

Troll Story

Once upon a time there was a troll. He lived under a bridge in the traditional troll way. No fancy hotels or condos for this troll, not he. He hadn't had a good meal in a long while -- no one walked across the bridge or rode slow, creaking wagons anymore. Now big metal boxes sped and roared across the bridge at huge speeds, much faster than the troll could move, or even think. The old bridge would shake and groan under the weight of these machines, which the troll had been told actually contained people, just like the old wagons. But they (the people) were out of his reach now, safe in their loud metal boxes. For a long time the troll had lived on small creatures like mice, insects, and eels from the river. He had almost forgotten what human flesh tasted like.

One day he realized it had been quite some time since he had heard the thunderous sound of a metal box crossing the bridge. Several months in fact. He had been sunken in despondency over the unpleasantness of his diet and the lack of diversions (in the form of people-catching and -eating) in his life and had not noticed the new silence. He decided to climb out and have a look.

In the night, after the sun had set and the moon had not yet risen, the troll crawled out of his lair under the bridge and climbed the bank to the railings of the bridge. He peered through rank weeds at the cracked and broken stone. He looked toward either end of the bridge and saw that each end had a barrier consisting of sawhorses painted in black and yellow stripes, and heavy chains. After a few moments of waiting to make sure there was no one there to see (the troll was habitually cautious), he climbed over the railing and went to the nearest barrier. He looked over the chain to see a large wooden sign affixed to a pole in front of it. He read slowly:

NO ENTRY -- BRIDGE CLOSED FOR REPAIRS

Well, that explains it, he thought. He sighed, and shrugged, and scratched the back of his ear. The thought occurred to him, not for the first time, about moving away, finding another bridge, but he was not really willing to do so. He was comfortable, after living so many years in the same place. He could still remember the trouble he had had before he found this place -- villagers sending armed parties after him, having to hide from the sun in garbage dumps and abandoned buildings and what-have-you. Not a place to live and eat in peace until he had found this old bridge. It had been little traveled but enough so that a single troll could get a good meal of manflesh at least once a month. The roads before and after the bridge went through treacherous country, swampy and brigand-filled on one side, overgrown and wolf-ridden on the other. So the occasional disappearance of a traveler was attributed to one of those causes; no one even thought of a troll.

Then the countryside had changed. Men grew more numerous, all of a sudden it seemed, and the swamps were filled in, the brigands run off, the forests cut down and the wolves vanished. The roads were smoothed and widened to give the metal boxes room to go their speeding way. The humans had tried to resurface the bridge with some smelly black stuff -- the troll had been driven almost mad by the smoke and the noise. One night the temptation had proved too great, and the nightwatchman had received a visit from the troll. But the fuss and bother after the disappearance of the nightwatchman (even though no one ever found the bones and other oddments the troll had hidden) had been worse than the construction noise.

Now it looked as if there would be noise and smell once more. Perhaps there would be another lone human left to guard the site during the night. The troll wondered why there wasn't one now. He took a closer look at the sign. (Trolls can see just fine on a

moonless night.) He saw that the sign was faded and stained, and hung crookedly where it was placed. The chain was rusted, and weeds grew up around the legs of the sawhorses, and a vine wreathed over one. He wondered if the bridge had been forgotten.

Even the road looked cracked, worn, and neglected. There were potholes and clumps of grass in cracks in the surface. No human, in or out of a metal box, had come this way in a long, long time.

The troll stood and thought for a bit, then made a decision. The night was still young -- there was plenty of time to go on a little journey. For the first time in years the troll was curious about the outside world, not just as a source of food. He was not sure what exactly he wanted to see. He was just bored, that's all, he told himself. He climbed back down the bank to his lair and went in. There he got his coat and hat, to protect himself from the moonlight later that night. Then he climbed back up the bank. He stepped over the sagging chain and onto the crumbling surface of the road. It went into stand of rank trees. The forest had grown back. In the distance the troll heard a wolf howl, and he smiled.