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### Troll Bridge—A Memoir

When I was a little human girl, I used to walk this particular path in the forest on my way from school to home. This path was an abandoned dirt trail that I regarded as mine and mine only, my personal retreat, for I was its caretaker. It had been overgrown with the creepy-crawly things and weeds, but when I found it, I lived it and loved it and put my little human heart into it. I lined the trail with shiny pebbles that gleamed silver. I packed the loose dirt tighter, and made it rich and damp. I cut the weeds and cleared the leaves. I built my personal shortcuts through the thick walls of bramble, and wove nets of vines high in the leafy green canopy that I loved to walk under.

Let me introduce who I was.

My name was Georgia Louise Hansen. I was a pretty dark-haired girl with deep black eyes. I was quiet and shy; I never smiled except when I was on my path.

Then, one afternoon, I recall, I was walking my path when I felt a gust of wind. It smelled and tasted curiously sweet, not a good, natural sweet, but a sickly, artificial sweet. Then I felt myself spinning insanely, though I was not moving. I cried out, but no one heard me, no one. The trees, the animals, the dirt trail, everything I had loved disappeared from view as my eyes closed, and I fell into a deep slumber.

When I woke up, I was no longer in my forest on my path. I remember how I found myself in that open meadow, sitting on perfectly green grass, so lush and soft it was unbelievable. The sky was a clear bright blue, unlike anything I had ever seen. Light fleecy clouds floated high in the air, teasingly. The sun was yellow, like in a child's painting.

My feet drew me toward a river, its rambunctious laughter echoing in my little ears. Then I saw the bridge.

The bridge was unlike anything I had ever seen before in my short life. I remember how it towered over me so majestically by maybe ten feet, maybe a hundred. And how it sparkled! It was made out of gold and silver and all the precious metals, and was studded with the largest, clearest, most beautiful jewels I had ever seen. The sunlight bounced off of each little gem, making light of all the colors I could ever imagine dance in the water. The bridge was adorned with ornate carvings and ancient runes, the meanings of which I could only dream to decipher. It was absolutely magical, so magical that the air around it trembled and vibrated with raw, unbridled power. There was a small sign erected by its base which read:

*Troll Bridge*

I found the name of this beautiful bridge almost as sinister as the atmosphere it was radiating. But even as I considered turning back and walking home, I felt the strange fascination that all children have for the pretty things. The jewels were the most beautiful stones I had ever seen, more beautiful than the little silver pebbles that lined my path, and I reached out to touch that little sapphire that sat so close to me, but as my fingers neared it, I felt a gentle tingling in my fingertips, and I heard what sounded like a small tinkling laugh, and the bridge seemed to glide away.

As I stood mesmerized by the gleaming sapphire, I did not notice him as he rose out of the crystal clear water. Then, time seemed to stop, and I heard a hollow moan that sent a chill down my spine. Slowly, my gaze shifted from the deep blue of the gem to the foggy gray of the troll's body. He was a tall figure with large, pale yellow eyes. His hair was a tangle of muddy brown, and his clothing was in rags.

"I am the troll of Troll Bridge," he cried. "I am going to eat your life, child. Fear me!"

Every bit of me wanted to tear myself away from the troll and the bridge and run back home and forget everything that had happened, and a strange feeling gripped my heart, one I had never really felt before, that I knew was called fear. However, as I looked at that troll, I not only saw wild hunger and threat, but also sadness, the wretchedness of a creature who had become what he did not wish to be. So instead of running, I found my feet moving me closer to this pitiable troll.

"Mister Troll," I whispered. "But I don't want you to eat my life. I haven't experienced very much yet, and I'm so young and little that my life is probably barely a mouthful. I promise, Mister Troll, I will come back when I am ready."

"Your word on it?" he whispered.

"Yes," I breathed back in reply.

The troll said no more, but despair clouded his yellow eyes. He moaned, and sank back into the deceptively clear water.

I uncrossed my fingers and ran from the bridge. I felt the dizzying sensation of magic, but I kept running and stumbling, only semi-consciously, and then I was in front of my house.

Many years later, I had grown into a quiet, serious young lady, beautiful but with an aloof air. I had, by then, nearly forgotten the incident of the troll. I remember walking down this path again, for the path was my youth, my spirit, and my solace from the world. As I kneeled down and started clearing out the dead leaves and neatening the piles of pebbles I had once so painstakingly arranged, I felt the tingling, the spinning, and everything flew back to me, the troll, the bridge, the promise that I had never really meant to make. And then I ran. It didn't matter

where, what direction. I just ran blindly, trying to escape the magic of the bridge. Everything went black, but I willed my legs to keep moving, keep running...

I woke up, and I was once again in the clearing. It seemed even more beautiful and surreal and sinister than before. The grass was an even brighter green, the sky even bluer, the clouds higher and fleecier, and the sun an even happier shade of yellow. The bridge, even shinier, still sat over that sparkling, gurgling river. Knowing another confrontation was inevitable, I walked over to the river, slowly, dreading what I knew would rise out of the shadow cast by the bridge.

The troll moaned. He, unlike the magic clearing, looked even worse. His gray skin was now not foggy anymore; it had lost color and substance, and now it seemed surreally translucent. His yellow eyes were hollow, reflecting what was left of his tormented soul; his hair and clothes were muddier and more ragged.

"I am the troll of Troll Bridge!" he cried. "I am going to eat your life, girl. Fear me!"

"But, Mister Troll," I protested. "There's still so much I haven't gone through. I am still young. I haven't finished college, or gotten married, or done anything really good with my life. Please, Mister Troll, wait just a little longer. I promise, Mister Troll, I'll come back when I'm ready, so you can eat an even richer life."

"But when you were only a little child, you had already made me such a promise!" he howled in anguish. "I have spared you once already! I cannot do it again, I cannot! Who knows when you will be back?"

"Yes, but Mister Troll," I pleaded. "Just a while longer."

A bead of something clear seemed to roll down his gray cheek, a single tear. Silently, he withdrew into the shadows, looking even more sullen and haggard than ever.

Then, some twenty years later, I was back. I was by myself. Everything had gone wrong in my life. Why? What had happened? Where did that pretty, smart girl go? She was gone. The pain had robbed me of her, the pain of losing first a husband, and then a baby girl, the pain of losing many jobs; the pain of death and failure. Instead, I had become an empty shell of a woman. I was such a wretched, sad creature that I actually felt a bit guilty for offering such an awful life to the troll who had defied his instincts and spared me twice. But, dear reader, please understand, this was my final option. It was the only thing I could do, see?

I remember how I tore through that forest I had once loved, kicking the neat lines of stones and the piles of pine needles into disarray, crashing through the vines and branches until my whole body stung with cuts and bruises. I remember how I had run, and let the tears and the blood stream into the wind, forgotten.

"Mister Troll!" I yelled. "Mister Troll, I am back! I have come so that you may eat my life! I have returned! I have..."

I was ready for that spinning when it came; I welcomed it. I knew I'd find myself in that clearing, which would be so artificial and unbearably beautiful, in front of that sparkling bridge where the troll, my savior, would be waiting.

When I opened my eyes, I was looking up into the troll's face. He had faded a lot, and was now but a flickering dusty shadow. His eyes were paler, now nearly empty, two glassy yellow mirrors that reflected now only an impression of an existence.

"I thought you would never come back," he whispered. "I thought I had lost my prey forever..."

Slowly, he bent his body until he was about my height. I felt a cold wind sweep around me, the same fear I had once felt as a child; I saw a swirl of gray and two orbs of watery yellow.

But in those eyes, I caught a faint glimmer of something. Maybe, just maybe, it was hope. Then, I knew that I had made the right choice.

All went black. I welcomed that blackness, that feeling of nothingness, of peace.

When I looked down, I saw the troll standing where I had been, looking out through what had been my eyes at what was now me.

"Thank you," he whispered silently.

And then, he turned back and walked slowly back through that forest path that I had come from, to what had been my small house, where he would now live forever.

Well, now I stand watch here at Troll Bridge, completely transparent. I always watch as children play in my meadow, as young people walk through my forest on my little path. I leave the pure of heart be, and satisfy my craving for humanity by just watching these humans pass by my bridge.

If you ever pass by my bridge, feel free to do whatever you like. I will not eat your life.

But remember--I will always be watching.