

JACQUIE FRANKS

My OCA studies, together with tutors' and fellow students' input, were invaluable in helping me improve my writing, find my 'voice' and also clarify what I wanted to write. Since completing my degree, I have not stopped writing. I love creating flash fiction and short stories, particularly surreal realism, and tales with a quirky angle.

BA Hons Creative
Writing

The following story was written in 2020 during my Level Two; it was longlisted in the Momaya Press 16th Short Story Competition and later published in their 2020 Anthology under the theme of 'Outsiders'.

BRIDGES

NYTV NEWS

Reports are coming in that Troll, pioneering model and TV personality, is dead at 31 after taking his own life – updates will be available when we know more. (Dave Roberts, Senior Lead)

WASHINGTON POST : Obituary

Troll, whose appearance as the first indie-model on the cover of *L'Homme* in November 2014 was an iconic moment for the We Are All Beautiful movement, died yesterday in Pittsburgh. He was 31. He had lived in Pittsburgh since the age of 19 after migrating from northern Scandinavia where he was born. A spokesman for the Pittsburgh police said Mr Troll's death had been ruled a suicide.

Troll is sometimes referred to as the first indie supermodel. His agent Lynne Lorrimer stated 'He was a great ambassador for indie-people; he was continually trying to change cultural resistance. His ambition was to break down social barriers by encouraging us all to value differences, not to fear them.'

Troll often said his childhood experiences of inequality and prejudice had inspired him to strive to 'make a difference' at a time when there is a renewed stress on multi-racial pride, and cultural perceptions of trolls and all other indie-people are being challenged by the civil rights movement.

EXCLUSIVE – BE SURE TO BUY YOUR 'USA TODAY!' ALL NEXT MONTH AS WE BRING YOU PERSONAL MEMORIES OF TROLL BY THOSE WHO KNEW HIM – ALL IN THEIR OWN WORDS!

Reserve your copy now to make sure you read about Troll's life and times in three parts with cut and keep centre spread including never-seen-before pictures of his early years.

WEEK ONE:

(The following account has been translated by Jon Ek)

TROLL'S MOTHER TELLS OF EARLY DISAPPOINTMENT!

'Yes, he was my son. Born of me and my husband. He didn't behave like my son, though. Give him his due, he did try, I suppose. In the early years, at least.

His father blames me. It was winter. I was close to my due date, and should've stayed at home, safe, under our bridge. I was watching the river as it surged past me and I got restless. Climbed out to meet his father. But I was so bulky, I fell, and bore him outside the bridge. His father reckons that's why he never really bonded with us.

He didn't 'fit', somehow. His height was wrong, for one thing. Too tall. And he hated living under the bridge, kept complaining it was too damp and dark under there. 'Well of course it is – it's supposed to be,' I'd tell him. But he wasn't having any. As soon as he could, he'd wander out into the open. At that age! His father had to tie him to his bed at night.

Next, he wanted to go to school. Started following the schoolkids that crossed the bridge. They called him names, even threw stones at him. But he wouldn't give up. I told him to get used to it. 'People aren't safe. They're scared of us, always have been. Best stay away.' He didn't stop though, as soon as we turned our backs he was off again. 'I want to be like *them*,' he'd cry. How do you tell your child that he'll never be like them?

In the end, the protection people stepped in. Bad luck for us it was, they arrived just after his father had tethered him under the bridge. Protection was horrified. We tried to explain that it was for Troll's own good, but they wouldn't listen. Placed him in a foster home. With humans. And after that, he changed. Worst of all, he started trying to change us. He'd suggest I do something – cleaning, say – the way humans and his precious Norrie, his foster mother, did things. Oh yes, he changed a lot after Norrie got her hands on him.'

FOSTER MOTHER NORRIE – TROLL WAS LIKE A PUPPY!

‘I remember when the Barnevernet – the Child Protection Services – delivered him, he was so shy he couldn’t look at me. But when he eventually did – well, I just melted. He reminded me of a lost puppy. Timid, toffee-brown eyes peeking out from under all that coarse hair... although I soon sorted the hair problem out for him.

He was such a curious little soul. Always asking me questions. ‘Why do you do that?’ ‘What’s this for?’ ‘How do you use it?’ Bless me if he didn’t think central heating was the best invention ever! He never could get enough of the warmth. Every opportunity he had, he’d sit with his back against a radiator. Begged me not to turn the heating off, even in the summer.

I don’t know why he never made any friends at school, he was polite enough. The only difficult time I had with him was when the Barnevernet set up visits with his family. Bless him, he was so eager to see his mum again, he bought her a bouquet with his own pocket money. But he brought it back; all muddy it was. Said his mother had told him off for encouraging mankind’s flower-murders. Soon after, he began making excuses not to go. His parents didn’t like the way he was living. Told him ‘it wasn’t natural to shave his body and he was getting too clever for his own good’. The Barnevernet insisted he kept going – told him he needed to know his roots. And he did go back to live there when he turned eighteen and I couldn’t legally foster him anymore. But I don’t think he was happy. He made the decision to travel to America, soon after.’

WEEK TWO

CLASSMATE KRISTOFER TELLS OF TROLL’S DESPERATION TO LEARN!

‘Not sure what I can tell you about him, to be honest. We used to call him ‘Beast’. After Beauty and the Beast, you know? First times we saw him was when he kept following us to school. He’d hang around the gates and beg to come in. The authorities got involved. Next thing we knew, he was coming to our class. Our parents weren’t happy at all. I mean, it isn’t right, is it? Schools and education are for mankind. We invented the system, for goodness sake! What right did he have to think he could take advantage of it? No right. He had no right to try to be better than he was.

The girls were a bit frightened at first, in case he got angry and become dangerous – like that wild character from the *X-Men* films. Once he'd lost the hair he looked a bit more normal, I suppose. Apart from the nose.

We all thought he must be a bit crazy. I mean, no one begs to come *in* to school, do they? It's not as if he was an A grade student or anything – well, yes, he did get next-best grades in the class, but not top. Alice, she was top. He wasn't top. I sometimes wondered if he'd cheated, how else could he have got the grades he did? It was a real shock to see he'd become famous, you know. Never expected him to get anywhere in life, him being a... well, you know. One of them.'

TEACHER OLAF

'Sport? Well that was a bit of a shame. He was good, more than good – had the potential to be a great sportsman. He was stronger than any of the other kids. Fast, too. Great reactions. But none of the kids wanted him on their team. He was always picked last. He never said anything though, just got on with winning the game for whichever team he was in.

He was a bright guy too, not at all what I expected. Of course, university was totally out of the question, although he applied to quite a few. He was desperate to continue learning. But the rules don't allow, you see. It's a pity, but things are what they are. As I often said to him, you can't change centuries of rules and traditions overnight. 'Can't you?' he'd say. 'Why not?' And he'd point out that no one had ever thought that a black man would become president of the USA, and yet Obama did. I think that's why he emigrated. He looked across at the States and believed that they were more open-minded over there. He had dreams, you see.'

FRIEND PHIL – WE WERE LIKE BROTHERS

'Oh yes, we both had dreams, it was our dreams which kept us going. Getting into America isn't easy, everyone knows that. I wanted to get a job, earn some money, get away from all those blasted bridges in Norway. I was born there, but I sure as eggs didn't want to die there, too!

Troll wanted more than that. ‘A job and some money to start with,’ he’d say. He hungered after something bigger. Although I don’t think he knew what, exactly. Not then, anyway.

We bonded straight away. Well, hiding on a ship in an oil drum – that’s what happens. We grew close. Stuck together. After we landed in America, we made for Pittsburgh. Turns out Pittsburgh is well named – it certainly was the ‘pits’ for us. People really hated us. ‘Go home’ was on everyone’s lips. We hid under railway bridges for the first three months. Fought the foxes over takeaway remains thrown into bins. Took showers when it rained. Finally, we got a break. A publican took pity on us, gave us a couple of drinks, let us stay on after the local punters went home. We bonded at the bar. Turned out he was actually a wizard, hiding out from other wizards. We didn’t ask why. ‘How the hell have you managed to build a life here?’ Troll asked. The guy shrugged. ‘I pretend I’m the same as them.’

Troll, he heard that as a gospel truth. The wizard gave us jobs and Troll worked all the hours under the sun to save enough money for plastic surgery. For his nose, see. He managed it too, but no surgeon would take him on as a client. Troll didn’t talk much after that, just brooded. Then he started roaming around at night, going to places where no one was welcome. ‘You got a death wish or something, mate?’ I asked. But he kept going.

He wouldn’t let me go with him, said he needed to be alone. I’ve never forgiven myself for not insisting. One night, he didn’t come back. It was me that found him, in the end. Beaten up and left to die; a sign to other immigrants that we are not welcome in the US. God, he looked bad. His face! It looked like mashed potato – red mashed potato. I thought he was dead at first, but he grabbed my arm as I called the paramedics. ‘Don’t give any details, let them think... *please*, Phil.’ So, I didn’t. And it worked. The doctors took it for granted he was a man with a mangled face and rebuilt his face along human lines.

He didn’t forget me when he hit the big time, you know. As soon as he could, he got me a job as a runner for the agency he worked with. Later, when he became famous, he took me on as his personal bodyguard. Ironic, really, given that I wasn’t with him the night he got beaten up. That’s twice I wasn’t there. I was away when he pulled that stupid ‘This Is Me’ stunt, too. Ah man, what was he thinking of? I dunno. I loved the guy like my own brother, but that stunt... it ruined everything. He could have been a Martin Luther King for us Indies. Instead, every scrap of respect he’d begged from mankind was destroyed. Seems the world wasn’t ready for the truth, after all.’

WEEK THREE

TROLL'S AGENT LYNNE LORRIMER SAYS TROLL WAS AN IDIOT!

'I know it's two years since the 'This Is Me' stunt but yes, I'm still angry with him. To throw it all away like that. The *idiot!*

It is every agent's dream, you know, to discover a 'someone'. Each of us lives and breathes in hope – forever scanning side-walks, malls, parking lots, for the next big 'look'. But I'd never expected to find a potential star in a pharmacy queue. God, if I hadn't been in desperate need of some aspirin for my headache we may never have met. There he was, this beautiful, long-limbed man, buying some aspirin too. I could tell immediately that he was photogenic. Better than that, he had an original look – sort of lost and lonely on one level, but full-on male underneath. I knew at once he had cross-gender appeal.

I didn't know about his background, not for a while. When he finally told me, I didn't consider it a problem. He was just a male model – *Vogue, Tatler, L'Homme* and so on – and clients are only interested in the photos. It was later, after he got a couple of TV gigs and people became interested in him, that I worried about a risk of negative publicity if we didn't manage the situation. My PR team created a background that played out with him, not against him. 'Get his story out there before the rumours start. Brand Troll as a "true original".'

Well, it worked! His career expanded. He became a public figure. He was superb at promoting indie rights. He didn't bluster and shout like some politicians – because that's where he was heading, I'm sure of it – he just kept planting seeds about fairness and equal rights. I don't think he set out to be a spokesman – whoops! 'spokesbody', Troll would have said – it just started to come together once he had a voice through TV, radio, the press, etc. He thrived on what he was doing. When he fell for Anya – well, I think he thought that was it, he was going to change the world. And for a short while, I think he did.

It all started to go wrong when social media, particularly Twitter, really took off. You remember how some people became really abusive on the sites, and the press created the term 'Internet Trolls' for them? Troll was beside himself. He foresaw all his efforts to educate humankind and reduce their prejudices about indie people would be destroyed by the thoughtless use of that title. Of course, he fought back; every time he made a media

appearance he'd ask people to reconsider the term and all that it meant. But then he became a 'trolling' target himself. He became obsessed with reading every word they said. He read them to me sometimes. They were all along the same lines. 'No one would listen if you had the honesty to be who you are.' 'You stand up for Indie Rights, but you left your home and changed your face.' 'Hypocrite.' 'Fake.'

Out of the blue he cancelled all his engagements for a month – of course, I know why, now. It was to let all his hair grow back! Hired his own PR and they released those awful 'This Is Me' photos. The campaign was totally misjudged. No one wanted to see what he *really* looked like! For goodness sake, every model is just a fusion of lighting, make up and digital re-imaging. The general public buy into an *illusion*, not the reality. They certainly couldn't cope with Troll's reality. The media offers and sponsorship stopped. Not even radio was interested.

I had to let Troll go in the end. I couldn't risk losing any clients as a result of my association with him. I'm a business not a charity – and I believed Anya would look after him. If only she had.'

EX PARTNER ANYA DENIES RESPONSIBILITY FOR TROLL'S SUICIDE!

'It wasn't my fault! People keep pointing the finger at me – I've had to close all my social media accounts – it just isn't fair!

No one's given me the credit I deserve. After all, I stood by T all through the 'This Is Me' backlash. It wasn't easy. It was me who found him a psychiatrist you know, and I promised him all my support during his therapy.

I really regret that now, though. T got the idea that having a child together would spearhead a new equality across species and restore his campaign. T kept on and on about it. But I was scared! I mean, we needed to find out if it was biologically possible, first! T kept telling me of course it was, but he didn't really know. How could he? In the end I just wanted to be free, back in the real world. Yes, if you like, with my own kind again.

Of course I miss him, *Of course* I'm sad that he's dead, but we'd broken up when he did it! I'm not responsible for his actions! I know what my PA – my ex-PA – said she heard, but it's clearly a stunt to make some money.

No, I will not confirm I said that. I told you, she's lying. I admit T and I had a few rows when he left, but my last words to Troll were *not* 'Go back under your bridge where you belong!' I can't remember exactly what I said, but it definitely was not that.

No, I couldn't speculate as to why T hung himself there. He always said he hated his time in Pittsburgh. And he hated the viaduct bridge at Silver Lake in particular, he always said it reminded him too much of his childhood.

No. No more questions, I tell you. No comment.'

The End

My degree introduced me to Fast Fiction, which I love to write. The following pieces are an example of a Drabble (100 words exactly, excluding title) and a 500 word piece.

Winter in a Cost of Living Crisis

A no-show sun. Short days, grey rains, dark chills.

Not in the Gallery. There, she's fallen in love. There, summer sunlight – captured by brushstroke, jailed behind frames – radiates from masterpieces, thawing her body, warming her soul.

Lunchtime visits extend to every spare minute until they become every minute every day. It's never enough. She pleads to set the light free; they won't let her. Tries to steal it; they throw her out.

Now she lives among the paintings, alongside rats in cavities, peering through ventilation grilles. Waiting till closing time. At dawn she dances with dust-motes, bathes in painterly light.

Serial Sperm Donor

You're sitting in your kitchen, browsing through Ikea's latest catalogue when – shshsssst. That can't be a knock. Not another visitor. Not so soon after the last.

Even as you think the words, you're moving under the table. Just in case. You listen with every atom straining in the hope it's a mistake. The cat moving around upstairs, or someone in the street. You know it isn't. You cross fingers anyway.

Damn. A further knock.

You tuck yourself tight up against the wall but upright foetal brings you no comfort.

Your careful scoping has proved you can't be seen by anyone looking through the window, yet when the inevitable tap, tap, tap on the glass comes, you hold your breath.

This one's persistent. They've gone back to the front door; a third knock, then the clatter of the letter box. They're either peering through or pushing a note in. Or both.

You hug your knees tighter. This is just too much. It's only been, what, a month since the last one? This must be number one-nine-one. God, at least two hundred more to hide from, even allowing for a high percentage of the 'not bothered'.

Another tap on the window. Haven't they got the message yet? You're not here. Go away! Then you notice the cat, sitting in the doorway and licking paws with intent. Damn – Jenks has arrived. If food isn't forthcoming in the next ten minutes, he'll walk across and stare at you fixedly. When that doesn't work, he'll complain. In loud 'yowl'. Unless number one-nine-one leaves quickly, Jenkins will give your hiding place away as surely as a large red arrow suspended above.

You curse the government. Science. Media. The government and science again. Not enough thinking ahead, not enough legislation and protection, and here you are. Hounded by brethren. Brethren coming out of your ears. Just because there were no checks in place to stop some stupid, greedy guy earning a living by donating multiple-multiple sperm.

Your internal rant is too familiar to gain any comfort. It is as it is.

Why you don't feel the need to 'meet up and share some filial love' you don't know. You just don't. Nor can you afford it. Coffees alone (no extras) would mount up to four

figures even if that's all it took to say 'bye'. Not to mention the danger of falling in love; no way are you risking that particular biological mess.

You refuse to move yet again. No point. Turns out it's near impossible to lose your identity nowadays. You've tried enough times. Records and red tape. Social media. Facial recognition. Anyway, why should you? You didn't ask to be drawn into this circus.

There's been no more knocks. Jenks is still self-valeting. A few more minutes and you'll return to what you were doing. Buying a larder cupboard – no shelves, tall enough to hide in – has just become even more urgent.