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Starlet

Children's fiction, 2025

Translated from the Norwegian by Rosie Hedger

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1. Thirteen

Finally! Helene thinks to herself as she hears the creak of the staircase.

They're on their way!

She squeezes her eyes tight shut, has to pretend to be fast asleep.

The door lets out a groan as it slides open, and quiet feet pad into the room over squeaky floorboards.

Helene hears someone fumbling with something. She opens one eye a crack and spots the tripod.

Seriously?!

The disappointment hits her like a ball hard to the stomach.

Her mum had promised not to film this year.

She hears the tiny crackle of a match bursting into flame, then some very clearly-enunciated whispering:

'1, 2, 3!'

The light goes on.

'Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you!' her mother sings, her strong voice ringing out around the room.

When Helene opens her eyes, she is looking directly at a mobile phone on a tripod. It's recording. In front of her is a huge, pink cake with thirteen candles on it. That, and a strange man.

His face is painted white. Red glittery balls are hovering in the air between his hands.

It's a bloody clown.

'Happy birthday to youuuuuuu! Hooray!

Her mother slides the cake into her lap. Helene hurriedly blows out all of the candles. She can't stop thinking about her sleepy face, knows her hair is a tangled mess.

As the last candle is blown out, the clown catches the balls in his hands. Then he stretches his arms into the air, leaps forward and does a somersault.

'Happy birthday, Hellybaby!' her mother says. Then she turns to face her phone, which has been set up at the end of the bed. The clown puts his arm around her mother's shoulder, and in unison they say:

'From Charlotte Bye and www.experiences.no, for every occasion, just use the discount code ByeBye!'

Silence descends for two seconds, then her mother turns off the camera and turns to face the clown with an animated look on her face.

'That was good, right?!'

Helene groans.

‘Muum! You promised!’ she shouts, pulling the duvet up to her nose. ‘I look awful!’

Her mother smiles at the man, looking slightly embarrassed.

‘It’s just a short video. You’re hardly even in it!’

Helene sighs. Her mother’s promises mean nothing.

Yet another birthday with no peace.

Even as a teenager she is being shared with her mother’s followers.

Posted all over Instagram and Snapchat and TikTok.

Commented on, talked about.

Will it *ever* stop?

Is she destined to spend her entire life as the internet’s *Hellybaby*?

The clown packs up his things. Her mother perches on the edge of her bed to finish up the video.

Helene wants to ask her not to post it.

But she can’t face it. Her mother doesn’t care anyway.

And she doesn’t want to argue any more than is necessary.

‘Is it safe to come in?’

Grandma steps into the room wearing her old, silk dressing gown. Her long, grey hair cascades over her shoulders. In spite of the fact that former actress Benedicte Bye loves the limelight, Helene is only too aware of her refusal to participate in her mother’s influencing.

‘Finally, a little peace, eh?’ Grandma says, then hands Helene a small box. ‘Happy birthday!’

Helene forces a smile. She opens the box and lifts out a heavy piece of jewellery.

‘Oh, thank you, Grandma!’

She examines the chunky necklace. It might be real gold. But... it’s also incredibly ugly.

She’s never going to wear it. It’ll sit there in her jewellery box along with all the other jewellery that she has inherited from her grandmother.

Helene sighs, trying not to look too disappointed.

There are so many other things she needs! And wants!

Her mother and grandmother both know that. Helene wrote them a very detailed list. She included links and everything. An iPhone, new trainers, a backpack. An e-scooter, even though she knows that her mother hates them and would never actually buy her one. But not just expensive things, either. A laptop case, scrunchies, a hoodie. Helene looks up at her mother. Surely she’d managed to get her *something* from the list? Especially after that morning’s attack of the clown and the camera at the end of the bed just hours after assuring Helene she wouldn’t have to be woken on film.

‘And here’s your gift from me...’ her mother begins, as if she’s read her mind. ‘Your very own choice of activity from www.experiences.no, for you and a group of friends!’

Her clear, blue eyes scan Helene’s face for a reaction. She knows that her mum knows. She is well aware that a gift from a new sponsor *isn’t* what her daughter has been dreaming of receiving.

‘And we’ll pick you up a nice new pair of shoes later, OK? In the sales,’ she adds quietly.

Helene probably ought to have forced a smile and acted as if nothing was amiss.

She knows they don’t have much money to spare. It’s been getting more and more difficult for her mum to attract any good brands to work with lately.

Her job as an influencer doesn’t earn her much without them.

But yet another crappy gift, not to mention the camera all set up at the end of the bed like that...

‘There are *loads* of great activities on www.experiences.no! You can take your friends... hang-gliding! Or juggling,’ her mother adds with loud, forced enthusiasm.

‘Great,’ Helene mumbles. ‘That’s just perfect, what with all my *great friends* and fear of heights.’

She grabs the phone lying on the bedside table. Two new messages. Helene knows who they are from even before opening them. One is a birthday message from Frida in London. Her cousin is the same age as her, and another only child. That’s just about all they have in common. Frida is petite and fair; Helene is tall and brunette. Frida is a ballet dancer, Helene hates sports. Frida has a wealthy father; Helene has no father to speak of.

But a few years ago, Frida became unwell and had to stop attending ballet lessons and school. For a year she lay in a dark room. The only positive thing about it was that for the first time in her life, she had the time to text her much less cool cousin in Norway.

It felt like having a friend, even though Frida was only on the phone.

‘Thank you!’ Helene replies, adding three heart emojis.

She opens the second message. Smiles. Alexander’s message is just an emoji. A green bikini. Their secret code.

Helene untangles herself from her duvet and grabs her swimwear.

‘I have to go, but thanks for the gifts,’ she says.

As she makes her way down the creaky staircase, she can hear exasperated voices in her room.

‘You could have bought her something normal!’ her grandmother says.

‘So could you!’ her mother replies.

‘Thanks for making the effort to get along on my birthday!’ Helene shouts up at them.

For thirteen years, she's lived alongside the two women in the large but dilapidated house everyone calls Crow Keep.

For thirteen years, the two of them have argued about anything and everything.

But surely today of all days they could get along?

Helene hears her mother whisper something to her grandmother. The old woman barks back at her.

But no, they can't help but bicker.

She ought to be old enough now to know better than to hope for more.

2. The Challenge

Helene grabs a towel from the bathroom and leaves. The sun is blinding but she knows the way, even without being able to see. 'You should see me in a crown,' she sings as she trudges through the overgrown garden. She snarls the words just like Billie Eilish does in the song. 'I'm gonna run this nothing town!'

It lifts her mood a little.

She passes the dirty old greenhouse and slips through the gap in the hedge. On the tiny beach between Crow Keep and the modern brick building, Alexander is waiting. He's holding a stone in each hand. When he sees her, he throws them in the air and starts trying to juggle. Like a clown.

Helene digs her toes in the sand and kicks her foot in the air, showering him in sand.

'Idiot,' she says.

'Sorry,' he says, then he hugs her. 'Happy birthday!'

They run into the water, which is still lovely and warm. Helene's whole body feels lighter as she ducks her head underwater. It almost feels as if she's starting her birthday afresh. As if she's being washed clean of clowns and discount codes and stupid mothers.

At the same time, she is only too aware that this is one of the last days she and Alexander can swim and hang out together before school starts back.

High school. Without Alexander.

He's going to be starting at a private secondary school for gifted footballers.

After seven years at the same school, Helene will have to go it alone.

And she's dreading it.

'The fact that your mum brought that clown into your bedroom is *crazy*,' Alexander says as they emerge from the water. 'She's worse than ever, right?'

They lie on their towels. Or at least, she does.

He starts doing push-ups on the sand.

'So are you,' she retorts as he gets up and starts a round of squats. 'Are you going to keep up the same level of training you've been doing this summer? You're heading for burnout!'

'No pain, no gain!' Alexander pants. 'But your mum. I mean, she's *actually* lost it now, right?'

Helene draws her knees up to her chest. Her long, wet hair tickles her back.

'Yes,' she sighs. 'She'd promised me my birthday this year would be different.'

Then quietly she adds:

'But we need the money.'

Alexander stops mid-push-up. Helene steels herself. She knows he doesn't get it.

Sure, they live in the same postcode. But the Samateh family live in a modern, luxury home. Helene, her mother and her grandmother live in a dump that her great-grandparents built.

Alexander's father was a professional footballer, and now his older brother is making a name for himself in England. He's never known what it's like to be hard up.

And maybe he thinks Charlotte Bye is more successful than she is.

Once upon a time, she was.

When her mother had wanted a baby as a single 25-year-old woman, she had documented the entire process on her blog. The donor, the egg, the whole shebang. Helene became Hellybaby at the age of six months, when she featured in an advertising campaign for Helly Hansen waterproofs. People watched Hellybaby take her first steps and clicked on the link to her first shoes. When Helene's hair grew, her mother made videos about braiding her locks. That was the peak of her online popularity, when she was able to give up her hairdressing job. Everyone wanted Hellybaby braids, and Hellybaby hair ties, and Hellybaby shampoo that didn't make their eyes sting. Even though the blog had long since been replaced by social media accounts, her mum still posts about Hellybaby and her hair. But her follower numbers had started to dwindle. Hardly anybody sells Hellybaby products these days.

Maybe because Helene is no longer small and cute.

'How much money you have isn't your responsibility!' Alexander says.

'I know,' Helene mumbles.

'But doesn't it bother you that your mother acts as if it is?!'

Yes. It bothers her *a lot*. The fact that her birthdays, Christmases, end-of-term celebrations and parties all had to be shared with people whose lives were so boring that they had to follow along with Helene's instead.

Urgh, it's so shit!

Her eyes fill with tears. She quickly sticks a finger in the corner of each eye to prevent them spilling out.

Not quickly enough.

'Helene, are you crying?'

Alexander crouches in front of her. Helene shakes her head.

'It doesn't bother me. I'm just angry. Angry at mum and the whole video thing... I'm thirteen! I don't want to be stopped in the street by Hellybaby fanatics!'

'You should tell her,' Alexander says with determination. 'If it bothers you this much, you have to say something!'

'I *do*. She doesn't listen to me.'

Helene waits for Alexander to give her a hug and say the usual, he 'gets it'. But he doesn't get it.

'You have to tell her properly. Say: "I don't want to be Hellybaby."'

She glares at him.

'I can't do it,' she murmurs.

‘Uh, yes you *can*. You’re practically an adult! It’s time you took responsibility for your own life and your own outcomes!’

‘Look, can we dial back on the coaching a bit?’ Helene says. ‘It *is* my birthday, you know.’

‘Exactly! It’s your big day. So, stop complaining and *do* something!’

Helene rolls her eyes. The tiny slice of her friend’s brain that isn’t filled with football is full of slogans he’s absorbed while watching too many football TikToks.

‘That’s it! A birthday challenge from me to you,’ Alexander says, lifting a finger in the air. ‘Tell your mum that you’re not going to be Hellybaby anymore. Just tell her! She can’t do any more posts or videos with you. Boom!’

Alexander brushes the sand off his hands and glances up at Crow Keep. Suddenly he lifts a hand and waves.

Helene turns around. She can see her mother on the patio shouting something inaudible.

‘Or would you rather spend the next thirteen years whinging?’ Alexander asks.

Helene just looks at him. At times he’s just like his strict, Gambian father. He’s so determined that everyone in his family should be an elite athlete. Everyone except Alexander’s twin sister Amy, that is. She manages to avoid the strict house rules and does whatever she likes. Their father probably knows what Helene realised long ago: there’s no hope for her, anyway.

‘I can’t hear you,’ Alexander says. ‘Are you going to carry on whinging, or are you going to do something about it?’

Helene groans.

‘It’s easy for you to say, you’re rich. What’s my mum supposed to do? Be a mum influencer without a kid? Then I definitely won’t be getting any decent birthday gifts,’ she sighs.

Alexander shakes his head.

‘No excuses. Be the change you want to see! What your mum is supposed to do isn’t your problem,’ he says, then he makes his way up towards the house.

Maybe he has a point, Helene thinks to herself. The way her mother earns her money isn’t actually her responsibility.

Plus, she’s tried setting boundaries.

Boundaries her mother couldn’t care less about.

The thought of the clown and the camera fire up her anger all over again.

‘Come on!’ Alexander shouts. ‘Do it now, or no more complaining to me!’

Helene gets up slowly.

Can she just stop? Just... not be Hellybaby anymore?

It’s a mad idea.

The idea of stopping feels just as impossible as it is tempting.

But... what if Alexander is right?

Could it really be that simple? Can she just say... no?

She feels a fluttering in her stomach. A flock of butterflies let loose.

Everything feels horrible and new and exciting all at once.

‘Ok,’ Helene says quickly before she has a chance to regret it. ‘Challenge accepted! I’ll do it.’

3. No, No, No

‘Amazing news, Helene!’

Her mother shouts above the sound of the hairdryer. She’s drying her hair in the corner of the living room. Dust dances in the air between the crowded bookshelves and the old furniture. Only the corner of the room is tidy. It’s Charlotte Bye’s chosen spot for filming her Snapchat stories. She looks mad, standing there in her PJ bottoms and sequined singlet.

‘I’ve got a new brand looking for content!’

‘Congratulations, Charlotte!’ Alexander says. ‘On the brand deal *and* another year as a mum.’

Her mother hugs Alexander and he winks at Helene over her shoulder. She rolls her eyes.

He’s excellent at sucking up to adults.

‘Grab yourself something to eat,’ her mother says. ‘You know where to find the Coco Pops.’

‘I’m alright, thanks,’ Alexander says, making his way towards the kitchen. ‘I’m trying to eat a bit healthier these days, but I’ll have a banana, if you’ve got one?’

Helene rolls her eyes. So he’s stopped eating Coco Pops now too.

Alexander had started writing down everything he ate that summer.

He goes to bed at ten o’clock on the dot every night.

Football is eating away at him bit-by-bit.

‘Of course. Have whatever you want,’ her mother shouts. ‘Anyway, Helene. I’ve landed a collaboration with a big health firm. They’re looking for a mother and daughter pair. It’s perfect for us, don’t you think?’

‘No!’ Helene shouts.

The volume of her own response surprises her.

Out in the kitchen, Alexander is silent. No doubt listening in on their conversation.

Her mother looks at her in astonishment.

‘Don’t you think it would be fun?’ she asks.

Helene swallows. She can feel her heart hammering in her chest. But she can’t back down now.

‘No. I quit. I don’t want to do this anymore.’

Her mother laughs.

‘You can’t quit!’ she says cheerfully. ‘You’re Hellybaby!’

Her reaction makes Helene furious.

‘I don’t want to be Hellybaby anymore!’ she shouts. ‘I specifically asked you not to film me this morning, but you *still* walked in with a clown and a camera. Don’t you get it?’

She answers her own question.

‘No, you don’t, because you’re just a stupid hairdresser. But I quit! Now!’

Her mother’s smile fades. She purses her lips and closes her eyes. She’s probably counting to ten in her head.

‘I understand,’ she says as she opens her eyes again. Her voice is hard and cold.

‘It’s clearly too much to ask of you, appearing in the background of a video for ten seconds. Looks like I’d better find myself a hairdressing job again. I’m sure there are *plenty* of people out there looking for a past-it hairdresser who’s allergic to hair dye, wouldn’t you say?’

Helene glances in the direction of the kitchen. Her cheeks are burning.

‘I don’t know,’ she says.

She’s regretting it now. Really, really regretting it.

Not what she said. She feels less inclined to help her mother with every second that goes by.

But she regrets speaking up when Alexander is over. It’s so embarrassing that he can hear everything!

‘No one in the world would hire me,’ her mother shouts. ‘Unemployment benefit, here I come!’

Alexander clears his throat in the kitchen. Her mother stops herself and shakes her head. She walks over to Helene and wraps her arms around her.

‘Ugh, I’m sorry, my love,’ she says. ‘And on your birthday, too. I didn’t mean to lose my temper.’

‘Me neither,’ Helene mumbles to the sequins scratching her face. ‘Sorry. You’re not stupid.’

‘That’s alright, love. But could we just film a tiny little snippet for this new brand deal? I’ve already signed the contract, so... well, you know how it is, don’t you?’

Alexander appears in the kitchen doorway. He wolfs down a banana covered in brown spots, following the action as if he’s watching a fascinating television programme.

Helene straightens herself up. Forces herself to open her mouth:

‘No, Mum. I mean it. I’m done being Hellybaby.’

Her mother stands there in silence for a few seconds. Then she nods quickly.

‘Ok? From... when, now? Ok, sure...’

Her mother smiles, but Helene can see that her smile doesn’t reach her eyes.

They’re dark with trepidation.

Maybe she should have waited a bit. Done things more gradually. Been more considerate.

‘Thanks for the banana!’ Alexander says, throwing the peel in the bin and making for the door.

Helene follows him into the hallway.

‘Now I feel really guilty,’ she whispers.

Alexander shakes his head.

‘Why? She took it well, didn’t she?’

‘Well?!’

Helene thinks he’s joking at first, but he stands there nodding, feeling smug about his simple training philosophy.

‘Change is never easy, but she went along with it! Nice job! Your life, your rules!’

Alexander raises a hand for a high five. Helene crosses her arms instead. She looks at him defiantly.

‘If you think it’s so easy, fine. Do it yourself.’

‘Hmm?’

‘I’ve completed my challenge. It’s about time you had one too,’ she says. ‘My challenge to you is to go home... and get a life!’

Alexander clutches his chest as if she’d just shot him.

‘Ow! That’s harsh! What are you talking about? I’ve *got* a life! Yesterday my heart rate monitor told me to take it easy!’

Helene shakes her head.

‘Exactly! Your challenge is to get a life that’s about more than football and your dad’s rules. Go to the cinema. Play some Minecraft. Get yourself some clothes that aren’t just for working out in! Eat something that doesn’t contain masses of protein. Go to McDonald’s! It’s been *so long!*’

Alexander shrugs. He looks worried. Helene nods determinedly.

‘I need to focus on my priorities, but... if you’re happy to take the blame when I don’t become a pro footballer, then fine. I’ll give it a try,’ he says, shrugging again.

He turns to go, but stops in his tracks.

‘Shit, I forgot about your birthday gift!’

He pulls a green bag from his backpack.

‘Sorry, I didn’t get a chance to wrap it.’

‘Thanks so much,’ she says, glancing inside. Sweet, sweets and more sweets!

She gives him a hug. ‘And don’t forget the challenge!’

He rolls his eyes and skips backwards.

‘Sure, sure. My life, your rules.’

4. Done

Helene makes her way over to the window when she gets to her room. She carefully pushes it slightly ajar. From up here she can see straight into Alexander's garden. She sees him jogging across the patio and over towards his twin sister Amy. She and her two best friends Marte and Klaudia are in their bikinis sitting around the small pool. She can smell food cooking on the barbecue.

Helene sticks her tongue out at the girls from behind the window pane. She hates them. Really, truly hates them.

It was Amy who first came up with the nickname 'Helene the Loner' back in fifth grade. Thanks to Amy and her two disciples, the last few years of primary school had been an endless nightmare. Whenever Helene approached them, they would start whistling the tune to that song 'Lonely'.

On the few occasions she spoke up in class, she'd hear the sound of laughter from Amy, Marte and Klaudia.

The same three girls were always teasing her for being Hellybaby. But worst of all were the few occasions they'd pretended to like her.