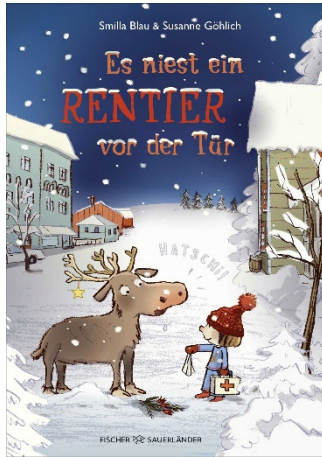


Smilla Blau: Es niest ein Rentier vor der Tür / A Reindeer Sneezes at the Door

with illustrations by Susanne Göhlich

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Chapter 1: A Patient for Frieda

It happened on Christmas Day.

The Christmas tree was brightly lit in the living room of the Winterwald family. The smell of freshly baked biscuits wafted from the kitchen. Frieda was sitting on the sofa in her reindeer pyjamas and was bored. Next to her was the doctor's case she had received from Father Christmas yesterday but she had no patients. Everyone was busy. Next door, the Hoover was humming. Dad was cleaning. That was exhausting. Maybe someone urgently needed to check on his heartbeat. Frieda grabbed her doctor's bag, slipped off the sofa and opened the dining room door.

"Dad," she called out, "can I examine you?" But Dad heard nothing. He had his big headphones on, bobbed his head wildly and pushed the Hoover back and forth in the same rhythm. When Dad listened to his music, he didn't want to be disturbed. Disappointed, Frieda closed the door.

"Ouch!" she heard Mum shout from the kitchen. "Now I've burnt myself."

"I can help you," said Frieda running into the kitchen. She pulled the bandages out of the suitcase and waved them in Mum's face. "I really need patients anyway."

"Sorry, sweetie, I don't have time right now," said Mum, holding her finger under the tap. "Aunt Margaret and Uncle Henry are coming over in two hours. Please go and find Dad."

"He's hoovering the dining room until it's tip-top, and Anton doesn't have time either, he's playing on the computer!" Mum didn't like it when Anton spent too much time on the computer. If Frieda was lucky, her brother would have to stop and could be her patient instead.

"Can't you play with your presents?" Mum just replied and dashed over to a pot that was smoking.

That was mean. Frieda wanted to play with her doctor's kit but she needed a patient for that! She couldn't very well doctor the Christmas tree.

DING-DONG.

That was the front doorbell. Frieda listened. But no one came to open the door.

DING-DONG, DING-DONG,

it rang again.

"Who on earth is ringing the doorbell this early on Christmas Day? Frieda sweetheart, go and see who's at the front door!" Mum called from the kitchen. Then she said, "Ouch," and, "Now I've burnt myself again." Frieda grabbed her doctor's bag. Maybe Aunt Margaret and Uncle Henry had arrived. Being old, they must have some serious illnesses: backache and headache, tummy ache and ear congestion and maybe even palpitations.

DING-DONG, DING-DONG, DING-DONG,

the doorbell rang again. Determined, Frieda trudged to the front door and opened it.

All she could see outside was snow falling from the sky. So much snow that Frieda couldn't even make out the big maple tree next to the garden gate. Suddenly a gust of wind came and blew the snow away.

And then Frieda saw an animal.

It was taller than Frieda and had antlers on its head. Multi-branched ones. A bit like the deer in the petting zoo but somehow different. Underneath the antlers two hairy ears wiggled in the wind. The strange deer stretched its red snout towards Frieda, with nostrils as big as vanilla biscuits. And with huge drops of snot rolling out like on a marble run – that fell onto the doormat.

Although she was normally afraid of large animals, Frieda wasn't scared of the strange deer. That was because the animal was holding a bunch of flowers between its velvety lips.

"Hatfi!" said the antlered animal. The flowers flew through the air and landed at Frieda's bare feet.

"Who is it?" Mum called from the kitchen.

"Erm," said Frieda.

Then something incredible happened. The deer opened its mouth so that Frieda could see the tip of its rosy tongue and then it said: "Merry ChrIdmas!"

Frieda was so stunned that she couldn't answer. The deer pushed her aside with its head and trotted past her.

CLACK, CLACK, CLACK

clattered its hooved feet on the tiles. Its white, stubby tail wagged back and forth as if it were beckoning to her. From outside, the wind blew a load of snow onto Frieda's bare feet.

"Hatfi!" said the deer again.

"Close the door, Frieda. Otherwise you'll catch cold," Mum called from the kitchen. "Who is it?"

Frieda really didn't know what to say. The deer had reached the door to the living room. She quickly slammed the front door shut and dashed after it into the living room.

The animal stopped just before the Christmas tree. First it sniffed mum's new perfume, which was still under the tree. Of course it had to sneeze. Three times in fact: "Hatfi! Hatttffffiiii! Hatfi!"

Then it lifted its head, brushed its antlers just past the television and started nibbling on the Christmas tree. It almost swallowed a particularly glittery star. Just as Frieda was about to shout "Stop!" before it ate the whole tree, Mum came into the living room.

"Why are there flowers all over the floor in the hallway?" she asked.

The deer turned round, snorted and stalked towards mum. "Merry Chridmas," it said - and nodded its head. With its snout it pointed to a crumpled envelope hanging around its neck, where its hair was at its shaggiest. In a creaky voice, it demanded: "Please elp, ickly." Then it sniffled as loud as a trumpet and wiped its snout on mum's apron.

"Yuck," said Frieda.

Mum said nothing, although her mouth was hanging open. Carefully, she took the envelope from the animal's neck and pulled out a letter.

"Read it out, Mum. Quickly!" shouted Frieda excitedly.

"Step back, Frieda!" said Mum and pulled Frieda a little to the side. "Maybe it will lash out."

Frieda didn't think the animal looked dangerous, more like it was quite exhausted. It trotted over to the sofa and plopped down bum first into the cushions. The beautiful photo of Frieda with the angel wings hanging above the sofa shook like there was an earthquake. With skilful lips, the antlered animal grabbed Dad's woollen blanket, tucked in its hooves and snuggled up full-length on the sofa. Fortunately, the doctor's case was no longer on it. It would have gotten as flat as a pancake.

Chapter 2: No Pets Allowed

"Theeeeeooo, can you come?" Mum called out in a squeaky voice that Frieda had never heard before. It sounded so funny and shrill that even Anton came out of his room.

"Bloody Hell," he said when he saw the animal lying on the sofa.

"What's that?" asked Dad. His eyes were as big as saucers. He looked terribly confused. "It's talking," Mum's voice still sounded strange. "And it gave me a letter." She held the letter out to Dad with trembling fingers. Dad read it out loud:

"Dear Winterwald family,

This is my reindeer, Flinn. Unfortunately, he's taken a bit ill. The Christmas delivery stress, you know. He urgently needs rest, tasty food and good care. As I delivered a doctor's case for Frieda Winterwald yesterday, as requested, I'm assuming that Flinn is in the best of hands with you? Please nurse him back to health. I will have him picked up again on 2 January.

Many thanks and all best

Father Christmas

PS:

Mr Winterwald, I find it rather boring that you ask for the same perfume for your wife every year. Can't you think of anything else?"

"A reindeer!" exclaimed Frieda enthusiastically. At last she knew what kind of animal it was.

"Not a moose. That's a shame. They're cooler!" said Anton.

The reindeer snorted and stood up. "Merry Chridmas!" it croaked once more. Dad turned pale. As white as the snow that was still falling from the sky outside. He stuck his index finger in his ear and rattled it around. "D-d-did it just say 'Merry Chridmas'?" he asked when he'd finished rubbing.

"No, it said 'Merry *Christmas*', Daddy," Frieda translated. "He can't speak very well yet. He's probably never been to Mrs Lippel's speech therapy."

"Shouldn't he be speaking Swedish?" asked Mum, who knew most about languages in the family.

"Nah, Father Christmas comes from Finland, I only saw that on YouTube yesterday," bragged Anton.

"That's really not the point!" scolded Dad. "Aunt Margaret and Uncle Henry will arrive soon, that's the point!" And then everyone was quiet - including the reindeer.

"Pets are not allowed in the house, neither with fur, scales or feathers," continued Dad. "Aunt Margaret and Uncle Henry strictly forbade that when we moved into their villa. You know that very well, all of you. Oh God, I hope none of the neighbours have seen Flinn."

Frieda shook her head so that her short brown hair flew through the air. "Oh no!" she said.

Dad sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Anyway, Flinn can't stay here."

"Why don't we hide him in the cellar until the two grouches have left again," Anton suggested. Frieda saw Flinn flinch when Anton said the word cellar. Perhaps he was just as scared of dark rooms as Frieda?

"Not in the cellar! He can crawl under my bed," she cried. "He can listen to my pirate stories until they're gone again. He'll love that, won't you Flinni?" She sat down on the sofa with him. She gently stroked him between the ears. "Besides, he's not a pet, he's Santa's helper!"

"Bingo!" shouted Anton, raising his fist in the air with excitement. "Do you know what that means - if we look after him properly, we'll get the best presents ever next year!" And this despite the fact that he had recently claimed that Father Christmas didn't even exist.

"A big animal like that sheds a lot of hair and makes a mess." Dad pointed accusingly at the damp trail that led from the living room door to the sofa across the wooden flooring.

Flinn bent down and grabbed a biscuit from the bowl. "Cimon," he mumbled, „Hmm“, crumbling at least half of the biscuit onto the sofa.

Dad rushed over to him and pulled the TV blanket out from under Flinn's bum. "Well done! All covered in hair," he grumbled. "As if a whole herd of reindeer had spent the night here. And I

used the last hoover bag this morning." He shook out the blanket. A cloud of reindeer hair flew upwards. The fine, glistening hairs floated through the air and then landed gently on the coffee table, the knitting and the bowl of biscuits. Flinn started to cough.

"I'll never get this clean until Aunt Margaret arrives," Dad moaned. "She'll spot the hair straight away. Then she'll know an animal's been in the house. And the day after tomorrow we'll be out on the street!" Dad looked desperate.

"Maybe it's best if we call Aunt Margaret and Uncle Henry off first," said Mum. "Then we can discuss what to do with Flinn in peace." She went to Dad and took him in her arms. "By the way, you really do give me the same perfume every year," she said and gave him a kiss. Directly on the mouth.

Frieda hugged Flinn. She dug her nose into his fur, right behind his ears. Where it was softest. He smelled like a walk in the forest, like damp moss and a tiny bit like liquorice.

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