

Translated excerpt

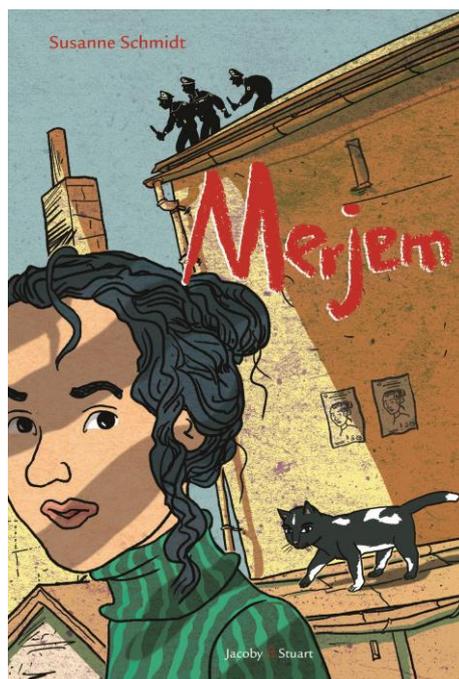
Susanne Schmidt
Merjem

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Translated by John Reddick



1.

He's standing by the open door of the helicopter, the rotor blades whirling away just above him. The wind is blowing his hair across his face, but he keeps his eye firmly fixed on the ship beneath, using the viewfinder of his special camera to take in the scene. Two Niko Bellic lookalikes are standing at the stern of the ship with a brown leather bag between them on the deck: inside the scruffy bag are a million dollars, and he, Linus, is determined to grab them. He does a last quick check on the strap attaching the bungee rope to his ankles, then signals to the pilot that he's ready to go. He takes a deep breath, braces himself for the jump, and...

Someone's shaking his shoulder. What idiot could that be?! He needs to concentrate: one false step and he'll be dead - smashed to smithereens on the deck of the ship, or cut to ribbons by the rotor blades.

'Linus, wake up!'

That's good, though: the ship has disappeared, as if swallowed by the waves.

'Linus, we've overslept!'

Linus tried to open his eyes, but presumably the sandman had got his bags mixed up and tipped glue into them instead of sand.

He tried to turn onto his side, but before he could get all snuggled up in his duvet again, his mother simply snatched it away from him.

'Come on, hurry up!' She grabbed his hand, yanked him onto his feet, and propelled him along the corridor to the bathroom, deftly steering him around the glass and paper recycling bags that were stored there.

'Can't I just skip the first lesson?'

Could he heck! In everything to do with school she was as hard as nails. To avoid a row he managed to clean his teeth and get dressed within the space of ten minutes.

She was standing in the kitchen in her dressing gown and woolly socks. She snapped his lunch-box shut and held out the front-door key.

'What's in my sandwiches?'

'Salami. We haven't got any ham left.' He stuffed the box in his rucksack. At least salami wasn't as disgusting as liver sausage. 'Bye, Mum.'

Leaving the flat he slammed the door shut behind him, then reached the bottom of the first flight of stairs in three carefully judged leaps, five steps at a time. On the lower landing a door was torn open to reveal Frau Mayröcker in a black and gold bathrobe and red fuzzy slippers: she must have been lying in wait for him on the other side of the door, as usual. 'What's all this noise for?', she bellowed, 'Anyone'd think we were surrounded by savages!'

She always used to say ‘surrounded by niggers’, but someone in the building threatened to report her for shouting racist insults.

With a ‘Sorry!’ he took the next flight of stairs at a more normal speed, just two steps at a time, and unlocked his bike, which he’d parked in the hallway the previous day.

‘Leave that bike there again and I’ll report you to the caretaker!’ Frau Mayröcker slammed her door shut at least as noisily as he had done. Why did grown-ups always have to moan at you about everything, then do exactly the same themselves?

When he turned into the street leading to the school there was the usual chaos of people arriving in cars, on foot, and on motor bikes and cycles. Classes hadn’t started yet, so he needn’t have been in such a rush after all.

There was still time - time enough to deal with a wall so grey that it couldn’t possibly be left that way.

The wall belonged to the tennis court changing rooms. It would only take him a minute to get there, two at most.

Just to be on the safe side he took another glance at the road, but everyone was busy getting to school.

He took the spray can out of his pocket, gave it a quick shake, and looked all around again to make sure no one was watching. A jet of red mist came squirting out of the nozzle with a soft hiss and settled in a wavy line on the grey wall. He added a few more wavy lines, then below them a semi-circle, two splotches for eyes, and a triangle to represent the nose.

‘What d’you think you’re doing, you horrible little monster?’ He didn’t even need to turn round: it was the unmistakable voice of Herr Karle, the school caretaker. Herr Karle was the size of an American basketball player, except that he had a big fat belly, as if he’d swallowed a basketball instead of throwing it through the hoop.

Linus dropped the spray can, grabbed his bike, leapt astride it after a couple of steps, and pedalled away just as fast as he could. Clattering over a pothole, he felt his back wheel start to slide away on the sandy ground, and he only just managed to steady himself with his right foot. The threats bellowed by Herr Karle were still ringing in his ears when he reached the road: ‘Parents... Headmaster... report you’ - the full works, just what you’d expect from a caretaker.

Linus raced along the street, but had to brake hard by the school entrance when a car pulled up right in front of him. Dana emerged from the car, and yanked her rucksack off the back seat.

‘Hi, Dana!’

Linus rode past her dad’s Audi at a snail’s pace and waved across to her. She hadn’t heard him, or at least she pretended she hadn’t.

Shift your weight, pull up on the handlebar: Linus tried to do a wheelie - but doing anything more than three metres straight off the cuff and with a rucksack on the luggage rack just isn't possible, and he very nearly tipped over backwards and landed on the road.

Instead of making out that she hadn't noticed him, she was now pulling a face.

He stuck his bike in a bike rack, then had a fight with the lock, which always jammed whenever he was in a hurry.

Dana had stopped by the school entrance next to Elena and Helena, a brain-dead pair of twins, and was listening to them arguing. They were always arguing - at this particular moment about whether varnish meant for finger nails could also be used on toe nails.

'Laugh!' Leonie was standing in front of him with her new phone. Linus widened his lips with his thumb and index finger to show her his freshly cleaned teeth. Leonie didn't mind: she'd photograph anything, even teeth. She'd been given her phone for her birthday the week before, and now she kept taking photos just so that everyone could see that she had the very latest model. Linus picked up his rucksack and shoved her aside. Her constant showing off was really getting on his nerves.

The first lesson was German. Dana was sitting next to Leonie three rows in front of him, getting her homework out. He had an unimpeded view of her hair since everyone was reaching down for their school-bags.

'Linus, where is your homework?!' Frau Fischer was standing right next to him.

Oh damn! He hadn't finished his homework, in fact he'd written just a single sentence. If only he'd laid his exercise book out on his table, then Frau Fischer might never have noticed that he'd barely done anything. He had to sidetrack her somehow - but what excuse could he use? A broken window? A fight in the playground? A dog turd in the main corridor? A stupid slogan on the blackboard slagging off foreigners? No way. He was just about to claim that somehow he just couldn't summarise stuff because he always got bogged down in the detail, when he suddenly noticed that there was an empty chair right at the front.

'Merjem's missing!' He pointed to the empty seat and added such a strong note of alarm to his voice that Frau Fischer looked up from his exercise book, took out her phone, and checked with the secretary's office whether Merjem had been reported sick. Merjem was of no particular interest to him - she was one of those boring girls who never said anything but always got good marks; but her absence might be useful to him by distracting Frau Fischer from his unfinished homework.

It worked! - She brought Finn out to the front instead of him. His task was to go through the 'Five Ws' on the blackboard all over again: 'Who?' - a family; 'Where?' - by a lake; 'When?' - on a Sunday morning. That was all part of the introduction, and Linus could have done that bit just as well. But then there was the 'What?' question, and that was more difficult. He made a real effort to follow what Finn was

writing on the board with his squeaky stick of chalk, but Dana's hair kept invading his mind. It smelt of cinnamon whenever you got close enough to it. He'd made a bet with Finn that he'd get her to agree to go on a date with him at the local ice cream parlour before it closed for the winter. It would have been much easier to arrange with a phone, but he didn't have one. His mother wasn't one of those anti-technology parents, it was just that she wasn't a doctor like Leonie's mum: she worked in a café, so she never had any money.

He'd just have to do it without a phone, then. So he wrote Dana a note. Might even be better that way, as he'd be able to see whether she read it.

'Linus, come out to the blackboard please!'

'Wow, she's really gunning for me today', he thought. He hadn't read the story, so he didn't have the faintest idea what he was supposed to write - all he knew was that it was about a family having a picnic by a lake, and something or other happened. But it *did* give him the opportunity to slip Dana his note. Standing up slowly, he headed for the board, and as he passed Dana he felt for the edge of her table and pushed the note across its cool, smooth surface until his hand was touching hers. For a brief moment his fingers lay on top of hers. It was a gentle sort of feeling, like stroking the back of a bar of chocolate.

She pulled her hand away, but he stayed where he was all the same.

'Linus!!' Frau Fischer propelled him towards the blackboard with a voice that sounded like thunder.

He took the chalk and looked to see what Finn had already written: picnic, mother delighted, Annika not keen, father didn't want to take the dog, Lars refusing to go without the dog.

He positioned himself so that he could watch Dana. She had picked up the note.

Did the family take the dog with them or not? What should he write?

Dana was now actually unfolding the note! With that happening, how was he supposed to concentrate on a mega-boring story about some family going on a picnic?

She was reading it. That nosy cow Leonie was leaning over and reading it as well. If she hadn't been afraid of Frau Fischer confiscating her phone, she'd have taken a photo of it.

'Linus, get on with it, right now!' Frau Fischer had planted both fists on her hips - always the prelude to a fit of rage.

Linus wrote as slowly as he could: 'They do take the dog with them.'

Frau Fischer nodded. But then she wanted to know what happened next, and he didn't have the faintest idea.

There was a knock on the door, and it was instantly torn open to reveal Herr Karle filling the entire doorway and casting a fierce eye over the class. Linus surreptitiously pulled one flap of the blackboard out, but to no avail: the caretaker shoved it roughly

back into place. ‘Headmaster’s office, straight after this lesson!’ he snorted, then turned on his heel and made to leave.

But Frau Fischer wasn’t having this, and blocked his way. ‘Given that you have interrupted my lesson, may I at least be told what this is all about?’

Herr Karle glared down at Frau Fischer, who seemed half his size, and was probably half his weight as well. He raised his arm as if to brush her aside, but then obliged her with a snarl: ‘He’s been using a spray can - and he’s going to clean it all off!’

Frau Fischer looked across at Linus. ‘Is that true?’ she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and gave an ambiguous shake of the head.

‘So what exactly did he write?’ asked Frau Fischer, using the same tone with the caretaker that she had used with Linus when asking him what happened in the picnic story.

Herr Karle darted a a grim look at Frau Fischer, but then once again transfixed Linus with his stare.

‘So tell me, please: what did he write?’ urged Frau Fischer, who wasn’t letting up. Herr Karle released Linus from his stare. ‘Er...’

Frau Fischer took a step towards him. ‘You can surely remember what he sprayed seeing that you’re so determined to get it removed!’

Herr Karle shuffled uncomfortably and scratched his ear.

Frau Fischer looked at him impatiently and planted her fists on her hips again, just as she’d done with Linus earlier on. Judging by his idiotic expression Herr Karle really was trying to remember what Linus had sprayed on the wall, but without success. He’d probably not even looked. Deflated, he looked half his normal size. ‘Hm!’ snorted Frau Fischer in a severe tone, and looking at him as if she were about to give him a bad mark. Herr Karle rubbed his nose in sheer embarrassment. ‘A scrawl that doesn’t belong there, that’s what!’, he mumbled almost inaudibly, ‘ - and he’s going to get rid of it!’ He puffed himself back up to his full height and blared across to Linus ‘I’ll see you after school by the changing rooms!’ And with that he left.

Linus walked back to his seat. He heard Leonie whispering as he went past Dana: ‘If he’s lucky he might just about have enough money for one take-away cone. On the last school trip he didn’t even have any money for the bus fare.’

Needless to say, she’d carefully timed her remark to make sure he could hear it.

Why did Dana have to sit next to such a stupid show-off?

Linus flopped onto his chair as if he’d played an entire football match plus extra time. The worst thing was: Leonie had it dead right. He had two euros in his pocket at best - not even enough for *one* decent-sized take-away ice.

He shuffled his chair out into the aisle a bit so that he had a reasonably clear view of Dana’s back. She might turn round for a moment or two. But she didn’t oblige. With

shoulders pulled back and a taut neck she kept her eyes fixed on the blackboard as if turning around would get her a detention.

2.

Linus was squatting by a bucket of paint on the battered wooden decking that ran around the changing-room building, watching the way the bristles of his brush filled up with paint.

Herr Karle was standing right behind him. 'Hurry up!' he growled. 'D'you think I want to wait around here for ever?'

Linus lifted the fully laden brush straight out of the bucket, with the result that grey paint dripped onto the decking before the brush was even half-way to the wall.

'For God's sake!' thundered Herr Karle. 'Wipe the spare paint off your brush! What d'you think that's for?!' he said, pointing with his foot at a kind of rack hanging from the inside edge of the bucket. He was wearing white basketball shoes, brand new ones, just the sort that Linus would have liked to have. They didn't go with his grey caretaker's overalls at all. Linus started to move the brush back towards the paint bucket, as instructed - and a large blob of grey paint dropped onto one of Herr Karle's new shoes and ran down the black stripes adorning its side. Speechless, the caretaker stared first at the brush, then at his shoe, and finally at Linus. The stare was accompanied by a sharp intake of breath, and Herr Karle's nostrils flared from sheer outrage. The look in his eye told Linus that something terrible would happen if he didn't get some paint on the wall extremely quickly. He stood up, this time with the right amount of paint on his brush - but as soon as he saw the wall he paused again: he'd caught her hair really well, he decided, and her neat little nose was pretty good too. Herr Karle's patience snapped completely at this point: he grabbed Linus's wrist and jerked the brush roughly back and forth over the wavy red lines, then yanked Linus's hand back to the bucket and dipped the brush into the paint. In his anger he, too, forgot to clear the surplus paint off the brush, and huge dollops of it splashed onto the decking. Before long Dana's face had gone, and the changing room wall was its usual grey again - but the decking looked as if a wild boar had been flailing around in the paint bucket. This didn't seem to bother Herr Karle in the least, however: all that mattered to him was that the wall was grey again. He handed Linus the paintbrush and the rack that had hung inside the bucket: 'Get them clean!' he ordered, before unlocking the door to the changing rooms with an enormous ancient key.

Holding the brush and the rack far out in front of him so that he didn't end up looking as paint-spattered as the decking, Linus made his way through the changing room foyer. Pushing the toilet door open with his elbow, he put the paintbrush and rack in the washbasin and turned the tap on. Through the window he could see the tennis courts, which were a pretty dismal sight: their red-ash top-surface had been scraped up into a heap, and two of the nets had been dismantled - the courts were kept shut throughout the winter.

Linus suddenly turned around. He'd heard the sound of light footsteps somewhere behind him. Perhaps it was an animal that had hidden in here and needed help? It might even be a dog. The door to the shower room stood open. Linus stayed put at first: perhaps it wasn't a dog at all but a fox, or a badger, or an extraterrestrial?

But there was no sign of life anywhere in the changing room. In the middle of the room were wooden benches with rails equipped with numerous hooks and shelving where sports bags could be stored. Along the walls were narrow, green-painted metal lockers. No sign of a dog. Linus knelt down to check beneath the wooden benches. No dog under there either - but he was puzzled to see a purple school bag sitting on the brown tiled floor close to one of the lockers. He had a feeling that he'd seen it somewhere before. There was bound to be a textbook or exercise book inside with a name on it, so he reached out a hand ready to open the bag and have a look.

'You can't take that - it's mine!'

The voice came from directly above him. Although it spoke very quietly, it gave him such a scare that he could scarcely breathe. He turned round slowly and tried to make out whatever was lurking up there in the semi-darkness. On top of the metal locker nearest to the door he spied an old blue skiing jacket with long black hair dangling down from it. A hand suddenly appeared from one of the sleeves and pushed the hair to one side.

'Merjem?!'

He was a bit disappointed. He'd had such a scare that he'd expected something more ominous - an extraterrestrial, a golem, a hobbit, or at the very least a pokémon. Instead of which it was just a boring old standard-issue girl.

'What the hell are you doing in here?!' She didn't reply. He took a closer look at her. Beneath the padded blue jacket he glimpsed pyjama trousers. Merjem was often badly dressed, in clothes that were too big or in clashing colours - but that ski jacket looked as if she'd fished it out of a clothes recycling bin. And Linus had never seen her wearing pyjama trousers before.

'Are you bunking off school?' That was the first question that came into his head. He didn't ask her why she was in pyjamas.

Merjem wrapped the blue coat more tightly around her shoulders, but still made no reply.

Herr Karle shouted his name from somewhere outside. Merjem vanished once again beneath her jacket as though it were Harry Potter's invisibility cloak.

'I'm coming!' Linus shouted back.

He was already by the door when Merjem finally opened her mouth. 'Have you got a phone with you?'

She was shivering despite her thick padded jacket. 'Are you cold?'

'Have you got one?' she asked again in a whisper, ignoring his question.

'No, sorry', he replied.

‘Please!’ she said, still whispering. ‘Can you get me one? I only need it for five minutes.’

‘I’ll try’, Linus whispered back. He had to leave or Herr Karle might come in. He collected the brush and the rack thing from the wash basin and dashed out of the room.

‘Do that again and your parents’ll get a summons for criminal damage’, snorted Herr Karle by way of a parting shot as he locked the changing rooms and shuffled off along the decking to a glory hole at the further end of the building. Opening its low-slung door and with his huge frame bent over like a penknife, he reached in and hung the key on a hook inside.

Unsure of what to do, Linus stayed put for a while, wondering how Merjem had managed to get into the locked changing room. ‘Why are you hanging about here? Get going this minute!’ Herr Karle clattered down the steps from the decking and busied himself with the tennis court fencing. Straddling his bike, Linus hesitated for a while. But going straight back to the changing room was out of the question: he’d have to come back later.

Merjem had heard Linus’s footsteps fading away. She had forgotten to tell him not to let anyone know she was hiding there.

She turned onto her stomach, gripped the top edge of one of the lockers, and tried to lower herself to the floor. But by now her arms were just as weak as her legs were, with the result that she lost her grip and tumbled down, cracking her head on the side of the locker. It really hurt, but she didn’t let herself cry, instead simply pulling her jacket up over her head. But she couldn’t do anything about the sounds and images raging around inside her head.

Loud knocking on the front door. ‘Police! Open up!’ Whispers. Footsteps in the hall, then the voice of her father: ‘I’m coming! I’m coming!’ ‘Kukuth na ka goditur, Kukuth na ka goditur!’ That’s her mother. She’s crying. Merjem couldn’t remember ever hearing her mother cry before. Whenever Merjem herself cried, about school or whatever, her mother always said, ‘No point crying, Merjem: you need to *do* something!’ More hammering on the door. Her father in his blue and grey striped pyjamas. He reaches out to turn the key. The door bursts open. Two uniformed policemen push past him. Behind them, a woman holding a piece of paper in her hand. ‘You’ve got twenty minutes to pack your stuff, then we’re taking you straight to the airport.’ she tells Merjem’s father. ‘Your flight to Pristina leaves at 9.10 a.m.’ ‘Kukuth na ka goditur, Kukuth na ka goditur!’ Why does her mother keep talking about ‘Kukuths’? Footsteps along the corridor outside her room. She clambers onto the window sill and from there climbs on top of her wardrobe and crouches down behind two large cardboard boxes. The door is thrown open.

Suddenly a policeman is standing inside her room taking in her empty bed and crumpled duvet. Her mother’s just behind him. The policeman opens the wardrobe, Merjem can hear him rifling through her things. Her knees are knocking together. Finding nothing inside the wardrobe, the policeman decides to look on top of it as

well and sets one foot on the window sill. The wardrobe starts to wobble. Merjem shuts her eyes and holds her breath: the policeman is now only an arm's length away - all he has to do is reach out, and he's got her. Merjem's heart freezes; she can scarcely breathe.

The policeman's brown shoe slips off the window sill: it's too narrow for his enormous feet. Irritated, he gives the two almost empty boxes a shake - while behind them Merjem makes herself as flat as flat can be.

He backs out of the room, then suddenly stops: he's seen something move underneath the duvet. Creeping forward stealthily, he pounces on the bed. Startled and hissing loudly, Merjem's cat Hannibal leaps out from under the duvet and escapes through the window.

'Merje-e-e-em!' screams her mother. 'Kukuth na ka goditur!' Why does she keep on talking Albanian? She's so proud of her German.

Merjem pushed her hood back off her head and gave herself an enormous shake, like a dog that's just come out of the water: she didn't want to have those pictures inside her head any more. It was getting dark by now, but she didn't dare to turn a light on in case somebody saw it. She tried to stand up, but couldn't manage it: her legs just wouldn't do what she wanted them to do. She couldn't even feel them any more, she was so cold. She tried using her arms as well: that worked, and she managed to shuffle her way to her rucksack.

In the front pocket she found scissors, and the pencil case full of felt-tip pens that her mother had given her for her birthday. She took all her books out of the rucksack, then simply emptied its entire contents onto the floor. A packet of crackers landed next to her feet, its contents crushed into tiny pieces. She ripped the packet open with her teeth and tipped some of the broken bits straight into her mouth. Some of them went down the wrong way and gave her a terrible choking fit. She was more careful with the bits that were left, shaking them into her hand first and then licking them up with her tongue. It was a better method anyway, because they lasted longer. 'More!!' growled her stomach once the last few remnants had been licked up - but she didn't have any more. She hunted around in the lockers just in case someone had left some food behind, but all she found was a pair of old tennis shoes. She tried them on: she'd gone to bed the night before with her crocs on. The tennis shoes were at least four sizes too big.

Her stomach was rumbling as if a huge hungry wolf was trapped inside it.

Going into the toilet, she turned the washbasin tap on and kept testing the water with her finger, but it didn't get warm.

Seeing an electric hand-drier on the wall next to the basin, she pressed the shiny silver button, and, roaring like a hurricane, the drier blasted warm air over her hands and then her face. She took off her jacket, lay down on it, and held her feet up under the drier. Only now did she realise that her feet had turned into lumps of ice. She had to stand up again five times to press the button before they had warmed up enough.

Her stomach was still rumbling.

She waited until it was completely dark outside, then clambered up onto the toilet bowl. The wheelbarrow wasn't underneath the window any more, but it was easy to climb out without it.

The street was bathed in yellow light from the lampposts. Whenever anyone drove past she ducked out of sight behind a bush or a parked car. Normally it only took her a quarter of an hour to get back from school, but this time the journey seemed to last for ever.

Her home - or what *had* been her home until the previous day - lay in total darkness. It really did seem as if a 'Kukuth' or some other awful bogymen had descended on the place and sucked all the life out of it. Once again she felt her lower lip begin to quiver, but she didn't cry. No point bawling.