweet, sticky buns.

Talk had to be deferred as the three Fraggles dug in, but eventually the plates and bowls were empty, and the chairs were pushed back.

“That was delicious,” said Gobo. Even Darl, who had not fully accepted that radishes were an essential part of almost all meals, agreed their meal was fit for a royal repast.

“It’s settled, then?” Gobo said to Darl. “Together, we can take Red’s challenge, and *win!* I *know* we can!”

Darl replied, “Why don’t you and Kiki go, instead? She’ll be much better than me at exploring with you.”

“The thing is,” Gobo slyly played his trump card, “Red sees the contest as between the gals’ team, and the guys’ team. So it *has* to be me and *you*, eh?”

“As long as you keep Darl from sniffing at Pop-Bladders, why not?” laughed Kiki. “Besides ... all Fraggles have a natural sense of direction in caves, so that they can *never* get lost. Even you, Love.”

Darl made a dismissive sound. “By that logic, then, I should also warble like a caged canary ... but I can’t even carry a tune in a bag.”

Bit by bit, however, the other two wore him down. Like it or not, it was settled, and he would join Gobo’s expedition.

On his way home, Gobo sang a few words *sotto voce* from his Uncle Matt’s favourite song, “Every day, the world begins again...”

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On the day of the contest with Red, Gobo explained the rules to an attentive crowd of Fraggles. He and Red, predictably, were unable to agree on those rules without considerable bickering over the exact wording, but fundamentally the

terms were pretty simple. The two teams would start from a tunnel locally known as *The Screwdriver*, that took many twists and turns as it branched out in confusing directions, so that any Fraggles could reasonably not be expected to set foot where Fraggles had set foot before. The two teams would separate at the first fork, going in different directions, and each would take notes on whatever they found along the way. At the end of the contest, the two teams' discoveries would be compared by an impartial panel composed of three judges.

It took another ten minutes for Gobo and Red to merely agree on who should be chosen as judges, before they could go on to *how* the judges would decide who had won – whether by how many discoveries had been made along the way, or by how important those discoveries might be. Finally, it had to be decided what prize the winning team would actually win. Or what the losing team would *forfeit*, as the case might be.

Red was all for Gobo and Darl helping Boober wash laundry for an entire week! Boober immediately objected that washing laundry was *fun*, and should be a prize, not a punishment!

“Oh, all right.” Red amended her suggestion to Gobo and Darl reading Mokey's poems all day, to everyone in the Great Hall who cared to listen, until night fell.

Mokey strongly objected that reading her poetry wasn't a punishment either ... but ought to be a reward! “And a perfect one, too,” since she had always wanted a public reading. “What a wonderful opportunity it will be to expose Fraggles to more culture.”

If he won, Gobo knew exactly what prize he wanted from Red's team. “The next time my Uncle Matt visits the Rock, I want you to publicly apologize to him for ever doubting his adventures!”

“What? No way!” protested Red, but on reflection she said, “Agreed. I'm going to win anyway!”

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“But your Uncle Matt *doesn't* know anything at all about Outer Space!” Darl whispered to Gobo, “no matter what he writes to you in those postcards! I *know*. I lived there all my life, before becoming a Fraggles, and his letters are complete nonsense!”

“Aw, well, I know. You told me. But I always looked up to my Uncle Matt. When I was just a little Fraggles, he was there for me after my dad died, and he looked after me as though I was his own son. I looked up to him for inspiration and guidance. He was a great hero, in my eyes. Not only that,” explained Gobo, “but *his* father was also a great explorer! I was named after my Great Uncle Gobo.”

Darl and Gobo two stood at the mouth of the broad tunnel into which Red and Mokey had departed only a moment before. Darl visibly hung back, reluctant to begin an adventure that he was sure he wasn't prepared for, and that every fiber of his being told him would end badly.

Gobo clapped Darl on the shoulder reassuringly. “C'mon ... it'll be alright. I've explored hundreds of tunnels like this one. In fact, I've explored many branches of *this* tunnel, and there will probably not be any real surprises in store. That's why we picked The Screwdriver – it's confusing, but the others would never have agreed to explore a cave where there was likely any *real* danger!”

“But you haven't explored *all* of them, have you?” Darl persisted doubtfully.

Gobo rolled his eyes upward, and simply said, “Let's go, eh?”

Only about two hundred yards in, the Screwdriver divided into two paths. After choosing directions, Red and Mokey had taken the one on the right, so Gobo and Darl took the left-hand way. Within another couple of hundred yards, the tunnel divided again, this time into three paths. After another short walk, the two Fraggles were confronted with *half a dozen* tunnels, including winding ways that led to higher and lower trails, and one that appeared to lead back on itself. In short order, they were in a hopelessly tangled labyrinth.

Darl was encouraged to realize that he *did* have an innate sense of direction. He knew precisely where he was, and where he had been. It was where he was going *next* that worried him. He had no idea at all where the next twist or turn in the dimly lit and oddly pigmented walls would take them. Darl also knew that they were deep in *terra incognita* now, and neither would Gobo know where they were going.

When he nervously mentioned that fact, Gobo retorted brightly, “That's the fun of exploring, right?”

This time it was Darl's turn to roll his eyes.

Truthfully, the caves they passed through grew more and more strange, one by one.

As a Silly Creature from Outer Space, Darl could be forgiven for once believing that caves were uniformly dull grey or dusty brown. Once he had lived a while among the Fraggles, however, he knew that in fact his adopted home was a seemingly endless maze, like a Swiss cheese, and was as variously hued as a box of Prismacolors. Instead of slate and shale, he found he was living in a Painted Desert, a natural wonder even among Silly Creatures in the outside world.

As he followed along behind Gobo, Darl saw bulbous formations of flowstone like mountains of grapes. Around the next corner a forest of crystalline shards clung to the walls ... from which came a faint ringing, so high-pitched that it was nearly above hearing. That room came to an end, but a small opening at waist level admitted the explorers into a spacious dome, beneath which a sparkling fountain of fresh water bubbled. They passed a balanced rock, too high to reach, teetering so ominously overhead that they were too fearful to make a sound until they were on the other side. Pillars of multicolored onyx filled another room, while the next had damp walls entirely lost in mossy gloom. They crossed natural bridges, and climbed winding stairs. The changes from one room to the next were continuous and bewildering.

Nor was The Rock merely a study in contrasting rock formations. There was life among the stalactites, stalagmites, chimneys, arches, rock falls, hot springs, rushing pools and broad open spaces; they were far from empty of living things. Far from it. As the two friends traveled, Gobo pointed out the astonishing number of fantastic creatures that lived within the nooks and crannies of The Rock. Wherever there was even a tiny growing space, plants of every description took root, creating riots of colour, shape and fragrance.

"You don't want to get too close to that, eh?" said Gobo. "Those Gibbershees are harmless, but the pollen makes you a bit giddy when you breathe their perfume too deeply. People who spend too much time close to them do foolish things, like singing backward or turning their pockets inside out for no reason."

Darl quickly backed off. "But they look just like the those *whatchamacallits* ... um ... Glitter Buds."

“Sure. But Gibbershee blossoms are bigger, and have more rows of petals around the center. Six or seven ... not only three or four. Glitter Buds are also, well, glittery, but Gibbershee blossoms are generally one colour. You don’t have to worry about them, though ... the worst they can do is make you act silly. Dragon’s Breath, on the other hand, you should never come close to if you can help it,” Gobo continued cheerfully. “It is perfectly safe if you don’t wake it, but if it hears you it will spray you with a sap that will stupefy a person for *hours*.”

“Fascinating,” Darl whispered nervously. He recalled that the words were Gobo’s and had sung them not all that very long ago in Darl’s hearing.

*On the road again,
Can't tell where we've been,
And can't tell where it is we're going to,
If we cannot know
Where we're going to go,
I'd go home, if it's all the same to you...*”

As they went onward, Gobo continued to explain the differences between dozens of common and other less-common types of flora ... but more and more often they met entirely unfamiliar plants, which Gobo admitted he had never seen before. Accordingly, they become increasingly cautious as they progressed.

“It’s just a suggestion,” Darl said nervously, “but this place is *very* strange. Even in my limited experience with living here, this place is beginning to feel a little creepy. At this point, perhaps you should start making *discoveries*, so that we don’t need to hang around here any longer than we need to?”

“Um... Good point. But there’s nothing that I think especially counts as an important *discovery*. Just a lot of cobwebby stuff and – *whoops, watch out!*”

Gobo dragged his friend backward several feet at the same moment that a “something” with far too many legs – nearly their own size – jumped out of the shadows and darted down a narrow passage.

“What was *that!*?” Darl cried in sudden alarm.

“I have *no* idea!” an equally rattled Gobo responded. “But I think we might almost count *that* as a discovery ... *whatever* it was!”

After catching their breath a while, Gobo said cheerfully, "Well! Let's get on the road again, shall we?"

Neither of them moved.

Finally, Gobo stepped off again, and they proceeded with even more caution than before.

Eventually, Darl asked, "What do suppose Red and Mokey are up to? By now, they've had plenty of opportunity to get into trouble. You don't suppose they might be in any danger?"

"Just because we were taken by surprise by that bat-thing? We were only startled. Why should the others be in any sort of danger?" said Gobo, as he warily walked around a nest of small, gaping mouths with razor-sharp teeth. "These caves are pretty safe, or I wouldn't have chosen them. You just have to watch your step. *Hey ...*" he suddenly shouted. "Those are my *toes*, you nasty little things!"

"I'm *so* glad I'm in your capable hands," said Darl, with only a trace of irony.

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Meanwhile, in another part of the tunnels, Mokey was saying, "What do you suppose the guys are doing? We've been walking all afternoon, and so far we haven't found anything of interest. Not even pretty flowers, or an unusual sort of Rumble-Bug. Just a lot of dusty, brown Carpet Sloths. Oh! We'll never win Gobo's contest at *this* rate!" she fretted.

"Relax! If I know those two, they have gotten turned around and found themselves back at the start!" scoffed Red.

They had been walking through a series of large halls, one after the other, without so much as a single unusual discovery ... only familiar plants, creatures and rock formations that they might find anywhere. Red was growing increasingly impatient with their lack of discoveries, while Mokey was trying to think of a rhyme for "boring." Finally, she began a little, sing-songy lyric.

*If you ask me, this exploring
Is nothing short of boring,
I'd have more fun just standing on my head;
As for finding something new,*

*I would leave that up to you,
I'd much prefer to be at home in bed... !"*

"In fact, you know what?" Red interrupted her. "I think those two are up to something! I think they've had this contest rigged from the start! They planned to send us somewhere safe, and *boring*, where there was nothing for us to find!"

"Oh, Red," said Mokey. "They'd never do anything like *cheating*! How can you think of such a thing? I'm sure Gobo gave us exactly the same chance to win the contest that he gave to himself and Darl!"

Red was mollified for the moment, but conceded only that there was nothing *here* that could be called a discovery. Everything they had seen so far had been as ordinary as Doozers working! "Well, what do *you* think we should do? It's obvious that we can't win the contest without discovering something ... *anything!*"

Mokey paused to consider the possibilities as she saw them. "Perhaps ... perhaps, we could *make* something interesting, and *that* would count?" But then she shifted to another point of view. "No ... that won't do, because making something really isn't *discovering* something, and you have to explore for it before you can discover a thing. But if you explored for something, then you wouldn't know what it was until you found it, and how would you know what to make unless you discovered it first?"

"I'm not sure that makes sense," said Red.

"Obviously, Red, we can only discover something that hasn't been discovered yet," persisted Mokey, "but we can't make something that we've already found, now can we? So if we've discovered something, then we wouldn't have to make it, but if we make something, then we can't discover it because we already know it's there, and we'll have failed as explorers!"

Red groaned with exasperation, "That's worthy of Convincing John. Let's do something *practical* instead. I bet you have some poster paint, or some chalk, in one of your pockets, don't you?"

The taller Fraggles searched her long robes, examining the deep pockets carefully before fetching out a handful of pigments in tiny sealed pots. "Here you are!" Mokey declared happily.

“Perfect!” said Red. “Now we just need a sleepy bug, or an odd shaped rock, and we can start collecting ‘discoveries’ to show to Gobo.” She began to search around the cave for whatever could be made into a “discovery.”

“REEEE-DD!” Mokie wailed.

“What is it now?”

“We can’t do that! Painting fake discoveries would be *cheating!*”

“No ... that would be ‘creative.’ You like being creative, don’t you?”

“Red, Red, Red, ” moaned Mokie, sadly shaking her head...

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Mindful of where they stepped, Gobo and Darl were deep in uncharted territory. Of the two explorers, both were troubled for their own reasons. Darl had no idea of where they were going, and that worried him. Gobo, on the other hand, had been certain he had chosen a tunnel that led nowhere other than where he expected to be, and certainly he ought to be nowhere that led to trouble. But yet it looked entirely possible that “in trouble” might be *exactly* where they were.

For one thing, the last few chambers they had come to had been nearly bereft of living things. The two Fraggles had been taking notes for the contest as they walked, and they didn’t much like what they were seeing of late. It was almost as though nothing but the meanest and most vile creatures would stoop to live under such conditions. Even the rare plant life seemed dispirited and grey. It was as un-Fraggle-Rocklike a place as Darl had seen in his short Fragglish experience, and even Gobo admitted that they were in a rather disagreeable place.

“I’ve been in worse places,” Gobo admitted. “But things usually look *worse* than they really are, eh?”

The farther they went, however, the darker and more gloomy the way grew, until they finally arrived in a large cavern that was nearly as large as The Great Hall. But where The Great Hall was alive with colour, laughter and activity, this grim, shadowy hole in the Rock resembled an abandoned blast furnace that had seen better days, and not been dusted in living memory.

Gobo slowly came to a stop, and motioned Darl to halt as well. "I'm thinking that we should go back, and try a different route. Not far, just back for an hour or two the way we came ... take a left instead of a right ... whatever," his words trailed away to a whisper.

Darl was quick to agree. "I was thinking the same thing myself, now that you mention it. This place gives me the *creeps*. Let's go back to that spot where we drank from the spring that tasted like cherry soda, where we'll probably have better lu..."

"*Shhh!!!*" hissed Gobo. "What was that?" his voice quivered. "I don't like this at all. We need to leave, *now*." But now was too late, as the Fraggles quickly realized!

Knuckle-walking out of the darkness, a pair of enormous creatures charged at the petrified Fraggles.

"Skeeks!" cried Gobo. "Run for your life!"

Darl had no idea at all what a Skeek was, but it was ugly and plainly dangerous. Running seemed like a very good idea, but there was no time. The one with sickly purple hair scooped up Gobo as though he were a child. While the struggling Fraggles kicked futilely at the creature's shins, his efforts were useless, and he was effortlessly slung over a warty back.

The other Skeek was having somewhat less luck managing Darl, however. The monster grabbing at him had long, ape-like arms, shaggy orange hair, a nose like a gherkin, broken teeth and an undershot jaw that was the size of a bear-trap! Darl dodged as best as he could, but in a moment he too was collared.

Struggling desperately, Darl was dragged along in a grip like a gorilla's, while Gobo bounced roughly over the other Skeek's gnarly shoulder.

"What are these goons going to do with us?" Darl wailed.

"If we're lucky?" Gobo gasped. "Drag us to their lair, beat us black and blue, then throw us into a deep pit, with the remains of past meals they've captured. If we're *not* lucky ... I expect they'll eat us right away!"

Darl responded with a very un-Fragglelike expletive.

As best he could as he jounced along on his captor's shoulder, Gobo explained more about Skeeks. They were fearsome monsters, with an appetite for anything that would allow itself to be caught. They were sly, malicious and unpredictable. They also had a body odour that could bleach cloth. For the most part, however, they stayed far away from the lighted areas where Fraggles lived, and the wholesome atmosphere around growing things. Instead, they preferred darkness and decay, and only hunted around the borders of their own blighted surroundings.

"This is all my fault," Gobo confessed morosely. "I should have realized from the signs that we might be near a Skeek's lair. It's so unusual to come within a mile of anywhere that Skeeks live that I didn't realize the danger! I was too caught up in *exploring* – " he spat the word out, " – to see the obvious!"

"So what do we do now?" asked Darl. "I don't fancy being eaten, not even if we're beaten first so that we have time to savor the terror!"

"I... I don't know," Gobo stammered in despair. "No... no-one *escapes* from a hungry Skeek!"

As Darl was dragged along, he saw that they were being hauled toward the mouth of a dark pit, from which emanated the fetor of unnamed things rotting. It would be no use to recite 'A Elbereth Gilthoniel' in a desperate situation as this, he realized – and then he acted so suddenly that he had no time to be conscious of what he was doing.

With a sudden, violent lunge, Darl kicked the Skeek that held him, right where he assumed the family jewels were kept under the matted, grey fur!

Instantly, the monster flung Darl aside, curled up into a fetal ball and screeched. The Skeet carrying Gobo dropped him to the floor and rushed at Darl with its snaggly fangs bared in a hideous grimace.

Still without thinking, Darl stepped inside the reach of the Skeek, and laid a desperate punch in its hairy belly – with unexpected effect.

The Skeek folded up! It whistled out a blast of reeking breath, tried to straighten up, then bent over again, wheezing. It tried to straighten up again, but this time Darl drove an overhand punch square into the monster's face, and his other fist

crunched into a bloodshot eye.

The Skeek backed off in a hurry, but Darl wasn't letting it off the hook so easily – he kept boring in with a barrage of one-two punches, finishing with a haymaker square in its breadbasket! The monster went down like a column of teetering rocks.

The other Skeek was still rocking slowly back and forth on the ground, curled up, clutching itself and moaning quietly.

A shaken Gobo rose from the cave floor to dust himself off, then stared at the two fallen monsters in awe.

“How ... did ... you ... *do* that?” he whispered.

“I don't quite know. I just did... ” Darl muttered, shaking. “But let's just get the hell out of here for now. Okay?”

“But I don't see how it was possible to hurt anything *so much* bigger than yourself, especially *so much* bigger than yourself,” Gobo insisted, still gawking at the defeated Skeeks and ignoring Darl's efforts to drag him away from the mind-boggling sight.

Darl was frantic to get the two of them as far away as possible before the monsters recovered. The Skeeks were probably still dangerous, and he was not about to risk another round with them.

“Use your common sense! Let's go!” he hissed. “Haven't you ever been in a fight before?”

“A fight? You mean with your *hands*?” replied an astonished Gobo. “Of course not.”

Apparently, no one had ever heard of *scientific pugilism* in Fraggles Rock before – not even the monsters!

— —

No two Fraggles had ever been more grateful to be back in the Great Hall again than Gobo and Darl. They had run back the way that had come, only pausing at the cherry fountain, where after huffing and puffing, they drank heavily, then started off again at a jog, which eventually slowed to a weary trudge. Since the tunnels were now brighter and full of more normal plants and creatures, it

seemed that they were safely outside of Skeeek haunts – but they were unwilling to take a chance. Finally, they began to recognize familiar Fraggles territory.

They were dusty, bedraggled, tired and exhausted when at last finally they staggered into The Great Hall. The contest had begun only a few hours before ... yet to the two spent Fraggles, it seemed as though their ordeal had lasted for days.

Red and Mokey had already returned from their own “expedition,” but most of the crowd of spectators had long since drifted away – even Fraggles viewing an exciting spectacle have short attention spans – so apart from Red, Mokey, the three judges and a handful of loyal friends and hangers-on, the area in front of the tunnel entrance was empty.

“Well, look who *finally* decided to show up!” cried a jubilant Red. “You lost your way, I suppose? We’ve been waiting for you to show your faces for the last hour! Look at all the important stuff *we* found. We discovered a stone that whistles by itself, some sweet smelling, sticky sap and a funny-looking Doozer helmet from thousands of years ago ... I guess ... at least I’ve never seen one like it before.”

Mokey rolled her eyes in exasperation, but then shrugged and kept silent as Red confidently played to the remaining spectators, and finally called, “Get the judges!”

The three judges ambled forward under Red’s urging. One had fallen asleep and had to be shaken awake, and the other two had been interrupted in eating a bag of gingerbread snaps ... and all three had forgotten that they were the judges for a contest. Red marshaled them up on the reviewing stand where they belonged, so that they could declare unanimously that Mokey and herself had *won*.

“Now pronounce the penalty for the *looo-sers!*” she crowed.

But Mokey, peering at the exhausted Gobo and Darl, sensed that something was very wrong. “Red?” she interrupted. “Something has happened, I know it. Gobo, you *must* tell me what happened!”

“This is not a good time to talk about it,” Gobo wheezed. “We’re hungry and tired and sore all over, and we just want to go home to get to bed ... isn't that right, Darl?”

Darl only grunted agreement, as he embraced a badly worried Kiki.

"But this is the *perfect* time to talk about how badly you lost!" Red insisted, pursuing her victory with a one-track mind.

"I don't want to talk about it, either," said Darl ... adding, "we may not have found much worth bragging about, but we were one step away from being eaten. This is one contest I didn't *mind* losing!"

Red's triumphant expression suddenly turned sickly. "Ea... ea... eaten?" she whispered, aghast.

"*Eaten!*" emphasized Gobo.

After that, no one suggested the two defeated explorers should do Boober's laundry, or read hours of flowery poetry in The Great Hall. Instead, the subdued little crowd dispersed in silence, and the cavern echoed unnaturally quiet for the rest of the evening.

--

Kiki led Darl away, one arm tightly around him, and demanded to know everything that had happened to him, from the moment the boys were out of sight until their return, hours later.

But not without a bath *first*. Kiki insisted that Darl stop at the Pond and have a thorough wash on the way home. Whether at work or play, Fraggles are usually not overly fussy about dust and grime, but there are limits. Darl was not only filthy from head to foot, he had somehow acquired a very disagreeable odour. At a secluded corner of the Great Hall's pool, Kiki steered the bedraggled Darl to the water's edge, and barely resisted the temptation to bodily push him in.

"You might have picked a spot closer to the warm spring," he complained.

Wrinkling up her lip, Kiki said, "Just *wash*. What did you do – roll in sour greaseberries?"

In fact, the water was at an ideal temperature for a soak. Darl pulled his favourite blue hockey jersey over his head, tossed it aside and plunged into the Pool. A murky cloud of dirty water immediately rose around him as he rubbed himself vigorously, sluiced himself with clean water and finally ducked under completely. Fortunately, the current was brisk at this end of the Pool, and the

water cleared quickly.

Kiki also threw her clothes aside, and eased into the neck-high pool beside her mate. "I suppose we might as well both walk home wet," she said. "Now, I want you to explain why you were almost eaten! I didn't give Gobo permission to let you get eaten in one of his expeditions!"

Darl settled back against a mossy mound and sighed. Clearly, he was obliged to explain *everything*, and waiting to return home was not soon enough for the impatient female who was poking him in the ribs. Describing his adventures, he had to admit that nothing they had found on the trip had satisfied Gobo's criteria for new discoveries until late in the day ... long after they should have noticed how threatening their surroundings had become. Then the Skeeks had appeared as though by magic, and it was all they could do to escape.

"How in the world did you get away?" demanded Kiki, shuddering. "*Skeeks!* Your bones would have been picked clean by now! What did Gobo do?"

For a moment, Darl said nothing ... then admitted, "Gobo thought we were finished ... we should say our goodbyes. I didn't know what else to do, so I kicked the Skeek that was holding me in the crotch! To my surprise, he collapsed like a bag of wet noodles! There was nothing else then but attack the other Skeek ... the one that had captured Gobo. I drew back a fist and *punched* that Skeet in the gut, as hard as I could. That stunned him, so I was able to finish him off ... though I still don't know how."

Kiki stared at Darl for several seconds before she said, "Say that *again?*"

She coaxed him through the entire story from beginning to end, liberally annotated with skeptical questions before she was satisfied. Then she fell silent, clinging to him as she trembled...

At the end of the day, Fraggles are scrupulous about the state of their clothes, their blankets and rugs, their saucers and pans, and it simply *wouldn't* do to go to bed with dirty feet. When Darl felt he was clean enough to share Kiki's bed again, he climbed out of the Pool, shook most of the water from his fur and reached for his shirt. Only then did he notice that *it* badly needed a wash as well. He decided to simply carry it home, and ask Boober to launder it tomorrow.

They walked home dripping, holding hands, with Darl carrying their clothes. Back safely in their cozy Hole, they carefully dried each other off with their worn towel ... and, what with one thing and another, they did not have supper that night...

--

Kiki was up early the next day, mulling over her breakfast. She felt partly to blame for encouraging Darl to take part in Gobo's foolish contest ... one that had nearly ended so badly. Also, the idea that Darl might be some sort of super-Fraggle was hard to fathom. As for Skeeks ... she had believed that they were only a story for frightening children who were naughty ... boogiemens no-one ever met in real life. But what if Skeeks ever came all the way to The Great Hall, to the very Pool of The Great Hall itself?

She had not had time to think for very long before someone tapped at the entrance to their Hole.

"Come in," she called up the stairs, wondering who it might be this early in the morning.

"It's me, eh," Gobo called back, and swept aside the beaded curtain in the doorway.

The blurry voice of Darl came from the sleeping area. "Who's that? Who comes calling even *before breakfast?*" he complained.

"It's Gobo, eh? Sorry, Darl, but I think it's too important to wait."

Darl appeared from the bed area, pulling on his *second* favourite shirt, a plaid "mac" that he had borrowed from Kiki. Until Boober collected and washed the laundry, the Maple Leaf jersey that he habitually wore would be unwearable.

"Did Wembley come, too?" asked Kiki.

"Naw, Wembley doesn't know I'm here."

"So what's all that important this hour of the morning?" Darl yawned, slumping into a chair at the little table, and waving Gobo into the chair opposite. "You look beat. Did *you* get any sleep?"

"Eh... no, not much," Gobo said slowly. "See, some things happened

after I got home.”

“What kind of things?” Darl asked.

Gobo paused, as Kiki poured cups of steaming cocoa-like brew for them, then replied slowly, “Well ... Red came by, just as I was getting ready for bed. She was really embarrassed, and confessed that none of the *discoveries* that she and Mokey claimed to have made yesterday were real ... just ordinary stuff, you know? I said I can tell if someone had tied a ribbon to a Scooterfly or not, and that was okay. We were still friends.”

“Well... that’s nice, but hardly important enough to wake me up at this hour to talk about it,” Darl grumped, taking a sip from his cup.

“Well... eh... Then something else happened,” Gobo mumbled.

“*What* else happened?” Darl asked, with exaggerated patience.

“Well... eh, later, after Red had gone, I was getting ready for bed, when Mokey came by. She said it was very important. She seemed sad, nervous, determined but very brave – in that way of hers, you know?”

“So what did Mokey want?” Kiki asked curiously.

“Well... eh... I thought she was going to confess her part in their fake ‘discoveries’ too, so I said I knew all about that. Mokey surprised me by saying she knew all along that I hadn’t been fooled, and simply could admit to the deception without betraying her friend Red. She hadn’t come to see me about that at all. Instead, she released me from the promise to read her poetry, because it was wrong to win a bet under false pretenses. Of course, I *had* to say I love Mokey’s poems anyway, and would love to read them... I guess I do like them ... when I *understand* them. So we’re still friends... ”

“Well, that’s just *sweet*, and I am very gratified to know you had such good reasons for your insomnia – ” Darl began ironically, and Kiki kicked him under the table. “ – OW! But still, that hardly seems important enough... OW!”

“Oh, eh... yeah, then something else happened,” Gobo mumbled.

“*What* else happened?” Darl hissed, fighting down an impulse to

scream. He knew from experience that most Fraggles have the attention-span of a chipmunk, and if he interrupted Gobo's train of thought, they might be here all day.

"Well... it's about my pal, Wembley," Gobo said sadly. He had finally arrived at the real reason why he came to talk with Darl.

"So Wembley isn't even coming?" asked Kiki.

"Naw, Wembley doesn't want me to leave him alone by himself. That's the problem. *Something* has to be done about that bully *Jenkis*. He picks on Wembley, and won't leave him alone. I didn't know anything about it until I got home yesterday, after ... you know all about that. I coaxed the story out of Wembley later, when I got home, but he was practically in tears before he would say anything."

"Well, I know that bully *Jenkis* gave Wembley a sprained leg, so he wasn't able to explore with you yesterday and I went in his place." Darl said. "But I'm sure I saw Wembley at the start of the contest, when he came to see us off."

"You did," said Gobo. "He was sitting on a ledge next to Rumble, when that tough bully, *Jenkis*, pushed Wembley off the end of the ledge. He fell and hurt his leg *again*, had to be carried home by Rumble and Lou, and put to bed."

"That's terrible," cried Kiki. "Will he be alright?"

"Yeah, I think so. I re-bandaged his leg, and it doesn't seem to be any worse ... just twice as sore as it used to be. He hasn't left his blankets since!"

"I don't think I like where this is going..." muttered Darl.

"There's no two ways about it," Gobo said bluntly. "You *have* to do something to help Wembley. If *Jenkis* goes on this way, Wembley will be too frightened to go outside at all! *Jenkis* is twice as big as any of us, but he's basically a coward. He backs down from anyone with any gumption, and *we* can stand up to him. But that doesn't help Wembley. He's easily spooked when he's alone, and he won't do *anything* to defend himself."

"I see that," Darl said, "But I don't know what you want me to do. I can't be with him all the time, any more than you can."

"But you *can* teach him to *fight* ... just like you learned how when you were a Silly Creature, eh!"

Kiki echoed Darl's thoughts: "I don't like where this is going, *either*... "

Wembley refused to come out into the Great Hall for three more days. He had good reason, since Jenkis lingered wherever he was likely to, sooner or later, encounter the smaller Fraggles. Sure enough, as soon as Wembley ventured from the Hole where he and Gobo lived, he discovered that Jenkis was shadowing him close behind. Other Fraggles, who disapproved of Jenkis' obvious bullying, had done all they could, but unfortunately that amounted to little more than stern frowns, and one or two impolite snubs. On one occasion, Red summoned enough anger to speak sharply to the bully as she passed by ... but not even *that* was enough.

It was only by summoning up courage for those three days that Wembley was able to scoot up the trail to the Hole where Darl and Kiki lived. Just as he feared, he found the oversize bully following close behind him the entire way. Wembley ducked inside the entrance to his friends' Hole, with a swaggering Jenkis only a few steps behind.

Peeking out, Kiki found the oversize Fraggles lingering a short distance away, an intimidating presence outside their doorway. A moment later, a frowning Darl was at the entrance as well. But Jenkis had heard about Darl's encounter with the Skeeks, and vanished down the tunnel ... just a little too quickly to call it "nonchalantly."

"How is your leg?" asked Kiki, seating Wembley at the table. "You walked all the way by yourself? Why didn't Gobo come with you?"

Wembley looked uncomfortable, as he always did whenever he was unsure of himself. "Aw ... well ... Gobo *wanted* to come ... but he also told me that someday I'd have to show that I wasn't afraid. So I said that if it was all the same with him, I'd go by myself!"

"I think that's very brave of you," replied Kiki, reassuringly. "If... "

"You don't think I did the wrong thing, do you?" Wembley interrupted.

Darl brought a dish of Doozer sticks with sweet syrup poured over them.

"Dig in," he said, "No, I don't think you did the wrong thing. I think all you need is a little self-confidence, and then you'll have no trouble standing up to a dim-witted, Two-Ended Balooobius like Jenkis."

"I ... don't ... know, " Wembley replied, sucking on a sticky confection. "I mean ... he's so *big*. And I'm so *small*. What if Jenkis pushes me really, really hard, next time?"

"But he's already done that! It wasn't *that* bad, was *it*?" answered Darl. "Just get up again, and... well... just push back. "

"And if he *knocks* me down? Harder than a push?" persisted the small green Fraggles.

It was a point that Darl could not evade forever. As a former Silly Thing, he dreaded the idea of introducing personal conflict into this peaceful little society, but he found it difficult to ignore the need.

"If he knocks you down, you've got to get up again and hit him back," he said.

"You mean, *hurt* another Fraggles? With my hand?" Wembley quavered.

Darl sighed. "Now look, you'd swat at a Blisterbug, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yeah, of course," Wembley said. "Blisterbugs sting! And it hurts."

"But you know it only hurts for a little while, right? And if you swat a Blisterbug, it won't ever sting you again."

"But Jenkis isn't a Blisterbug!"

"Yes, he is," Darl said. "He may be a Fraggles, but he's also mean for no reason, he hangs around waiting to hurt smaller Fraggles, he annoys *everyone*. He's just a big, mean, dumb Blisterbug!"

Wembley held up his open hand and looked at it dubiously. "So if I just swatted Jenkis, you think he'd stop hurting me?"

Wearily, Darl extended a hand and curled his fingers up. “Just a swat won’t be enough. This is how you make a *fist*. I’ll also show you how to make one so that you don’t break a finger. Now you try it. That’s right ... ”

Wembley waggled his clenched hand loosely, as though to shake a bug off. Darl sighed again. This would not be easy.

Darl taught the awkward little Fraggles the basics of fighting over the rest of the morning. Kiki watched with fascination while Darl taught Wembley – the hard way – not to fold his thumbs inside his fingers. He demonstrated how to keep his fists up, jab forward, then practice putting his weight into it. In fact, they were making good progress when Wembley backed into a settee, and nearly went head over heels after knocking over one of Mokey’s paintings.

Kiki strenuously objected that, henceforth, home was out of bounds for training. “Clearly, this is not the place for this kind of rough and tumble. You’ll have to take it outside in future!”

--

Next day, Darl led Wembley to a secluded spot at the end of a short tunnel. Red could often be found there, organizing team sports, lifting weights, exercising or encouraging young Fraggles to emulate her own strenuous life-style. In fact, she spent so much time there that she had all but claimed it as her own. It was, of course, the common property of all, and the floor had been polished by centuries of running, chasing, throwing, hopping, sliding and skittering Fraggles occupied in the business of having a good time. It was one of Red’s favourite spots.

At one end were several different sorts of goal posts that could be used in marking almost any sort of score. The other end held a cubbyhole for all the paraphernalia of an ill-defined number of sports, including Rock Hockey, Bladder Ball, Butt Bouncing and Bowling with Rollies. For the spectators, rows of moss-cushioned seats were thoughtfully provided along both sides of the field ... although in any case, most of the crowd, and some of the teams, were likely to have wandered away or fallen asleep well before the end of the game.

Darl and Wembley wouldn’t need any equipment, however, and they had even less use for spectators. It would be only the two of them, *mano-a-mano*.

“Yesterday, we practiced how you hold your hands,” said Darl. “You remember what I showed you?”

The smaller Fraggles was in much better spirits already. "I sure do!" Wembley cheerfully replied. "I hold my hands like *this!* And then I do *this!*"

Unfortunately, the punch he demonstrated was slow and feeble, at best. In Darl's opinion it would be a long morning before Wembley would be ready to strike a blow against a pillow... much less his teacher's padded body. If not for the weak "poof" sound, Darl would not have known Wembley had even connected.

"You can't throw a proper punch unless you put some weight behind it. To do that, you have to *follow through*. Understand?"

"Oh, sure!" agreed Wembley. "How... how do I do *that?*"

"Stand like this!" Darl said, using his feet to push Wembley's feet into better position. "Now, see? You're here, and now you can move forward with your weight, and use all that power in your blow. Now try it again!" he said.

Wembley tried it harder.

"Now again!" Darl instructed. "Harder this time!"

And Wembley tried again ... and again ... and again, landing an imperceptibly more solid blow each time. They spent the entire morning before Darl was satisfied with their progress, and both Fraggles felt need of a rest.

There was little need to mention that they needed a dip in the main Pool after so much exertion. At the Pool they found the usual crowd of laughing, giggling, running, jumping, splashing, gossiping revelers, who greeted them joyfully.

Several called out, "Whatcha doing?" "Come join us!" and "*Watch out, Red's diving!*" ... just as Red landed in the Pool with an impressive belly flop that soaked Fraggles who were standing outside for several feet around.

Climbing out, Red gingerly rubbed her furry belly, and complained, "That could have gone a little better. Where were you two all morning? I asked Gobo, but he wouldn't say anything ... just that you two had *things* to talk about. Are you going to tell me, or am I going to have to pry until you give in?"

"Oh, sure..." Wembley began an eager explanation, that Darl promptly cut off.

"It was really nothing," he said.

Surprised, Red said, "Nothing?"

"Not really," Darl continued. "Just a little pep talk ... I wanted to give Wembley some confidence by telling him that ... he has no reason to be nervous ... around others, that is." This was not at all what Darl wanted to talk about, and he was searching for ways to avoid touching upon the subject of conflict between Fraggles.

"That's not what *I* heard!" crowed Red. "Mokey told *me*, that she overheard Lou talking with some of *her* friends, and they had noticed that Jenkis was picking on *Wembley* again. They complained to The World's Oldest Fraggles, who said he already had enough problems of his own with his bunions, so he sent his helper, *Henchy*, to tell *Gobo* that something would have to be done about this nonsense! I bet Gobo went straight to *you* next, and that's what's behind all the secrecy between you and Wembley!"

Darl glowered at Red, not at all pleased by either her deduction, nor by the satisfaction she felt because she was more or less correct.

"That's neither here nor there," he equivocated. "This is a matter between me and Wembley, and it's better if it remains between the two of us."

Next day, the two friends arrived for their work-out, and found a small crowd of curious Fraggles ahead of them...

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"Sorry. I tried to shoo them away," apologized Gobo. "I didn't mean for the entire Rock to know all about it, eh ... but I guess Henchy blabbed."

Darl frowned, then sighed. "I think *everybody* blabbed!"

Kiki took a seat on a bench along with other spectators. When Darl shot a look in her direction, she did her best to show encouragement.

Darl showed Wembley how to warm up, and then after a couple of minutes they began to practice the previous day's lessons...

Gradually, Wembley began to get the hang of using his hands properly, as well as to overcome the nervousness that he felt by trying. He was landing solid

rights and lefts on Darl's pillow, and soon it was time for Wembley to be padded as well. As Darl began to rain real blows on his partner, Wembley learned to duck and weave, and not curl up in fright whenever he failed to dodge a blow.

All the while, Kiki sat on the sidelines, slowly growing more and more apprehensive as she watched two of her favourite Fraggles trade punches with each other.

Gobo, who had also come to watch the exercise, had a strangely unreadable expression on his face ... and kept silent the whole while.

--

"I think I can say," Darl congratulated Wembley, "that you know how to defend yourself as well as any Fraggles in the Rock. You should be more than a match for two Jenkises. Three!"

"*Bam* ... you really think so?" said his sparring partner, jabbing energetically at Darl's outstretched fist. "*Bam! Bam!*"

"Without a doubt."

Darl looked over at Kiki, and then over to the other side of the makeshift gym, where Gobo sat. To his surprise, he was unable to clearly read either Fraggles' face. Kiki stuck her tongue out in mock disapproval, while on the other side, Gobo sat as though made of stone.

"I think you better hit the showers, old sport," said Darl. "That's Silly Creature talk for go *for a swim*. Why don't you and Gobo meet up with us, later? First, I want to have a word with Kiki."

Kiki scooted over and allowed Darl to occupy the other half of a stuffed cushion that was leaking feathers from several places.

Darl said, "Wembley did pretty well, don't you think?"

"Too well, I'm afraid. I don't like this *fighting* business at all," Kiki responded. "Did you see the expression on Gobo's face just now, when Wembley joined him at the sidelines?"

"Gobo seemed happy enough when I agreed to be Wembley's teacher."

"We'll see," Kiki said, doubtfully.

Gobo had been obviously relieved at the start of Wembley's lessons, but – day by day – he grew more thoughtful-looking. Finally, he was watching the practice sessions as though something in his stomach was upsetting him.

Excited as he was about his new-found skills, Wembley noticed nothing wrong about his friend. Instead, he danced with excitement, and gushed enthusiasm like a small puppy. Gobo listened as stony-faced as before. But, then, a slow smile broke over the explorer's face...

"That was great," Gobo congratulated Wembley. "I was really worried that Darl couldn't teach you to protect yourself, but he really came through, didn't he? If Jenkis ever gives you a hard time again, you'll be able to handle him like *just like that!*"

"Aw... he wouldn't even dare! Darl said I only needed to gain a little confidence, and I'd be alright. Just to be unafraid of him will be enough to give that big bully something to think about!"

Gobo laughed, "What if next time, maybe I'll need *you* to protect *me*, eh? Wouldn't *that* be strange."

"That'll never happen, Gobo. Why ... we're best buddies. You've always been there for me," said a very sincere Wembley, "...and now *I* can be there for *you* too!"

"Of course you will. Now, let's go have some fun, eh? I hear that Lennie has fixed his harmonica, and ... "

Watching from the other side of the playing field, Darl and Kiki were unable to overhear anything that followed. Kiki commented, "They left in good spirits. For a second I thought something was wrong between them. Did you notice?"

"What could possibly have gone wrong?" said Darl. "And *no* guessing!"

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The showdown came much sooner than anyone expected.

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Jenkis had been conspicuously absent during most of the time while Wembley had been "training." When seen at all, he remained quietly in the background, going about his own business. Fraggles even began to approach him cautiously

with tentative “good mornings” and “how ya doings?” but Jenkis was untalkative, and refused to return anyone’s greetings. Instead, he lurked around the margins of The Great Hall, watching events carefully ... clearly sizing up the situation.

The Great Hall was much more than what the name implies. In the middle of the enormous space that encompassed the Hall was The Pool, itself more than it seemed. The main body of water was long, and broad enough for a gaggle of Fraggles to swim and dive in without crowding. In places, it was all but bottomless, and Red could cannonball as deep as she wanted with no danger of touching bottom. In fact, it wasn’t clear if the dark blue depth even *had* a bottom, or whether it just came out topsy-turvy on the other side. It is said that folk known as *Mergles* lived in that strange place ... but few Fraggles had ever visited there. Elsewhere, The Pond was shallow enough for the most unsteady toddlers, and in-between swimmers were able to choose whatever depth they were most comfortable with.

Fresh water ran into The Fraggles Pool from several springs, and by common consent, no-one was allowed to muddy or taint the water for several yards around. The water that ran over the rocks was crystal clear and cold; however, there were hot springs as well, that bubbled up from unseen fissures, and were a source of circulating warmth that promoted relaxation. At most times of the day, you could find one or more Fraggles in the tub-like warm basins, soaking limply in the water, or chatting convivially with their neighbors. For those who wished for a little privacy, it was easy enough to find a hot spring nestled not far away, but sheltered out of sight among the rocks.

At the far end of The Pool, streams from every part of the Great Hall collected together into a torrent, and rushed headlong into the Goblin’s Garden, whose rocky pinnacles of tortured stone drained the torrent into invisible pits, sinkholes and abysses. No Fraggles would have been mad enough to follow – not even Gobo, his Uncle Matt, or any of his illustrious family of explorers ... however foolhardy they might be.

But The Pond in The Great Hall was only the *jewel* in the crown of the world that was known to Kiki and her kindred. The cavern that was the Great Hall was itself immense, and would have seemed so even to any Silly Creature who might have found a way inside. In every direction could be found large gathering

spots, blind alleys, broad platforms, narrow ledges, inspiring towers, twisty passageways, rock curtains, natural bridges and private grottos divided into many smaller worlds. Any geologist worth his salt would have had a field day.

Yet the heart of The Great Hall was not the vast underground dome under which its denizens lived, but the Fraggles themselves. Here they played, laughed, sang, danced, rambled without goal and took impromptu naps when it was quiet. It was its inhabitants that truly gave the Great Hall its life, and there was nowhere that Fraggles might not be found.

And at the center of this pocket universe, Wembley had begun his morning stroll ... closely followed by Jenkins.

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Wembley had rounded the far end of The Pool when Jenkins caught up to him, and then jogged by the smaller Fraggles in a purposefully clumsy pass. The hard shove against Wembley's ribs nearly sent him windmilling into the water.

"Hey, watch where y' going," Jenkins taunted. "You're so short you trip over your own feet!"

"That's not funny!" stammered the smaller Fraggles, pulling himself into a semblance of dignity and turning to face the smirking Jenkins.

"Yeah, it is!" said the bully, and made a noise that sounded like "*schnert*" when he laughed. He waited for Wembley to react, and get himself in deeper ... and his smile wasn't the pleasant sort, but the kind that says the owner wants to humiliate someone.

Jenkins had chosen his ambush well, too, without any very close witnesses. Although it was impossible to be this near to The Pool and remain totally unnoticed, several Fraggles had pricked up their ears when they heard the fracas, and begun to watch from a safe distance.

"No... *it's not!*" said Wembley, backing slowly away.

"*It is!* And maybe it'd be even funnier if you fell in. Why don't you fall in ... why don'cha, hey?"

Jenkins moved in closer to Wembley, leaving him no room to back away any farther. He was crowding the smaller Fraggles toward the edge of the pond, with

the obvious goal of forcing him into the water. At this point, all eyes were watching closely. Several Fraggles were even emboldened enough that they cautiously gathered around.

That was when a furious Red arrived.

“You leave Wembley alone! You hear me?” she snapped. “In fact, why don’t you just stop being so *unfriendly!*”

Jenkis turned away from Wembley then, and gave Red a once-over with mild surprise. Red faltered, and backed ever-so-slightly away. Then Jenkis began a deliberate, menacing advance toward her...

“Don’t you *DARE!*” screamed Wembley! In an instant, he dropped into the defensive stance that Darl had taught him, and fear had fallen from the small Fraggles. No longer backing away from Jenkis, he was actually moving inside the reach of the much larger bully, and was choosing his attack!

Caught completely by surprise, Jenkis tripped over his own feet and fell to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. Awkwardly, he rolled onto his back, only to find Wembley standing over him, ready to do business.

The bully crawled backward as quickly as he could, scrambled to his feet and ran off like a Dry Bloatie on fire.

Red was paralyzed by astonishment. She had never seen a Wembley like this before, and wasn’t sure she was seeing it now.

“Wembley? Is that really you? Did you *really* stand up to that big bully?”

“Gee ... I guess I *did!* I did, *didn’t I!*” Wembley was every bit as surprised as he was impressed by his own success in standing up for himself.

Other Fraggles were thronging around the small Fraggles, laughing, slapping him on the back, shaking his hand, cheering him for a jolly good fellow. It was almost too much of a change in his humble station in life, to suddenly become the Hero of the Hour!

Suddenly, Gobo was there with a huge smile, bracing his shoulders.

“Way to go, Wembley! I heard about your run-in with Jenkis. I wish I had been there to see it! I heard it became quite the *battle-royal* when Red got involved.”

“Aw, naw... it wasn’t anything.” Wembley said modestly. “At first, I was scared, but then Red stuck up for me!”

Red couldn’t resist interjecting, “And Wembley stuck up for *me!* *Didn’t you! I’ll say you did!*”

“Well ... gosh, I was afraid Jenkis would hurt Red. Then I just did what Darl taught me, and just like you said ... once that bully saw he couldn’t scare me anymore ... *he ran away!*”

Gobo laughed. “That suits me fine ... the last thing I need is for *you* to protect *me* someday!”

It was the last anyone in The Great Hall ever heard or saw of Jenkis. “Good riddance!” was the unanimous sentiment, and three cheers for Wembley Fraggles!

--

The celebration went on for most of the day, as Fraggles, young and old, gathered around Wembley with their congratulations. In fact, just before the mid-afternoon snack, the World’s Oldest Fraggles mounted the podium next to the Fraggles Horn to announce that Wembley Fraggles was now an Official Hero of the Rock, and that he was henceforth entitled to wear a Very Special Medal – which had just been made by Mokey from paint, glue and an old pocket watch that no longer told time. Then, following Wembley’s investiture, the Great Hall Occasional Glee Club and Chowder Society sang a new song, composed in his honour.

*Hooray for Wembley!
Once he was weak and tremble-ey,
But now he always comes through in a pinch!
Big bullies, he can stop ‘em,
And wallop, biff an’ bop ‘em,
To those bullies he will never give an inch...!*

... and so on, until they came to a confused trailing-off while trying to find a rhyme for “invincible” that made any sense at all.

As it happened, Darl was not present at the great showdown. He and Kiki had

been digging for wineberries along the riverbank, a mucky business at best, and had come home late, and spent the rest of the afternoon soaking at the far end of The Pool. News travels fast, however ... except in the rock, where it ambles aimlessly. As quickly as they were alerted, however, Darl and Kiki dressed themselves and then hurried over to the podium, where the presentation was being made.

As it was, by the time Kiki and Darl arrived they were nearly late for the whole thing. Fraggles were already drifting away to their suppers and a nap. However, they discovered most of their friends in animated conversation next to The Horn, where Wembley was proudly showing off a gaudy decoration nearly the size of his head.

"Oh, look!" shouted Wembley. "Darl came! And Kiki! Look at the swell medal I was given for saving Red. And also for scaring Jenkis away for good!"

"That's right!" Red broke into Wembley's rush of words. "I had no idea that huge bully was so *terrifying*," she exclaimed, missing no opportunity to overwork the drama. "Why, he must have been *twice* as tall as a regular Fraggles. *Three* times!"

"I almost *fainted* when I heard about it from Red," added Mokey.

Boober, who was perpetually nervous, claimed that he couldn't imagine how Wembley hadn't been killed outright. "When I heard about it, I thought he was a goner for sure!"

"Really?" said Darl, a little skeptically. He spoke to Wembley directly. "You did okay? Tell me everything that happened. Right from the start."

Wembley was only too happy to describe the morning's altercation. It had been the ninth time in the last hour that he had been called upon to describe the events that ended Jenkis's reign of terror ... and it would not be the last.

Kiki had been silent throughout, glancing from Darl to Wembley and Gobo, trying to read their thoughts. Finally, she spoke to Wembley: "I'm so glad you weren't hurt. In fact, I'm glad that *nobody* was hurt!"

Then she shot a clearly unhappy look at Darl. "This won't happen again, *will it?*"

Uncomfortably, Darl replied, "I doubt it will ... I mean, of course not."

Next, Kiki turned to Gobo for his thoughts. She saw that Gobo looked subdued, and was eyeing the Very Special Medal awarded to Wembley with open envy. It did not take a Trash Heap to know that Fraggles often do not behave well when they sense any sort of inequality, unfairness or disharmony, and Kiki felt disturbing currents had begun to flow in The Rock.

"I was really proud of Wembley today," Gobo said, after a brief hesitation.

"Because Wembley had learned how to stand up for himself, that bully Jenkis *backed down!* That bully was *really* afraid ... of *Wembley*, of all Fraggles! How funny is *that*, eh, Wembley!"

"Right, Gobo! If there's ever trouble again," Wembley reassured everyone, "I'll be right there to help anyone who needs it! *Especially* to help my best friend when *he* needs me!" And Wembley gave Gobo's shoulder a friendly little buffet.

"Like *that* will ever happen," quipped Gobo, rubbing his shoulder.

Now Kiki knew, without a doubt, that trouble lay ahead...

--

The next few days were uneventful. Life returned to normal. No sooner did the Volunteer Fire Brigade hold their annual Open House than it was time for the regular Water-Banging ceremony. Two days later, it was time for the Championship Yodeling Competition. One thing after another as the passage of time flowed endlessly onward.

*The days roll 'round and 'round and 'round,
There's always something fun to do,
Until the new day comes, and that
New day's a gift from me to you...*

Not to be upstaged by a motley rabble of off-key yodelers, Red decided to organize a splendid costume masque, and – naturally – all of her friends had to be dragooned into it!

Keeping a dozen or so Fraggles in order is no small task, and Red had her hands full seeing that they didn't forget the very reason that they were gathered in one place.

"That's good," said Red to a young Fraggles who was having trouble with his costume. "Just remember to keep your paper-mâché head on tight, okay, and don't leave it somewhere while I'm busy with Morley."

The same Morley protested that he lost his wings while he was eating, prompting Red to pin them on again for him. "Has anyone seen Boober? Or Wembley?" cried an exasperated Red.

"Did you want me?" answered Boober, from an out-of-the way corner. "I've been making sandwiches for the judges' table."

"And I've been helping!" said Wembley.

A moment later, the two ambled over to Red's work table, where she was handing out "clouds" to three sisters who were to portray a rainstorm as seen from the Gorg's Garden.

"What are you wearing?" Red asked Wembley. "You're supposed to be dressed up as The Helpful Doozer." Pointing at the big medal that the World's Oldest Fraggles had given him, she asked, "Why are you wearing that?"

Indeed, Wembley was wearing his medal, hung around his neck under the painted basket that was supposed to be his Doozer construction helmet.

Thoroughly surprised, Wembley said, "I just thought, you know, it would be a good time to put it on. I mean ... for being a *hero* and all that."

"But Wembley, you're supposed to be a Helpful Doozer, not a *hero*. Besides, you've been wearing that medal of yours every chance you get! You even wore it when it was your turn to polish the Fraggles Horn!"

"That was a *very* important occasion!" Wembley reminded her.

"It was *not*."

"Was."

"Wasn't!" Red declared emphatically.

Boober had been watching the exchange nervously, as usual, and ventured to say, "I thought he was *sort* of a hero. That was Wembley's mistake, you see! He never should have taken the chance of doing anything heroic, and just been a

coward ... like *me*."

Gobo, dressed as his Uncle Traveling Matt, elbowed his way through the busy preparations with an armload of mixed hats. He had overheard enough of the conversation, however, to take exception to Red's remarks.

"Why shouldn't Wembley wear his medal if he wants? He won it, after all, by doing something *heroic*, eh?"

"That's right!" agreed Wembley. "It's not every day I do something heroic!"

A little reluctantly, Red conceded that Wembley had been heroic after all. "But he wears it *everywhere*!"

"He *doessss*, doesn't he..." said Gobo. "But if Wembley wants to wear his medal, why not? It isn't all that *big* a medal, after all," Gobo continued in an oddly strained little voice, "and he really didn't do *alllll* that much for it... did he?"

"That's right!" laughed Wembley, who didn't notice Gobo's change of tone. "It was nothing *anyone* wouldn't have done," he added, with self-effacing, yet not entirely convincing modesty.

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That was *far* from the end of it.

Over the next week, Wembley found some reason to wear the Very Special Medal awarded to him by the World's Oldest Fraggle on almost every day. He wore it to the Funny Name-Calling Contest, to Radish Carving Class, to Fire Brigade Practice, to Lou's Cider Tasting, to the weekly collection of heavy laundry with Boober, and even to a Special Peripatetic Poetry Reading Event that Mokey organized on the spur of the moment.

He did decide not to wear it to the "Slip'n'Slide" event ... lest his decoration become all gross from Greaseberries. The ripe berries are notoriously hard to wash out, even with strong soap. Sensibly, he decided it would better to leave it at home for once. Wembley also forgot to wear his medal to the Tail-Balancing competition. Having been late for the start, he was unable to find it tangled in his blankets until it was too late.

Nevertheless, Wembley found reason to wear the gold-and-green, sunflower-shaped medal at every public occasion that he could. In fact, he wore it so often

that the guilt was beginning to rub off in one or two places. It didn't matter ... Wembley wore it with pride!

In truth, seeing Wembley with his ostentatious decoration for extraordinary valour had begun to seem faintly ridiculous to everyone. More than one Fraggles even felt the stirrings of *irritation*.

Especially Gobo ... whose feelings about Wembley's lessons in self-defense had grown more and more ambivalent as the days passed.

It came to a head on Trophy Day, the day on which Fraggles everywhere pick a trophy for themselves from last year's Trophy Day. There were rarely any surprises on Trophy Day. As a rule, everyone picks the same trophy as they did last year, and the year before, and the year before that... Every Fraggles picks the trophy that he or she feels best expresses their own unique qualities ... whether it be for being able to eat more cream pies than anyone, for having the longest and fluffiest *baloobius*, or else for something *really serious*, such as belching out the complete words to the Radish Rag.

*More fun than sleep or playin' tag,
Is belchin' to that Radish Rag,
Take a breath and give a shout,
Burp it out! Burp it out! Burp it out! Burp it out!*

Truthfully, Trophy Day was not about prizes, but about everyone feeling good about themselves ... and having fun.

As usual, Mokey chose a loving cup with a long, fluted stand and gilded flowers, while Gillis, the choir master, picked out a trophy that rang with a perfect B-flat when gently tapped against his tuning fork. Marlon, who was rather weird even for a Fraggles, instinctively chose a trophy cup that had a large crack in it, and was lopsided as well. Kiki was next, and from the pile of trophies she picked her favourite, a glass bowl that was perfect for sipping honeyed lemon tea. She had to urge Darl forward with a gentle push to take his turn, since it was only the third time he had participated in the game, and frankly he didn't have a favourite trophy for himself ... so as before, he took one that nobody else seemed to want ... but which, he privately believed, resembled hockey's Stanley Cup.

When it came to be Gobo's turn, he immediately picked up his favourite cup, the

which, as he claimed, represented his prudent feat of seeing a deadly Poison Cackler before it saw him ... and before it had given chase.

"I suppose you'll want your favourite cup again, eh?" Gobo said to Wembley, whose turn it was next.

It had long been Wembley's habit of to be completely, interminably indecisive about which trophy to award himself, but eventually – with a sigh of resignation – he always gave himself the same award, a modest little cup for his accomplishment in wearing the best shirt with banana trees on it. This time, however, Wembley showed no interest in his usual, humble choice, and said nothing at all about shirts with banana trees. Instead, he took for his own an ornate, showy eyesore from the pile.

Gobo was startled, and blurted out, "That's not your *usual* trophy! That's the one that Murray likes because it holds up his cucumbers so well! Besides ... you're already wearing the silly medal Mokey made for you!"

"Silly? *SILLY!*" Wembley protested, "What do you mean, *silly!* I won that medal for fearlessly driving away a dangerous bully, and saving Red's life!"

"You did *not!*" said Gobo, loudly enough that everyone could hear. "Red was only ... *surprised*. She could have looked after herself! And what frightened Jenkis away was really *Darl's* reputation ... not *yours!* Don't – make – me – laugh!"

Wembley was shocked to hear his best friend scoffing at him. "What!?! I knew it! You're ... jealous, aren't you? *You are!* I can't believe it!"

"Why would *I* be jealous?" shouted Gobo. "Did *you* almost get eaten by a Skeek, or was it me and Darl who escaped from a blood-thirsty monster? Oh ... I forgot ... Jenkis *PUSHED YOU!!!* How *terrible* for you!"

Words completely failed Wembley, reducing him to incoherent spluttering.

"You – take – that – *back!*" he shouted.

"*I won't!*" Gobo shouted back.

Everyone was frozen in shock to see both Fraggles in an uncharacteristic rage.

And then something truly astonishing happened. Wembley tried to *push* Gobo. He didn't mean it, and in fact barely touched his best friend. But that was enough to raise a collective gasp of astonishment from the crowd. What was still more surprising ... Gobo *flinched* from Wembley's shove.

"How – dare – you!" Gobo choked.

"I... I... didn't mean it," Wembley quickly apologized.

"That's right," Red agreed.

"Wembley didn't mean it, did he?" Mokey hastily added.

Gobo was not to be assuaged. "You did *too* mean it! Everyone saw that you pushed me!" Then he challenged the crowd to contradict him: "*Didn't you!*"

Darl did not like how matters were developing, and murmured quietly to Kiki that it might be better if they were somewhere else – "In case it occurs to anyone to blame *me!*"

"It's not your fault," Kiki whispered back. "Gobo asked you to be Wembley's teacher. This is all on *those* two, not *us.*"

Nevertheless, they remained discreetly at the back of the crowd.

Conciliatory words had no effect on Gobo, and soon Wembley was shouting back at his best friend again.

Once again, Red tried to intervene, but neither feuding Fraggles would stop their argument.

That was when Gobo unwisely shoved Wembley in retaliation for Wembley's first, impulsive gesture. That did not go well. Wembley stumbled backward a couple of steps, and then lunged forward and pushed Gobo a second time – for real, this time – and Gobo went head over teakettle.

Gobo sat on the ground for almost a minute, panting. Then he rose suddenly and rushed away to the Hole he shared with his estranged friend, leaving the victorious Wembley to himself.

"Wembley... " said Mokey, "What are you going to do now? Are you going to

go home and apologize?"

"Apologize!" cried Red. "Why would Wembley apologize? This was all Gobo's fault!"

"Gobo's fault? Oh, no, Red! As anyone can see, this was clearly Wembley's fault."

"What? NEVER!" retorted Red. "Of course it was Gobo's fault, right, Wembley?"

"It certainly was *not* Gobo's fault!" insisted Mokey.

"It was!"

"It wasn't!"

Wembley stepped between Red and Mokey, to prevent yet another argument from starting. He had a more urgent concern, now that he realized he had nowhere where to sleep that night. Fortunately, he spotted Boober lingering unobtrusively in the background, and cried, "Boober, old buddy! Can I sleep at *your* place for a little while?"

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Neither Darl nor Kiki slept well that night. They talked long into the night, after the light from the Ditzies had faded, and the dark was held at bay only by adding glow-wood to the fire.

"They've had little spats before," Darl said. "Remember when the two of them couldn't agree on switching bunks because Wembley thought he whistled in his sleep, if he slept too high from the ground, but Gobo insisted it was only in his imagination?"

"Yeah, I remember that, Love. It turned out that it was Gobo who was whistling in his sleep, because he had a cold," Kiki replied.

"And then there was the time when they argued over whether to make Sour-Honey Biscuits, even though neither of them even liked Sour-Honey ... but each believed that the other did?"

Kiki had to laugh at that. "But I don't remember them ever having an argument this bad before. I don't recall them ever..." It actually pained her to say that the

two friends had physically *scuffled*. It had been a terribly *unFragglish* thing to see. What was worse, the dispute had spread to Red and Mokie, and other Fraggles had muttered things out of Kiki's hearing that sounded very much like other disagreements starting.

"Well," Darl said hopefully, "It will probably blow over quickly. Tomorrow will be another day."

Pulling up the covers, Darl was soon asleep.

Tomorrow would come, certainly ... but not quite as anticipated, and it was actually a few days later before it was clear that the problem with Gobo and Wembley had still not been resolved.

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"I hope you don't mind me coming over so early," apologized Gobo. "I should have waited until after breakfast, but I brought over some radish muffins."

"That's very thoughtful," sighed Kiki.

Darl was still rubbing sleep out of his eyes. "Have you and Wembley made up yet?" he said, hopefully.

"What? No! The last I heard of Wembley, he was still sleeping over at Boober's place, eh?"

"No, really?" Kiki only feigned surprise at the news. She had seen Wembley from time to time at the other end of the Great Hall, near Boober's laundry, but nowhere near the cave where he usually lived with Gobo. They had seemingly kept their distance from each other.

"So this is this a purely a social visit, then?" said Darl. "Or were you proposing we go on another expedition, to get hung by our tails over a stew pot?"

"Nothing as exciting as that, eh? As a matter of fact," said Gobo, "I was looking forward to becoming the World's Oldest Fraggles by myself someday. It should only take about another two hundred years!"

On beginning his strange new life in Fraggles Rock, it had surprised Darl to learn that, with a little luck, he might easily reach such an advanced age, himself – that is, if he stayed out of mischief down dark, mysterious tunnels.

"Then to what do we owe the unexpected pleasure of your presence this cheerful morning?" Darl hinted.

"Does there have to be a reason to visit one's *best* friends, and share *freshly* baked radish muffins that you like?"

Like most Fraggles, Kiki did indeed love radish muffins ... as well as plain radishes, radish soup, radish ragout, radish soufflé, radish cake, radish toast and just about anything else made from radishes. However, Darl was quite literally of two minds about the spicy root. As a Fraggles, it was just as tasty to him as it was to other Fraggles – crisp, fragrant, developing a rich and versatile palate of flavours, depending only on the imagination of the enterprising gourmet. Yet Darl also remembered how radishes had tasted when he was still a Silly Creature – just a bland, peppery salad filler. It was frustrating to live in two mental universes sometimes.

But the conversation over breakfast muffins wasn't getting them any closer to the point of Gobo's visit.

"Do you hear that Wembley has taken the job as Chief of the volunteer fire brigade?" Gobo said, without preamble. "Yeah. *Wembley*, if you can believe it."

"That *is* a little surprising," replied Kiki. "Wasn't Ferguson the Fire Chief?"

"I know. He'd been Chief of the volunteer brigade since the old Fire Chief retired, years ago. All of a sudden, though, Wembley said *he* wanted to be Fire Chief, and not just be the siren because he was the newest member of the brigade."

Kiki thought for a moment, then said, "That's not like Wembley at all."

"I know, eh?" Gobo replied.

"Was Ferguson alright with that?" Darl asked.

"Probably *not*," said Gobo. "But Wembley said that Ferguson had no idea how to put out a fire, since there had never been one in the Great Hall – as far as anyone knew – so Wembley thought he was as qualified as anyone else, so *he* should have a turn now."

"Poor Fergie," said Kiki. "What will he do now?"

"Play the siren, maybe? But that's not all," Gobo continued. "The other day, Rumble Fraggle was playing a game of Spinners. You both know that Rumble has a problem with making foolish bets ... so we all try to find ways to *not* win against him all the time, eh?"

"Spinners? I don't know that game," Darl said.

"It's simple, really," Gobo explained. "You use small wooden disks, and spin them on edge. You can spin two, three, four or as many as you want. They have pictures on one side, so you can spin them so that some come up with pictures, but some don't. But you can also use some spinners without pictures, to make winning harder. The fewer with pictures, the less likely you are likely to win."

"Pretty much only a fool would play the game unless the spinners had the same number with and without pictures," added Kiki.

"Unfortunately, Rumble is that fool," Gobo laughed, grimly. "Wembley took advantage of Rumble, won all his spinners, and kept them."

Kiki was shocked. "Oh! Weren't those were the ones that were so beautifully painted by Mokie, and that she gave to Rumble?"

"Apparently, Wembley thought they were beautiful too," Gobo said dryly. "Not only did he *not* give Rumble's spinners back, but he even encouraged him to go on playing even after he didn't really want to play any more. As he picked up all the spinners, Wembley said, 'Winner takes all – *what are you going to do about it?*'"

Darl was incredulous. "He said *that?*"

"So Morris the Reporter on the Great Hall Horn told *me!*"

Darl was still a little skeptical that Wembley would ever say anything so out of character.

"People have complained for days about Wembley's changed behavior." Gobo insisted. "Did you know that yesterday, Wembley cut to the front of a line for a share of Fermented Honeycomb? Morris also told me that Wembley might have taken *two* pieces ... maybe even *three!*" Gobo paused for dramatic effect, then continued. "You won't believe this, but just yesterday, Wembley actually *told off* Marlon!"

In point of fact, Darl *half* believed it, but he wasn't sure *which* half to believe.

"You know how *Marlon* is," Gobo told Darl. "With his suspicions and insinuations, it's just his way, but he doesn't really mean anything by it. At one time or another he's assumed the worst about almost everyone."

"I just think he's a bit peculiar," said Kiki. "It's rather sad that he has such a suspicious mind, really."

"All the same," Gobo went on, "Wembley shouldn't have told Marlon to his face that he was a sneak ... even if he is. And he threatened that if Marlon didn't stop pestering him, he'd *make* him stop!"

"He said that?" said Darl, now *very* worried.

"Marlon told me all about it, later! He said he was quite scared of what Wembley might do if he became angry!"

"This is certainly worrisome, but I'm afraid this is not any of our business," said Darl, doubtfully. "Is it?"

"That's why I came this morning," Gobo said, finally admitting his real purpose. "I need you to show me how to deal with Wembley's growing mean streak!"

Darl and Kiki exchanged knowing glances, suspecting what came next.

"Darl," pleaded Gobo, "You have to show me how you beat the Skeeks ... In case *Wembley* ever, you know ... *loses control* ... I may need to stop *him* ... "

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Darl had been *afraid* that was what Gobo meant. Exchanging glances with Kiki, he sighed in resignation.

"I want to make it clear," Darl said firmly, "that my purpose is to *prevent* trouble, *not* so that you can pick a fight – not with Wembley, nor with anyone else. All I want to show you is how to not back down, so that Wembley – nor anyone else – won't feel that he can throw his weight around!"

From the start, there was the delicate question of where to practice. The most obvious place was the same exercise area where Darl had taught Wembley to defend himself. But neither Gobo nor Darl were eager to be seen training Gobo

for a grudge match against another Fraggles.

The cave where he had taught Wembley being out of the question, Darl asked if Willa, one of Kiki's friends, would allow her workshop to be used as a training space. Willa was not only a potter, but an enthusiastic, if highly amateur, sculptor. The Hole in which she lived was not overly large, but the adjacent work area was as crowded and unkempt as one might expect from an artist. There were bins of broken bits of pottery, abandoned wooden forms, half-filled sacks, a number of poseable Fraggles models with mismatching limbs and tails, raw chunks of greasy clay on a big pedal wheel, scattered tools and unfinished projects that were in varying degrees of completion.

The workshop was obviously too crowded for teaching self-defense. Outside her workshop, fortunately, there was a rambling cavern where Willa dug for her clay. There was more than enough space in there for a little rough and tumble, away from prying eyes. It was musty and clammy, and one had to watch one's footing to avoid tumbling into one of the softer parts.

Otherwise, the area was perfect.

Gobo caught on quickly – more quickly than Wembley had. But then, Gobo was bolder and far more adventurous than his former friend. It did not take a full day to coax Gobo into making punches – or to convince him of the advantages of ducking when taking them. In fact, it soon became clear that it would only take another day or two for Gobo to perfect his moves, and prepare himself for any eventuality.

Judging Gobo's latest feints and dodges, Darl said, "I think you're as ready as you'll ever be. Perhaps we should celebrate your graduation ... but to be honest, it doesn't seem the sort of occasion you should celebrate. Instead, I think it should be kept quiet, and hope your new skills are never needed."

Gobo replied in the same sober manner. "I think we agree on that."

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If there were any two Fraggles who anyone would have said were least likely to come to blows, they were Gobo and Wembley – yet, only two days later, they were squared off against each other!

It came about when Mokie and Red both decided they each needed the use of the

Great Hall – Mokie having organized a performance of mimes, and Red a fanfare for trumpets – unfortunately, both at the same time. Mokie claimed that she and the assembled mimes had arrived in the Great Hall first, but Red insisted that she had announced the day before that the *Jubilee Rag Time Dizzy Doozer Band* would give a full costume performance, and wasn't about to postpone it! Neither would give way, and tempers frayed when some of the other Fraggles joined in, taking one side or the other. Such noisy rows were not uncommon among Fraggles, *as such*.

In fact, it was almost normal for public activities in the Great Hall to compete and sink into a rhubarb of one sort or another. What *was* unusual was that Wembley, with his new-found arrogance, decided that he had had enough bickering, and that he would bring order out of the chaos. Naturally, this attempt only created even more confusion.

“But Wembley,” protested a flustered Mokey. “We were here first! Red says she told the band to play today ... but she didn't tell anyone else! How were we to know that Red would turn up just when *we* wanted to use the Great Hall?”

Wembley disagreed. “I’m sorry, Mokey, but Red is right. She put up a notice, and a notice is a notice. It’s Red’s turn to use the Great Hall.”

“That’s right! I put the notice up myself!” asserted Red. “We're all raring to start, just as soon as you stop prancing around in face paint!”

“But no-one wants to hear band music, and the mimes are all ready to perform!”

That was when Gobo pressed forward from the crowd. “What’s all *this* about, eh? Mokey doesn’t have to look for notices that aren’t there! Red should have told *everyone* yesterday ... not just tell her dopey trumpet band!”

“DOPEY?” shouted Red. “Who are you calling dopey?”

“Well... why can’t the mimes and the trumpeters play together?” suggested Wembley.

“But *mimes* are supposed to perform in silence,” wailed Mokey.

Indignant, Gobo protested, “How could you come up with a stupid idea like *that!*”

Now every bit as riled up as Gobo, Wembley yelled, "Oh, yeah! Well, what makes you think *you* have all the answers, and what makes *you* the All-Knowing Trash Heap?"

"Oh, yeah!" shouted Gobo. "If there's anyone who needs to be taught to be humble, it's *YOU!*"

"Hey, quit it, you guys," Boober protested nervously, arriving late amid the suddenly-quiet crowd. "We're all *friends*, remember?"

"Oh, shut up," cried Gobo, Wembley, Red *and* Mokey *together*.

That was when the shoving began.

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Kiki burst into their cave, where she found Darl. With nothing much to do, he had been watching water drip onto a growing stalagmite, and was struck by her agitation.

"What are you so excited about?" asked Darl, piqued.

"You better follow me," said Kiki. "Everyone has their tail in a double knot – and with hot pepper sauce on it!"

--

When Kiki and Darl arrived in the middle of The Great Hall, they found it packed. The World's Oldest Fraggles vainly struggled to calm the agitated crowd from his speaker's platform, but no-one paid him the least attention. While he waved his arms and stamped for order, it seemed as though everyone capable of holding a contrary opinion was expressing it vigorously! In the center of it all, Gobo and Wembley were circling each other like a pair of angry Hissyfits, all puffed up and bawling for each other's blood!

Both were smudged and soiled from scuffling, as well as winded from their unaccustomed exertion. As yet, neither one had actually laid a hand on the other!

"You *talk* ... a ... good ... fight," panted Gobo, throwing a loose, half-hearted roundhouse that passed over Wembley's head.

Wembley puffed, "I've ... I've been waiting ... for *you* to ... *start!*" Wembley

swung on his heels to dodge a weak left, spun all the way around to face the watching crowd, and was momentarily confused.

Making the best of the opportunity to back away from Wembley, Gobo made a great display of raising his defenses again ... but did nothing to renew the attack, merely pedaling his fists in circles.

That delay allowed Wembley to recover his balance and face his adversary again. Neither antagonist seemed overly anxious to close in for the finish, however. Instead, they shuffled in circles, dodging and weaving, looking for an opening that neither of them knew how to recognize – or to exploit.

Darl found Boober hovering nervously in the back of the crowd, and demanded, “*What’s* going on? Have those two lost their *minds*?”

“Without a doubt,” Boober answered. “I always knew there would be trouble over those mimes one day. I don’t know about you, but they’re *terrifying!*”

“*Everything* terrifies you, Boober!” Kiki said.

“And your point *is*?” moaned Boober. “But do you know what *really* terrifies me? That’s when I see that all my friends are *fighting*. Gobo is fighting Wembley. Red is fighting with Mokey. All our other friends are *also* beginning to take sides!”

Looking embarrassed, Darl admitted that in a way this might be his fault.

“I was going to blame *Jenkis*,” said Boober, “But now that you mention it, maybe this *is* your fault!”

Kiki was quick to interject, “That’s not really fair, is it?”

“No, ultimately it *is* my fault,” Darl asserted. “And I’m going to do something about it, *now!*”

“Just make sure that you don’t make it *worse!*” Kiki pleaded. “You can’t just *thump* everyone. That’s what a Gorg would do, and *not* a Fraggles thing!”

--

Pushing his way through the excited crowd of Fraggles, Darl faced the two sparring rivals eye to eye. “Just what do you two idiots think you’re doing?” he cried.

Wembley had lost almost all his hard-learned skills, and was blindly throwing punches that never came even close to connecting. Gobo, limping slightly from a stubbed toe, was doing no better, and seemed unwilling to come near his windmilling opponent.

“Are you two going to knock it off!” Darl demanded.

“This is between ... ‘tween me and Wem... Wembley,” panted Gobo.

Echoing Gobo’s willingness to brawl, Wembley swung a roundhouse punch that he was unable to aim, and only succeeded in spinning around and sitting down in the dust, rather unexpectedly.

Gobo cried “Aha!” launched a hopeful swing, and inadvertently joined Wembley in the dust on the floor of The Great Hall.

They two feuding Fraggles clambered to their feet again, and renewed their ineffectual battle.

By this time, Darl was thoroughly annoyed. He stepped between the two and announced crossly. “You may think you can settle this just between the two of you, as though one of thinks he can beat the other ... but now *let me* show you a thing or two!”

With no further warning, Darl slipped between Wembley’s flailing arms, crossed a foot behind him, then gave him a hard push that left him sprawling on the ground. While Wembley struggled to get up, Darl turned to face Gobo, grabbed him by one arm and twisted. Gobo twirled helplessly, tangled his feet together and landed on his face. Wembley was just regaining his feet when Darl pushed him to his keister for a second time. Gobo was trying to scramble up again, but was not even half-way upright before Darl tripped him.

The two warring Fraggles had been reduced to a dusty tangle of limbs and tails in a matter of seconds.

Where a moment before, there had been a milling crowd of bad-tempered Fraggles shouting at each other, now there was a shocked silence; then, suddenly, there was a laugh from somewhere in the back. One laugh became several, as Gobo and Wembley lurched to their feet and made feeble attempts to either face

each other, or Darl.

In the next instant, both hapless Fraggles were back in the dust ... Darl standing over them.

The scattered laughter became an avalanche, as all the Fraggles in the crowd joined in raucous merriment at the expense of the two dusty, disheveled, would-be-warriors.

Darl had barely touched either one, yet the steam had gone out of their feud.

The two sparring partners slowly shook their heads to clear them of bewilderment. As they looked at each other's dusty faces, first Wembley broke into embarrassed giggles, and then Gobo into his familiar, cheerful guffaws. Their strange madness was over.

Darl lifted both of them to their feet, dusted off their shoulders, and then said, quietly but sternly: "Remember, no matter how good you think you are in a scrape, there is always someone who is better. Now, have we had enough, or do I have to give more lessons about what to do with a couple of hard-headed Jenkises?"

"I guess we acted like Mooches who had too much fermented fruit, didn't we?" Gobo admitted.

"Yeah... I'll say!" Wembley added, still giggling.

"Let's go home, Wembley... "

"And you know what," Wembley said thoughtfully, "I don't think I want to be a Jenkis ever again. I think I prefer being a siren."

At that, every Fraggles in the Great Hall broke into a spontaneous cheer – reconciliation had prevailed!

*Who wants to fight?
It just ain't right
To fuss and squabble all the day,
To see a Fraggles
Gripe and haggle
When he ought to laugh and play.*

*When day is done
We should have fun
To look back on, instead of strife,
We should take time
To sing in rhyme,
The best part of a Fraggles life!*

--

It had been a long day, made longer by the sudden hilarity that Darl and Kiki met everywhere. They had to zigzag through the celebrating crowd, encountering dance, song or horseplay of every kind. After days of growing tension and dissension had put everyone on edge ... but now all that been released at once with an outburst of Fragglish laughter, and the hard feelings created by the stress were instantly forgotten by everyone.

It was not likely that Darl and Kiki would soon forget how it had all begun, however – with poor Wembley being the victim of a bully, and the foolish contest between Red and Gobo. One thing had followed another with an inevitability that Darl and Kiki could still scarcely believe, even as they finally broke free of the crowd and trudged wearily, hand in hand, toward their cozy Hole.

Other Fraggles could laugh, but Darl was lost in reflection as he trudged up along the meandering slope that led home. Kiki meanwhile watched Darl carefully, speculating on his thoughts. He had been given an awful lot to think about lately, after all.

Climbing the flight of shallow stairs halfway up the wall of The Great Hall, Darl suddenly stopped, turned to Kiki and asked, “What if someone were to pick on you? I don’t think it would ever be any of our friends, but ... what if something like that *did* happen? What if some unfamiliar Fraggles came from somewhere else in The Rock and tried to hurt you?”

“It would never happen.” Kiki assured him. “Mean Fraggles like that Jenkis are almost unheard of, and I’m certain that all our friends have learned their lesson.”

As they resumed the climb toward their Hole, Darl continued thinking, and finally spoke again: “Suppose it isn’t a Fraggles at all? There are some pretty nasty-looking creatures in the Rock, any of which would find you easy pickings,

you know.”

“Then I suppose I’d have to call for you to help me.”

“And if I wasn’t near enough to help,” persisted Darl. “What then?”

Kiki merely shrugged, and replied calmly, “I guess you can’t be ready for everything.”

“But there *is* something to be done,” Darl persisted. “I could teach *you* to fight!”

Kiki was shocked. “I’m sorry, Love, but I don’t *want* to learn to fight, however much it may worry you if I *don’t!*”

Hearing this, Darl finally broke into a smile. He felt that no matter what had happened recently, everything would finally be alright ... now that *no-one* wanted the forbidden fruit that Darl had unwisely offered. But then he was genuinely surprised when, in the next moment, Kiki unexpectedly changed her mind.

“There is one person who *does* make me afraid. I wonder if I shouldn’t learn how to fight, after all,” she mused.

“Now, who could *that* be?”

“Who else could it possibly be but *you* – what if *you* become too big for your britches?”

Darl laughed helplessly. “In that case, my Dear, you will have to learn how to put *me* in britches that are big enough!”

□

I’m grateful to Walt Wentz for not only the time spent while proofreading my stories, and providing always-useful suggestions, but also for his creative input. By devising the short snippets of poetry you have read throughout the text, Walt created an extra dimension that I am nearly incapable of myself. It is hard enough to write what I mean, but I find it most infuriating, and almost impossible, to write with a rhyme scheme at the same time. I have tried, and come up with a smattering of doggerel, but the great majority of the rhymes are Walt’s work, not mine. Of course, a bit of poetry is only a reflection of real music, but we must make do.

*And what is a Fraggles Rock story without **song**?*

Cutting Words *(Editorial Afterthoughts)*

This might be confusing, but what the hell, it's *my* fanzine, and I'll confuse my helpless readers if I want! It's really quite simple: If and when I publish another fanzine called *The Baloobius*, it will be a fairly short affair published by expediency and limited by the constraints of the calendar. Nothing like that holiday essay published nine months after the last Christmas tree needles have been swept up, is there? So with punctuality is a virtue, another *Baloobius* may be the remedy. However, I will need a new editorial for *Faux Pause*, the opening or closing remarks of my showy new fanzine.

How have you been holding up as the pandemic rages on? Make no mistake about it, the pandemic isn't over yet. Too many people around the world have not been vaccinated, and probably never will be. They will have to catch COVID and hope to survive it ... or stupidly expose themselves needlessly, believing that Jesus, Donald Trump or ignorance will protect them. (I know which I bet on.) Surprisingly, though, the pandemic has not made that much of a change to my own life.

I live a life of quiet desperation anyway, in which a trip to WalMart or the blood clinic has been the height of my day. I was barely able to control myself when my Black & Decker coffee-maker broke, and I visited the mall for a replacement. Still, I miss those occasional visits from Bob and Sharry, and dinners with Steven. I also haven't attended a coin show for more than a year, and I discover that I am in the strange situation of having money in my pocket that I want to spend before inflation starts to take a toll. If I were desperate enough, I might even attend a book signing at Bakka. Is it strange of me to want to have a book-signing of my own for *Faux Pause*? Anything to get myself out of the house!

It wasn't that I was looking for an excuse to have my second vaccination. I got my first two or three months ago, through arrangement with the building I live in. It is owned by the city and serves mainly for low-income families, single elders or the disabled. When the local community health center went door to door to administer the vaccine to willing residents, I was almost the first to roll up my sleeve. But so far I had heard nothing about the follow-up shot, and I was beginning to be concerned. Fortunately, I had an appointment with my general practitioner in late July for blood work, so I took the opportunity to ask if I could be vaccinated at the same time. I came home with a band-aid on my arm as a result.

I was warned of possible reactions that might be worse than the initial shot, but I can't truthfully say I noticed anything but a modest bruise. I've shrugged off worse from leaning on an elbow for too long. Had there been any cramp or sore muscle, it would have been worth it for immunity. But ... *is* it immunity? There is a little uncertainty about this. There may have been cases of immunized patients who subsequently came down with Covid, anyway. There is a little evidence that the vaccines may be less

effective against the Delta variant, particularly over the long term. It has even been suggested that in the best scenarios we may face booster shots every two or three years. None of which is a great price to pay, given the alternative. (By the way, one way or another, look for MAGA hats selling at a discount in the near future.)

Life recently has not been limited to the excitement of visiting the health center; one morning I woke to discover that my coffee maker didn't. Yesterday it was fine, but today is was not. Normally this would be a great calamity, but I had picked up an unwanted coffee maker from the curbside last year. I didn't need one, but I've bought enough of them to know that sooner or later I would, so I merely put the found Black & Decker in a closet until it would be inevitably required. The inevitable happen a couple of months ago, and I pulled the spare coffee maker out of the closet without skipping a beat.

Still, it was the sensible thing to replace the spare as soon as possible, and not simply defer an interruption in my morning coffee to a few months or next year. I drove Traveling Matt up Queen Street to WalMart to look at the selection. In an ideal world I would have gone to several hardware stores in the neighborhood, and chosen the model best suited to my needs, at a price I was willing to pay. Brushed steel espresso machines, loaded with features, are all well and good, but do I really want to have espresso every day, and was I willing to spend a couple of hundred dollars to have it? Or did I just want another Black & Decker that would make coffee every morning, and that didn't cost more than \$30? I opted for the practical. The spare is once again stowed away in the closet for a rainy day.

Everything slowed down for the pandemic – not only the social lives of most people, but also needed repairs at home and at work, travel plans and even necessary surgery! I have to consider myself fortunate if the biggest dislocation in my life over the last year and a half has been my hobby of collecting ancient coins. One might wonder how this could be affected. To be sure, there have been no coin shows since the pandemic began, but even before the frequent shows there was the internet.

I was able to hunt through a web page for intriguing finds and good value in very much the same way I once hunted the shelves of a bookstore. There wasn't the smell or tactile feel of a promising book in hand, but in photographs and text descriptions sustain a similar substitute reality. Still, it can't be said that having the actual coin in your hand at a show is in any way superior. Furthermore, the trade in coins appears to fallen into the doldrums. I no longer see new offerings in the web pages I'm used to. No more 1st century Marc Antony-Octavian Denarii from Ephesus, nor 6th century Ostrogothic Civic Issues that would once have excited my greed! Hopefully, new shows will be announced this fall, and I will be able to carry my swollen purse to go shopping, and return home with fascinating new discoveries! I can't pretend that shopping on line is the equal of the excitement of the hunt from bookstore to bookstore, the bag hung over your shoulder and still warm with recent finds.

Is it only my imagination, or is all of fandom slowing down? It goes without saying that

conventions have been undergoing a moratorium while the pandemic rages. I had been looking forward to a fanzine renaissance, a fertile period of creativity in which record numbers of top-notch fanzines would nearly overwhelm the readers. In fact, the opposite seems to have been the case. There was a flurry of activity at first, with William Breiding's *Portable Storage* taking center stage, and then the overwhelming final *Outworlds* arriving in mailboxes with the thump of an alpine avalanche. And then... well... very little. The most reliable offerings have been from Andrew Hooper's, Nick Farey's and Guy Lillian's personal zines – not unlike my own *The Balooobius* – and aside from that, only the usual leaking faucet of N3F zines. If you search, you will certainly come up with more titles, but it seems to me that the absence of the major genzines that are usually the vital pulse of fanzine fandom has been telling.

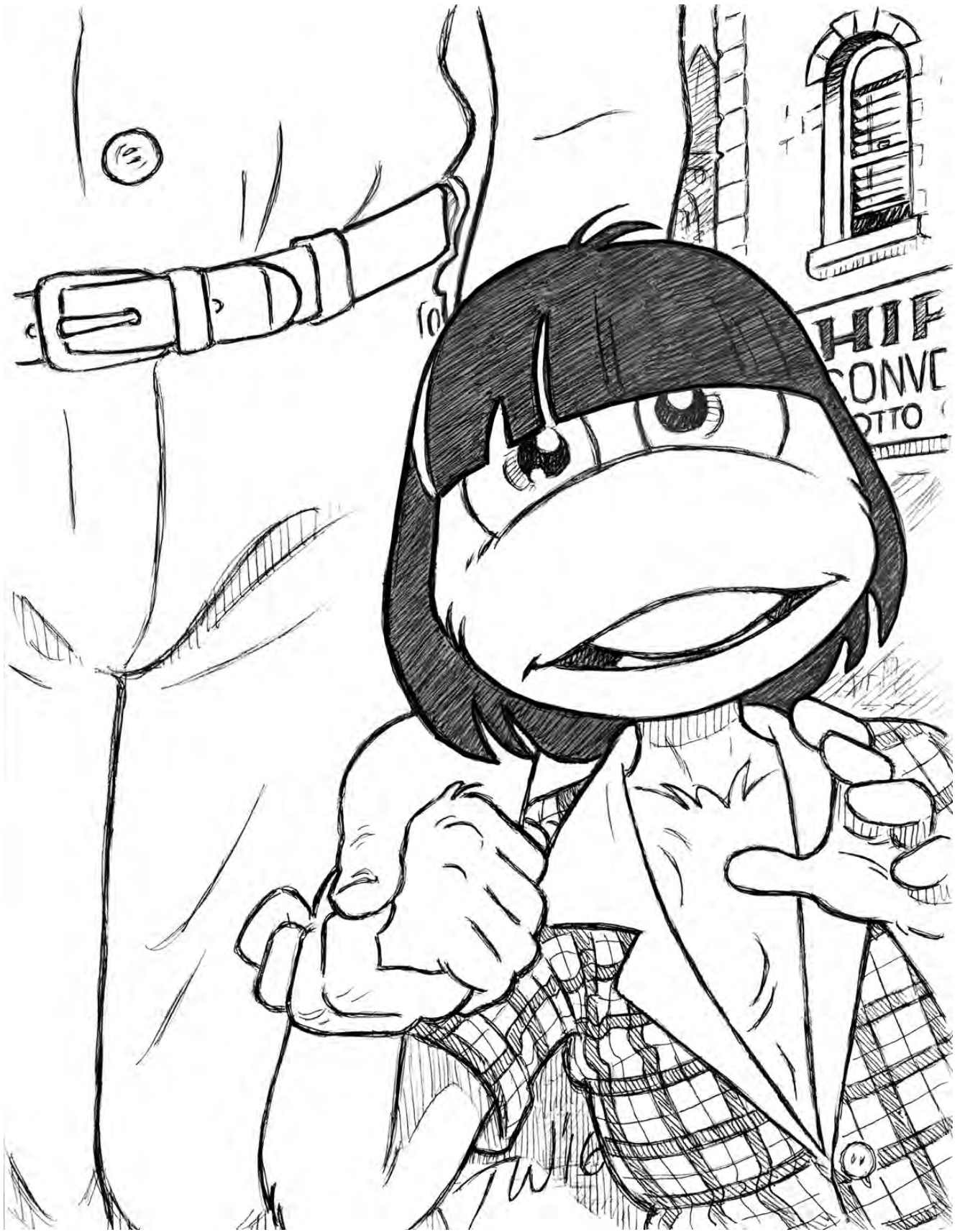
Of course, it's one thing to simply complain about fandom's slow-down, but a more constructive response would be to add toward fandom's collective creative genius, and *publish!* Having just finished an 88-page fanzine, I think no one can say that I've shirked my responsibilities.

Having produced one 88-page fanzine, you might think me in no hurry to produce another ... but that's where you might be wrong. In fact, I'm prepared to produce at least two more, with long-finished articles already put aside for each issue. It doesn't mean that they will be ready for distribution over the next few weeks, or even months, since those issues will need other material to flesh them out. There is a theme of sorts. The article about my grandfather in this issue will be followed by one that has much in it about my mother, and in the third I will write about my father. I anticipate that this may sound quite dreary to the readers, but my aim is to entertain them all the same. That is the point of writing, isn't it? ... high literature notwithstanding.

It won't be entirely my decision, also it seems entirely likely that we haven't seen the last last of *The Balooobius*, either. I have learned the value of short little personalzines when expediency demands them.

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Next issue, we explore the origin of Kiki and Darl