**Excerpt from The Brook (*Bekken).* A novel by Bjørn Arild Ersland**

**Translation by Diane Oatley**

I want to start at the beginning, down in the rushes by the sewer where my friends and I hang out. It’s around noon or one o’clock. It’s midday and I just got back from a drive with my dad and granddad. We went to pick up shuttering moulds for pouring concrete. We’re going to build a foundation wall for the new deck. The boards are on the roof of the car. I should have been at home and helped to carry the boards up behind the house.

The brook comes from the other side of the road. It collects water from the entire valley. It hasn’t rained for several weeks. The water is lower than normal and it smells worse than usual. The old houses use the brook as a sewer; they dump waste right into it. Only the new houses are hooked up to the purification plant.

At home I have a metal detector I got for Christmas once. I’ve used it in the dumpsite outside and around the old houses, where they threw junk before they got rubbish bins. The mounds are overgrown with grass and plants that grow much taller here than in other places. When I was a little boy I went there to pick flowers. Wild tulips are growing on some of the mounds. They’re yellow and much smaller than those mum buys at the store. White flowers that smell like onions grow there too. I like trees, I like acorns in the autumn when they’re still green, before they ripen and get brown. I don’t like the black stuff I get on my fingers when I pick dandelions.

Once I found a silver ring. It’s the only thing of value I’ve found with the detector. It beeped and when I dug into the dirt I found a place in the ground where tin cans and remnants of half-disintegrated old clothes and shoes were buried. The buttons were still whole. The zippers fell apart when I touched them and it was difficult to tell whether they’d been attached to a pair of trousers or a jacket. Suddenly I saw a silver ring amongst all the other things. I could have given it back to the people who live in the house, but I put the ring in a wooden box I have in my room. I made the box on the carpenter’s bench at home in the cellar. I keep things I find in it.

The light is shining at a slant from the side. I can see the sun through the reeds, the tallest reach above our heads. Between the reeds I can see our garage. I see the wall and the fences granddad and dad built so I wouldn’t fall off the bluffs. It was the first thing they did after we moved here. We bought the last house in the row, the one on the steepest lot, the one nobody wanted.

Our house is on the turn at the top of the road. Jan lives in the house just below. Ivar lives in the house next to Jan’s. There’s a path running from our lot and down between the houses, to the brook and the fjord. There’s a road there, which runs over the brook and up to the old houses and Nico’s farm. The houses on our side are identical, only the foundations are different. All the old houses are different.

The fences on our lot were finished before they let me go outdoors by myself. We built the other things later. We have a picture that granddad took where dad and mum and grandmum are standing in front of our house and there’s a pile of stones beside them. They say I was lying in a pram when the picture was taken. The people who built the house had put the stones in a pile and dad and granddad were left with the job of getting rid of them. The stones were so jagged and crooked and full of gouges that they couldn’t be used for anything. We put them in the walls, in the concrete. Mum planted a hedge where the stones had been.

A part of the pram can be seen in the photograph. Mum is holding the handle with one hand. Later they put the pram in the garage and it got covered with dust. Patches of rust began to appear on places where it should have been shiny. Finally it was so ruined that when we built a go-cart I got to saw off the wheels. We would have won the go-cart race if I hadn’t driven straight into a mud puddle. It happened right before the finish line and I got wet all the way up to my neck. Ivar wanted to throttle me, I could see it in his eyes. He was the one who designed the go-cart but the wheels were mine so it was natural that I got to drive. We built it together. Ivar and Jan did the pushing, but then I lost control right before the finish line. I don’t know why. It wasn’t difficult and I drove perfectly through the big turn. I got onto the track closest to the fence, but suddenly it was like my body wanted to drive into the mud puddle. It became impossible to stay on course, so I steered the cart in the direction my body wanted.

The water is much warmer here in the fjord than out by the islands, but still nobody goes swimming. We could have kept our mouths shut and not talked while we were out in the water, then it would have been fine. We could have done it when nobody was watching, but the water is not inviting. The shiny, sticky coating on the rocks makes it hard to climb in and out, maybe we would stink afterwards.

They went swimming here when mum was little. They stood on a diving platform out on the headland. I’ve never seen her dive. I think she used the stairs and went down them until the water came up to her waist and then she could lie on her back and float. That’s how she swims, always backwards, except for when she’s going towards shore again and onto dry land.

This was before the water started growing, before the sludge settled on the beaches and the slimy seaweed loosened off the bottom and formed small islands across the fjord. If you try to step onto such an island you will sink right through it. If you drive through it slowly with a boat it gets tangled up in the propeller.

The base of the diving platform is still there. Beside it is the foundation wall of a building where they used to change their clothes. There’s a stairway there that continues down under the water. It goes deeper than we can see.

It was the town that tore down the diving platform. They did it before I was born. People could get sick from swimming in the dirty water and they tore down the diving platform so nobody would be tempted. For mum it made no difference. She doesn’t like to swim and the stairway is completely intact.

The brook is off limits. They told us that when we were little, but nobody understood that they needed to keep telling us as we grew older. If we go further out, we are hidden behind Jan’s house. From there only Jan’s mother can see us and she doesn’t care.

Ivar leads the way. We reach the pipe sticking out of the road, where the water pours out in a straight line and falls down where the brook should have started again, but below the pipe nothing is happening. The water is calm. It’s hardly a brook at all; the water should have flowed here, over to the outlet where the syrupy water from the valley and the houses mixes in with the fjord. Further out the water is just as dirty and just as clean.

Jan is wearing his trousers full of holes and his yellow parka. His pockets are full of screws and nails and things he collects. I can hear the stuff rattling when he walks, that’s the sound of Jan. He dreams of building a raft that actually floats. He is going to empty all the junk and materials out of his pockets and the garage and build a raft big enough so all three of us can go out on it at the same time. At home in his garage he has collected broken wooden pallets and other materials.

He has an old window he wants to put into what he calls the wheelhouse. He found a broken steering wheel from a car. He got hold of a car seat he’s going to sit on inside the wheelhouse. In the cellar he has a box full of tools. He has three hammers, one for each of us. He has a saw and an angle iron and an electric drill he got from his father that he’s never used except to drill a thousand holes in a board that’s still lying on the floor. He didn’t notice that the drill went through the board. He made a thousand holes in the floor of the garage at the same time. I think that’s why he left the board where it was.

I promised to find nails for the raft. Jan has spent all his time at school making drawings of how the finished raft will look. It’s pure fantasy, all of it, because Jan can’t draw and neither is he especially good at building things.

His mother doesn’t know that the garage is full of junk. She’s never been out there and looked. His father moved away for work. At first he came home on the week-ends but then he stopped coming. Ove went off to sea around the same time. He doesn’t care about what his little brother is doing in the garage either.

Jan collects old drums that used to contain window-washer fluid. They are supposed to keep the raft from sinking. Every Friday he rides his bike to the petrol station on his way home from school. They save the drums for him so he can pick them up. Now he doesn’t need any more, the garage is full, but he still keeps picking up the drums they put aside for him.

He talks about using some of the materials to build a shed behind the garage for dry storage of the things he’ll collect in the future. He says he wants to save money for an outboard motor and that we’ll split the cost of the petrol. Ove knows someone who can weld a rack to put on the back end of the raft. The motor will hang there. He wants to run a rope from the motor all the way to the steering wheel in the wheelhouse. Everyone knows that Jan will never have the money to buy an outboard motor. Jan doesn’t save his money. I know how much money Ivar has in his bank account. I know how much money I have. Jan doesn’t have any. He buys sweets for the money he gets and shares them with anybody who asks.

Ivar has decided that Jan’s raft has to wait.

“Reed boats are simpler,” Ivar says. “Reed boats float on their own, so we don’t have to mess with the plastic drums.”

I want to go home to our garden. I want to be with my dad and granddad. I want to be with my mum. This morning I was awakened by the sound of mum going out the door downstairs and when I went into the sitting room, I saw that dad was working outside. I heard the sound of the nails he was pulling out, the sharp, loud sound of the nails that had been hammered into the wall when they built the house and that dad pulled out again using a crowbar. He had to tear down the stairs to make room for the deck. Then he took the stairs apart and will use the materials for the shuttering. I am going to help him take all the nails out of the boards.

Granddad was standing by the garage when I went outside. His bike was leaning against the wall. He handed me a bag of boiled sweets and it was warm. His sweets taste like trees. He always buys the same kind. They sell them at the newsstand but I’d never buy them.

He dug through the bag on the handlebars of the bike and handed me a box of nails he’s brought home from the factory, nails that are no good because the galvanizing is wrong. It makes the nails stick together in clusters and look strange. Granddad picks clumps of nails out of the bins where they throw away the nails they can’t sell. He had the hammer in his bag and took it out and laid a bunch of stuck-together nails on the wall.

“You have to hit them carefully, then they’ll separate,” he said. “Be careful not to bend them.”

He gave me a fistful of nails that I was supposed to bang apart. I stood close to him and hit them with the hammer. He lit a cigarette and it smelled like the best bonfire in the world. The cluster of nails separated.

“Let me know if you need more,” granddad said.

“We’re going to build a raft,” I said.

“How exciting.”

“I want to build a tree house in my tree,” I said.

“Where’s dad?”

“He’s tearing down the stairs. Mum went to the shop.”

The garden is a forest. I have named all the trees. When I run down the stairs and onto the stones, it’s like it’s completely flat, because my feet remember every step. The neighbours claim that our trees are blocking the sunlight. Dad has promised that we are going to keep them anyway. We don’t need a lawn and a flowerbed, like the others. We don’t need a lawnmower and hedge clippers because the trees do just fine on their own.

I don’t like the spruce tree; it’s too prickly for climbing. I don’t like the sticky gunk that gets on my fingers when I touch it. I only climb the oak trees. In the oak trees I have branches where I can sit and lean against the trunk and look out. From the tallest tree I can see over the others. I can see as far as I want. I see the fjord and the roofs of the houses. I see the islet out in the fjord. I see mum riding her bike to the shop on the other side of the football pitch. She parks the bicycle in the bike rack, takes her shopping tote with her and walks into the shop.

I see the roof of our garage and the path that runs between the houses and down to the road and the brook. The road continues past the mailboxes and the football pitch. I know the road by heart: across the bridge and around the corner by the shipyard, down to the bumpy cobblestone street, the one that continues past my granddad and grandmum’s house.

I saw when Ivar came out onto the steps. I saw him from the top of the tree. Yesterday he said that today we were going to start working on the boat. I knew he was going to come. I heard the sound of the doorbell when he was standing on the other side of our house ringing it. I sat completely still and hoped he wouldn’t come around to our side, but he knew I was hiding there.

Had it been up to him, he would have preferred to help out pouring the concrete. But that’s not how the days with granddad and dad are supposed to be. I had no choice but to go along down to the brook.

If I stand completely still, water seeps up out of the ground. It bounces under my feet when I walk.

“Give me the knife,” Ivar says.

I hand him the knife and he bends down and cuts off a reed all the way down at the root. He gives the knife back to me and I slide it into the sheath. Ivar folds the reed and winds a piece of twine around it. It’s supposed to look like a reed boat. Then he places it carefully down in the water.

“Look, the boat is floating,” he says. “Perfect. It floats on its own.”

Jan has no objections.

“Cool,” he says. “It’s just like Thor Heyerdal’s reed boat.”

“That’s what I said,” Ivar replies.

The reed boat is so light that it follows the current Ivar’s boot makes when he moves his foot. It’s grass. It’s easy to see how fragile the boat will be.

“The fjord is way too deep,” I say. I’ve seen it on the map. It’s more than fifty metres deep at the deepest point. “Besides I don’t want to swim in a sewer.”

“We’re not going to swim,” Ivar says. “We’re going to sail, it’s totally safe. We just have to make the boat big enough.”

“Then we’ll have to use all the reeds in the entire bay,” I say.

“Yes,” Ivar says. “That’s the plan.”

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