

The Meeting Pool

RUSKIN BOND



It was Somi's idea that we should meet at the pool in ten years' time.

'When we are men,' he said, 'we must come back to this place. Ten years from today, Rusty—at mid-day on the fifth of April 1964—we must return to the pool. No matter where we are, or what we are doing, or if we are married and have children, we must meet at the pool. Promise?'

'Promise,' I said.

'Promise,' said Anil.

It was a schoolboy's pledge, and made in deadly earnest. As boys, we usually mean the things we say. And so we shook hands on it, and dived back into the water.

The pool had been discovered by me a few months earlier. I remember that it was going to rain. . . . I could see the rain moving across the foothills, and I could smell it on the breeze. But instead of turning homewards, I pushed my way through the leaves and brambles that grew across the forest path. I had heard the murmur of water at the bottom of the hill, and I wanted to see the water and touch it.

Sliding down a rock-face into a small ravine, I found the stream running over a bed of shingle. Water trickled down from the hillside, from amongst ferns and grasses and wild primroses. The rocks beside the stream were smooth, and some of them were grey and some yellow. A small waterfall came down the rocks and formed a deep, round pool of apple-green water.

When I saw the pool, I turned and ran back to town because I wanted to tell the others.

Anil and Somi were my closest friends. Anil lived in a crowded lane off the Dilaram Bazaar. He was wild and a little dangerous, subject to moods and impulses, but he had a

certain animal charm. Somi, on the other hand, was sensitive, gentle in his ways; but in common with Anil he had a sense of fun and an instinct for adventure. They usually chose the adventures we were to have and I would just grumble and allow myself to be involved in them. But the pool was my own discovery, and I was proud of it.

'We'll call it Rusty's pool' said Somi. 'And remember, it's a secret pool, no one else must know about it.'

I think it was the pool that brought us together more than anything else. Somi was a beautiful swimmer. He dived off rocks and went gliding about under the water like a long golden fish. Anil's legs and arms were very long, and he threshed about with much vigour but little skill. I could dive off a rock, too, but I usually landed on my stomach.

There were slim silver fish in the waters of the stream. At first we tried catching them with a line, but they soon acquired the art of taking the bait without being caught on the hook. Next we procured a bedsheet (Anil removed it from his mother's laundry), and we stretched it across one end of the stream; but the fish wouldn't come anywhere near it. Finally, without telling us, Anil fetched a stick of gunpowder from a fireworks shop. Somi and I were startled out of an afternoon siesta by a flash across the water and a deafening explosion. Half the hillside tumbled into the pool, and so did Anil; but we got him out, along with a good supply of stunned fish that were really too small to eat. Anil, however, didn't want all his work going to waste; so he roasted his fish over a fire and ate them by himself . . . including their tails.

The effects of the explosion gave Anil another idea . . . to enlarge our pool by building a dam across one end. This was accomplished with our combined labour. But we had chosen the season of the monsoon rains, and one day a torrent of water came rushing down the bed of the stream, bursting the dam and flooding us out of the ravine. Our clothes were carried away, and we had to wait until it was dark before slinking homewards stark naked. We kept to the darkest alleys, but

Somi was spotted near a lamp-post. He simulated the stance of a naked fakir and began calling for alms, and finally slipped in through the backdoor of his house without being recognized.

Other activities at the pool included wrestling and buffalo-rides. We wrestled on a strip of sand that came down to the edge of the water, and rode on a couple of buffaloes that sometimes came to drink and wallow in the more muddy pads of the stream. We would sit astride the buffaloes, and kick and yell and urge them forward; but we were never able to move them. At best they would roll over on their backs, taking us with them into the soft mud.

It didn't really matter how muddy we got, because we had only to dive into the pool to wash off the mess. If it was possible to get out of our houses undetected at night, we would come to the pool and bathe by moonlight. We bathed silently, because the stillness and eeriness of the surrounding jungle seemed to discourage high spirits. We saw several snakes, which came out to feed on the frogs that spent the summer nights in full-throated song. An impassive owl occasionally watched us from the branch of a big sal tree. Sometimes Somi would sing in a deep, pleasant voice; and we would float magnolia blossoms down the moonlit stream.

a tree or bush having white

I don't remember how we finally broke up; it was hardly noticeable at the time. In spite of our pledge to return to the pool as grown men, we never really believed that we would go different ways, that we would be leaving the pool. After about a year, Somi passed his matriculation examination and entered a military school. When I saw him about three years ago, he was sporting a fierce and very military moustache. Shortly after Somi left school, Anil and his family went away to Delhi, and I did not see them again. I could not visualise Anil in any conventional occupation, he was so wild and unpredictable. And yet, sometimes I wondered. . . . Those who are rather wild when they are young, often grow up to be respectable people; while the quiet, reserved ones turn out to be perfect hellions.

yellow
purple
flower

a person who behaves
like a child

And what of the pool, and our pledge to come back after ten years?

In April I happened by chance to be in the same part of the country, and I decided that I at least would keep my part of the pledge. But I could not find the pool. I found the ravine, and the bed of shingle, but there was no water. The stream had changed its course, just as we had changed ours.

I waited in the ravine for two or three hours, but no one came. I suppose it was foolish of me to expect anyone. Somi must have been with his unit, Anil occupied with the business of living. Probably they both had families. I was the only one who hadn't really grown up.

I turned away disappointed, and with a dull ache in my heart. Friends, and day-dreams, and even forest pools must succumb to the inexorable, deceitful journey of Time.

But I hadn't gone far when I heard the splashing of water and the shouting of boys; and pushing my way through a thicket, I found another stream and another pool, and half-a-dozen boys splashing about in the water.

They did not see me, and I kept in the shadow of the trees and watched them play. But I didn't really see them. I was seeing Somi and Anil and the comfort-loving buffaloes. And I stood there for nearly an hour, a disembodied spirit, romping again in the shallows of our secret pool.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruskin Bond (b.1934) has delighted his readers for several decades by writing stories set mostly around the hills and valleys in the foothills of the Himalayas. In many of his stories, a boy called Rusty appears as the first person narrator. He was born in Kasauli and when he lost his father at the age of ten, he went to Dehra Dun to live with his grandmother. He has been living in Landour, near Mussoorie since 1960. His first book *Room on the Roof* was published when he was twenty one and it received the John Llewelyn award in England. Of his numerous books, some of the best known are *Panthers Moon*, *Night Train to Deoli*, *Angry River*, *A Season of Ghosts* and *Vagrants in the*

group of wishes that grow close together

an enjoyable time of rough & noisy play

divest of a body
dispossession

Valley. His short story, 'A Flight of Pigeons', was made into a film (*Junoon*) by Shyam Benegal. Vishal Bhardwaj has made a film based on Bond's story, *The Blue Umbrella*.

ABOUT THE STORY

'The Meeting Pool' is a tender evocation of boyhood. It also conveys a sense of the passage of time by making us aware that one cannot go back in time, and innocence once lost cannot be recaptured. When ten years later the narrator comes back he cannot find the pool of his childhood, yet he sees other boys splashing about in other pools which reminds him of the continuity of life.

GLOSSARY

hellions: colloquial word meaning a person given to devilry.

QUESTIONS

1. Did Rusty really expect to find his friends at the pool after ten years? Why did he come?
2. Describe some of the antics of the three friends and say what they reflect about boyhood.
3. 'The stream had changed its course, just as we had changed ours.' Analyse the significance of this sentence in the light of the rest of the story.
4. Rusty does not say much about himself. What do we learn of his character from the story?
5. Why did his disappointment at not finding his friends suddenly change into happiness?

LANGUAGE WORK

- A. Rewrite the following passage using the present tense forms for all the verbs:

Anil and Somi were my closest friends. Anil lived in a crowded lane. He was wild and a little dangerous, but he had a certain animal charm. Somi on the other hand, was sensitive and gentle,