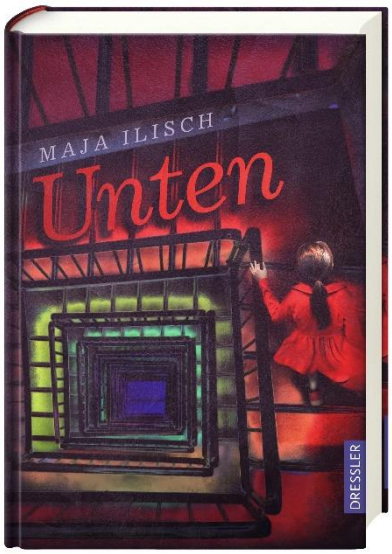
DRESSLER



Maja Ilisch (Author)

Unten

Down Below

Children's Fiction | Recommended age: 10+ | ISBN: 978-3-7513-0104-6 | Pages: 304

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Anything that even resembles fun is forbidden. But Nevo has to stick to the rules, or else her mother will lose their flat and they'd have to move further down the building. And nobody wants to do that. These flats are Nevo's entire universe; her whole life is there. Nobody has left the building for generations. The property management company keeps everything in order. But then Nevo's best friend Juma falls down the laundry chute while playing one day and appears to be swallowed up by the earth. Moreover, the adults act as if Juma had never existed. Nevo is used to having her questions unanswered, but this is a bridge too far. She sets out on a mission to find Juma - little realising that it will turn out to be the adventure of her life.

- Prizeworthy: a thrilling novel following in the footsteps of Momo.
- For all fans of Michael Ende, Ursula Poznanski and Morton Rhue.
- Extraordinary, touching, timeless - a story with true classic potential.

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Juma, where are you?

Nevo's hands were trembling as she pushed the hatch shut again. Had Juma slipped away while Nevo was distracted by talking to that old man? Was she just trying to be annoying …

"It's not funny!" she shouted into the hallway. "Juma? Come out. The joke's over."

Juma didn't reply. And however much Nevo strained her ears to listen up and down, left and right, she couldn't hear footsteps anywhere. Nevo screwed her lips together tightly. Don't cry. Don't worry. Juma hasn't fallen down the chute. She'll at home, waiting for Nevo, waiting to laugh at her. Everything's fine …

She could still feel the old man's eyes boring into her back, and she turned to look at him. "Did you see her?" she asked. "My friend. She's about this height, she must have climbed out of the laundry chute …"

The old man shook his head. "I haven't seen her," he said. Nevo's heart sank. The man had a direct view from his door to the hatch: if he hadn't seen anything, that meant that Juma hadn't got out. She'd fallen down. The note in Nevo's pocket had suddenly become meaningless. Now she really would be in trouble. And she hoped that trouble was all that Juma would end up in. All that laundry would surely give her a soft landing. She'd get a telling-off, but nothing worse than that. Wouldn't she?

Nevo didn't want to have to shout down the hallway. The words were stuck in her throat and didn't want to make their way out, even as she padded back to the red door. "I think," Nevo managed to say, "I think my friend has fallen down the laundry chute."

It sounded so weird when put it into words, but the old man didn't laugh. He just said very quietly: "Then go to her flat and tell her parents, and then go home and tell your own parents. And next time, you need to be more careful."

Nevo nodded. "Maybe she's already home …" She didn't believe this even as she said it. "Our mums are still at work. Should I go down there and see if I can find her …?"

"Go home," the old man repeated. "And wait for your friend there. And for your mother." He nodded at Nevo again. "Everything will be fine," he said. And then he shut the door. Nevo was left standing all alone in the hallway, not knowing what to do with herself. Her anxiety was rising. Go home? She didn't dare. She knew the old man was right, but she still didn't dare. So long as she dawdled in the hallway, she could still convince herself that everything was fine and that Juma was sitting at home with a couple of bruises, wondering where Nevo was. But what if something really had happened to her?

The light flickered, and for the first time Nevo was shocked rather than amused when it suddenly went dark, albeit just for a moment. The hallway suddenly felt colder and narrower; the loudspeaker was still hanging above her and seemed to be watching her. There was nothing for it: Nevo would have to go home. However, she took the long way round, creeping as slowly and quietly as she possibly could.

She reached their flats. Numbers twenty-seven and twenty-five. Right next door to one another, just as Nevo and Juma had lived next door to one another for as long as they could remember. Nevo swallowed. She listened at her own door and at Juma's and then, as she couldn't hear anything, she knocked. Only very quietly then, as she screwed up her courage, a bit louder.

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Nobody answered. Nobody opened the door. Nevo waited. She had her own front door key; all she needed to do was go inside. But she might then miss Juma coming home …

Nevo sat down in front of the wall between their doors - right in the middle - and waited. She felt sick with fear. She shut her eyes, opened them, shut them; she couldn't decide which, and the fear inside her was rising whatever she did. She heard the door into the hallway and jumped to her feet, but it wasn't Juma. It was a woman who lived further down the corridor; she was carrying her little girl and hastened past Nevo without paying her any attention. Nevo sat down again. She carried on waiting and didn't even dare go into her own flat.

The loudspeaker crackled. Nevo jumped to her feet again. "The building management would like to remind you," said the voice which could have been either male or female; even after all these years, Nevo had never worked out which, "that loitering in the corridors is not permitted."

Nevo looked around. There was nobody to be seen, so the announcement was clearly directed at her. Her heart started to pound. Was the announcement a good sign? "No loitering" might mean that they didn't know anything about Juma. "No climbing into the laundry chute" would have been worse, wouldn't it? But Nevo couldn't risk being warned twice in one day by the corridor monitor. Even if she could claim that she'd forgotten her key or lost it, or that she wasn't in fact loitering - she didn't even know what loitering meant … It was a weird word - and the way it came across over the loudspeaker made it sound like "littering", which would mean not caring about anything, whereas she cared so much that she could barely breathe for terror …

Her hands were shaking so badly that she dropped her key twice when she finally tried to open the door. Inside, it was as dark and lonely as it could possibly be, which only made Juma's absence all the more striking. Nevertheless, Nevo said quietly: "Hello? Juma? Are you there?"

Nobody was there. There wasn't really anywhere that anyone could be hiding. Nevo had to go out into the corridor for exercise precisely because they just had the one room - plus a small kitchen and tiny bathroom - and there was no space to run around or do anything much. Nevo tiptoed through the flat without switching the light on. She even looked behind the curtain which separated her mum's bed off from the rest of the flat to see if Juma might have hidden there. Needless to say, there was no sign of anyone.

Nevo sat down in the half-light on the sitting room floor, leaving the front door open a crack so as not to miss Juma coming home, ready to leap up at any moment. She could hear her mum's alarm clock ticking somewhere in the flat, but it was otherwise silent. Of course it was never truly silent: the walls were too thin for that, as were the floors. They could always hear someone above or below, but Nevo had long since learnt to tune it out. It was odd, then, that she could still hear the alarm clock, tick, tick, tick, time passing at its usual steady pace.

Darkness fell. Evening came earlier in the inner flats whose windows looked out over the light well - a misnomer, for it was always in shadow. Nevo knew the difference: the twins lived diagonally opposite, facing outwards, and their flat was not only twice the size of hers - the twins even had their own bedroom - but was much lighter too.

Juma didn't appear. But the corridor started to fill up with the sounds of people returning from work and others setting off for their nightshifts. Footsteps kept passing Nevo's door, and more than once someone pushed it slightly and peered inside. Nevo looked up, shook her head, and whoever it was shrugged and went on their way. Someone else tried to close the door fully, but Nevo held onto it and this person went away too. Was it even permitted to leave the door open?

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Presumably not. Safety and stuff. But Nevo was sitting there keeping watch, so nobody could come in if Juma reappeared …

Then Nevo's mother came home. Nevo knew the sound of her footsteps even from a distance, and heard them slowing down as she noticed the open door. She stopped, hesitated, then cautiously opened the door.

"I'm here," Nevo heard herself squeaking. She had managed not to cry for the whole time but now of all moments, she burst into tears.

"Nevo!" her mother cried. "What on earth are you doing? Why've you left the door open?" She had already switched the light on, which revealed Nevo sitting huddled on the ground in all her tear-stained glory. "What's happened? Are you ill? Have you had an argument with someone?"

Nevo shook her head and pointed wordlessly at her mouth to indicate that she wouldn't be able to speak until she'd got her breath back. Then, finally, she managed to come out with one sentence. "Juma fell down the laundry chute!"

Her mother looked at her and shook her head. For a moment, she looked as if she might be about to laugh, but she didn't. Instead she frowned and said: "Who's Juma?"

Nevo is used to her questions not being answered, but this is a bridge too far! How can her mother act as if she had never heard of Juma? Nevo has no choice but to set out alone to find her friend - whereupon she has the adventure of her life.

A thrilling novel which follows in Momo's footsteps!

MAJA ILISCH was born in 1975 in Dortmund. She had various jobs in the book trade and for publishing houses and libraries before becoming a freelance writer. Alongside her writing, she runs Tintenzirkel, an online forum for fantasy fiction writers. Maja Ilisch lives in Aachen with her husband in an old house which may or may not be haunted.

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