

*\*Issue 3\**

*August 2010*

*First issue in 23 Years*

# NEWTOY



*Twio*



# New Toy 3

## Aug 2010 - ToC/Talk

All contents by Taral Wayne unless otherwise credited.

### Cover - "Beauty Shot"

The art was built up from a simple pencil sketch, using Photoshop to enhance, colour and paste-up the different elements in the composition.

### The Taraltorial Instinct - "Let Me Entertain You" - Page 2

Why, after so many years as a fanartist, am I writing more than I draw? Why, also, am I publishing again?

### "Alternate Future" - Page 4

Read this imaginary conversation with my proofreader before leaping up to send a loc correcting my grammar. Language on the street can be hilarious!

### "Who Wouldn't Hate Monday?" - Page 7

It took more than a single 24-hour period to happen, and I was still feeling the effects weeks later, but it all focused on one harrowing Monday that I would rather not remember. Naturally, I wrote it all down before I could forget...

### "In the Balance" - Page 12

We take money at face value, but it wasn't always so. At one time, a coin was worth the silver or gold that it was struck from, and counterfeiting was a serious problem. A coin might be base, or lightweight, yet the difference invisible to the eye. How could you tell? Easy... a gentleman carried a handy brass balance scale in his pocket!

### Sunday Pages - "On the Run" - Page 15

I drew these pages as a commission for a big fan of one of the characters. "Tangel" (short for "Tangelwedsibel") is one of several extraterrestrials I've made up over the years, and in fiction lives with Saara and me in a small town called Willow Run. The story stars Saara Mar as well, and shows a few corners of our big old house, "Homefall."

### Lost and Found - "Eight Random Thoughts" by Robert Charles Wilson - Page 19

This feature is for articles by friends and other writers. This particular piece is the Guest of Honour speech that Bob gave at Ad Astra in Toronto, in 2004. It has not been previously published, which is a pity. On the other hand, it gives me the opportunity to start this feature with something unique.

### Lost Toys - "Vaster Than Empires" - Page 25

I plan to reprint old article of mine, part of a project to revise them into digital form. The first of the series is this fictional piece about Saara Mar. You probably don't realize that she once attended SF cons -- perhaps you foolishly went to a Larry Niven reading, and missed her. I wrote this originally in 1978, and have revised it from time to time, most recently just last year. Although mimeographed in a small number of copies, it has never been widely seen.

### "Down in Fraggie Rock!" - Page 33

They were only terrycloth and scraps, but they were more human than some people I know. Fraggie Rock was Jim Henson's masterpiece, aimed at adults and children-as-thought-they-were adults. Finally, it's all on DVD!

### LoCol Colour

The letter column. Unfortunately, there are no letters. Those I must have gotten for New Toy 2 were lost long ago, and would probably not raise a single memory of what was in that issue anyway. If you want letters, **write!**

### Back Cover - Joshua W. Kennedy - Page 38

### Art - Steve Stiles - Page 24



# The Taraltorial Instinct

## Let Me Entertain You

Taral Wayne

Doubtless, there are many reasons why people write for fanzines. Egoboo is one. A need for self-expression is another likely suspect. Some misguided individuals write because they feel a duty to proselytize science fiction to the as-yet-unenlightened masses. A few write to stir up shit. For five dollars and a self-addressed, stamped envelope, I *may* be willing to send you a list of names of people who I think may write for any of the above reasons.

I've often wondered which of the reasons given is *my* reason for fanwriting. Had I been subject to the vice of perfect honesty, some years ago I might have answered, "for reasons of egoboo." I saw other fans writing in zines and basking in attention in the next issue's letter column; why not me? I don't think my motives are quite as simple anymore.

It may be that I write more for the need to write or for the love of writing than before. But I feel a bit uncomfortable trying to wear the role of dedicated writer-for-the-sake-of-writing. I look ludicrous in a frazzled sweater coat with leather patches at the elbows. I have never smoked a pipe and heavy drinking never entered the picture. While I don't deny that I enjoy writing (when it is going well), something else must explain why, in the last few years, I've spent as much time as I have at the keyboard.

If it were just a form of logorrhea, I would do as most fans do and spill out an endless stream of opinions and a formless litany of events, just as they occurred in my not very remarkable life. That is what most fanwriting appears to be. Though there is a broad appeal to such fanwriting, frankly it calls for no great skill or

judgment as a writer. I've done my share of this sort of writing, and it has always left me feeling... inadequate. At the end of the day, what is the point?

Yet I'm no Faulkner or Salinger, trying to reshape literature. I'm not so in love with the English language that I play with it to satisfy the inner artist alone. If I were that sort of writer, perhaps I would have made a much more concerted effort over the years to become a professional writer. But I don't seem to have had that sort of drive.

I'm some other kind of writer, content to do his best with familiar materials that are sure to be understood, and write to an audience of people I recognize. To them I present myself as a story-teller. A journalist. A stand-up comedian. A commonplace entertainer, in other words. The reason I write for fanzines is that I enjoy capturing the interest of, and amusing, my readers. That's you.

Let me entertain you with this fanzine.

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The last issue of *New Toy* appeared in February of 1987. It was only the second issue, and I had fully meant to publish more. Instead, I became caught up in publishing booklets and then portfolios for mail order. For the next 15 or so years I was heavily involved in "furry" fandom. I was one of the founding members, you might say, and knew all the other founding members. Everything about furry fandom was fresh and exciting, and held the promise of new professional opportunities. Somehow, though, nothing worked out quite as expected. The early published comics disappeared, to be

replaced by others that catered to a narrower view of what “anthropomorphics” could have been. Sales outside of the in-group plummeted, the old faces faded away, and the internet became the focus of almost all fanac. I found that being in furry fandom was not as much fun as it had been. My sales plummeted as well, so it was not as profitable either. Science fiction fandom began to seem more appealing again.

As I wound down my activities as a small-scale convention dealer and underemployed comic book artist, I began to use my time to write for fanzines. It was only a small amount at first, but it grew steadily. Arnie Katz was one of the first to notice. He encouraged me to contribute to *Vegas Fan Weekly* and put me on to Chris Garcia’s *Drink Tank*. I had been so out of the loop that I had never heard of Chris. Drink Tank was not exactly a classic fanzine, but I quickly learned to appreciate the rapid-fire publication of issues, and funneled Chris any short, light-weight, time-sensitive articles I had. By that time I had begun writing more ambitious pieces as well, that I tried on heftier fanzines like *Challenger*, *Banana Wings*, *File 770* and *Askance*. A little to my surprise, every one was accepted. With alacrity, no less. I’m happy to say I’ve had very few rejections since. So it seems these days I’m as much a fanwriter as a fanartist... maybe even more so.

Still, I have begun to run into an unexpected obstacle. There aren’t enough fanzines. While you could list quite a few titles I have not yet been published in, they would be zines not very likely to publish anything I wrote anyway. It should come as no surprise that I have had nothing published in *Relapse*, and probably never will. It is a zine exclusively about British Fandom in the last Ice Age, and I have nothing to write on the subject. I have little interest in Steam Punk either. For the most part, this bars me from *Exhibition Hall* or *Journey Planet*. (I had a Victorian-era short story in *Journey Planet*, notwithstanding.) I would be unlikely to contribute to *Original*

*Universe*, a zine dedicated to comic books. *Science Fiction/San Francisco* would be another waste of time. *The Fortnightly Fix* is all Steve Green and rarely more than two pages long. Shelby Vick’s *Planetary Stories* publishes only pastiches of old pulp fiction. And so it is, zine after zine. Once the inappropriate are crossed off the list, there are only two dozen titles that I care to submit to, and that would be willing to run what I send them.

Late last year, I actually ran out of places to submit new articles to. Fortunately, a few next-issues came out in quick order. I filled up the openings in something like two months and was back where I started. A few more issues came out, but I filled up the vacancies as quickly as they appeared. There was only one avenue left open to me. I would have to start publishing my own zine again.

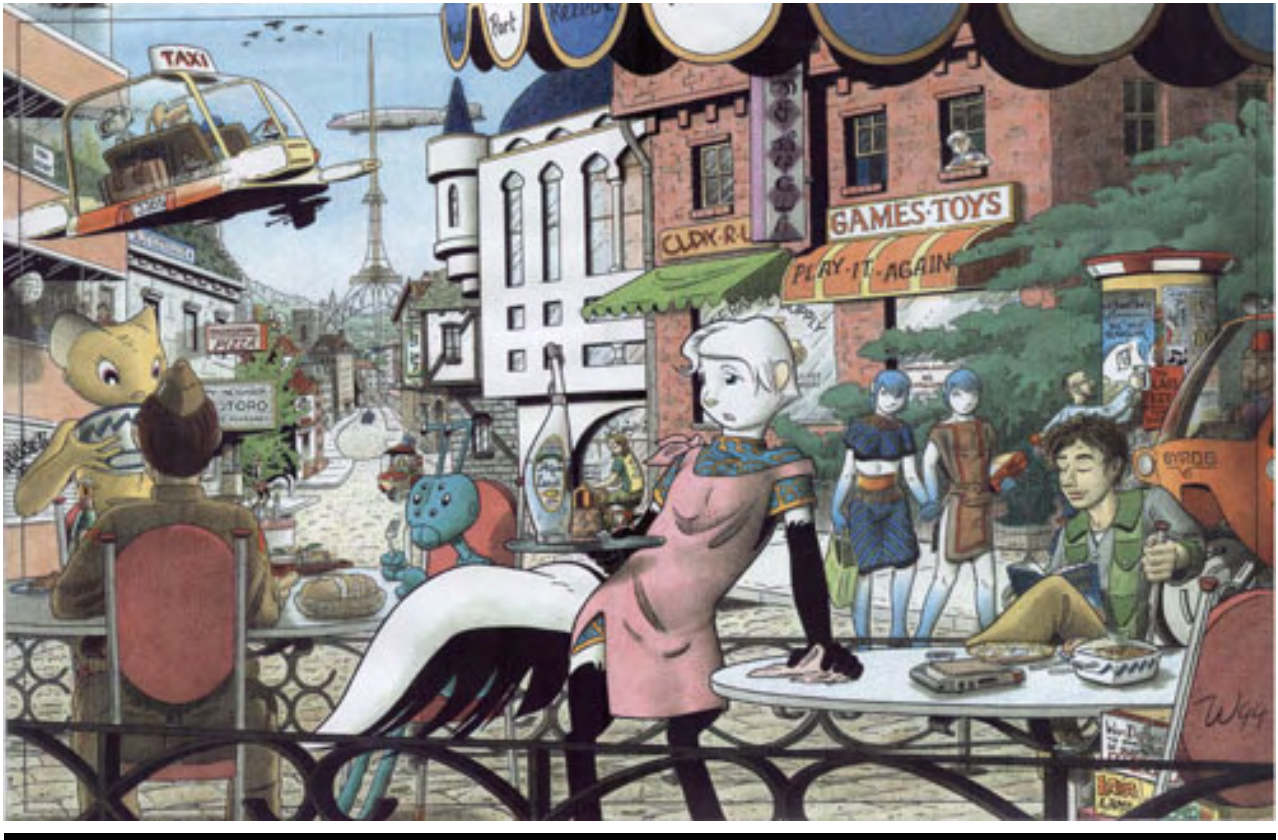
*New Toy I* appeared in February 1986. The second issue came out a year later. Both were mimeographed on twiltone, with offset covers. They were about 40 pages each. One included the notorious Rotsler “Letraset” sheet folded in. I wrote every word except the letters in issue 2, and did most of the art. Back in 1987 I had every intention of publishing a third issue, hopefully *sooner* than 1988. But I didn’t. Nor did I produce a third issue in 1989. Or 1990. In fact, with this issue it will be a full 23 years since the last *New Toy!*

Not that 23 years is remotely like a record in fandom, but it’s surely *too* long. With any luck, the 4<sup>th</sup> issue should come out *well before* 2033. Ironically, any untoward delay might well be due to how much less art I’ve been doing in these late days. A fine state of affairs for a nine-time Hugo nominated fan artist.



# Tara Wayne

## An Alternative Future



A little while ago, I exchanged e-mail with Walt, my old editor at Ruralite Magazine.

Talking about your e-mail lacks style and drama, however. Forget that I said it. Instead, let's imagine that I was actually talking with Walt over coffee. We met in a charming café on the Left Bank... of Bangkok. No... in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, the new capital of Canada ever since the population shifted north, along with the national borders. That way, Winnipeg could become the new American capital. Anything below what was once the Mason-Dixon line – now known as the Sear Line – was uninhabitable because of Global Warming and the general rise of the oceans.

I ordered my coffee in the Vietnamese style, in a press with plenty of hot, sweet condensed milk. Walt took his Java like a man – black and strong enough to craze the enamel in his cup. We mulled over the old days, when he sent me assignments and I illustrated them.

Being an editor, of course, Walt was sensitized to small transgressions of the language that most of us would scarcely notice. He regaled me with a number of hair-raising stories about his years with Ruralite. Hair-raising, that is, if you were a fellow editor. I was not, but listened politely.

“But worst of all,” he said with intensity, “are the illiterate, manglers of the English language who cannot, or will not, use the word

“foreword” and insist instead on using “forward!”

“This happens often?” I asked, snagging an absinthe as it went by on a tray. Walt absent-mindedly patted the pale greenish serving-girl on the rump and she smiled, showing two venomous-looking fangs.

“More often than you imagine.”

“It’s not the sort of thing I spend much time imagining,” I said, leering at the departing girl. I’m afraid the gesture was somewhat wasted, as I noticed from a slender waxy curl below the hem-line that she was entering her molting season.

All the same, I had to agree with Walt. Illiteracy was going around like the Second California flu, and I discovered new examples of the English language misused every day. But, it was the old days I recalled most clearly.

“Back home, when I was a lad of seventy-five or eighty,” I said, “there was a place I used to walk by whenever I was window shopping, or when I went up the street to have my corneas re-silvered. It’s a vanity, I know, but I can afford it ever since selling the rights for “Beatrix” (and two contracted sequels) to Pixar. The place was a coffee shop. You’re familiar with the sort – carrot muffins, hash brownies, and overpriced Fair Trade coffee that the Chinese have a complete monopoly on.”

I stopped to sip the absinthe. It was mixed with Mountain Dew rather than Stewart’s Lemon-Lime, but it was palatable.

“So?” Walt prompted me. He stuck to his Java and pesto fried Mozzarella sticks.

“So the place had a folksy-looking sign hung out in front that looked like the owners burned the name on in phony antique lettering with Junior’s wood-burning set. They called the place *Alternate Grounds*.”

Walt nearly bit a piece out of the coffee cup.

“You’re kidding? They couldn’t tell the difference between a noun and an adjective?”

I agreed they couldn’t. “You don’t know how many times I went by that place and barely had the self-control not to go in and tell them it was supposed to be *Alternate Grounds*. That an *alternative* was a choice or option, not a difference.”

“I don’t suppose it would have done much good, since they had already hung up their artsy-crafty sign.” He sighed. “Pity. Otherwise, it was a good pun.”

“Sometimes, signs are just unintentionally funny,” I continued. “Years and years ago, I knew of a place that repaired old-fashioned electronic stuff. You know what I mean – radios, tape recorders and TVs with *tubes*?”

“I don’t much like admitting that I’m old enough to remember things that worked with tubes.”

“Neither do I, but between two guys well past their 11<sup>th</sup> decade, who are we kidding?”

Walt looked up at the passing stabilized-positronium gas dirigible. At one time it would have been a screaming Airbus, not the silent, stately, flattened teardrop that glided by just over the greenery topped skyscrapers. Times *had* changed.

“Guess what the shop was called?” I pressed on.

“No idea,” said Walt, finishing his coffee.

“Pavlov’s Reconditioned TVs. No,” I held up my hand, “I kid you not. Then there are out-and-out typos. When I lived in Willowdale there was a judo school north of me on Yonge Street. I must have gone by it a hundred times until I finally noticed an oddity in the sign above the plate-glass window. They had spelled

*marital* wrong, and were advertising to the world that the school taught the *marital* arts.”

“Maybe they did... in the back... on the quiet.” My friend snickered.

It was time to go. Walt threw down a thousand Euro bill, and I dropped a couple of hundreds to cover the tip. “Remember credit cards?” I said, self-consciously. I had managed to get myself in trouble with them more than once, in the Ponzie Age. “Damned good thing we got rid of them.”

We argued a bit and decided to stroll down to the beach. It was a bit cool for Autumn in Yellowknife, but we guessed there would still be a lecher’s bonanza of sun-tanning topless girlies on the balmy shores of azure Great Slave Lake. There was too. Before we lost track, we counted over forty well-contoured breasts. Thirty-two of them belonged to sixteen women in a variety of colours – flaming pink, chartreuse, glittering gold, ivory and a silky teal that I wanted to fall in love with. (I gave the metabolic accelerator in my wrist a whack, but it didn’t help.) The remainder belonged to a matched pair of felinids, one lapine and a spliced polar bear who dyed herself fuchsia – but the bear was just a little *too* outré for *our* tastes.

I rewound my memory five minutes and ran it again, fast forward. “Speaking of teaching improper subjects out in the back... I guess I haven’t told you about a sex shop I used to know?”

“Another funny store name? Are you sure you don’t make these up?”

“Not exactly the store’s name. Whenever I drove to a Costco in the west end of town with anyone, we invariably passed a small sex shop that sold explicit videos and porno magazines. This was before it was legal to sell actual sex, of course. I never saw it open, and it wasn’t the sort of place I was likely to go looking for a

bargain, either.”

“I’ll bet,” said Walt.

“And I’ll let that pass,” I said. “It was always dark when we drove by, and the place was closed. The window, though, was always lit up like an old-style bar, with red and blue neon all around the sills and the store’s name was a custom, hand-blown, one-piece glass neon tube in cursive script. After fifty years I hardly remember what the joint was called, but I’ll probably never forget what it said underneath.”

Walt interrupted the story. “Let me guess. It said *rear entry*.”

“You were a customer, then?” I shot back at once.

A turbo-jitney beeped at us, and we stepped aside to let the grinning Tibetan mercenaries pass by. One day, I swore under my breath, we would expel the Buddhist invaders...

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It’s all nonsense, of course. But, in our e-mail we did talk about misuse of the English language, and each of those instances *is* drawn from personal experience. There is an “Alternative Grounds,” there was a judo school who taught “marital arts” and even though “Pavlov’s Reconditioned TVs” disappeared years ago there is, in fact, still a sex shop on the way to Costco with “rear entry.”

For some time, Walt has been encouraging me to start writing something I can sell, to begin one particular novel I’ve discussed with him many times. But, somehow, there is always *one more fan article* I have to write! When I’m done with it, I’ll be free to write “Wendy and the House Gamins” or one of the other book ideas in my head. Yet, it never happens that way, of course. I no sooner finish one fan article, then another one comes to focus in my mind. It happened even as I wrote to Walt about ill use of the language. I suddenly



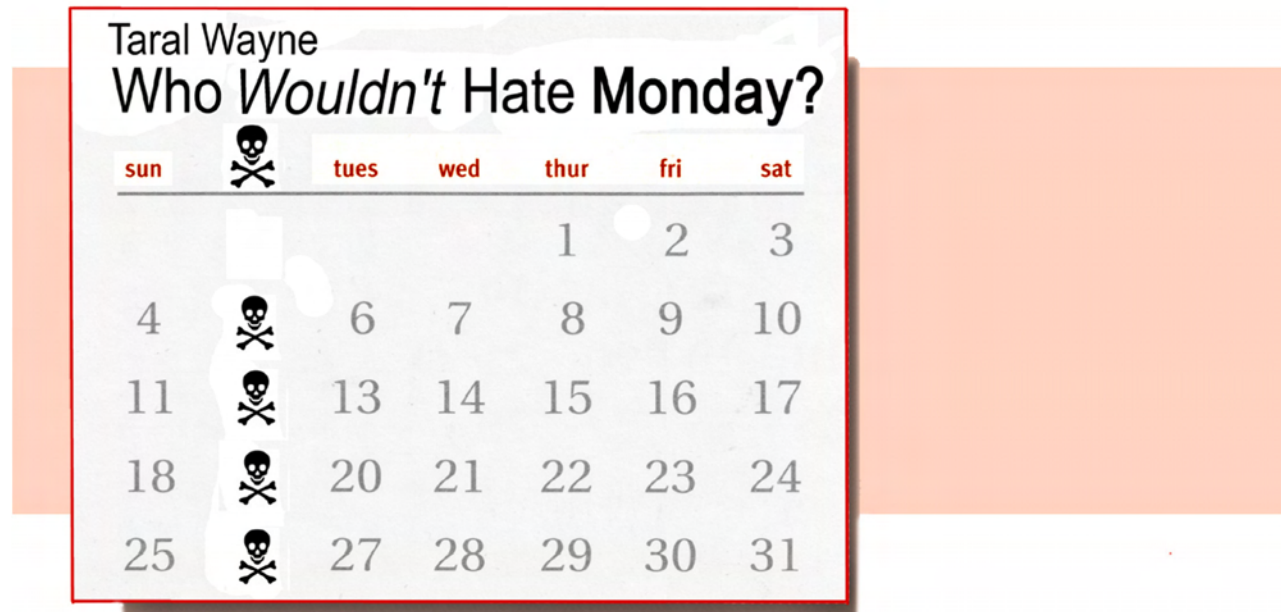
typed out –

*"Oh no... I sense an article coming on! I've got the material for it already figured out!"*

I did, too – and this was it.

I ask you... how can I ever get down to serious writing when I'm writing all the time?

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Anyone who is against air conditioning is an enemy of The People.

But the truth of that assertion will not be obvious at first. The start of this tale goes back more than a week ago, to an insignificant little summer cold. I woke up one morning and realized that my nose was running, and that I was sneezing. My nose didn't run very much and I didn't sneeze often, so as colds go it was not a memorable one. It ran its course in two days, which *did* seem unusual – but who complains they've had a bout with the cold that didn't last long enough and was hardly enough inconvenience to the sufferer?

What I didn't know was that the coldt hadn't gone away at all. It had only gone into hiding in the branching passages of my lungs, where a fiendish, viral bomb bided its time.

By Friday, I recognized that something was very wrong. I had begun to cough, and I noticed that one ear was stuffed up. Was this a *new* cold, so soon after the last? And following a plan of attack so at odds with the first? Or was this the *same* cold, making a new assault after a strategic withdrawal? Questions like this can only be rhetorical – the main thing was that I was feeling sick again.

It was all the more awkward that I had already arranged a small get-together at my place the next day. It isn't often that I do. And, with less than 24 hours' warning, I was reluctant to phone the other three people to call it off. I didn't.

When Saturday came, Steven was the first to arrive. I was feeling very tired, still had trouble hearing and my voice was hoarse.

Lisa and her boyfriend arrived later, in somewhat tardy fashion. By that time, I was so close to calling the party off that I could see Schrödinger's cats walking through the walls and furniture. Either that, or I was hallucinating.

Fortunately, grilling burgers wasn't difficult. Having put a little food under my belt, I revived. It was actually Lisa who fell asleep, not me. Steven drove her home and I went along to enjoy the fresh evening air. The much cooler air conditioning in Steven's car also helped revive me. From somewhere I found the reserves to watch all the way through "Avatar" with Steven before it was time that he went to his own well-deserved repose that night.

When I woke on Sunday, I *knew* I was in trouble. My cough had turned into deep, compulsive hacking that was dredging up phlegm every bit as thick and noxious as tar balls from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill – the only notable difference being colour. I began to think about seeing my GP.

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It takes two cars on converging courses to make a collision. The other car in this case was an issue I had with my bank. Since being accepted by Ontario Works for support, I had allowed myself to be talked into signing the necessary papers for direct-deposit from the Province of Ontario, my benefactor, to the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. I had resisted the idea in past because I owed a pretty sum to the CIBC-card that I held. Twice before, when I had been able to make a deposit into my account, the credit branch had reached into my account and taken every penny without warning. The first time it happened, I didn't understand. \$500 I had scrimped together had vanished. The bank said they didn't see anything out of the usual, so perhaps I had made a mistake in my accounting. Naively, I made an extraordinary effort to pull together another

\$300 and deposited it. It was gone before the ATM could tell me to have a nice day.

On the second occurrence, I went back and demanded the manager explain where my money was. The \$300 I put in my account one minute, and was gone the next, was damn-well no bookkeeping error on my part. Oh, he said. See where IBB is printed in your passbook? That stands for Interbranch Banking. We took your money. Apparently, in the miles of small print in the credit card agreement I signed, I had given them the right to take payment from my account at will. The account was empty, my service charges had built up, overdraft protection had gone into effect, so I owed *them* money for an account they had closed. Oh, and by the way... have a nice day.

I had had very good relations with the people in that bank up to this point, so I opened a fresh account. The smiling manager lied to me with the ease of a soul that was resigned to going straight to hell, and no longer gave it a thought. He assured me that the old card agreement did not confer on the CIBC the right to enter a new account. I believed him about as much as I believed there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. But banks know that you must do business with them on their terms, since they're all the same.

From then on, I never kept more than \$10 in the account to cover service charges. I cashed checks and paid bills at the counter. It was too hands-on to be convenient, but it was secure.

Until now, that is. My social worker wanted to deposit my monthly check directly into my account at the bank. I explained why I thought this unwise, and the social worker said that if I had any problem with the account, speak to her and she'd straighten it out. Reluctantly, I signed the papers.

By the way, this is probably an opportune time to mention that I have learned to give the various people at LOFT (a community volunteer assistance group) and Ontario Works the highest respect. They have been efficient, courteous, and helpful in my hours of need. Unfortunately, when it came to banks they were more than a little naïve. (Who isn't?)

I wasn't sure when to expect the first directly-deposited to appear in my account. Near the end of the month, most likely. So, on the Wednesday before my get-together, I walk to the nearest branch of the CIBC with the aim of withdrawing my money from an ATM. The account was empty. Every penny had been lifted, even the \$50 I had gradually built up there to keep the account active. All of it vanished like America's hopes and dreams for a brighter future.

Despite a Humidex that felt in the mid-'40s – 95 or so to Americans – I rushed home to phone Ontario Works. The time on my clock read 4.32 when I punched in the final number. Ms. Marshall, case worker 208, had already left for home, said the pleasant voice on the recording. I left a concise message about the catastrophe. I dragged off a sweat-soaked shirt, put on a dry one, and rushed down to the ground floor to see if there was anyone in the building's LOFT office. My case worker, Jason, was on *vacation*. Nobody could tell me what to do except come back later and explain matters to Maria, the office supervisor. Unfortunately, the next day was Canada Day, and nobody would be in. Neither would case worker 208 at Works Ontario, for that matter. So all I could do was wait patiently until Friday, my world in tatters.

I wasn't disappointed by Maria. The office supervisor was there in the office on Friday, just as she should be. I explained what had happened, she looked in my passbook, tapped

on the keyboard and said, "This can't happen. It has to be illegal."

I was assured that one way or another I'd get my money. Caseworker 208 had returned my call, as well. I noted the time as I entered the last digit. By coincidence it was about 4.30 again and I missed R. Marshall by minutes. I'd have to wait again until Monday.

Yes, we're finally converging on *Monday*.

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By the first of the week I was now coughing up rafts of yellow blubber with an eerie green tinge. I had all but lost my voice, as well as the hearing in one ear. Worse, I had begun to notice sore eyes the night before. But, when I woke up Monday they were swollen and nearly glued shut. Staring out of the mirror at me were two assholes that had been fucked by diseased donkeys all night. The Humidex was back up in the mid-'40s – nearly 100 American – and the reading of the Air Quality Index was in a region that aboard a Federation starship meant imminent core breach. There couldn't be a more perfect day to say home with my creaky, but functional air conditioning.

My conversation with Ms. Marshall went something like this:

"Ermamah ayn oober."

"Mr. Wayne? I'm sorry you missed me Friday, but 4.30 is the usual time we close for the day. We have an urgent problem."

"Lormf maffle evu!"

"I really don't recall you objecting to direct deposit. However, we are sending an emergency sum to cover your immediate needs directly to your own mailbox. It's not for as much, unfortunately. We want to make arrangements to pay your rent directly

to Metro Toronto Community Housing as well.”

“Umf urh mmf?”

“No, I’m sorry, once the creditor has his hands on the money, there is nothing we can do.”

Well, I finally knew. When it came to a showdown between the Province and the Bank, the Bank wins! And I know who lost. I knew all along that Ronnie Reagan was lying through his teeth about who held the real power over the Common Man and in whose interest this was... but I was just *hoping* that, as this was *Canada*, that... But the rule of Nations ends at a line. The rule of Money goes on without limit.

The ramifications of this will go on for weeks longer, but at this point the CIBC and my welfare check leave the story. Instead, Ms. Marshall says, “You sound terrible. You should see a doctor.”

I indicated that I was thinking about it. But it was very hot, it was a long walk and I felt like shit. Marshall was very insistent, and suggested a compromise. There was a medical clinic down the street from me, only half the distance to my usual doctor’s office. I agreed to try. Privately, I was not too confident I’d get far from the door.

Taking advantage of every square inch of shade and every doorstep or flower box or window ledge that I could rest on, I made it. I felt like an old man as I tottered in, stooped over, feet dragging, puffing like an engine. I could almost hear the sweat pattering on the tiled floor as it poured off me. Mercifully, the clinic was air conditioned like a morgue. But, the receptionist said to me in some version of English that was highly coloured by the Zambezi, “No doctors. No doctors!” I yammered back at him, “Me sick. Me plenty

sick! Mebbe die lobby!” He indicated upstairs, and said, “Doctors.”

He was just trying to get rid of me. There were no doctors there either. They only saw regular patients on appointment. Some *clinic*...

The upstairs receptionist suggested I go to St. Joe’s. This big Roman Catholic hospital in the East end had been one of Ms. Marshall’s suggestions, but now I was at the other end of Parkdale from it. My Doctor’s office was now far nearer to where I was.

Dr. Wu looked me straight in the eye and said, “You have an infection.” No shit? I thought I had demons. He listened to my back a while, then peered in my ear with something that looked like one of those things you use to decorate cakes. “Nothing there.” He wrote a prescription for an antibiotic for my eyes and asked if I had ever used an inhaler before. Uh-uh. He wrote a prescription for one of those too. It wouldn’t help the infection in my chest go away, but it would help me breathe, which was my immediate goal. Then I exited into air too swampy and polluted to be breathed. As well, I faced about twice as far to walk if I wanted to get home.

There was no question in my mind, as the elevator carried me up to the 21<sup>st</sup> floor that I was going to rest for half an hour, or even a whole hour, before attempting yet another walk from my apartment to the drug store. And the walk to Guardian Drugs was the shortest of the three, so it seemed that everything would soon be set to order.

It was about 4.30 I learned otherwise. I don’t know what it *is* about that time of the afternoon. I’d always thought it a rather pleasant hour, myself. But at 4.30 in the afternoon of Monday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2010, the lights in my apartment went out all at once. More important, so did the air



conditioning. Water doesn't flow up-hill, either, so nothing came out of the taps. As well, the TV, stereo, computer, stove, fridge, coffee maker and everything else in the place were dead. Only a primitive phone that had a cord and was connected directly to the wall still functioned – it was the only reason I kept it.

For that matter, I had long since learned to keep water under the sink for those times when the plumbing stopped, and stored more water in the refrigerator. I had a gallon next to the toilet for an emergency flush, as well. Altogether, I never had less than 7 gallons of water on hand for all uses. If I had power, at least I could still wash, cook and make coffee. Without power? There was squat I could do. I wouldn't go thirsty, and I could brush my teeth, but that was about all.

My immediate problem wasn't long-term survival, though, it was the two prescriptions in my pocket that needed filling. One was supposed to help me see and the other to breathe. Breathing was *very much* a short-term priority. I needed to fill the prescription for that inhaler very badly, or else I was looking at a night of sleep that consisted mainly of dropping off and being wrenched awake again by shortness of breath. Failing that, I needed the power back so that I could run the air conditioner. As the situation stood, it looked very much as though I might spend the night in a smothering steam bath with neither the means to escape it, nor go for what I needed to endure it. A functioning air conditioner had become a near life-and-death matter for the first time. It was a sobering revelation.

And there *are* people who scorn air conditioning, crediting it with the destruction of the ozone layer and the imminent end of civilization as we know it. I don't doubt they favour euthanasia of the old and weak, as well. Never mind the SUV... more than any other technological advance, it is the air

conditioner that makes habitable wide swatches of this planet – swatches such as the American South and Southwest – and Toronto in Summer.

I phoned around, talked to neighbors, and gradually pieced together the story. A major transformer in the west end of the city had blown and caught fire. Half the city was in the dark. The Queen of England, just sitting down to her Yorkshire pud at the Royal York Hotel, was momentarily startled, but fortunately there was an emergency generator. People were stuck in their elevators, shopkeepers gave away ice cream that would otherwise melt in their freezers, ordinary citizens jumped out of their cars to direct traffic in the absence of signal lights... all the usual mixed blessings that come with a massive power outage. I loaned what extra flashlights and candles I had to my neighbors, and from them I learned that – just like the Royal York – my building's elevators *also* ran on emergency power!

Strapped back into my sandals, my third shirt of the day on my back and prescriptions in my pocket, I set out. The building's lights came on even before I had the door fully open. Thanks for *nothing*, Irony!

I had had my rest. And, without a doubt, the six blocks from my Dunn Avenue building to the Queen Street Guardian Drugs was the shortest walk of the day. Nonetheless it was a shaky and exhausted 58 plus-year old guy with a bum-back who arrived outside the pharmacy to discover it... closed.

But, no, the lights were on. I went to the other door to find most of the staff huddled around the check-out area. I banged. They shook their heads and pointed at the blue screen on the check-out computer. I held my prescriptions against the glass and mimed fainting. And then I don't think I was faking it anymore. Instead, I was panting, hands on

knees, facing the sidewalk, trying to avoid looking any closer.

After a minute I was able to straighten up. I had the bright idea that maybe the drug store would open again once their computer was on-line. There was a small, but well-stocked video store another block or two down Queen Street where I could spend a few minutes, so shuffled off. Luck surprised me. I found a previously-viewed copy of an old Jack Lemmon movie I wanted. With my discount coupon, it cost me a whole \$2 for "The Fortune Cookie."

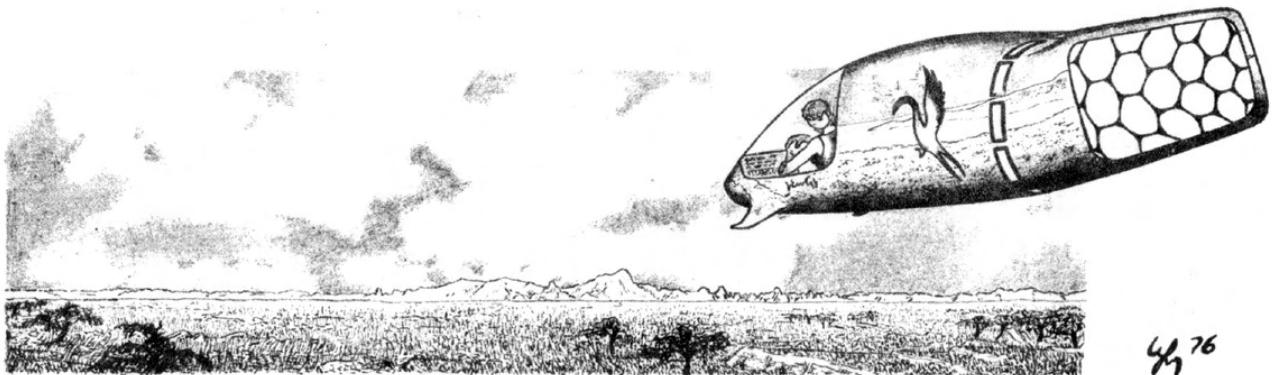
I noticed, too, a huge Shoppers' Drug Mart across the road. Maybe their computer hadn't crashed and I could fill my prescriptions there? I much preferred my regular place. They were good to customers who were down on their luck, and either charged them a flat \$2 dispensary fee, or neglected to charge one at all. I could expect no such favours from a corporate giant. With under \$10 in my pocket, it was doubtful I could have paid the fee on even one of my two prescriptions. I worked my way back to the Guardian, instead.

The Jack Lemmon film must have been a

turning point. Guardian was open and people were streaming in. I had my prescriptions filled in minutes. The cost was covered by the medical card from Ontario Works, and the pharmacist waived his fees entirely. I had enough in my pocket for a diet cola and a box of very reasonably priced blueberries on the way home. Would you believe \$1 for the blueberries? Thank air conditioning. They were grown in California.

With the first puff of the inhaler, I felt an immediate difference that I don't think was my imagination. I liberally applied eye-drops as well. Perhaps it *was* my imagination, but right away my eyes felt less sore. It was two or three hours, though, before my eyes began to lose some of their swollen redness and the greasy ropes of pus began to fall away from the lids. I could read again. In fact, I watched "The Fortune Cookie" until I was tired enough for bed.

There I was, comfortably at home in an air conditioned apartment, with running water, television, internet, hot food, cold drink, eyes that could see and lungs that drew enough air to sustain life. I glanced at a clock and thanked some god or other that it was *Tuesday*.





# In the Balance

A couple of days ago, a much-anticipated package came from Andrew Tucker in England. Andrew is an assistant museum curator in London, and had been given permission to take home some items dubbed superfluous. They included two of these odd "sovereign balances."

What in the world is a "sovereign balance," you may ask. I may answer...

I will. Back in the days when gold coins were in actual circulation, there were considerable problems with forgeries. A gold sovereign traded even with five U.S. dollars in the mid-19th. century, and it represented something like a week's wages -- potent incentive to make counterfeits with base metal. The solution to the problem was this handy little gizmo.

It's a simple device, about four inches long, and is made in two pieces -- a base with a fulcrum, and an upper beam with a weight at one end and two pans at the other. They were simple to use, too. Place a sovereign in the larger pan, or a half-sovereign in the smaller one, and if the beam balanced, the coin was good. If it was either too light or too heavy, the beam would not balance. As an additional security feature, the slot in the pan would not pass any coin that was too wide or too thick. A coin that was too small would go through with a visible gap.

Any number of manufacturers made these

scales. While more or less identical from maker to maker, they displayed endless minor variations. Finding information about sovereign balances on Google was a little easier than I expected, but, as you might expect, there are not actually a whole lot of websites devoted to the subject. I only found two of any use, in fact.

From those sources, I gathered that the maker of the two balances in my possession was a Simmons company, in Birmingham, England. There seem to have been three Simmonses -- T (Thomas), I (John), and C (Charles). They must have been all one company, so I don't understand the distinction. Brothers in a family business most likely -- but why mark the product so? Although a few sovereign balances continued to be made for specialty use well into this century, the Simmons company apparently produced them mostly between 1835 and 1852.

One of the sites I referenced was an auction house, and had starting bids on similar balances of 40 to 50 Pounds. The expected selling price was as high as 80 ( about\$135). On an unrelated blog, I found a remark that until recently such balances could be had for only a few Pounds, and had only lately become fashionable with collectors. It's an interesting comment on the timing of the museum that they would wait until now to rid themselves of unwanted clutter.

On an interesting note, I have an 1866 gold half-sovereign (perhaps I should post a picture of

that as well). I placed it in the smaller, outer pan, and sure enough it balanced perfectly. I also have a \$5 US gold piece, called a "Half Eagle." (A full Eagle is a \$10 gold piece.) As it exchanged exactly with the British sovereign, it should have balanced as well. I placed it in the larger, inner pan, and it sank like a rock. It was too heavy!

Well, of course the Half Eagle wasn't a fake. It happens that the gold in the US coin was less pure by a small percentage. To make up the same value, the Half Eagle was a few grams heavier in base metal alloy.

What do I do with \*two\* nearly identical sovereign balances? As it happens, I have my eye on a coin held by my favourite dealer. It is a bit too pricey for my taste, but I have interested Robert in buying the spare balance from me. With that discounted from the sales price of the coin, I may be able to add it to my collection after all.

The coin that I crave is a small bronze thing called a quinarius. (I don't know why. It has no relation to the actual silver quinarius of three centuries earlier.) It was minted by an usurper named Allectus in Britain, and shows a nice image of a Roman warship on the reverse. Earlier, a Roman general, who commanded the Channel fleet had seized control of Britain and the northern Gallic coast. Carausius ruled as bogus emperor for several years, even commemorating himself with coins that showed him alongside the legitimate emperors of East and West. But he was fooling himself. Maximianus was only bidding his time while preoccupied with more important matters to the south.

But there was never a showdown. One of Carausius's lieutenants, Allectus, murdered him first! So it was this Allectus on whom the wrath of the legitimate emperor finally fell. The general who was dispatched to the north in 296 AD to polish off the presumptuous usurper, was Constantius Chlorus. The newly minted Caesar

would later become Augustus, as well as the father of Constantine the Great.<sup>1</sup>

Just moments ago, I got e-mail from my dealer. He's agreed in principle to leveraging the sale of the Allectus with the purchase of one of my balances.

Woo hooo!



<sup>1</sup> In the Tetrarchy established by the emperor Diocletian, there were two senior emperors called Augustus. One Augustus ruled the eastern empire, the other ruled the western empire. Each had a junior colleague called Caesar.



Feature - The Sunday Pages

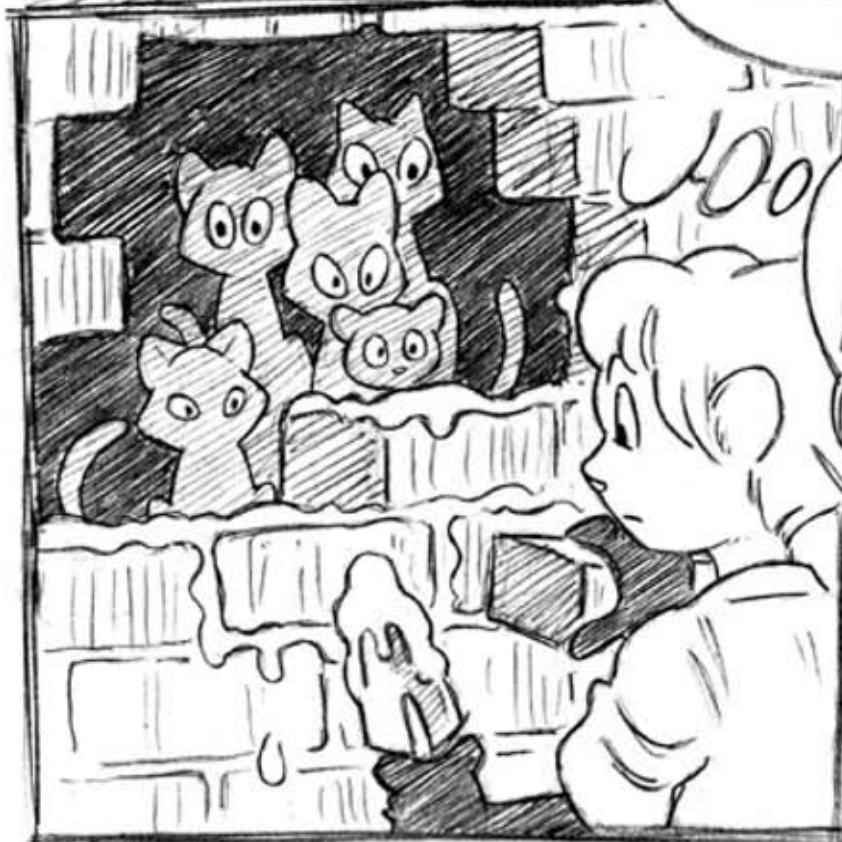
# TALES ON THE 'RUN



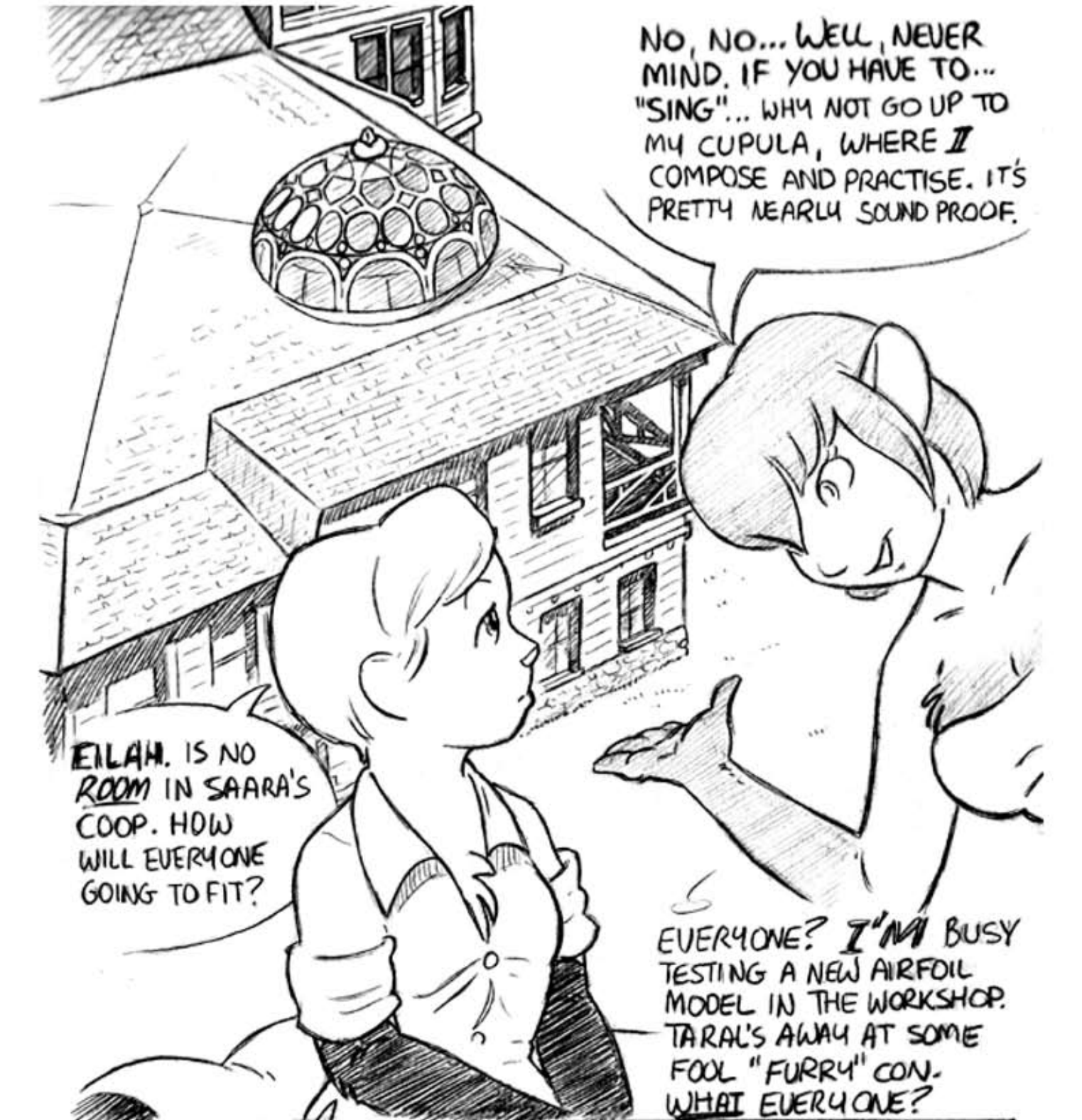
ALL YOUR LIFE!!!

HA HA - THAT'S  
NOT *SINGING*...  
THAT'S CATERWAULING.

WALLING CATS? IS LIKE  
EDGAR ALLAN POE, SAARA...  
IN *CASK OF ARMADILLOS*?







NO, NO... WELL, NEVER MIND. IF YOU HAVE TO... "SING"... WHY NOT GO UP TO MY CUPULA, WHERE I COMPOSE AND PRACTISE. IT'S PRETTY NEARLY SOUND PROOF.

EILAH. IS NO ROOM IN SAARA'S COOP. HOW WILL EVERYONE GOING TO FIT?

EVERYONE? I'M BUSY TESTING A NEW AIRFOIL MODEL IN THE WORKSHOP. TARAL'S AWAY AT SOME FOOL "FURRY" CON. WHAT EVERYONE?



THEY. FAMILY ARE  
COMING TO HAVE ALL-  
DAY SING-ALONG AND  
THANKSGIVING DINNER.

OW... SO THAT'S  
WHY YOU WERE  
BAKING ALL OF  
YESTERDAY...

THANKSGIVING  
WAS LAST WEEK,  
TANGEL...







*This is the speech I put together for the Guest of Honour hour at Ad Astra 23, held over the April 2-4 weekend in 2004. I spent a week wondering what I could do that would possibly fill the better part of sixty minutes. My wife Sharry said, "Just write down the next six or eight thoughts that come into your head – give them five minutes each, and you're done." Excellent idea. This was the result.*

### **1. People are collectively brilliant and individually stupid.**

I'll give you one concrete example. A TV commercial.

I don't know if you've seen this one. A car ad. I forget which car. Some chunky 4-wheel-drive kind of thing, for the guy who drives it every day from Mississauga to Leaside but likes to know he can cut through heavy swampland should the need arise. As the ad begins we see the car reduced to maybe four inches high, frolicking the snowy high-country with a bunch of wild rabbits. It's dealing with the snow pretty good but right away you're thinking, geeze, rabbits. Then a cougar creeps up on this bucolic scene. A cougar is bound to be bad news for a four-inch-high car, even a four-inch-high car with rear-window wipers and sonorities that look like they could peel the hair off a coconut. The rabbits scatter, but the cougar's eyes are fixed on that four-inch automobile. I don't know why. Probably the same reason your cat likes to chase your shoelaces -- sheer perversity and bad dietary decisions.

The cougar attacks. But the car is too fast for it.

The cougar does his best to express a new land-speed record, but that little shoebox-sized car is pulling out in front, turning corners where the cougar can't, shooting out sprays of snow over this picturesque mountain valley where miniature Jeeps and Volvos interact with the wildlife in novel ways. Finally, the frustrated and breathless cougar gives up the chase. End of sixty-second ad.

Okay. Now, to see this as "brilliant" you have to take a step back and squint. But let's consider the authentic genius involved here. Layers and layers of collaborative human ingenuity are involved in this television ad. Some of it is embedded in the word "television" -- not just the invention itself, but the countless elaborations and refinements of video technology over the last sixty years. Total up the man-hours necessary to bring even a cheap conventional color TV into your home, and the result, I suggest, would be absolutely staggering. And that work in turn rests on an absolutely colossal body of prior knowledge, all of it generated piece-by-piece and preserved and transmitted

over generations. The ad itself is a cultural act dispersed over yet more years and generations of human imagination: that car would likely not be frolicking with rabbits at all if a body of French surrealists had not made us at home with incongruous images combined in novel ways, and we wouldn't see it with such tremendous false clarity if not for the work of filmmakers from George Melies to Ray Harryhausen to Steven Spielberg.

And that's only the beginning. The point is, while the ad may seem to be (and in some sense was) some advertising guy's singular inspiration, the ad as an artifact is the work of literally millions of human beings. It can never be a desert island technology. One or two people can't build it, even if they're as smart as the Professor and as rich as Thurston Howell III. It may, in fact, require a quietly and unconsciously collaborating population of two or three billion living human beings -- and the past contribution of millions more -- before such a cultural artifact can exist, in the same way an apple tree has to reach a certain size and maturity before it can produce fruit.

So even something as inherently humble as an automobile commercial stands as striking evidence that we, as a species, have an absolute genius for collaboration. Even without conscious intent -- and after all, of all the billions of people necessary to produce that ad, only a handful of them actually wanted it to exist -- we can still create something in which our collective ingenuity is embedded and embodied.

We are collectively brilliant.

So why do I think we're individually stupid? Because the same ad has a tag-line running at the bottom of the screen that says, "DO NOT ATTEMPT."

**2. Science fiction has always hovered on the verge of literary respectability but has never achieved it, and won't in the near future.**

To which I would add: And it doesn't matter. Much ink has been spilled on the subject of science fiction's respectability. The consensus is, we don't have it but we come close.

"Respectability," in all these discussions, is never defined, but seems to concern the way works of SF are received by the keepers of what you might call "the canon" of contemporary literature -- university English departments in North America and Europe, or more broadly the network of newspapers, magazines, journals and web sites that serve as cultural gatekeepers. It isn't that SF isn't discussed in these quarters, but that the discussion tends to be held at arm's length. "Popular culture" is a phrase you hear -- "popular" implying "vulgar" or "common," "culture" denoting an unauthorized creative product which is nevertheless difficult to ignore.

Academia, after all, has an appetite and must be fed. Jargon is made to be used, and tenure won't secure itself. Or we might say: The critical discourse surrounding fictive objects labeled "science fiction" is shaped by the threshold demands of, and potential or imagined career trajectories in, designated cultural filter institutions.

I've been reading academic journals.

I don't want to make this an anti-academic rant. I know and like several people who work in SF studies. They often have interesting, even profound things to say about science fiction. I'm also delighted that university presses have done us the great favor of bringing back into print lost or obscure works of early SF -- Caesar's Column, or Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder, or any number of other recently exhumed titles.

Nevertheless, I recently opened a copy of Science Fiction Studies at random and dropped my finger on this paragraph from Livia Monnet's essay, "A-Life and the Uncanny in Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within." Quote:

"Some seventy percent of the unnerving sensation produced by a-life organisms is

rhetorical (via rhetorics of localization and ubiquity, and of a-life's 'genuine life' or aliveness). Another twenty percent emerges from absence or abduction (in the disappearance of life's sovereignty and substitution of the life effect for real life; the abductive mode of reasoning allowing for an encounter with a missing term that is yet to come, such as 'life as it could be'). Finally, ten percent of a-life's uncanniness is a-corporeal (the enmeshing of human bodies, affects, and ecology with the evolution of a-life creatures.)"

I read that and thought, "Dang if it doesn't add up to exactly 100%!"

My own take on it is that SF was sidelined from general respectability by an accident of literary history. The broad, mainstream trajectory of literature from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth has been a movement toward realism. Science fiction is special not because it bucks this trend but because it's an unacknowledged product of it -- the bastard child of literary realism and the scientific worldview.

Look for instance at H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, which I consider the fundamental text of modern SF -- i.e., the first widely-read novel that a modern reader would unhesitatingly identify as science fiction. The elements Wells puts together -- the journey through time, the elfin Eloi, the goblin-like Morlocks -- must have looked to contemporary critics like the stuff of purest retrograde fantasy. But his intentions are ruthlessly realistic. In *The Time Machine*, Wells is imaginatively inhabiting the world revealed by nineteenth-century science, the same radically godless, Darwinian/Huxleyan vision that made Victorians so uncomfortable. Wells as a young man was fascinated with this cutting edge science, the fearful and simultaneously exciting vision of an Earth far older and more mutable than contemporary clergymen wished to admit, an Earth once inhabited by creatures so deliciously strange that their fossilized remains have been mistaken for the bones of dragons, an Earth on which, in the most central

Darwinian heresy, humanity itself, the thing we are, appears not as a divine gift but as an emergent property in a species of ape, a world in which the fundamental meaning of the word humanity has changed and will undoubtedly change in the future.

Wells dispatches his "chronic argonaut," in other words, into the heart of a brand new and radically different vision of humanity's place in the universe. The Eloi are not elves. The Morlocks are not goblins. The Eloi and the Morlocks are our children's children's children. Not because the author is being playful but because the author is telling a core truth about the way things really are.

So -- is this literary realism or is it backward-looking fantasy? Part of the emergent literary mainstream, or a reconfigured fairy tale? Do we swallow it or spit it out?

Many years ago, in one of those conversations that arise in the late hours of fannish excess, in some battered Boskone motel room or other, I wondered aloud to a friend of mine how a glass of Manishevitz would look to a bacterium. Would the sugar content, bacterium heaven, compensate for the alcohol, bacterium hell? How would a bacterial food critic describe it? My friend said, "Like a steak covered in shit, I guess."

Which neatly describes, I think, the current place of SF in the discourse of literary respectability.

### **3. Question posed by a church billboard in rural Alberta: "Are we living in the last days?"**

Headline in a local entertainment paper: "Scooby-Doo Dethrones Christ at Box Office."

### **4. The best sports have the best sounds.**

I should add that I'm no expert on sports. I was the kid who got picked last for school teams -- not because I was a nerdish weakling, though

perhaps that figured into it too, but because I was usually hiding under the bleachers with a copy of *Adventures in Time and Space*. From that vantage point you don't see much of the game. But you can hear it.

Since then I've done a lot of sports research -- everything, in fact, short of actually playing any of these games, which would have involved a tedious process of figuring out the rules, not to mention a distasteful amount of physical exercise -- and I've reached the conclusion that baseball and hockey are the best sports.

Baseball and hockey are seasonal metaphors, and you can hear it in the noise they make. Baseball, summer, the occasional crack of the bat, like somebody chopping wood but not working too hard at it, the long lemonade breaks implied in the murmur of the crowd; a narcotic, almost narcoleptic sport, interrupted by action the way an afternoon nap is interrupted by fragmentary dreams. Even the tension in the game is humid, muffled -- the pitcher glaring from the mound like a bored delinquent on a hot street in July, debating whether to throw hard inside and maybe send the guy to first with a bruised rib but settling for another lazy curveball, a fly out to centerfield.

Hockey, on the other hand, is three rounds of winter night incarnate, charged with the spiritual desperation of enforced isolation at thirty below zero, cabin fever armed and dangerous. It doesn't stand still because it can't; it would freeze in place. Sticks slap on ice like a prisoner beating at a barred window; fights break out -- of course they do. The rage is diverted, representational. It's not always pretty, but it's easily understood.

Lesser sports have less evocative soundtracks. Basketball, for instance, is a sport for masochists, at least when it's played indoors. Maybe the game itself isn't to blame; maybe the problem is chemical -- the varnished floor, the rubber soles, some toxic combination of polyurethane and polypropylene and friction. But if you just can't get enough high-pitched

squealing, take your fingernails off that chalkboard, son, and put on your Nikes: Every point on the scoreboard is a nail through your tympanic membrane, guaranteed. And it's a high-scoring game.

(I say this even though, as we all know, basketball was invented in Canada, where it was originally played with peach baskets, leather moccasins, and the heads of our vanquished enemies.)

Which brings us to NFL football, the American id, the institutional footlocker in which a nation's suppressed homoeroticism is hoarded up and sealed away. The most basic sound of the game is the sound of men in intimate contact, not combat, exactly, but a deeply tensioned physical engagement; the sound of grunting and heavy breathing carefully embroidered with emblems of conventional masculinity: hypereroticized cheerleaders, random gestures of flag-waving patriotism, drunken vomiting, and the occasional celebratory overflight of stealth fighters or predator drones. Little wonder, then, that the Superbowl duet between Janet Jackson and Jason Timberlake caused such an uproar. The problem, I suspect, wasn't the momentary exposure of a breast, to which so much press time was devoted. As interesting as it was to watch newscasters struggle to choose between euphemisms -- the jaunty, irreverent "boob," the clinically distanced "mammary gland," the dismissive "knocker," the grim and Protestant "chest area" -- what was more deeply troubling was the threatened intrusion of contemporary sexual images and sounds, improperly framed and sanitized, into the sacred stands and locker rooms of Reliant Stadium. There's no telling where this could lead, but one imagines a calamitous collapse of reassuring archetypes into the murky floodwaters of postmodern cultural chaos: the Green Bay Packers vs. the New York Metrosexuals, a half-time tribute to Ellen Degeneres, color commentary by Al Franken. Clearly, a line had to be drawn.

None of this explains the sport of curling.



Even the sounds associated with curling -- something like the end-of-shift cleanup at a tuna packing factory -- are enigmatic. I have nothing to say about curling except to observe that, like the equally gnomic sport of golf, it originated in Scotland. The Scots, apparently, have embarked on some avant-garde project to push the frontiers of what can plausibly be called a "sport" -- they are to athletics what Frank Gehry is to architecture, what James Joyce is to English literature, and what Pablo Picasso is to the concept of bilateral symmetry.

## **5. This just in.**

Citing an unstable political climate, proven stockpiles of chemical and nuclear weapons, a rigidly government-controlled media, and the need to confront emerging threats in a timely fashion, President George Bush announced today that the United States has launched a full-scale invasion of the United States.

## **6. If the universe seems strange, maybe it is.**

There was a brief time in the sixties and seventies when it looked like the universe wasn't living up to our sfnal expectations. That was when the first Mariner and Viking images of Mars showed what looked like a cratered, patently lifeless planet; when the moon landings began to seem repetitious and finally ended altogether; when the entire much-elaborated SF construction of the solar system as a kind of South Pacific in the sky, which we would one day visit in our spacefaring equivalent of tramp steamers, playing Somerset Maugham to the rock people or the cockroach people, became finally and completely insupportable.

So we turned inward and read Malzberg and Russ for realism or Tolkein and his imitators for romance. Or we wrote fantasy that felt like SF, or SF that felt like fantasy. Or we ignored the solar system and focused on the stars, which were so far away that our rock people, now slightly shopworn, could be safely relocated, like the natives of Bikini Atoll back when it was considered okay to blow up tropical islands with thermonuclear weapons. We carried on, in other

words. But something important had happened even if we tried to ignore it. One of our central metaphors had been gutted. We had been proved wrong. The universe was, in at least one respect, less interesting, disappointingly less strange, than we had believed it to be. Or so it seemed.

Lately it begins to look like we've been vindicated.

You only have to look around for evidence, but I'll cite one obvious example: Opportunity, the second of the two rovers currently operating on Mars. I'm assuming most of you heard the big news last month, the confirmation that Opportunity had landed in what scientists believe to be the dry bed of an ancient, acidic sea. That bare fact alone is deeply exciting, and there's more to come -- just last week the European Mars orbiter detected traces of methane in the atmosphere, a possible signature of remnant life. Down under the surface, down where it's dark and icy, something might be growing.

I think we've been vindicated. I think we're entitled to say, "I told you so." When I was ten years old I imbibed from science fiction the archetypal image of the dry Martian oceans, lonely and vast and mysterious. Now I'm fifty years old, and I've seen those empty Martian seas. They stretch away to a hazy horizon under a tangerine-colored sky, and they're covered with millions of tiny spherules of hematite, and they are just about exactly as windswept, lonely, vast and mysterious as we ever imagined them to be.

In other words, we nailed it.

We nailed it, ladies and gentlemen, it because we knew.

Let me be absolutely clear about this. I don't mean that we predicted what Opportunity found on Mars. Science fiction isn't about making predictions. What's been vindicated here is our intuition about the strangeness of the universe.

I'm not just talking about space travel. Look at cosmology. Take a gander at string theory, where people talk routinely about multiple dimensions. Consider the rapidly-expanding inventory of known extrasolar planets. Think about the recent Hubble images of nascent, crudely-formed galaxies nearly as old as the universe itself. Ponder the biological possibility that, if there is bacterial life on Mars, we might be related to it, even descended from it. It all begins to look non-coincidental. What does it mean, I wonder, that the human brain, presumably designed by evolution to make sense of its environment in order to exploit it more effectively, experiences the universe as increasingly strange the more we comprehend it? Think about that: the Newtonian worldview was displaced by the much less intuitive Einsteinian worldview, which is being displaced in turn by the Lewis Carroll world of strings, branes, and multiple dimensions. Each set of ideas explains the world more completely than the previous, but each one appears radically more peculiar, more uncanny. The only conclusion I can draw is that world really is in some profound sense strange. Step outside of your daily existence, people, even for a minute, and you're in deepest Oz. Which means you've always been there. You're there now.

Aldous Huxley wrote a Utopian novel called *Island*, which some of you may have read. One of the features of his Utopia was that the island's parrots had all been trained to say "Here and now!" "Here and now," they would screech, reminding any Utopian backsliders to focus on the moment.

In real life, I suspect this would only result in a dramatic spike in the sales of shotguns; but it occurred to me that science fiction writers are doing something similar, that our most fundamental purpose is to every once in a while tap you on the shoulder and say, "Look how absolutely fuckin' strange the world is!" If that basic intuition is wrong, then we might as well have been writing cookbooks or greeting card copy. But it isn't wrong. And I think that's good news for science fiction as a viable, relevant

literature, no matter what happens in the publishing industry over the next few years.

### **7. It's always a good idea to flatter your audience.**

If the people in this room ruled the world, wouldn't it be a much better place than it is right now? Because, damn, we're smart! And finally,

### **8. Brevity is the soul of wit.**

Thank you.

*- Wilson 2007*





# VASTER THAN EMPIRES

Nineteen seventy-five.

“Hello,” he called, walking across the room to where the ex-tee was sizing up a bowl of pretzels. “Not busy, are you? I noticed you’re one of the... is it *Kee-ol-ah*? The one who’s a science fiction fan? I’ve been wanting to talk to you a long time, but you don’t seem to be at many cons.”

“I thought maybe you were going to say, ‘I noticed your name tag,’ she said. Then the blue-and-white furred humanoid laughed. “As Kjolā go – and that should be more like *Kyoh-lah* – I attend a lot of conventions. But you’re right, insofar as fans go, I don’t go to many. Call me Saara. And you are?”

“Gene Avissen. I was just elected president of the STF-3F this year.”

He was a faded, mousy-looking fellow with an indifferent moustache and no more presence than a garden salad at the bottom of a steakhouse menu.

“Stuff three eff?” She repeated, questioningly.

“You know about the Scienti-fiction Fantasy Fan Federation?”

“Now you mention it, I have heard of the ‘Stuff three eff,’ She admitted. “Taral has mentioned it a few times that I recall. It’s something along the lines of that fringe group -- the Cosmic Center -- isn’t it?”

“No, nothing like that!” Avissen protested “The Cosmic Center was way back in the ‘40’s, when fandom was pretty naïve. Even then, the founder, Clive Duggles, was way off the beam trying to organize fans along his crank theories. He was probably not all there, either. The STF-3F isn’t anything at all like that!”

“Well,” said Saara, realizing she had gotten herself into an obligation to listen to a man with a *message*, “why don’t we sit and talk about it.” She

waved to a couple of vacant seats near the buffet table. "I don't think we'll be in anybody's way if we're not in the middle of the room. You wouldn't mind waiting a moment while I grab a can of Green Apple cola? Want one too?"

He nodded and said, "just a Coke". Saara insinuated herself into the crowd.

Saara Mar was about to have her 283<sup>rd</sup>. carbonated beverage, one of the many counters and watchers in her mind whispered. Her subconscious filed it automatically in case she ever wanted to know. (The first had been on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. 1970, at 4:21 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, ten days after discovering the goofy planet called Earth.) Her memory told her how it tasted, how cool and wet the perspiring can had been, at what angle the tab pointed before pulling, the PH of the drink, the temperature that day and the cloud patterns overhead, the warmth of the asphalt, and a thousand other things to which she paid no conscious attention but of which she was always aware on some level. On *this* level, in the here and now, she was aware of the half-melted ice in the bathtub as she fished for parti-coloured cans submerged in it. A cola can came out with a rattle like chain mail. It wasn't Coke, but it was all there was. Her blue hand dipped into the ice again for a second can, the short fur of her hand and wrist wet and plastered down.

Saara wouldn't have attended this *CanAmCon*, but Taral was going and had talked her into it. It was the first year the *Pongs* were going to be awarded, and having an ex-tee present would make the event a more cosmopolitan-- if not actually cosmic--occasion. Saara didn't know as much about fandom in 1975 as she would later, so she was initially reluctant. To change her mind required a promise to introduce her to Bub Drucker himself.

"I may not know who he is," she'd said, "but I've heard the name forty-one times, and if you think I should meet him, okay, I'm game."

The cans dripped on the floor. Cans always drip on the floor. The coke wasn't even a real Coke but some cheap grocery-special house brand that concons always buy to save money, and that tastes like carbonated instant iced tea. The spongy carpet in the suite soaked up the free-falling drops and felt like tiny cold measles through the fur of her bare feet, and that was good.

"So tell me about Stuff Three Eff," she said to the newly elected president, tucking her legs beneath her in a half lotus.

"It's been around for some time, Saara."--Avissen made her name sound like "serra"--"from at least the early 1940's I think, and it's sponsored a lot of worthy projects. Like, um, the tape bureau that saves the voices and opinions of old fans for the future. We keep an up-to-date fan directory for all members, complete with birthdays. We published the *Encyclopaedia Fanica* back in the '50's, and republish it from time to time. One of these days we plan to update it, too. We have a *WelComecom* that helps neos adjust to fandom. A Manuscript Bureau... the, uh... Birthday Bureau, and a... pseudonym cross-index... a lot of things like that. The purpose of the STF-3F is to help fans communicate, to unify fandom in an international organization, and also to introduce newcomers to fandom. We publish a monthly organ, *Laserbeam*, that keeps all our members up to date on bureaus and projects. It tells them about upcoming conventions in their area, clubs the can join--oh, and explains how to participate in other fanzines. Our WelCome Committee starts them off by offering them a guideline to fanac. We urge them to become involved in our activities, and begin writing to each other. Volunteers in our Feedback Bureau guarantee a loc to every first issue they hear about, issue unread!"

"It's to usher people into fandom the right way, then?" said Saara. "How do you find out about the Stuff Whatever, though, if you're not already in fandom, reading fanzines, writing locs... I'm a 'bonafide fakefan,' according to

Taral, and I'd effectively never heard of Stuff Three Eff to this moment. How would someone new ever find you?"

"Wellll... " Avissen drawled the word, fighting for time to collect his thoughts. "We leave flyers at conventions – there's a pile right now on the registration table in the lobby, for instance, and in the dealers' room too. We also pick new names out of fanzines that are sent to our Central Archive. We write to any new clubs we hear of as well. We reach hundreds of neofans every year with the STF-3F, giving them indispensable help. We do a *lot* of good."

*Taral?* Saara reached out with her mind. He was in the dealer's room dickering over some Gnostic Press Asimovs. *Are you listening, Taral?*

*I am now. That STF-3F nonsense is distracting me from negotiating a good price for a copy of Eternity's End.*

*What do you know about this? This guy Avissen isn't telling me much of anything that I can get a grip on,* thought Saara.

*Gene Avissen? Big talk and grand notions, but little substance. Personality-wise, he's kind of a wet blanket. Forced to listen through to the end of one of his pitches, you 'll probably lose interest in fandom entirely, maybe even shortly after he tells you his name. Wait a sec...*

Taral paid the dealer more than he wanted to for the book.

*The STF-3F was the brainchild of a very misguided Damian Knave in 1940. He almost immediately had second thoughts, but by that time it was too late. A fan named Arthur Whittier picked up on the idea, wrote a constitution, and before you could say "Scientifiction" there it was. Knave seemed predestined to create Frankenstein's Monsters. He founded SFWU, the Science Fiction Writer's Union, as well... and lived to regret it.*

*But unlike SFWU, the STF-3F was always pretty much a joke. It did accomplish a few worthwhile things in its time, in the context of the time. It has a truly Byzantine talent for bureaucracy though. If memory serves right, Harry*

*Warren says in "All Our Tomorrows" something like: "the first ominous hint of an enormous bureaucracy, and wasted motion in the form of useless rote action...." and other such endearments. Very inspiring. And never mind who Harry Warren Jr. is--There's pizza cheese dripping on my new books!*

Saara returned her attention to the outside world-- specifically to Gene Avissen.

"Isn't it a little late to be introducing new fans to fandom when they're already publishing their first fanzine, or they're at a con?" Saara inquired mildly, and slugged back a jolt of her cola.

"They still need help, Saara!" Avissen said earnestly. "If you were a neo with a first issue, where would you go to get material for your second issue? Who would you send your first issue to? We give neos the names and addresses of our membership to send their zines to for feedback. As well, they can ask for articles from our Contributions Bureau. We're trying to set up an artists' pool too, so the new fanzine editor can get illos from us. We even have a letter-writers' group called the Bull Pens, who guarantee egoboo-- " Avissen paused only long enough to take a breath and a slug of his own cola.

"Rotten stuff, isn't it?" Saara commented.

"Our contributions?!?" He looked horrified.

"No, no, the cola."

"It's the same stuff I get at home." he said defensively. "Cheaper than Coke or Pepsi, and just as good." He burped defiantly.

"The problem, as I see it," persisted Saara, "is still that people have to find out about the Stuff Three Eff before you're any help. And once in fandom, a neo can probably find all the help they need from anybody as easily as from your club-thing. Anyway, would it be much help to have a mailing list for your fanzine that



consisted only of other neos? That's not really getting *into* fandom, is it?"

"That's the point of getting everyone involved!" Avisson trumpeted, waving his arms all-inclusively "That's why I wanted to talk with you, Saara. We *need* seasoned fans to be in the thick of it, to join our bureaus, to lend a hand to newcomers! We need popular fannish writers to contribute to our Manuscript Bureau. I like the few things you've written, for example. And artists. Maybe you could urge Taral to give something to our new artists' pool. He's a pretty fair fanartist... I guess."

*Taral does **not** want to contribute to their welfare scheme for fan art, even if that isn't fair of me.*

*Just eat your pizza.*

*It's soaking into my books!*

*Eat the books, then.*

*Klingon-lover!*

If Saara's momentary inattention showed at all, Avissen was too caught up in the passion of his cause to notice. "We need people to run the bureaus, too! The whole problem from the beginning has been to get fans who can do things to join the STF-3F, not just those who want help! We haven't really been able to do much all these years because so few active fans belong. Even those who joined the STF-3F when they were new! They join, they learn the ropes, they quit! It's so unfair!"

"Um... "

"One of the things I ran for president to do was revitalize the organization!" Arvisson orated. "To start a drive for more members from fandom! To get the top names to provide fanac for everyone! They *owe* us!"

"Ummmmmm..." Saara was not often speechless, but her subconscious counters and watchers recorded it was an entire three seconds before she replied.

"And I, as a fan of some sort, fit into your plans *how*?"

Avissen drew himself up, having delivered what he believed was the hooker, and shifted the tempo of his patter according to a formula he evidently believed guaranteed successful salesmanship. Passion first, now the Personal Touch-- and an appeal to principle (You Don't Want to Let Down the Cause, Do You?)

He began, "It would really impress the newly-joined if we could show we had members like you. It would prove we offered something to everyone, to experienced fans and not just neos. That we work hard to provide access to all sorts of fanac, not just the lowest common denominator. That we take seriously our responsibility to see that fans mix instead of grouping in little cliquish circles. And-- well, if we have someone like you in the organization, fans will want to join so they can meet Saara Mar, a real extraterrestrial."

*He only wants you for your body, see!*

*When have **you** not been interested in my body? The only thing I've seen you more aroused by has extra-cheese and pepperoni on it.*

*Are you making fun of my books again? Pizza sauce all over a first edition Asimov is no laughing matter. I'll have to buy another.*

*First edition?*

*No. Slice.*

Saara pushed the can up against her nose, draining the last of the wretched beverage. Making a grimace, she contemplated the bare spot her nose had wiped in the condensation. It least it had been cold. Avissen was talking again, but Saara was resigned to it.

"You wrote an article on Earth pop music that appeared in a fanzine called Eacen."

"I know. I publish Eacen. Two issues for the moment."

"I wondered if you would write more like that for the Manuscript Bureau?"

*Now how did he see that? thought Saara. I don't remember sending copies of Eacen to anyone called Avissen or to anything called STF-3F?*

"I'm flattered you liked the article, but you know I don't do much fan writing or pubbing. I only do it because Taral twists my arm to write for his zine, then procrastinates so long I publish myself. It has a rather short mailing list..." She ended the sentence on a note of inquiry.

The only answer she got was, "Taral publishes a fanzine?"

*Chilw! Well, logically he read someone else's copy. I sense you suspect Earl Brandon Brown, who leaves all the old zines he's read in boxes in con suites, who was on my last issue's mailing list. Right?*

*Right. It's almost like you read my mind >snicker<.*

*It was easy. It was written in block letters at a second-grade level.*

Saara shifted her attention back to Avissen. "So does the Stuff Three Eff have a fanzine of its own to publish contributions, or are they only for neos to use, first come first served?"

"Well, first of all, it really isn't pronounced 'Stuff', but 'Stef'. It sounds better. 'Stuff' sounds, er, sort of obscene."

"You haven't exactly been getting 'Saara' right either, or 'Taral', but let it pass."

"The *Stef Three Eff*, doesn't publish the material submitted to the Manuscript Bureau. Material to be published by the monthly newsletter, Lightbeam, has to be submitted to a different bureau, the Official Publications Bureau, whose editor isn't allowed to access the Manuscript Bureau unless he announces first that he intends to publish a personal fanzine not officially sponsored by the STF-3F.

"The material held by the Manuscript Bureau is only for members who send a written request for material to the proper officer of the club. People who contribute articles or columns also send their material to the Manuscript Bureau, though not to the officer's personal address. Submissions and requests should be sent to STF-3F's official PO Box, of course."

"Of course?"

"The officer in charge of the Manuscript Bureau publishes a list of available material in Lightbeam every month. It's listed by topic and length, but the author is kept anonymous. Can't have people cherry-picking articles only by Drucker or Willitz, after all. Nobody would want the rest. Instead, the head of the Manuscript Bureau selects a piece that suits the request."

Avissen slowed a bit in his spiel. He was trying not to stare at Saara, who with her slim, delicate fingers, was absentmindedly peeling strips of aluminum from the empty can in her hand. It was taking on the appearance of a tinfoil daffodil.

"Er, well," he stuttered, "I was saying... uh... that way the material is shared fairly. But we never have enough contributors. For some reason, the demand for material is always greater than the supply."

Saara crumpled the metal flower into a golf ball. "Look, Gene. Suppose I'm a real fan and not just a fringe fan, and I write fan articles all the time. Now let's pretend I send one to the STF-3F. It might be published by anyone, probably by no one I know, in any sort of badly produced fanzine with other material that's totally amateurish. I won't know when it will appear-- it could be years later-- and I might never know what happened to it at all. I can't ask whoever has it, because I don't know who the STF-3C gave it to. Where's the satisfaction in that? The egoboo? If fanac is for fun, why should anyone do it when you make it *not* fun?"

*Don't forget fan art!*

*I'm getting to it.*

"Artwork too. Art can be effectively destroyed by bad repro. The artist wants to know if he'll get the originals back. And when, and in what condition? But *he* doesn't know either.

"Most fans write... and draw... mainly for their own pleasure, or to please their friends. So I'm not surprised the supply doesn't meet your demands as a sort of central clearing house."

She exploded a short laugh, then casually flicked the metal golf ball--that had been a tinfoil daffodil-- that was formerly a cola can-- into a waste basket at the other end of the con suite. (It narrowly missed Moss Fetter's right ear as it flew by the cheese platter, but her aim was perfect.)

"I don't mean that the only motives for fanac are selfish ones," she added. "But if you look at it honestly, if you're an altruist you join Greenpeace, not fandom. In fandom you help your friends, but you're under no obligation to help anyone unless you get pleasure from it. The STF-3F seems fiendishly designed to remove as much pleasure or ego or choice from fanac as it possibly can."

"I like working for the STF-3F. And you don't have to do much for us. Just a little from everybody. *But nobody will do anything*" he cried. Seeing that his salesmanship had apparently failed to snag a customer, he was reduced to begging-- and indignant, too, that important fans cared too little for the plight of helpless newcomers.

"Apparently not many people share your concerns," said Saara, "or the *Stuff-Three Eff* would be more popular than it seems to be. Your whole approach is wrong. You don't go to people for something you want done, demanding, "I need help -- give it to me if you're a good person." You offer nothing in return, and seem oblivious to the fact that

fandom is a volunteer recreation. Incentive is the basic drive of anyone, even if it's the sense of doing a duty. But fandom isn't a duty, it's a goddamn hobby!" (*Who said that anyway?*)

*Somebody dead, no doubt.*

*Quiet, you.*

"Your goals are laudable, in a way," she added more kindly. "I'm not saying you can't enjoy giving a helping hand. But if you want others to feel the way you do about it, I think you're going to have to make the STF-3F fun to belong to, a benefit somehow to everyone, not just the newbie. And maybe more efficient. From your description, it seems over-complicated. Perhaps then more fans will want to belong. Or maybe not. That's how hobbies are... unlike a job. As it is, you're trying to make me feel as though I owed people my time and effort just because I'm a fan and have knowledge or ability that you want shared. The answer is no."

"Nobody says you *have* to, of course," he wheedled. "But you *should*. It would help, and be hardly any trouble."

"All beside the point," she sighed. "What you mean, even if you don't say it, is that I'm not a nice person if I don't share your views about this."

Avissen's next words were caught in mid-launch. He self-consciously lowered his voice to its original colourlessness. "You remind me of a book I once read-- read part of, anyway. Ever hear of Ayn Rand?"

"Yes. A pedantic writer obsessed with autocracy and wealth, as I recall. There's a little sense in her books if you don't think too deeply about them. I don't recommend the books unless you're already sympathetic with her ideas and have a very materialistic view of society. It will only seem to justify what you already believe. "

"I hope all you aliens aren't as hard-hearted as Rand." The words were spoken with conviction that all the inDalmirinla obviously *were* as hard hearted as that.

"Yes and no," Saara said, frowning, and poking a fallen potato chip with her toe. "If you were to actually *need* my help, say you were drowning or injured, I would certainly not be a good person if I ignored it. But who are you to judge who needs my help, when, and how? We have to make those decisions for ourselves. As civilizations advance, people more and more make the right decisions. Ourselves. Co-operation can't be forced on free people. When it's forced, there's the danger of disobedience, and to prevent disobedience there has to be punishment, and wouldn't punishing people for refusing to write for a fanzine be pretty silly? One easy test is to ask yourself whether the punishment outweighs the crime. If it does, then there's something seriously wrong with your thinking." She stared meaningfully into Avissen's eyes.

It was an effective gesture. Avissen saw himself in Saara's silvery irises, and he looked very small, and distorted. "This is why Humankind isn't allowed to go to the stars, you know..."

"But all we need..." he started again.

Saara laughed so loudly, he didn't complete his sentence. "Here we go again!" she sputtered.

Avissen followed her glance upward.

"To the room party upstairs?" he suggested in confusion.

"No, no..." Saara cut him off. She was thinking she would like to be home now, not on this world of irrational people with only one sun. "We were only talking about the STF-3F, weren't we, not Civilization or civilizations. I'm glad you enjoy helping neos in fandom so much. Remember what I had to say about

incentive, though. If enjoying yourself when you help someone is wrong, I don't know how making it a chore to help someone can be right."

"Huh?"

"Sleep on it."

Avissen shrank away, unsatisfied and deeply fearful that it was his own weakness that had lost the day.

*Taral, they are misguided, but should I be encouraged that so many mean well?*

*I don't know. Sometimes the ones who mean well are the ones I worry about most. But I suppose so...*

Saara caught Avissen at the door, just before he left. "Do keep trying," she said, "you may be right that whatever you're doing with the STF-3F is worthwhile. Your opinion is the only one that matters, of course. But I have a secret for you too. Lean close."

A part of Saara's mind noticed his shiver. The fur of her lips must tickle his ear. "Out there is the universe. But this is only fandom."

*Only indeed, thought Taral at her, I would probably have wasted my life in fandom if you hadn't picked me out of my limited horizon and showed me there was much, much, **much** more.*

Saara moved through the crowd in the con suite toward a man whose name tag she thought read "Bub Drucker".

*Yes, Taral, there was **pizza**, wasn't there?*

*And, **Kahlua**!*

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**Aug 1978/revised 2007 & 2010**

*For better or worse I've decided to rescue old fan writing of mine from its pre-digital state, and commit it to word docs. One of the first choices*



was this oddball piece of fan fiction with quasi-references to fan history. I ran it in a short print run handout with the idiotic name *Delta Pussy*. (A joke somebody made on my first genzine, *Delta Psi*.) I gave copies to people I knew at cons, I think, but even so the short stack of them was still largely untouched until a few years ago when I threw most of them out. So "Vaster Than Empires" – a new title – cannot have been widely read. In typing it into Word Doc I started making small changes only, but gradually it grew necessary to rewrite "Vaster" more and more radically. I think it's about 75% the original article.

But I still can't imagine what anyone will think of it..

"Chilw" is a bit of Siroihin, the chief language spoken by Saara, and means something like "rats" or "damn". And "inDalmirinla" is the name for the loose federation of planets and species that Saara's people belong to. The affix "in" signifies belonging to, and "la" a community or dwelling place. It's usually okay to just say "Dalmirin" in English though. It means only "civilization", in the way so many native groups call themselves "the people". To Saara, the group of sentient species she knows are civilization -- we don't belong yet, and don't seem likely to measure up.

At one point Saara says, "We were only talking about the STF-3F, weren't we, not Civilization or civilizations." It's said as a sort of play on words. In the original 1975 version I quoted from a song on Sgt. Peppers, where George Harrison sings "We were talking...." but decided it was a stupid joke and got in the way of the flow of ideas. So I cut it. A good deal of the philosophy later on has been tightened up from the original, and the focus shifted slightly away from showing Saara quite as hard nosed as I portrayed her nearly 30 years ago.

(Thirty years! Oh GOD!!! Where have I wasted so much of my life!)

\*Ahem\*

The people named in this piece are all real, but their names modified to lightly disguise their identity. Anyone who really knows fandom should probably figure out who's who. Bub Drucker is Bob Tucker, for instance, and Moss Fetter is Moshe Feder. I wasn't

sure if I should do it this way or go for real names. I might yet revert to the real.

My proof reading facetiously asks,

Jeeze, how does that doof Taral rate a cute furry babe like her?

The rumour is that after observing Earth for a few days from orbit, following it's "discovery", she decided to land just outside Toronto. Her choice was dictated by desiring to avoid appearing to side with any major power, yet take advantage of being in a country speaking English, the most widely spoken language on the planet. Canada was also a socially civilized place without major conflicts and not engaged in any hostilities with any other country. Australia or New Zealand might have done as well, except for their relative isolation. And as Toronto was the largest city in Canada, it was her choice. As it happened, the empty field her ship set down on wasn't far from where I was living in 1970, and while others quickly on the scene shied away, I stupidly went right up to the ship and had the honour of being the first human to meet the extraterrestrial. After that it was mainly government big shots, military personal, and scientific functionaries who took up her time, until she rebelled and looked up the first normal person she met. From her point of view, the big shots and soldiers were neither impressive nor interesting.... a total surprise to them of course. At least that's the rumour I heard.

It's not true? Chilw!

Gaaltlahaleen, (So long and well met), Taral.

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Over the decades there have been many children's shows that could claim to be the best ever produced for television: The Sherry Lewis Show. Captain Kangaroo. Sesame Street. But ask me, and I would say it was Fraggile Rock – no contest.

I watched my first episode sometime in the 1980s. I think production may have recently ended and what I saw were re-runs, and out of order. They caught my attention and held it, but I didn't become a fan right away. That came later.

The show grew on me, though. Though not all the songs were chart-toppers, now and then one was such pure gold that I found I fell in love with it. The peculiar thing about them was that the winsome, comic voices were as much a part of the songs as the words. "Sail Away" or "Come and Follow Me" would mean nothing if sung by a well-known entertainer instead of the character it was meant for. Think of "It's Not Easy Being Green" performed by Michael Jackson instead of Kermit the Frog. It would be just stupid.

Fraggle Rock is an underground world, with openings to ours in unexpected places. One of them is a hole in the wall of a shed used by an elderly tinkerer named "Doc" and his dog, "Sprocket." Doc has no idea the hole leads anywhere, or that anyone lives beyond it, but Sprocket is quick to catch on. Being a dog, however, he is frustrated by his inability to tell his master.

The world of Fraggile Rock is a limitless labyrinth of colourful caverns, filled with natural wonders such as singing rocks, mesmerizing plants and strange monsters. While on the whole it is benign, there are dangers too. The Fraggles are only one of



the intelligent creatures who live in the Rock. About knee-high to a "silly creature" -- which is what they call us -- Fraggles live a life that is mainly adventure, play and music. They have few material possessions and, usually, fewer worries. When hungry they can raid the Gorg garden for radishes or eat Doozer sticks.

Doozers are even smaller than Fraggles. Where Fraggles play, Doozers are driven by a passion for work, and fill Fraggile Rock's many caverns with intricate constructions built with crystal "sticks." They serve no purpose, and the Doozers are only too happy when some carefree Fraggile breaks

apart a bridge or tower and eats the pieces. That gives Doozers the opportunity to build something new in its place.

Gorgs are the opposite of both Fraggles and Doozers. They neither play nor work, but put on airs about their importance and responsibilities. Also unlike the other creatures, Gorgs are huge. They are much larger even than "silly creatures." They also live outside the Rock, as we do, but the Gorg world seems to belong to the Gorgs' alone.

The Fraggles include Gobo – an amiable leader, often beset by doubts, and Wembley – who “wembles” in constant indecision. Gobo and Wembley share a cave. Red is the assertive, outgoing sort, if she must say so herself. Boober is dutiful, depressed, and dedicated to his laundry duties. And Mokey is a New Age dreamer, mystic, artist, and Red’s best friend.

Among the many Doozers is Cotterpin, the only one of her kind who likes to pal around with Fraggles, and sometimes even skip work.

There are only three Gorgs in their whole world: Paw, who is King; Maw, who is Queen; and Junior, who is heir to the throne and general drudge around the castle – which, truth to be told, is little more than a broken-down cottage with a token tower. Generations of Gorgs have lived in and ruled over this world, their kingdom, guarding their radish patch against thieving Fraggles.

They have no idea that their universe is also inhabited by the wisest and most compassionate being in all worlds – Marjory the talking trash heap.

There were any number of other characters who appeared in only a single episode, or in at most a handful -- Cantus the Minstrel was Jim Henson himself. There was also the World's Oldest Fraggles, Sidebottom (Boober's fun-loving *side*, that he always kept *down*); a mean-spirited genie; a monster that looked exactly like whatever you thought it should look like; a rock that swallowed anyone who approached too near; Poison Cacklers; an Invisible Gargoyle; Large Marvin; singing cactuses that hypnotize; toe-ticklers; Convincing John; Uncle Traveling Matt and scores more colourful characters and preposterous creatures.

What impressed me most about Fraggles Rock was not only its almost endless inventiveness and the often extremely moving songs, but the sheer adult profundity of some of the stories.

In one rather early episode, Red and Boober were trapped by a cave-in. They had no idea if their friends knew where they were or if they would be rescued, and realized that they faced death. (This is a *kid's show*, remember!) Boober, who was the worry-wart, turned out to be best prepared for death if it should come. Red, who lived entirely in the moment, had never given a thought to death. In an entirely believable reversal of roles, it was Boober who consoled Red. Considering that Fraggles are puppets, made of foam and terrycloth, their body language is exquisite. The way Boober compulsively stroked the rocks imprisoning them spoke volumes about his fear, showing it barely under control.

In another episode from the final season, Wembley was lost and hurt from a

rockslide. He woke up to find himself in the care of the Mudbunny named Mudwell, who had rescued him. They hit it off well, discovering many things in common. Just as they became fast friends, though, the Mudbunny turned nasty and threw the surprised Wembley out of his cave. Wembley had no idea what caused this change in his new friend, but finally worked up the courage to go back in search of understanding.

The Mudbunny is a strange creature, it seems. He dares not have friends, because he is close to the time when his kind has to die – and he dies literally as Wembley watches. The weakest of Fraggles learns not only to cope with his loss, but also realizes that he has gained.



It was more than twenty years ago that I saw the final episode of Fraggles Rock. Unusual among television programs, Fraggles Rock had a deliberate ending. In it, Doc at last began to suspect Sprocket was right, and there was something living beyond the hole in his wall. But when his "scientific" experiments were unable to prove anything, his doubts returned.

Down in Fraggles Rock, Gobo had to find four "honks" – symbolic sounds – before an important musical celebration could begin. The stone Great Fraggles Horn was obviously the first. For the second, Junior Gorg gave Gobo the "royal sax." From the Doozers, he borrowed a tool that makes a sound when blown through. But Gobo could not think of what the fourth "honk" could be, and it seemed as though the celebration was doomed. Cantus the Minstrel gave Gobo a last chance, and some advice in uncharacteristically simple words.

With his courage renewed, Gobo decided he must seek the fourth "honk" among the "silly creatures." Venturing farther into "outer space" than he ever had before, he met Doc face to face for the first time.

But even face to face, the "silly creature" was completely unable to see the Fraggles. Without the final "honk," Gobo had failed. The celebration would have to be cancelled and all the other Fraggles would be disappointed.

Determined to have another try, he went back to "outer space" and discovered Doc talking on the telephone. The "silly creature" had gotten a call from his lifelong friend and next-door neighbor, Ned. Ned's health was poor, and he would have to move from the coast to somewhere where the climate was warm and dry. Doc agreed understandingly that it was the only thing Ned could do. But once he hung up, Doc let himself pour his feelings out. Believing himself alone, he asked what he would do when his only friend was far away and he might never see him again. Unknown to Doc, Gobo was listening in the dark and heard every word. No longer mindful of



his own problem, Gobo left the safety of his hole, took Doc's hand and consoled him.

Only then, when Gobo reached out and touched him, was Doc finally able to see the Fraggles.

Just the two of them in the darkened workshop was a tremendously moving image. The actor, who had never, as far as I know, played a serious role before, gave a powerful performance.

But the discovery of the Fraggles was not actually the final episode, I was surprised to learn. There was one more that I had never seen – until literally the other day.

Although it would mean abandoning the most wonderful discovery he had ever made, Doc decided he too would move away, to be with his friend, Ned. But he tried to persuade Gobo to come with him. Deeply unsettled, the Fraggles fled to his hole and disappeared. Much as Gobo was tempted to explore "outer space," he just couldn't leave the Rock and all his friends behind. Unsure what to do, Gobo eventually went to Marjory, the all-wise trash heap for advice. Should he go with his new friend or stay with his old friends in the Rock? She told him, "Go, young Fraggles," in her outrageously Jewish-grandmother voice, "Go to your friend and tell him that he cannot leave the magic." Gobo did not understand this at all. But he did as Marjory said and returned to "outer space."

Unfortunately, he was too late. Doc was gone. The shed was dark and empty.

Far away, Doc and Sprocket entered their new home for the first time. Nothing had

been moved in yet, but a couple of boxes left by the previous tenants provided a place to sit. One box sat close to the wall opposite, partly hiding a hole. "Isn't it funny," said Doc, "Here we are moved into a new home, and there is a hole in the wall just like the one back in our old work shed. Wouldn't it be funny if it was a Fraggles hole too?" But it wasn't. When he moved the box aside, there was only an empty hole behind it. He pushed the box back where it was and sat down next to Sprocket again.

In Doc's old work shed, Gobo and his friends discovered that Doc had left a tape recording for them. Playing the tape, they heard Doc apologize for trying to talk Gobo into leaving Fraggles Rock. He said he understood that you can't leave your friends. That was why he had moved, because *his* friend, Ned, needed him. Then, he added that if whoever listening wasn't a Fraggles, he should ignore everything he just heard.

On the way back down into the Rock, Gobo noticed something he hadn't seen before. In a dark spot, behind a tangle of pipes and wires, was another tunnel. Suddenly, he understood what Marjory had meant for him to tell Doc.

Far away a box moved, and Gobo stepped out into Doc's new home. Doc *could not* leave the magic, Marjory had said – and he hadn't.

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Fraggles Rock was created by Jim Henson, on a Concorde flight from London to New York. It went on the air a couple of years later, in 1983. Unusually, it was co-produced in Canada, in the US, and in the United Kingdom. I'm proud to say that it

was actually filmed in Toronto. Fraggle Rock was really here in my home town, at least as far as the studio sets can be considered the real Fraggle Rock.

The live-actor sequences were filmed separately, so that each country could have its own. In the UK, the “silly creature” was a lighthouse keeper named “The Captain.” In Germany, he was another inventor, also known as “Doc.” And in France the Fraggle hole opens into a former bakery. The other half-dozen or so countries that broadcast the program shared our Canadian Doc.

The first season of Fraggle Rock came out in a handsomely packaged set of five DVDs, and featured a reproduction of the notebook in which Jim Henson wrote down his ideas for the show. This was followed by the second season, with a facsimile of the booklet – or “bible” – that Henson Associates used to pitch the show to the networks. Then came season three, with a set of production illustrations in a miniature “briefcase.”

Of course, I bought each and every set as it came out.

Then I waited eagerly for season four. And waited... and waited.

But season four never *came* out. I was afraid I would never see those wonderful last episodes ever again!

The injury was made insult when I read on Wikipedia that the entire four seasons *had* in fact been produced as a single, exorbitantly priced box set. Even if I could afford the \$100 to \$125 for the complete Fraggle Rock, I had already bought, and

paid dearly for, the first three seasons! I would have to spend all that money just for season four. It was extortion.

Apparently quite a lot of people shared my thinking, and complained as bitterly as I felt. Late last year, the fourth and final season was released separately, for a modest \$32. I can’t compliment the packaging. It was a only a plastic box with a cardboard slip cover, and there was no bonus, as there had been with the first three sets. But that didn’t matter. Now, finally, I had the complete Fraggle Rock, and over the next couple of nights was able to watch many episodes that I had never seen before. Most important, I was able to see the final episodes again, and re-live Doc’s touching discovery of the wonder that lived behind a humble hole in a wall –

– down in Fraggle Rock.



# Loc'n Colour

Since I have no LoCs, AND AN empty page to fill, I thought I would bring up a deep suspicion that I've had for some time... I suspect that downloading fanzines from Bill Burns' eFanzines.com site has made fandom into lazy fucks. It's too easy to download a file, save it in a folder on the hard drive AND then just forget about it. Nobody knows you downloaded it. In your ANONYMITY it's easy to decide that you have NO obligation to loc the fanzine!

I've asked a number of faneditors, AND for the most part they complain that it's not like the old days, when a reader had to respond if he wanted to get the next ish.

But I have a plan. This issue is a freebie. Next issue I won't post on eFanzines for six months! Loccers will get New Toy 4 by direct e-mail. So Loc!







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