

# One Week in the Life of Nøkken

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Translated by Jean Paul Bardou

I did my internship in a kindergarten called Nøkken, located in the Northwest area of Copenhagen. It is located right in the middle of the city, and yet it feels as if it is in the countryside.

There are three teachers at Nøkken. Helle Heckmann, who started the kindergarten fifteen years ago, is the daily leader. She takes care of the smallest children in Lille Nøkken (Small Nøkken). Søren is primarily with the middle group, and Rune has the older children, but the middle and older groups are mixed together. Liv is an assistant teacher working part-time. I suspect that Liv hides a magic wand somewhere, simply because she can really do magic. She can turn a sad, gray basement into a convivial dining room with light, warmth, and a delightful, quiet harvest atmosphere. Otherwise, she is with the smaller children. There are three interns, Daniella, a first-year intern, Tove, a third-year intern, and myself. Altogether, there are twenty-seven children at Nøkken with nine in each age group.

## Monday

### The Right Word

*Only the meaningful should come to the lips of those who strive for higher development. To talk for the sake of talking, for example to pass the time, is damaging. We should avoid talking to each other purely for enjoyment. We must, however, not isolate ourselves from being in contact with other people. In that kind of contact, our talking must slowly develop into meaningfulness. We are always ready to talk to others, but everything we speak must be well thought out and well considered. Otherwise, it is best to remain silent. One must try to use neither too few nor too many words. Listen first, and then process what was heard.*

I ride my bicycle in the rain on my way to Nøkken. The streetlights will soon be turned off, and it won't be long until the church bells ring. It is almost 8:00 a.m. I make my way down Støvnes Allé, looking for

Nøkken, I come to a large, comfortable, yellow house with climbing roses on each side of the door. There is also another brand new house next door. I can almost smell the Swedish fir of which it is built. The area around the house is a construction site. The house patiently waits to start its function as the "New" Nøkken, I cross the gate that stands between the two houses, and I enter Nøkken's garden. There is a vague cover of fog and chimney smoke. Daniella has started the wood stove in Lille Nøkken,

I am met with an open hand and a smile, "Good morning." We welcome each other and a new day. The church bells ring and we start our morning meeting, standing outside as we always do. There we read relevant literature, talk about the day, and mention which children are not coming. The verses for the day and the week are read aloud with devotion. In that morning time, stillness and a force are being planted in me as a small seed.

It is 8:30 a.m., and the day has begun. The children slowly start streaming in through the gate. Each of us starts doing some meaningful work. Helle and Daniella hang laundry to dry near Lille Nøkken, Tove gives some fresh hay to the rabbits while Rune and I are in full swing sawing wood. A six-year-old boy standing near Søren greets us, "Good morning." He comes directly towards us with outstretched arms. "Good morning, Peter. Good morning, Tiril." He is anticipating with joy a new and eventful day in the kindergarten.

The garden is now nearly full of children, and it is close to 9:00 a.m. Helle calls out for the children to come to the morning circle by singing: "All the children must come now, we are going to sing!" The circle is formed and a beautiful seasonal song resonates. Helle continues with, "Good morning altogether, a new day starts. Jonas is here, Sine is here, Helle is here." When our name is called out, we bow to show that we are present.

*We are now here altogether.  
Above the clouds the sun shines, round and golden. All  
the children greet each other  
first on one side and then on the other, and  
each and every flower and every bird.  
The firs and the birches whistle in the fresh wind,  
Hear all the roosters that stand and crow  
in the morning Cock-  
a-doodle-do!*

Helle says, "Will you please hop on one leg to the gate." Small and large, we all hop out through the gate, on our walk to the roundabout. A three-year old boy goes with me, hand in hand. He is tired so we don't say anything. We walk and listen to Tove's beautiful lantern song: "Lantern, lantern, sun, moon and stars. Shine my light high, shine my light high." Rune goes first, and all the children follow him in a long line. My place is in the middle between Rune and the smallest who come at the end with the carriages, or in them. It is Helle or Daniella who push the carriages. I must make sure that all the older children walk in front of the carriages.

We stop just after coming through the cemetery gate, for that is the area we call the roundabout. Here, there is a lot of room to play freely among many kinds of trees. There are trees to climb and bushes to hide and make caves in. There is room to play for all. A four-year-old girl and boy are used to having a specific tree, a slanted fir that is grouped with other trees, forming a corner by the roots. Here they climb to the top, sitting and chatting until it is time for the singing game.

In the middle of the roundabout stands a huge tree, its trunk stable and strong with its lowest branches high up. This is where Helle and the smallest children are, for it is a good and safe place. Rune takes his stick and knife out and walks around quietly, keeping a discrete eye on what is going on in the corners. Tove has found her hand-spinning tool and her wool box while Søren carves a beet into a lantern. All are well spread around the whole area.

I look for a good piece of wood that could possibly become a small mouse. While I look around, I have good opportunities to take a peek into the different games the children play. The sun breaks through between the trees, but the cold bites our cheeks a bit. It is about 10:00 a.m. when Rune calls the children to come to him for the singing game.

After that, the children play freely again until 10:30 a.m. A little boy's stomach starts to rumble. We know it because he begins to call out as Helle does when it is time to go home, "All children must come now, we must go home!" The children stream from the corners to the place where we gather before going home.

Today we have rice pudding on the menu. After the meal, Tove tells a fairy tale. She does it for two weeks and then it will be Søren's turn. The atmosphere from the fairy tale remains during the playtime in the garden that follows. There is no shortage of creativity or fantasy. The children play freely in the garden before and after snack at 1:30 p.m. In the meantime, I paint the swing chair. When it gets to be 2:15 p.m. it is time to clean up. The parents start to come to pick up their children. The last ones come to the waiting stair. We shake hands, "Goodbye, thank you for today."

After all of the children are gone, the adults form a circle and take each other's hand. If we have any comments regarding the day that just finished, then we share them at this time. Then we say, "Good-bye and thank you for today."

## ***Tuesday Right Action***

*Our outer actions should not have a deleterious effect on our being human. When we feel in our inner consciousness the motivation to act, we must carefully consider how that action can be most consequent with the whole and with other people's well-being. When we take action from our own interest, we must deeply consider the possible effects of our actions.*

It is 8:30 a.m., and a six-year-old girl comes through the gate. She greets us all, and we greet her, "Good morning!" The garden becomes more and more lively as children fill it. After the morning song, we must walk backwards towards the gate! It is fun to see how good the children are at it, they don't fall at all! When we reach the street and all are gathered, Rune watches carefully for cars and bicycles before standing in the middle of the street with his arms stretched out: "Will you now cross the street?" Two four-year-old girls are not thinking about going anywhere; they look at something on the ground, and could have discussed what it was for ten min-

utes. But we must move along, "On your way, on your way!" They know that well, and get going at a good pace. We reach the roundabout. Because of the light rain, we have taken rain clothes with us, and the hats are tight. None of that gets in the way of the playing. It is nice to be here, rain or shine.

Today, some boys have an interesting experience. A four-year-old boy jumps from the lowest branch of a large tree. He is sure of his jump, but a small branch gets caught in his coat. He is stuck in a position that is not dangerous for him. Then I see two other boys, one six and the other four, come to help him, so I choose to let them try to manage it on their own. The bigger and stronger six-year-old boy starts lifting the hanging child while the four year-old concentrates on freeing the coat from the branch. They do not manage at the first attempt, but that is no reason for giving up! By the third time, the boy in the tree begins to get tired of hanging there and starts mumbling something to the others to the effect of getting an adult to help. Helle also follows what is going on and says in a loud voice that I can go and help. But as soon as the boys hear that, they put all their energy into that last attempt that had to succeed, and it does! I have seldom seen two boys be so proud of themselves. It highlights for me that the experience of being able to do something by oneself strengthens self-esteem and the desire to try.

After the singing game, two of the older boys think that there is not enough happening, and they start putting dirt into the drinking water bottle. They find it very enjoyable until Tove catches them in the act. Tove is strict for she did not find their prank very amusing. They consequently have to sit for a time by Helle. The conniving, mischievous looks slowly fade from their faces as more and more of the other children come to have a drink. The boys realize that it was not really funny that the others should be thirsty because they put dirt in the drinking water. I believe that it will be a while before those boys do that type of action again.

"All children must come now, we must go home!" It is 10:40 a.m., and stomachs rumble. We gather and start to walk back home. When we reach the gate, the youngest go to Lille Nøkken, while the middle and older group go down to the basement cloakroom. When eighteen children come into such a small room, the temperature rises quickly, and

the temptation to make trouble grows. It is as if the air gets overfilled with energy. Søren starts singing the Lantern Song, and the children concentrate on taking off their coats. One four-year-old boy could sit on the floor forever. It looks like he is building castles in the air on those four buttons sewn to his coat. I ask him to take his boots off. He looks at me and kindly asks for help. But Søren says that he can manage by himself. He does finally manage, but he needed the extra time. The older children are quickly done taking off their coats and washing their dirty hands in warm water. They are really quite good at helping the smaller ones: pulling tight boots off and untying scarves.

We go into the most central room in the basement. Earlier this morning, when I looked in, it was full of painting supplies and seemed a bit sad. But Liv had been there in the meantime with her magic wand: she had made a partition with a piece of cloth so the painting supplies were hidden, and she had decorated the place with candles and tablecloths. When all are sitting at their places, Rune asks for quiet. There are three candles on the table, surrounded by autumn leaves. Rune strikes a match and lights the candles, letting one child blowout the match. Rune sits down, and we sing our blessing.

Rune asks a six-year-old boy to be his helper today. The boy is glad to do so and starts dishing out the rice pudding with a serious look on his face. To preserve the quiet, Rune tells a little story about the time he broke his arm when he was a child. In the meantime, I pour warm herb tea in glasses and cups. The children are hungry, and they eat the food as soon as they get it. While we eat, Søren and Rune often tell small stories, which helps the children eat and be quiet instead of fooling around with each other. Consequently, the noise is considerably less. A little three-year-old boy manages to eat four servings before he has had enough. While I clean up later on, I can see that others have secretly dropped a couple of bites on the floor. The children use the bathroom and get ready to go outside for a story and playtime.

When I am done cleaning up, I go out to the garden. Fairy tale time is already over, and the children are quite involved with playing. I find a mess of leaves, old bricks and rotting apples in the back of the playhouse. I clean up there until snack time. Two small boys, almost three-years-old, saying they will

be glad to help me clean away leaves and apples, come with a small wheelbarrow and a shovel. They can't talk very well yet, so we sing songs. We eat our snack, and yet another day is almost gone. I greet the father of my two helpers and say: "Good-bye and thank you for today."

### **Wednesday** **The Right Standpoint**

*Our attitude towards life must be to live naturally and spiritually. Don't get involved with life's superficial aspects. Avoid all that brings unquiet and precipitation in life; don't do anything in over-excitement, but don't have too much inertia either. Consider life as a means to work, to higher development and act accordingly.*

We sing and shout: "Cock-a-doodle-do!" We shout especially loud today because Helle had told us that Mohammed, one of the carpenters, had not heard us at all yesterday. "You must go to the gate on stiff legs!" Rune takes us safely across the street, and we joyfully get going, but today, we are not going to the roundabout. Instead, we go to the rolling slope. The rolling slope could at first glance look like the roundabout: tall trees with long and heavy branches reaching all the way down to the ground; bushes and scrubs to hide. But here there are stone stairs and a large grass area. There is another atmosphere, too. The trees are closer together here which makes it a bit more secretive than the roundabout. The older children rejoice over the possibility of having a large hiding place without adults, and if an adult should come by, the voices go to whispers and murmurs. It is nice to have something that is your own.

I sit, carving my stick, when I suddenly notice three children up in a tree. They are well underway towards an argument with loud voices. Two boys (four and five) and a four-year-old girl, all three very energetic children, want to be the one to sit at the top of the tree. The voices get louder, and they are very close to getting really mad at one other. Helle says that she does not want to have screaming children and that they should come down from the tree. There is some mumbling up there in the tree, and after a short time, all three are sitting on the very same branch with a generous view over the grass area. There is room for all, and enough to talk about.

Over by the hedge is Helle's place, and the small

children putter around her. Diagonal from the hedge is the reason for the location's name, namely the rolling slope. Here they roll down the small slanted slope, on and off from time to time when they want to get a bit dizzy. It is almost 10 a.m. and Rune calls the children for the singing game. The smaller children may join in if they want to, and they often do. Rune gets down on his knees, and we gather in a circle. Two two-year-old boys are too fascinated by Rune's movements to follow him. Sometimes one hand comes up with a small motion that is slightly like Rune's, but they mostly sit with gaping mouths and are totally engrossed in what is going on. It is wonderful to watch children's intense desire to learn.

Rune stands up, and we all agree that it is a bit too cold to remain sitting on the ground. To get warmed up, Rune sings while he hops around a little: "Freezing, shivering, sneezing noses. Stamping, trampling, ouch the wind bites." The children laugh; it is so much fun to get warm that way.

After the singing games, the children may play freely again until 10:30 a.m. when it is time to go back. We gather in front of the rolling slope and go home another way than we usually do. On our way, we stop by each watering place and look. If it is freezing weather; we look to see if there is ice in the barrels. Fingers get cold from holding ice, but it is so fascinating that the children cannot resist playing with it.

After we come back home, we wash our hands, and it is time to eat. We eat milled porridge today and drink warm tea. Soon all have outdoor clothes on and it is time for the fairy tale. Outside, there is a small sandbox with a bit of grass around it. Carpets hang on clotheslines to create an undisturbed space. This is the fairy tale room.

One of the older children is the helper and sits next to Tove. The helper has a lyre on her or his lap. We form a circle in the middle of which there is a tree stump covered with silk, where a small lantern stands. Tove lights the lantern and sings for the fairy tale to come to her: After that, the helper must play the lyre to make the fairy tale come down from the stars. Two fingers glide over each and every string. The same fairy tale is told all week. One must know it by heart, because after a couple of days, the children remember precisely how it was told, and one gets corrected if any words are forgotten. The story

ends as it should, with everlasting happiness after hard challenges. Then the helper plays again to send the fairy tale back to the stars.

It is almost 1:30 a.m., and the children have played well in the garden. I have sawed enough wood for the stove for a couple of days, but there can never be too much firewood. All the children now come; for it is time for snack. It is getting to be 2:00 p.m., and we sing: "Ding, ding-a-ling, each takes a thing, cleaning up and laying down, all children must come along." After we clean the garden together, the children that have not been picked up by parents yet go to the waiting stair. The waiting stair has exactly six steps. The older children sit on the upper step, and so on down the steps by age, and wait until mother or father comes through the gate to get them. We greet the parents and say: "Good-bye and thank you for today."

#### **Thursday**

#### ***Let all previous exercises become habits***

*One must be careful not to do anything that lies outside the realm of one's abilities, and not to leave out something that lies inside of that realm. One must see further than the daily and the instantaneous, and set goals and ideals that fit with a human being's highest duties. For instance wanting to develop oneself to be better able to help and counsel other people, although it might not happen in the near future.*

We welcome the children that have just arrived. A five-year-old boy has a difficult time saying goodbye to his mother today. He cries and asks for his mother. His little brother looks at him with soft eyes. It is strange that his brother's crying does not rub off on him. After the morning song, the boy has overcome his difficult good-bye with his mother. He has his eyes on the new day and the upcoming experiences with his friends.

Before leaving for the roundabout, we try to walk to the gate on the tips of our toes. It is difficult with big boots, but all try the best they can, and if some cannot, they try to go backwards instead. It is fun to see how much they try to show what they *can* do rather than giving up. On the way to the roundabout, the lantern songs resonate. The songs sink into the children as the celebration gets nearer, and they talk with one another about the upcoming

ing festival. At the roundabout there is a huge tree with long branches that hang low. It is perfect to climb, for the branches are supple. Those who have not yet figured out how to climb can simply hang and swing on the lowest branches. Two two-year-old boys have practiced climbing in trees several times. They climbed up easily, but when it was time to come down, they regretted having climbed up so high. Somebody had to help them down. For that reason, they are not allowed to climb up in the big trees anymore. They stand and peep at the nice climbing trees. One day, they will dare to climb again.

Rune does the singing game when it is about 10 a.m. The older children have whispered that they would like to hide from Rune during the singing game. Strangely enough, they are the first ones to show up when Rune calls out. Then, the children play freely for half an hour more until Helle calls them, and we are on our way back home again.

Today we shall eat pate. It tastes good, and the dish is soon empty. The cloakroom fills with children and songs; the energy is irreproachable. The older children are good at helping the smaller ones with dressing. They know precisely what clothes belong to whom.

After the fairy tale, I get my small paint bucket and my paintbrush. Painting the swinging chair is a long process. The swinging chair stands in a corner of the garden, right next to the large sandbox. I hope that no one pays notice to my "wandering" ears. I have also a perfect view over the activities that go on in the garden. The children have been watching the carpenters build the new house long enough to know how it is done. They have been inspired, and the girls have stacked up some walls with pallets to make a room. They have added a board, some chairs and, at times, a computer. While they potter around and have a good time in their new house, a boy is well underway mixing cement. The water and sand is thoroughly mixed with a stick before it gets slapped on bricks, and nicely spread on top before a new brick is added. That, I must say, is the best and most clear example of imitation I have seen. In the end, it becomes a very nice house to decorate the garden. Some three-year-old children, two girls and a boy, come to me as I paint the swinging chair. Earlier, I had sung a song about a troll from the Norwegian forest that they wanted to hear again. I keep painting while I sing, and it is not long before they paint

with me with imaginary paint brushes, while their heads swing from side to side in pace with the song. In the garden, the older children help by cutting vegetables for tomorrow's soup. They sit and complain a bit about this "boring" task, but in fact they seem to enjoy the company. It is, in fact, quite a social activity to sit across from one another and prepare a common meal.

It is 1:30 p.m., and time to have a snack. The older groups sit at the two long tables that stand in the garden. Rune comes with a basket full of appetizing apples. Each child gets one. "Oh, no! There is a worm in my apple," announces a four-year-old boy. "You should not worry about it," says an older girl. "It tastes just the same as the rest of the apple, and it is not dangerous." "Yeah," says the boy. He takes a puzzled look at his apple and eats the whole thing, quite satisfied with the apple's taste. After they eat their apple, the children run to play again.

A couple of two-year-old girls play well. One of them has tucked the other into a metal bucket, and she has a large blue sheet as a blanket. She gives the "baby" plenty of food and drink, too. (Here in the kindergarten, you are properly cared for.)

### **Friday Right Memory**

*Everything we meet is a good means to gather experiences that are useful for one's life. Has one done something that is not quite right or not perfect? Let it be an opportunity to later do something right or perfect. We must strive to learn as much as possible from life. If we observe other's actions, let us do it with purpose, but with a loving eye. We need to always look back on the experiences that can help us reach what we want to achieve. We can learn a lot from all people, even children.*

Friday is a special day, because the smaller children don't come to Nøkken. Consequently, this day offers different possibilities. When the children have arrived and we sing the morning song, it is not to the cemetery that we go, but to the swamp. The swamp is just down the street from the kindergarten. We follow the narrow path along the water. There are benches every twenty-five meters and the children may run freely, as long as they stop at each bench. When we are all gathered by the next bench, Rune says: "You may go on." Many interesting things

can be found on the bank. These days, there is a dirt heap along the edge of the water, where the children find some large living mussels. They go down to the edge of the water, lying on their stomachs so that there is no risk of falling in. Of course, an adult keeps a watchful eye.

We arrive at the large fallen willow tree. It is a good climbing tree and is also a charming tree, just waiting there for children to come and make it useful! There is a large fire pit with an outer circle of stones to sit on or to be used for a bonfire. Rune has brought some dry wood from the kindergarten, and he lights a little fire for us. At first, there are not so many children around the bonfire; they play on the large tree trunks next to it. Rune and I sit and carve a little, in the warmth from the bonfire. One of the older children comes over and pulls his knife out; he wants to join the quiet. We do not say much to one another—we just carve. More come over, and we end up sitting all together. The smaller children use two wood sticks: one is a knife, and the other, well, a wooden stick. There is a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. The eyes of some of us disappear in a dream into the flames of the bonfire, listening to Rune's story about his travels.

We put out the bonfire and head home. We have a little more time today, because there are no small children that must nap, and the soup that awaits us is better from sitting a bit. It takes a bit longer to get home because we walk another way. We go by a large stone that has been cut and polished in the water, with stairs to climb. It sways a little and makes rings in the water. The children who can manage the stairs on their own may go on it. Those who cannot manage stand and watch—a foot is hesitantly placed on the first step, but goes no further. One day they will dare to take the first step.

We go home for now we are hungry. The warm soup is dished out by one of the oldest children. When we are done eating, it is fairy tale time and then time for free play. Soon it is time to clean up and go home. Both parents and children join hands and say: "Good-bye and thank you for today." For all the week been enriching and eventful.