

*Teen must prove
he's a good kid, or
get eaten.*

The Dietary Habits of Blue Closet Trolls

by R. Sutherland Smith

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R. Sutherland Smith

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Chapter I

Boy on the Menu

The troll never tried to get in while I was asleep. At least, that's what I thought. And I expected he would be fat. Fat, slow and stupid. All the books said so. I figured I could get away from a fat, slow troll easy. If he was stupid on top of everything else, I had my choice; I could outsmart him or outrun him. So the troll in my closet was really not a problem.

Until the night I woke up and he was sitting on the end of my bed.

I had never actually *seen* the troll before, but that's only because I'm as fast as the wind. I can be out of bed and down the hall before he gets the closet door open half an inch. I keep a log of every time the troll came for me and there's not one paragraph in six months showing he got more than his big, runny nose inside.

But tonight was different. Because of my cold, I had taken all the cough syrup my Mom made me swallow so I was kind of sleepy. But I just closed my eyes for a minute. That was all. Then I felt the bed move so, of course, I thought my dog had climbed up on the covers.

"Shadow, get down," I said, without looking.

When nothing happened, I opened my eyes and saw what was really weighing down the mattress. Suddenly I was wide-awake. All the lights in the room had gone out except for a blue glow coming from the foot of the bed.

The troll was sitting there, looking down at me. So much for outrunning him.

This was not the overfed, nasty bloodsucker that I had planned for. He was huge. If you stood a bullfrog up, added a few warts and gave him the arms and legs of a hairless gorilla, you'd know what was sitting in my room. But this thing had teeth. A lot of teeth. Long, worn down fangs, short yellow molars, bulging bicuspids. And not all of them fit inside his mouth. There were four toes on his left foot and three bigger toes on his right. He didn't look like any troll I'd ever seen in the picture books. His skin was a shiny bright blue and the darkest black with a glow that lit up the room. The black patches and the blue seemed to fade and shift around even though he was sitting still. His wide mouth stretched from ear to ear. Only he didn't seem to *have* ears.

I figured he *could* have come out and eaten me right off the bat but for some reason he was just sitting there watching me. The easiest thing to do was play dead. Real heroes do that in the movies, you know, pretend they're asleep to fake out the bad guy.

Then came the next unpleasant surprise. He could talk.

"Say there, Sprout, I can't help but notice your bedroom is a pigsty."

I guess playing dead only works on TV. And my name is *not* Sprout. Still, I didn't say anything.

"Which in fact, is very odd," the troll continued, looking around at all the aquariums, tanks and cages of my pets, "because it seems like the only animal you don't have is a pig...besides yourself, of course."

I tried to slip a little bit further under the covers. The last bubble had burst; he wasn't stupid. Rude, yes, but not stupid.

"Of course, if you *had* a fat, farting porker in here, it would feel right at home. Perhaps it could sleep in the corner over there next to that, ah, is that a dog or a wolf? Hard to tell in the dim light." He paused a second. "You may speak now, if you'd like."

As they say in the cartoons, the jig was up.

"I'm asleep," I said quietly. "You're just a bad dream. And wolves *are* dogs. A real troll would know that."

The troll laughed. "Just testing, Sprout. Some of my best friends are werewolves. They don't like to be referred to as 'weredogs', though. Wolves tend to be kind of stuck up and snooty about their poor relatives."

I hate being called Sprout. "My name's Cory. Cory Colby. Only my Dad calls me Sprout."

"Sure he does, Sprout. And it's really annoying, isn't it? Twelve years old and your Dad calls you a baby name. You oughta talk to him about that. But, hey, that was a very good possum act, Sprout. You faked it pretty well for nearly two whole minutes. I'll bet you didn't know that trolls have excellent night vision. I saw your eyes open. Pretending that you're not scared is slick, though. Almost slick enough to fool a human. But not a troll. Particularly a Blue Closet Troll, which is the best kind of troll to be! Snuck up on you tonight, didn't I? You usually run away and get 'her' for protection before I make it in the door."

Well, that was true. Soon as that door opens a crack, I'm out of the room, yelling for parents. The troll is scared of Mom. I know that. My Mom can put the fear into

almost anything. It's like when you're sitting around the campfire in the woods and the sun goes down. You know there's something scary out there but you don't know what, only you won't like it when it gets here. That's the feeling my Mom gives to little kids.

"However," the troll went on, "getting to the point. The Troll Council asked me to come by. Ordered me, actually. We have received a complaint."

"A complaint?"

"Yes, a complaint."

"About me?"

"Of course about you."

"Just one?"

The troll frowned. "One is all we require. Why do you ask?"

"Well, they usually come in batches..."

"Then you should be relieved to know that we have received a variety of comments, both large and small but, for convenience, we have sorted, grouped and edited, managing, at last, to classify all of the smaller objections, general accusations, specific criticisms and complete condemnations into one huge, crushing complaint. It took five administrative trolls and a supervising fairy two weeks to get it all down on a single 1044 EZwhiner form."

I have a standard reply to criticism. "The complaint department is downstairs, front bedroom on the right," I said. "Ask for Mom, take a number and get in line. She keeps a file cabinet with my name on it."

"Your mother has the patience of the late and generally unheard of Saint Berta, who, throughout portions of the Lower Ukraine, was famous for her

composure with budding juvenile delinquents. That and her ability to hold sixteen gumballs in her mouth at the same time. But I digress. Regarding the nature of the complaint, it is of the very worst sort." The troll took out a paper scroll and let it unroll down to the floor and across the rug. He looked over the entire sheet and shook his head. "I hardly know where to begin."

"Start at the beginning," I said. "Go to the end. Then stop."

The troll studied his list. "Sorry. I don't have that kind of time. The Farsund Crab Leg Festival starts in fifteen minutes. They're saving a seat for me."

"Farsund? Where's that?"

"South Norway, on the Gulf. Small town, pleasant people, good crabs. The butter sauce could be better. But don't change the subject. To sum up the finer points, it has been reported that you are not a very nice person. You have trouble taking responsibility for yourself. In particular," he pointed to a line about midway down the list, "you don't take proper care of your pets. I can see from here that the reports appear to be correct."

"I feed them all the time!" I said.

"And sometimes you forget." The troll stood up and glared down at me. "Besides, food is only part of the solution. Food is not enough. What goes in one end eventually comes out the other. Judging from the smell in this room, you seem to be ignoring the other end. Smarten up, kid. We trolls take a dim view of boys who mistreat animals. Bad things come their way."

He leaned in, giving me a close-up look at his teeth. "Very bad things."

Just then there was a noise on the stairway. Something creaked.

"Her!" he said, like an alarm going off.

I was wrong about the troll being slow. He leaped into the air and did a backflip that landed him all the way across the room near the closet. He vanished through the door without another word, which was fine with me. Right away the room got lighter; like he carried the darkness in with him and took it out when he left.

"Shadow, did you see that?" I said.

Shadow lifted his head slightly, barely opening his eyes, and looked at me. Then he lay down again with a loud 'humph' and went back to sleep.

My Mom poked her head into the room. "I guess we must be feeling better, making so much noise and all," she said, looking around as though she expected to see a circus. "I thought you were sick."

She carried in my dinner tray.

"Mom, you missed it!" I shouted. "There was a troll here. On my bed!"

Mom put the tray on the bed table. Her hand went to her forehead, covering her eyes. "Oh Lord, not this again," she mumbled. "Too much cough medicine."

In a louder voice she said, "You don't believe in monsters under the bed. We got through this *years* ago."

"I know that," I said. "But this wasn't a boogiemanager. It was a troll. A whomping *big* troll and it was sitting on my bed. He said he's going to kill me!"

"And yet, you're still here." Mom exhaled real loud. "It was just a bad dream, dear. Try to get some rest. Get

your dog to sleep on the bed. He'll scare off anything on two, four or eight legs."

"You don't like it when he sleeps on the bed," I explained. "Besides, I don't think he can see the troll."

"Well, neither can I, so just stay in bed and you'll be fine. Eat your dinner. Go to sleep."

She closed the door. Her footsteps faded down the stairs.

rats

I lay in bed a long time thinking about what the troll had said. He was full of it; my pets were happy. I treated them just fine! I made up my mind to tell that troll off.

In the meantime, I had food. A pork chop. Peas. Applesauce.

yuch

And pie. A big dish of my Mom's apple pie is the best thing in the world. Being sick means you get dessert even if you don't finish dinner. A half-hour later, the dried-out pork chop was laying there cold. But I had pie. I'd eaten all the ice cream and saved half the pie for tomorrow. Pie first thing in the morning is the right way to start the day.

But there was still the troll to deal with. Well, next time he came around I'd just straighten him out and send him on his way! The trouble was, it's easy to be brave when the other guy isn't there yet and I didn't expect 'next time' to be that same night. It was barely ten o'clock when the closet door creaked on its hinges and opened a crack. I heard a rumble of thunder from far off and it seemed like the wind had picked up. I began to think that maybe trolls carried bad weather and storm clouds around with them. The door pushed open slowly from

the inside and then the shadows poured out. The room went dark, like a thick cloud had rumbled into the room. My reading light dimmed then died. I suddenly felt a little less confident but I had rehearsed what I was going to say so I wasn't worried... much.

The troll came out a few inches at a time, surrounded by his blue glow. He followed a careful path, placing each foot in a certain spot, as if he was afraid of landmines. Once, he must have strayed off-course because he froze solid, like a mouse that was lost and smelled a cat. After a minute of rolling his eyes, but not turning his head at all, he backed up the way he had come, right to the closet. He waited there a few seconds, crouched down like a giant blue nightlight. Then he got up slowly and stepped over to my bed, without moving an inch out of line.

Well, there was one improvement; he was wearing clothes this time. He had on a red wool hat and a bright checkered pink and blue sweater with matching ski pants. He was covered in snow which he shook off all over the rug. The rest melted on my blanket. Sitting on the edge of the bed, dripping wet, he looked all around the room like he had never been here before. He took off the wool cap and tossed it on the bedpost. His eyes fell on the bed table. His mouth opened and closed slowly. Each time it opened, the troll inhaled.

"You're all wet," I said. "What, did you get into a snowball fight?"

"You got pie," he said, ignoring me.

"Yes, I do. My Mom made it. It's mine," I said. "There's most of a pork chop there."

He didn't even glance at it.

"Today I've eaten fifteen toasted cucumbers with pig tails. And a pot of turkey's foot soup. Two full bowls of witch's giblets. I just finished off a barrel of crab legs. But I haven't had pie," the troll said, staring at the bed table. He was either drooling or just dripping. I couldn't tell which.

"It's *my* pie. I'm saving it for later," I said. "Pig tails?"

"Not from real pigs. They're actually a sort of deep-fried earthworm. You know, termites are considered a delicacy where I come from. Your attic has some of the best I've ever tasted. I have eaten over fifteen hundred termites today." The troll paused for a second then said to himself, "But I have not had *any* pie."

Maybe I should tell Dad to get the house inspected. First trolls, now termites. The place was infested!

The troll made his own decision.

"Nabbage," he said suddenly. His mouth opened wide and a huge green/yellow tongue unrolled and flew out, striking the bed table and just missing me. When the tongue rolled back, the dessert plate was gone. Now it was my turn to freeze stock-still.

"You shouldn't of done that," I said, wiping at a little bit of slobber on my jammies.

"I said 'nabbage'. That *is* the standard warning."

This just annoyed me. "Next time you come over to steal my pie," I said, "at least leave the plate."

"Oh, sorry," the troll replied slowly, licking his lips for pie flakes. "That was thoughtless."

The giant tongue flew out and dropped the empty plate back on the bed table, wet and gunky. Steam floated off of it. The troll blinked his eyes twice and looked

thoughtful for a second, like he was going to apologize again. But then he frowned and leaned in to me.

“Actually, the *next* time I come here,” he said quietly. “It will be to eat you.”

The room was silent for a minute while the troll smiled. This was not what I had expected to hear and I couldn’t think of a smart comeback. Actually, I couldn’t think of much of anything besides all those teeth. Maybe I would tell him off some other time.

“It’s all about *taste*, of course,” the troll continued. “I eat bad children. They taste best. Good kids taste of warm sweat and sour beer. Good kids leave an aftertaste like Diet Coke. But bad kids... Bad kids taste of sweet cinnamon and salmon filet. Of all the kinds of children there are to eat, bad kids taste best of all! And there’s the added bonus...”

“Yeah, what’s that?” I asked.

The troll leaned in close to me and smiled. His voice went very low and deep, almost a whisper.

“Nobody misses them very much.”

He sat back on the bed and examined his fingernails. Seeming pleased with what he saw he added, “And I hear that you’ve been *very* bad.”

This seemed like a good time to panic. “You got the wrong kid! There’s plenty worse out there than me! You haven’t met my friends! I mean, Billy Shuesser is a real jerk. Dougie James steals money from his mother’s purse! And you should get to know Amanda! If you think I’d taste good, heck, I’d be a fish stick compared to Amanda!”

The troll smacked his lips.

“Hmm, fish sticks! I love fish sticks. And we know about Dougie James. He’ll get his. But if you were smart you wouldn’t talk about fish sticks. I might get hungry and, maybe, eat you tonight.”

“Hang on, my Mom’ll be up in a minute,” I said. “Maybe she could deep fry you a few flounder fingers...”

“She’s coming?” the troll said quickly. He looked over at the door and sat straight up, like a crook who’s about to make a run for it. Then he figured out I was lying and relaxed. “Very funny.” He rolled his eyes and blinked twice. “Look at this place. It’s a mess. You don’t seem to mind this dump but your pets do *not* like living in filth. Add that to the fact that you never took the trouble to learn anything about them; how they live; what they like, nothing! You act like they were put on Earth to entertain you. Well, they weren’t. You have a responsibility.”

“My pets are just fine. They like it here.”

The troll ignored me. “Besides, *everyone* knows you’re a bad kid. I’ve heard your mother *begging* people to take you away. She told the postman that you were switched at birth by a demon.”

“She said that to the meter reader!”

The troll looked at me like it didn’t really make any difference. And I guess he was right but I wanted to show he didn’t know *everything*. He stopped a second to sniff the air a few times. Then, like he had read my mind, he reached under the bed and pulled out a leather book.

“Hey!” I said.

“So what’s this?” he asked.

“That’s *The Captain’s Log*. It’s private!”

“Well, it seems to be a plain old diary to me. In fact, I think it’s *your* diary. Why look!” the troll said, opening *The Log* up. “So tis! You know, I can always tell a bad kid from a good one by what he says about himself. And you’ve written it all down! How very considerate!”

He patted his pockets. “I don’t have my glasses with me. Read us a few pages why don’t you...out loud.”

“No, thanks. I don’t want to,” I said quickly.

“Hah! Here’s an entry – quite a while ago but it will do. Go ahead, let’s hear it.”

“It’s too dark,” I said. “I can’t. It’s bad for my eyes.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” The troll pointed at the bed lamp and it flicked on. “Better? Look, if you read fast enough, you might finish before I get hungry again.”

I looked at the page he had picked. The bridge party disaster. Well, *that* certainly didn’t prove anything. He couldn’t eat me just because Otto messed up. I took *The Captain’s Log* from the troll and began to read.

August 8

Well, I’m in trouble again and it’s all Otto’s fault. Actually it’s Mrs. Keller’s fault because she opened the window and otherwise the cockatoo never would have got in and nothing would have happened. My mom was having strawburries and melted chocolate and powdered sugar with her bridge friends at the table where she likes to sew in the afternoon. Otto usually keeps her company when she sews but today the window was closed so he was sleeping in the yard with Shadow. All the bridge ladies heard Mom say keep the window shut or the bird will get in, but Mrs. K. was too

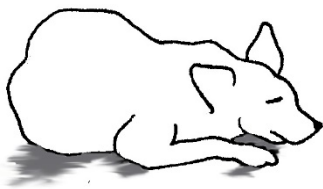
busy feeding on strawberries to pay attention. Again, NOT my fault.

On hot days Shadow digs himself a hole in the corner of Mom's flowerbed and goes to sleep because he's a big black dog with lots of fur and he knows that if he digs up the garden he won't get blamed. *I will.*

So Mom yells at me, "Cory, your dog dug up my irises and if he does it again he's going to *the Pound!*"

The Pound. Mom always says *the Pound* like it's a bad place. But Shadow never goes to the Pound so I don't worry too much about what the Pound is or why Shadow wouldn't want to go there. Anyway, as soon as Shadow fell asleep, Otto, who had nothing better to do, used him for a perch and took a nap on his back. Shadow doesn't usually let him do this cuz Otto tends to take a dump on things when he lands. Shadow knows that cockatoo feet get real warm just before they let loose. So if Shadow gets woke up by tiny, warm feet, he's outta there.

The bridge party was on a break, eating the strawberries, and my Mom must have been in the kitchen cuz I couldn't see her through the window. I was up in the oak tree in the front yard, almost at the top so I was nowhere near the strawberries when Mrs. K. wiped the chocolate off her face and said how she was "absolutely stifled" and she went and opened the window. Well, the window sash creaked and woke up Otto who flew in to the table where he usually finds my Mom sewing only she's not there, just fat old Mrs. Keller and the bridge club ladies with cards and powdered sugar and strawberries on *his* table so he couldn't find a place to land. Of course, he got confused and had no



choice but to hover over the table making a little tornado out of the powdered sugar. This got the old ladies to screeching, "Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my!"

Otto, when he's upset, repeats everything he hears so he starts squawking, "Oh my, oh my, oh my, oh my!" and the old ladies jump up and knock the chairs down and the playing cards went flying all over. The noise woke up Shadow who ran over to protect the house by barking and growling in at the open window and this scared the bridge ladies even more so they all ran out of the house covered in powdered sugar and crying and with a few more "oh my, oh mys" Otto vanishes out the window and my mom comes in to an empty room that's covered with powdered sugar with the cards stuck in the chocolate and no bridge ladies anywhere. Mom throws up her hands and starts yelling my name in a very scary manner and I think she's going to send me to the Pound so I climb up to the very top of the tree where I find Otto with his head under his wing pretending to be asleep and Mom is screaming that the bridge club ladies should come back and how I am going to personally apologize to each and every one of them.

And I don't know why cuz I didn't do nothin'.

ψψψ

The troll looked at me.

"So?" I said.

"So? You say 'so?' Don't you see?" he said, opening his mouth *very* wide. "Look at all the trouble you caused."

"Me? I wasn't even there!" I said.

"Then you *don't* see the problem. You keep a herd of pets and you don't understand any of them. Your animals are your responsibility. If you don't take care, any trouble they cause is your fault. You're a bad kid!"

"No, I'm not!" I cried. "It wasn't my fault! You should go eat Mrs. Keller!"

"Ah, Mrs. Keller," the troll smiled. "I am afraid Mrs. Keller is no longer available. Poor Mrs. K. She was *very* fond of strawberries and chocolate. She got so fat she couldn't see her feet, or anything else below her belly button, and one day she tripped over her wiener dog and fell down the stairs..."

"Yeah, I heard," I mumbled, without much sympathy. "That's too bad for her."

"Excuse me?" the troll said, leaning in over me. "Was that a nasty comment?"

"I said, 'Yeah, I heard. That's so sad for her.' A real shame. I suppose everybody blamed the wiener dog..."

"Everybody but *me*," said the troll, drooling over my bed. "Careless people never blame themselves. Now I believe we were about to discuss my dinner..."

With one huge paw holding down my legs, the troll opened his mouth. The hundreds of teeth of all sizes in several rows had bits of stuff stuck in them and they smelled like rotten garbage and, just a little, like apple pie.

"But Otto caused all the trouble!"

"Otto has a brain the size of a peanut. *You* are responsible."

Hearing his name, Otto woke up and, for the first time, seemed to notice that the troll was in the room. With a great squawk, he flew over, landing on the troll's head. Then he began to nibble on the few bits of hair that he found there.

The troll actually smiled a pleasant smile that made me think I might not get eaten tonight. His eyes rolled up

to look at Otto. Otto leaned out and peered down at the troll over that massive forehead.

"Say, you know what?" he said. "This bird has *very* warm feet!"



The troll wiped his forehead off with his wool cap. He was not at all pleased with Otto; or with me, for that matter. After doing his business, Otto said, "Uh oh" and retreated back to his cage. He pulled the door shut behind him.

The troll was glaring, not at Otto, but at me.

"I believe this illustrates my point. You really need to teach better manners to your bird," the troll said, looking unhappily into the cap. "Or, at least, warn a fellow."

Just then there was a noise in the hall. Shadow, who still acted like he didn't even *see* the troll, lifted his head up and looked towards the door. So did the troll, who sniffed the air twice with his mouth open. Shadow sniffed twice too. As the doorknob began to turn, the closet door slammed shut. Mom flicked the light switch on.

"What is all the banging around up here? How does a kid in bed - and you are *in bed*, aren't you - make so much noise?" she said. "What are you doing up at this time of night?"

"Mom, it wasn't my idea. The troll came back! He said he was going to eat me if I didn't read him a story and prove that I was a good kid!"

Okay hearing that out loud, well, maybe it sounded a little farfetched.

Mom let out a long breath of air. “The troll wanted *you* to read *him* a bedtime story that would prove you’re a good boy?” She looked at the ceiling for a minute and shook her head. “The fairy tale hasn’t been written that could pull that one off. Mother Goose would turn in her grave. But then again, the Brothers Grimm wrote some real whoppers and even Frankenstein’s monster had his good points, so who knows...”

She looked at me for a minute, then came over and kissed me on the forehead. “I swear you make the boy who cried wolf sound like an angel. It’s just bad dreams. Sic your dog on him next time, dear. Hey, what’s this?”

She picked up a damp wool cap. “Wait, don’t tell me. The troll left it behind.”

“Well...”

“I said don’t tell me. Make sure you give it back to its owner.” She looked closely and dropped it. “Eww! And clean it off before you do. It looks like Otto pooped in it.”

After my Mom left, I was alone in the dark. I remembered what the troll had said about my pets being unhappy.

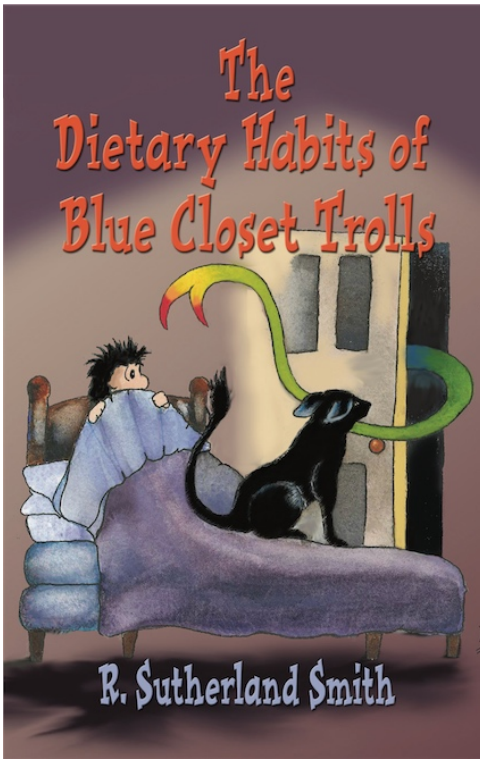
‘That’s ridiculous,’ I thought, looking around the room. “Anybody here got any complaints?”

The room was silent.

ha!

But just the same, it was a long time before I got to sleep.





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