



## **BILLIE AND BO AND THE PHENOMENAL CHRISTMAS**

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Original title: *Billie og Bo og den heidundrande jula*

Illustrated children's book for readers age 6 - 9

100 pages

Publisher: Gyldendal

Publication date: October 2024

Translated from the Norwegian by Rachel Rankin

Oslo Literary Agency has received translation grant support from NORLA.

### **A BOX IN THE ATTIC**

When we arrived in Billie's stairwell, I asked if we shouldn't have that sandwich straight away. But nope. We were heading straight up into the attic to search.

There was writing on the attic door, almost exactly the same as what was written down in the basement: *Billie and Kalle's storage space*. It was tight in there beneath the slanting roof – the little storage space was crammed.

"Oh, there are quite a few cardboard boxes here," I said and felt that I was losing my motivation before we'd even started.

"You start over that end and I'll start here," said Billie, and then she was off.

*You're not playing about*, I thought and made sure to search carefully.

I realised that Billie was working her way through a box of old comic books because all of a sudden she was completely absorbed and I had to remind her of why we were there.

I had just opened my second box and, when I saw that it contained mostly papers, I was about to close it again. But a photo was poking out from one corner, and of course I had to check it out. I pulled it out and saw that it was of a little girl with tangled hair who was missing both of her front teeth. I had to smile because it wasn't hard to see who it was.

I was just about to show it to Billie when she went:

"Yes, found it!" She held up the star and smiled, showing all her teeth. "Nice, right?"

"Yes, it is," I said, because it certainly would be once it was lit up.

"And here's the Christmas tree stand too, yes," she mumbled to herself.

"But best of all!" she shouted suddenly and started pulling out thick ropes of glitter in turquoise and pink and gold. "Check out all the Christmas decorations we have, Bo!"

The ropes looked a bit shabby, and to be completely honest, they weren't exactly the kinds of Christmas decorations I was used to. But Billie clearly loved it.

"Huv ye ever seen anythin' as bonnie as this before?"

"Uh..."

For a moment I wasn't sure if she was joking or not, since she said it like that, but then she continued, and it was then I realised that she meant it.

"These right here, Bo, are sure as heck some of the *most beautiful* things in existence." She ran her hand over the glitter. "*Garlands*, I think they're called. And check this out," she said, fishing out a long length of something else.

I had to study it for a bit to figure out what it was. Then I saw it: loads of toilet roll tubes all strung together. They were painted and covered in bits of cotton wool, and it looked like a slithering snow snake.

"Great, right? I've just pulled a string through them all. It usually hangs from the top of the tree and goes all the way down to the floor."

"Jeez."

"Just wait until you see our Christmas tree. You have never seen anything so cool, Bo, I promise you that."

I noticed that I was just nodding. I didn't manage to say anything. Because I didn't exactly want to lie or anything. Then I realised I was still holding the photograph, which worked out well, because then we could talk about something other than the slightly unusual Christmas tree decorations that Billie was so proud of.

"Take a look at her!" I said, holding the photograph out towards Billie.

“That’s me, Bo!”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Where did you find that?” she said, bounding over to where I was sitting.

Then she leaned over my box and started rummaging around.

“I think it’s mostly just papers in here,” I said.

But for some reason or another, Billie kept searching. Maybe she was hoping to find more loose photos of herself. *You’re not playing about*, I thought when I saw that old receipts and all sorts were being scattered all over the attic floor.

She had almost reached the very bottom of the box when she stopped. She was quiet for a few seconds, then suddenly lifted up what looked like a big, dark-green book.

She opened it and turned to the first page before looking at me.

“I’ve found a whole photo album, Bo.”

“Oh, cool.”

Billie didn’t reply, and I wasn’t sure if she actually thought it was so cool.

She flicked through it in silence for a short while, and then looked up at me again.

“I think it’s from when Mum and Dad were going out, before they had me.”

“Oops,” I said.

“It looks like they had it pretty good,” she said, and it was then I realised that she wanted me to sit closer and look, so I did.

There were photos of them standing on top of a mountain, and there were photos of them jumping into the ocean while holding hands. There were even photos of them *kissing*, with fireworks in the background. In all the photos where they were looking into the camera, they were smiling.

I wondered how it would have been if Mum had gone out with my dad, if they might also have had an album like this. And how my dad would have looked if he were the one jumping into the ocean or smiling on top of a mountain.

“Oh,” said Billie when she’d turned to one page. “Check out that belly!”

For there was a person who must have been her mum, in just a bikini or whatever it was, with an enormous belly.

“Is that you in there?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“Haven’t you seen this before?”

“No...all the photos of me when I was a baby are in the album we have in the living room. But there’s almost none of Mum in there.”

Then we came to the last page of the album, and it felt just like a cold gust of wind passed through the attic. There was only one photo at the very back, but it was completely different to the smiling photos that had come before.

It was of a lady in a hospital bed. Only after looking at it more closely did I realise that it was the same lady as in the other photos – that is, Billie’s mum. She was completely transformed, her face almost grey, with a mouth that I think was trying to smile but not quite managing it. In the window in the background hung a large Christmas star.

I glanced at Billie. She was sitting as though turned to stone, staring at the picture, and I noticed that she was reading something that was written beside the photo because she was tracing underneath the words, like she always did whenever she was reading. It wasn’t especially nice handwriting, but I still managed to read it. I read it just to myself, but it was as though I could hear Kalle’s voice in those words.

*Two stars*, it said.

## THE STAR

We didn’t just take the star with us down from the attic. We more or less took the whole box with the decorations and the Christmas tree stand.

“So I know where they are,” said Billie when we carried it down the stairs and into the flat.

She hadn’t said too much after we’d closed the album, but I noticed that she was trying to be in a good mood and act like everything was normal.

But things weren’t normal – I knew that. Because when I, up in the attic, had asked if we weren’t going to take the photo album down with us as well, she had simply shaken her head and put it back in the box.

I’m not often in Billie’s house, just like she isn’t often in mine. We’re mostly outside whenever we’re together.

That’s why I had to spend a bit of extra time looking around and noticing how it smelled in their flat. It’s much messier than ours, but it’s still cosy. The only thing I noticed that wasn’t so cosy was the plant beside the TV. It looked pretty sad. It was like I could hear it screaming for water, or perhaps for love – it’s hard to say.

Just as I was about to suggest we give it some water, Billie started showing and explaining things.

“Here is the advent candle holder!”

She was standing beside the coffee table and holding her hand out towards it, as though it were a work of art.

“And it always sits on this little tablecloth,” she said, stroking the material as though it were the softest fur.

“And don’t get hung up on the fact that not all the candles are purple, Bo.”

“I won’t,” I said, even though I had noticed that there were only two purple ones, as well one red and one orange. A colourful congregation.

“I started with the orange one, as you can see, since it’s the least Christmassy. Then it just gets better and better the further into December we go. Get it?”

“I get it. Do you usually say some kind of advent verse...when you light them?”

At first she just looked at me, as though it were the stupidest question she could ever have been asked. Then she lifted the matchbox that was on the table and took one out.

She gave me a serious look before striking it and lighting the orange candle. When she blew out the match, she fixed her eyes on me again and began:

*O little candle burning bright.  
you light the darkness every night  
you light the path to every heart.*

Her voice was loud and clear and ceremonious.

She squinted, and then I realised that she was finished and that she might be waiting for a reaction.

“Oh,” I said. “Th-that was lovely.”

“I know. And will I give you some words of wisdom, Bo?”

“Yeah?”

“The thing is, that verse just popped into my head yesterday while I was sitting sewing buttons onto my jacket.”

“Did it?”

“And the weird thing is that it feels like I have *always* known it.”

“Jeez...a lovely verse,” I said again.

“Yes, it’s quite *powerful*, actually!”

Billie jumped from a stool up onto the windowsill. From there, she could just about reach the nail the star was going to hang on.

“Good thing this was here from before,” said Billie, putting the star on the nail. “Can you go and turn off the light? Then I can get ready to plug it in?”

“Yep,” I said and looked for the switch.

“There, on the wall above the TV,” she pointed out.

“I see it!”

I glanced at the wilting plant before pressing the switch.

Even though it was still only the afternoon, it was twilight outside, and since the orange candle barely gave off any light, it was dark in the flat.

“Now we have to count down from three,” said Billie, sitting ready in front of the plug. “Because that makes it official.”

“Okay,” I said and waited for her to give the signal.

When she gave me a nod, we started at the same time:

“Three...two...*one!*”

And there shone the star!

“Wow!” I said. “Have you got a *red* lightbulb inside it?”

“Yes! *The Christmas lightbulb!*” said Billie, leaping up from the floor and standing beside me.

We stood in silence and admired the star for a bit, and then Billie said quietly:

“Now, Bo. Now I feel it for *real*.”

“What?”

“December. That Christmas feeling. Now I feel it in my bones, like, a hundred percent!”

I looked at her. Her face glowed red in the light from the star. But perhaps it also came from somewhere inside her as well, straight from her bones or her heart, for example.

## THE SANDWICH

When we sat at the kitchen table to finally have that sandwich, I just had to ask:

“How old were you when your mum died?”

I didn't know much about Billie's mum apart from the fact that she died a long time ago. I think Billie once said that her mum died before she learned to speak, but I wasn't sure if I was remembering that right.

"Just a baby," said Billie, putting the crust of her sandwich onto the table, as it didn't seem like they used plates.

"It...it looks like it was Christmas in that last picture," I said and thought about the star in the window behind the hospital bed.

Billie looked down at the table and nodded before looking up at me again.

"It was. It was Christmas when Mum died. But I've never seen that specific photo before," she said and put her finger in her mouth before picking up crumbs from the table with it.

I wasn't able to say anything because that photo of her mum was imprinted onto my mind. It was almost as though I could feel that cold gust again just by thinking about it.

"She looked so *ugly*!" Billie suddenly burst out. "She didn't look like I'd imagined her."

I swallowed and noticed that I was sitting on both of my hands.

"But...she looked lovely in all the other photos," I said quickly. "You actually look like her when you smile," I blurted, but I meant every word.

Billie glanced at me.

"Like when you smile with all your teeth, I mean," I went on.

It looked like Billie liked that because she kind of calmed down.

"Do you know what I think, Bo?"

"No?"

"Even though I didn't know her...since I was just a baby when she died...I feel like I have to celebrate Christmas for her as well."

"Oh?"

"Since she isn't able to herself."

I nodded, not knowing what to say, since I'd never thought about something like that before.

"It's like, I decorate a bit extra *for her*," continued Billie.

"Do you?"

"And I pretend that, for example, it's Mum who has sewn that tablecloth over there," she said, nodding towards the little tablecloth she'd stroked earlier on.

"Pretend?"

“Yeah – maybe that’s a bit weird?”

“No, no,” I said quickly.

“And then I think that she’ll be happy because we’re using it, you know. It’s *her* tablecloth, in a way. That’s she’s sewn for *us*, her family.”

“I understand,” I said, and imagined that they’d probably bought that tablecloth in a shop and Billie had just erased that part and come up with a whole new story.

“Because I think Mum liked Christmas, actually. Or like, I have that feeling. And so I feel like if I’m happy, then she’ll be happy as well. And if I make Christmas nice, then she’ll notice it too. Up in heaven, or wherever she is.”

“Have you asked your dad? If she liked Christmas?”

Billie fixed her eyes on me, as though it was completely the wrong question.

But then she just inhaled and shook her head before saying:

“We hardly ever talk about it. But yes...I have asked.”

“And what did he say?”

“That it wasn’t something I needed to think about, since she isn’t here anymore anyway.”

I finished chewing the last bite, washed it down with some water and asked:

“Is that why Kalle doesn’t like Christmas? Because of what happened with your mum?”

“No, it’s nothing to do with that,” said Billie quickly. “Dad has just never liked Christmas. It was the same when he was young, actually.”

She picked up the last of the crumbs with her finger, mine too, but let the crust lie there.

I thought about Kalle, about how he has *never* liked Christmas, and about Billie, who kept everything going all by herself.

I looked at her and suddenly thought that she looked so...*grown up*, in a way.

“It was good we found the star, at least,” I said, and then she smiled at me, as though this was exactly the reminder she needed.