

Håkon Øvreås and Øyvind Torseter (ill.) BROWN

BRUNE, 136 pages, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2013, novel 6-9 years

FOREIGN SALES: China Simplified (New Buds), Denmark (Carlsen), Faroe Islands (Bokadeildin), France (La Joie de Lire), Germany (Hanser), Iceland (Forlagid), Netherlands (Querido), Korea (Wisdom House), Sweden (Rabén & Sjögren), US (Enchanted Lion)



A Superhero for the Underdog!

As long as the sun is up, Rune is merely Rune, but come night he transforms himself into Brown – a totally fearless super hero. Armed to the hilt with brushes and brown paint he sneaks out of the house. Rune can hardly be blamed if Brown chooses to paint the big bullies' bikes brown, can he?

Winner of the Nordic Council's Children's and Young People's Literature Prize 2014

Winner of the Ministry of Culture's Literature Prize 2013 (Best Children's and Young Adults Book)

Winner of the Trollkrittet Prize 2013 (Norwegian Children's/YA book Writers' debut prize)

“... suspense, good dialogues as well as hints of magic. Rune’s conversations with his dead grandfather are lovely, and all his characters have bucketloads of charm ... Bursting with attitude and humor, the pictures are as expressive as they are simple ... recommended for anyone. The book is a highly charming tale of growing up, superheroes and the struggle for survival.”
Dagbladet

“In this enormously charming book we meet three little superheroes, each equipped with a bucket of paint ... Øyvind Torseter’s beautiful drawings show us what it’s like to feel small and out of place in a big world. They also evoke the warmth of the friendship between the children ... Warmly recommended!”
Aftenposten



Håkon Øvreås has previously published two books of poetry. *Brown* is his first children's book.

Øyvind Torseter is an award-winning writer and illustrator. He won the award for Most Beautiful Book of the Year 2013

Sample translation by John Irons

Pages 1-45

[A note on the title: The main character here is called Rune, a fairly common name in Norway. He takes the super hero name "Brune", which means Brown in Norwegian. The translator's solution here doesn't quite match the Norwegian, it might be better to change the boy's name, but since this is a sample translation we have opted for the simpler solution.]

1

The day grandpa died Rune had to be at Aunt Ranveig's the whole day while mum and dad were at the hospital. Aunt Ranveig's house smelt of liver paste. There were small glass figures everywhere, on the TV, on the shelves – even in the loo there was a glass reindeer. In the living room the radio was on low all day long.

They ate fish for dinner. Rune sat for a long while, gazing down at the mountain of brown onions on his plate. The fork felt heavy in his hand.

'Now you can eat,' Aunt Ranveig. 'Do you like coley?'

'Holy moly,' Rune said.

Later that evening dad came and fetched Rune. It was then dad told him. He said that grandpa was dead.

'OK,' Rune said and put his jacket on.

He went out and sat in the car. He kept sitting there, picking at a sticker on the dashboard. His dad came out a little later. He sat in the driver's seat, put the key in the ignition, but didn't switch the engine on.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Sure,' Rune said. He stared at the white remains of the sticker.

His dad started the engine and they drove home.

2

The next day Rune had to be at Aunt Ranveig's again. His mum and dad had to go back to the hospital.

'Why?' Rune asked.

'We've got to deal with all the practicalities,' mum said.

Rune nodded, as if he knew what 'the practicalities' meant.

When they moved from the town, his mum had said that it was more practical to live in the country. At the time he thought that 'practical' meant that he could see grandpa more often, but now he understood that that wasn't right.

Aunt Ranveig was standing in the doorway as he came up the steps.

Rune went past her and took his shoes off.

'Hello, Rune,' she said, patting him on the head. 'How nice you're going to be here again today!'

'Yes, I think it's practical,' Rune said.

He sat down on the sofa. On the table in front of him were three glass penguins. Ranveig went out into the kitchen. She made a lot of noise with some appliance. Rune

went out to have a look. She was using a mixer that was stirring mince meat. She turned the mixer off after a while.

‘We’re going to have meatballs for dinner!’ she said, and Rune could see her lopsided tooth when she smiled.

Rune could hear Aunt Ranveig clinking with dishes and glasses. After a little while she called out to Rune.

‘Can you fetch a bottle of cordial from the cellar?’

‘Sure,’ Rune said.

He opened the cellar door. It smelt like when you open a bag with forgotten gym kit. He switched the light on and went down. The walls looked like a dish-cloth with black spots on it. He went over to the wall and pressed a bubble in the white paint. The paint fell off. From the shelf with bottles of cordial he took out one of the top ones. White flakes of dust swirled up, making Rune cough. He turned round and went over to the stairs. Under the staircase there were three large tins of paint. It was brown paint. Afterwards, while they were eating, Rune asked:

‘Can I have the paint you’ve got under the stairs?’

Ranveig was chewing on a large piece of meatball. She looked at Rune as she chewed.

‘What do want paint for?’ she asked after a while.

‘To paint with,’ Rune said.

‘It’s better for children to use watercolours,’ Aunt Ranveig said.

‘But I want to paint a hut I’m building with my friend Atle,’ he said.

Ranveig looked at Rune for a long time. She nodded.

‘So you’ve got a friend out here, have you?’

‘Yes, Atle. We’re building a hut together.’

‘Yes, then you can’t use watercolours of course,’

‘No,’ Rune said.

‘Well, you can have the paint if your father says it’s all right,’ Ranveig finally said.

Rune stood at the window and saw his mum and dad drive up to the house. He went down into the cellar and carried the three tins of paint over to the cellar door. It opened out onto the back of the house, where the car stood parked. He opened the door, carried a tin over to the car and placed it in the boot, hurried back and fetched the other two before closing the boot as quietly as he could. When he came up from the cellar, Aunt Ranveig and dad were talking in the living room.

‘There you are,’ dad said. ‘Everything OK?’

‘Sure,’ Rune said.

‘Have you behaved yourself?’ mum asked.

Dad held out his hand, as if to give Rune something.

Rune looked at his hand.

‘We’ve been over to grandpa’s house and cleared up a bit, and we thought you might like to have this.’

Dad opened his hand. It was a watch. Rune remembered it. A watch that hung on the end of a chain. Rune took it. It was still warm from dad’s hand.

‘It’s stopped,’ Rune said.

‘You only need to wind it up,’ dad said. He turned back to Aunt Ranveig again. Rune wound the knob at the top of the watch, but there was no ticking sound. The hands stood still.

Atle's mail-box hang crookedly. His room was in the attic – they had to climb up a ladder. From his window you could see the church tower. The top of the church pointed upwards with the big, silver-grey scaffolding that had been erected when they were going to repair the roof.

'My grandpa died on Monday,' Rune said.

'OK,' Atle said. 'My uncle died up in the mountains. He fell down a crack in a glacier, and they couldn't get him up again. So now he's down there in the ice, frozen solid. And dad says when the ice melts, he'll start to live again.'

'No way,' Rune said.

'Yes, really. Just ask dad.'

'In that case he's going to be pretty confused when he wakes up,' Rune said.

He was picking at a model plane.

'I've got lots of paint for the hut, by the way,' he said. 'Brown paint.'

'OK,' Atle said. 'My cousin works at a paint factory, and I can get as much paint as I like.'

Rune pulled one of the wheels on the plane. It fell off.

'Have you ruined the plane?'

'No,' Rune said. 'It can easily be fixed.'

'You've got to pay for it.'

'Can't you just glue it on again?' Rune asked.

'But glue isn't for free,' Atle said.

Rune put the plane down.

'Shall we paint the hut?'

'Tomorrow perhaps,' Atle said. 'I've got to go with mum to a meeting.'

'What sort of meeting?'

'I don't know. But mum says I've got to go with her.'

Rune went through the gardens and up onto the path alongside the forest. At the edge of the forest, where they had built their hut, there lay three bikes. Rune looked up towards the hut. Three big boys were standing there. He recognised them. It was Anton, the Vicar's Son and Ruben from Drammen. They always hung out together.

They were kicking away at the planks. The Vicar's Son was heaving and pushing at the woodwork. The whole hut was swaying from side to side. Rune stood down on the path and shouted up to them:

'Don't ruin our hut!'

The boys stopped and looked at Rune.

'What did you say, half-pint?' Ruben from Drammen said.

'Don't ruin the hut,' Rune repeated. 'It's ours.'

'Got your name on it, has it?' the Vicar's Son said.

'No, but it's ours.'

'It's our hut now,' Anton said. He laughed as he said it. 'We need the planks.'

Rune looked at the bikes and back at the boys up there on the hill.

'Are your names on the bikes?' he said.

The boys fell silent. Rune could feel his hands shaking, but he clenched them hard so the boys couldn't see it.

‘I need a bike like that, and if yours haven’t got names on them, I’ll take one with me.’

He started to lead away one of the bikes. The boys threw down the planks and started to run down towards Rune.

‘You want me to kick your teeth in?’ the Vicar’s Son called out.

Rune threw away the bike and ran off down the path. He jumped into the hedge of the garden where Åse from his class lived, and squeezed past the tangle of branches. He could hear the boys coming after him, and Rune ran across the garden, up Åse’s steps and rang the door-bell. Anton came up onto the steps and grabbed his arm. Then the door opened. In front of them stood Åse’s mother. Anton let go and went down the steps.

‘Hello, Rune,’ Åse’s mother said with a smile. She had a blue shawl over her shoulders. ‘Come to visit Åse?’

Rune came into the hall. He closed the door behind him and saw through the window that the boys were standing out in the road.

‘Åse!’ the mother called up the stairs to the first floor.

‘Visitor for you.’

She turned round.

‘She’ll be down soon, she said before going into the living room.

Åse came down the stairs. She looked at Rune as if he was a soft present on Christmas Eve.

‘I was being chased by the Vicar’s Son,’ Rune said.

‘Come in,’ Åse said.

They went into the kitchen. From the window they could see the boys out in the road. They had fetched their bikes and were cycling back and forth in front of the house.

‘I don’t know if I’ll ever get home again,’ Rune said.

‘Let’s go up to my room, then they can stand out there till they get bored.’

Åse’s room smelt of hairspray. He had horse posters on the walls.

‘Do you like horses?’ Rune asked.

‘No, not really. My sister didn’t want them any longer. She thought I might get interested in horses if I looked at pictures of them.’

‘Does it work?’

‘I don’t know yet. I’ll give it another month.’

‘My grandpa died on Monday,’ Rune said.

‘Oh, not good,’ Åse said. ‘My grandma died last year, but she wasn’t particularly nice, so I didn’t feel sad. Did you feel sad?’

‘No, but grandpa was very nice.’

‘Then I don’t understand why you didn’t feel sad.’

‘Why wasn’t your grandma nice?’

‘We were never allowed to go into her place, but had to sit on the steps when mum was visiting. And when she came to our place, we had to curtsy, and we weren’t allowed to say “huh?”. We had to say “What did you say?”, and we weren’t allowed to be in the living room because we made so much noise, and one Christmas we got a book that had to do with how to behave, and once my sister forgot to place her serviette in her lap when we were to have dinner, and she didn’t get any food and had to go to bed early. She was crazy.’

‘Didn’t your mother say anything?’

‘I don’t think she dared, because grandma was so crazy.’

‘My grandpa wasn’t crazy.’

‘Then I don’t understand why you don’t feel sad,’ Åse said.

The boys had disappeared from the road when Rune left. Åse stood on the steps and waved. Rune thought he could hear bike tyres behind him, and started to run. Mum and dad were sitting in the kitchen when he got home. There were pans on the table. He could see from their plates that they had eaten.

‘Where have you been?’ mum asked.

‘At Atle’s,’ Rune said.

‘I phoned Atle, but you weren’t there,’ mum said.

‘I had to hide from three boys.’

‘Hide? Have you been in trouble? I don’t want you to get into trouble, Rune. We’re new here, and it’s not a good thing to get mixed up in trouble at this early stage.’

‘We’ve been living here for six months,’ dad said.

‘It wasn’t my fault,’ Rune said. ‘They were pulling down Atle’s and my hut.’

‘I understand,’ said mum, ‘but even so it’s not good to get mixed up in trouble.’

Rune didn’t say anything more, but put a potato on his plate. He held it in his hand and peeled the soft skin off with his knife. His mum got up, placed her plate in the sink and left the kitchen.

Dad sat looking at Rune.

‘Things all right with you, Rune?’ he asked.

‘Sure,’ Rune said.

4

That evening there was a film on TV. It had to do with a super-hero called Ray-X who could see through houses and cars. He had to stop a bad guy from pulling down a highrise building. They had talked about the film at school.

‘It’s bedtime,’ his mother said when the film was about to begin.

‘Can’t I see the film?’ Rune asked.

‘That’s OK,’ dad said.

‘It’s far too late,’ mum said.

Rune kept sitting there, but during a break for commercials his mum said that now he really must go to bed. Rune didn’t say anything, but got up when they heard sounds outside. It sounded like a shout. Rune stuck his face against the window pane. In the dark garden he could make out three shadows.

‘Not our apple tree!’ mum shouted.

Dad shot up and ran over to the verandah door. He slipped on a pair of clogs and went out. The shadows disappeared over the hedge. Rune ran to the door at the front of the house. He stood on the steps and peered out into the dark. It was completely still. Rune felt his arms getting cold. Then he heard the sounds. Three shadows cycled past on the road at top speed. It was extremely dark, but it was easy to recognise the long handlebars of Ruben from Drammen’s bike.

‘Rabble!’ Rune’s dad shouted as Rune went back in. ‘Pity I didn’t manage to grab them!’

‘I don’t want anyone to bother us,’ mum said.

The film began again, and Rune was allowed to see some more. Until the next commercials.

Rune lay in bed, but his eyes were open. He heard bike wheels braking out on the gravel, and thought he could hear laughter as well. When he got up and looked out at the dark road, it was empty. Rune went back to bed. He took out the watch, lay there winding the knob, but it hadn't started to go yet. Rune placed it under his pillow. He couldn't fall asleep. Every time he felt he was drifting off, he thought he could hear someone cycling outside, someone calling out and laughing.

He heard mum and dad go to bed.

He cautiously switched on the light and went over to the wardrobe. There he had the tins of paint he had got from Aunt Ranveig. He opened one of the tins and stuck a pencil down into the paint. The paint was thick and gooey and hard to stir. He could write letters. He started to spell his own name: R – U – N – ... The paint slowly slid back into the letters he had written. Then, when it was flat, he added a B and an O and got: B – R – U – N – O.

He stared at the letters that slowly disappeared into the brown paint. He wrote it once again: BRUNO.

He got up quickly. In the wardrobe he found a pair of brown trousers. On the shelf above he found a T-shirt that was black with brown stripes. He crept out into the living room. There was a light-brown blanket on the sofa. He took it back with him to his room and tied it round his neck. It made a fine cloak, but the knot was a bit big. Rune found a pair of scissors in the drawer by his desk. He cut out a half-moon where his neck could fit, and the knot became perfect. The piece of material he had cut out he put on so it looked like a mask. A bandit's mask.

Rune sneaked out into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. There he stood: Super-Hero Bruno. His heart was pounding inside the brown costume. He was no longer just Rune. Over the cupboard door hung a brown belt that his mum used. A proper super-hero belt. Now he was ready to go into action. He went back to his room and fished out the watch from under the pillow. He was about to place it in his pocket – and that was when he discovered it: the hands had started to move! Bruno placed the watch up to his ear and could hear ticking. He put the watch in his pocket and fixed the chain to the brown belt.

Bruno took one of the paint tins and went as quietly as he could to the outside door. He slipped on his shoes, opened the door carefully and crept out. The air was cold, the wind caught slightly in his cloak.

The garage door was open, and inside the garage Bruno found a thick paintbrush at the back of the shelves. Soon he was running across the road to the path on the other side. He knew where Ruben from Drammen lived. At the bend in the road, not far from Atle.

Ruben's bike stood parked on the lawn at the side of the house. Bruno crept over to the bike, lifted the lid of the paint tin and dipped the brush in the paint. It hung in a sticky mess on the bristles. Slowly he started to smear the brown paint over the bike. 'Lovely and brown', Bruno thought, 'just think how happy he'll be when he discovers he's got a lovely brown bike.' He giggled and dried the brush off on the grass next to the bike.

Bruno was finished and crept away, out onto the road, before he started to run. His cloak fluttered behind him.

He followed the path along the edge of the forest back home. It was extremely dark under the trees, but Bruno was unafraid. Super-heroes are not afraid of the dark, he thought and ran through the black forest.

Now he wasn't far from his home. Where the path ended and came to the road there was a large stone that Rune used to climb on. Someone was sitting on the stone.

Bruno gave a start when he discovered this, but was too close to get away without being seen. It was an old man.

‘Hello, Rune,’ the man said ‘Out on a mission, I see.’

Bruno came closer.

‘Grandpa? Is it you?’

‘Of course it’s me. I’m just sitting here enjoying the beautiful summer night.’

‘But... aren’t you dead?’

‘Oh yes,’ Grandpa said.

‘How can you be sitting here then?’

‘Just look at yourself,’ Grandpa said. ‘Aren’t you lying there asleep?’

‘Er... yes,’ said Bruno hesitatingly. ‘But that’s Rune lying there asleep. I’m Bruno.’

Grandpa laughed. He nodded.

‘I understand,’ he began by saying. ‘In that case, it’s Grandpa who is dead, and I am Super-Pa.’

Bruno giggled.

‘What’s the paint for?’ Grandpa asked.

‘Er, I ... was going to paint something.’

‘Yes, that’s my boy! But now you’d better hurry home before someone discovers you out on business in the middle of the night.’

‘Will I get to see you again, Grandpa?’

‘Of course you will. I sit here lots of times. I’ve got a view of your house from here, and I can look down to the water at the same time. Then I can think of the times when I went out fishing. I once caught a good-sized pike, it was almost as big as the boat I was sitting in. Have I ever told you about that?’

‘No,’ Bruno lied. ‘You’ve never told me about that.’

‘Or I could tell you about the time I drove my veteran car all the way to Italy to buy a hotdog, but I must have told you about that?’

‘No,’ Bruno said. ‘Tell me!’

Grandpa looked at him for a long time. He gave a little laugh.

‘No, that will have to be another night. Now you must get a move on. Daylight will soon be over the ridge.’

Bruno began to move towards the house.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow night,’ Bruno said.

Grandpa waved from the stone.

Back in his room, Bruno took off the costume and became Rune again. He loosened the watch from the belt. Now the hands had stopped. Rune tried winding the knob, but nothing happened. Soon Rune was lying in his bed trying to get to sleep. The Bruno costume and the paint were hidden at the back of the cupboard.