

Liza Szabo: Marie Bot – Someone Recharge the Nanny!

- Mary Poppins charm with a modern twist
- Authentic situations of a funny, drawn-from-life family
- Intriguing question: Can a robot have feelings?

A robot as a Nanny?!

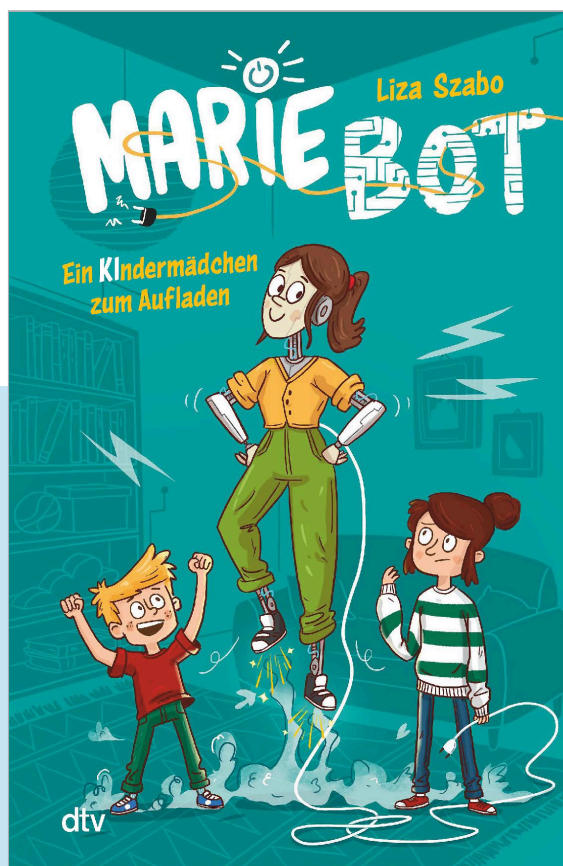
What happens if a robot is suddenly put in charge of a family's life? The Kalliske family is trying this out: After yet another nanny has run away, Papa Jens has had enough and orders Marie Bot at a trade show for artificial intelligence, which consequently turns their family life upside down. Will the Kalliskes pull through and make it work or is something more required to keep a family together?



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Liza Szabo is an overwhelmed mother of three children and now lives in Hamburg. A long time ago she completed training as a book-seller in Frankfurt am Main and studied Romance languages in Leipzig. Marie Bot is her first book.

Wilm Lindenblatt is an illustrator and comic-book artist living in Berlin. His passion for drawing, and enthusiasm for music both began at an early age and are reflected in his work.



Liza Szabo, Wilm Lindenblatt (Ill.)

Marie Bot – Someone Recharge the Nanny!

224 pages

September 2024

Age: 9+

b/w illustrations, 14,3 x 22 cm

Genre: Children's Books Friends / Family, Children's Books

ENGLISH
SAMPLE
TRANSLATION
AVAILABLE

Chapter 1 (p. 5 – 7)

In which you get to know my family and
might form a bad impression

Adults truly are hopeless space cadets.

For example, if Dad, who is really good at one thing, namely finding things, were to look for Mom's purse, and if Mom, who is really good at something else, namely being on time, were to constantly remind Dad of the time, then I could make sure Finn (while Dad tries to be ready on time and Mom looks for her purse) doesn't start playing soccer in all that chaos. And everything would go more smoothly in our family, guaranteed!

WHAM! I've just barely finished thinking this complicated thought when Finn hits me with his darn ball!

"You idiot!!"

Unfortunately Finn is just Finn. So don't ask me what he's good at.

"Finn! How many times have we told you NO SOCCER BALL in the apartment?!"

"Dad, it's not a soccer ball. It's a basketball!"

Finn tries to run away from me, even though it's totally pointless. I catch him before he's even out of the hallway.

"Stop it right now! Jens, what time is it?" Mom screams, just like she always does when she's running through the apartment looking for her purse.

"It's a quarter past seven," I say, grabbing a hold of Finn's leg.

"Oh no! I need to go! I have to pick up the movie tickets at 7:30!"

"Me too! I need to get out of here! The parent-teacher conference is starting earlier today. It's all about your class field trip!"

If one of our series of babysitters doesn't show up soon, Mom and Dad are going to have another problem: there's no way I'm staying home alone with Finn. That's all I need!

"Who's coming to babysit? Suzanne, did you sort that out?"

No answer.

"Didn't Simone say she's coming? Shoot! Or was it Miriam?"

“You need to call them! Jens? Please call Miriam, Mareike, or Simone and ask them what’s going on!”

“Miriam? Not her! I hate Miriam!” Finn whines. He’s now firmly clamped under my arm with no chance of escape.

Then the doorbell rings. It’s Simone. Mom and Dad stare at her as if she’s an alien from Mars. Then they take a deep breath. Shoes on, purse under the arm, a few kisses, and they’re gone.

Phew. This is what a completely normal evening looks like in my family, the Kalliske family. We’re actually a completely normal family – or we were until that one day in September.

But I better explain everything in order.

Chapter 8 (p. 34 – 40)

In which I share how Marie Bot the robot wakes up in our apartment

“Well, let’s do it then.”

Dad sounds a bit solemn. Which isn’t surprising, since there’s a robot lying on the floor in front of us with eyes closed, looking like a real dead person. The robot’s name is Marie, and it’s a she and is now supposed to babysit us on a trial basis!

The robot does look a little different than I remember it. Maybe it’s not the same model we saw at the trade fair – there must be several different ones. On the other hand, I didn’t really look at it that carefully. There’s no way I could have guessed that one would move in with us just two weeks later!

The thing lying on the floor in front of us is wearing a fluttery, yellow blouse with little black buttons. The pants are wide and green, a pea green, and they’re a little too short. The feet—are those actually feet?—are inserted in black sneakers with Velcro straps. One of the blouse’s sleeves has slipped up a bit, providing a clear view of white plates held together with metal rods that must be hiding all kinds of technical components underneath. Pretty creepy if you ask me. But the hands look like real human hands, deceptively real and very soft. The neck is a creepy-looking, gleaming metal rod, just like the wrists. And what is the head made of? At first glance it looks like it’s been carved out of wood, the kind that’s soft and smooth, but it’s probably some kind of plastic. And the hair on the wooden head—or whatever it’s made of—isn’t painted on: it’s real reddish-brown hair that’s done up in a ponytail with strands hanging down on either side of the forehead.

What does a robot need hair for? Hair doesn’t make it look like a person anyway. But it doesn’t look like a machine either. It looks more like a toy. A toy that’s grown up, a doll with a mischievous face. It’s impossible to guess it’s age—it’s a mix between Grandma Hilde and three-year-old Jette who lives on the second floor. Young or old; human or machine; she, he, or it—you really don’t know what it is! Why didn’t they just make it rectangular like a toaster? At least then you’d know what you’re up against.

“So what now?” Finn bursts into my thoughts. “Aren’t we going to turn her on? We’re just standing around! This must be the Power button.” Finn puts his index finger on a completely inconspicuous silver grooved spot under the robot’s chin. How did he find it so quickly?

“Finn, wait!” Mom says. But too late: we hear a quiet but clear zzzzt. Then two to three seconds of frantic buzzing—but wait, that’s just a big fly banging itself against the window as we hold our breath and stare at the robot.

All of a sudden it opens its eyes. It happens so quickly and it looks so alive that all of us except Finn flinch in shock. The robot lifts its head, turns it from left to right and then shakes it, as if it has just been woken up from a little nap. Just like Grandma Hilde when she nods off on the sofa in the evenings and then wakes up a few minutes later and looks at us contentedly.

Now the robot's eyes meet mine—is that a real gaze?—and I suddenly realize who else it reminds me of: Pinocchio! This thing looks just like the Pinocchio in our tattered picture book! And then this Pinocchio who isn't Pinocchio slowly and clearly says: "Hi, my name is Marie Bot."

"We know what your name is. We met at the trade fair," Finn says, holding out his hand.

"Hello, I'm pleased to meet you," Marie says, shaking Finn's hand. "And who are you?" she says, turning to me.

"That's Karla, my sister! Don't you remember? I thought you all have amazing brainpower."

"Hello, Karla. It's nice to meet you." Her voice is light and soft.

Stupid blockhead, I think, forcing myself to muster a weak "hello."

"Or aren't you the robot from the fair?" Finn asks.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Do you mean fair as in an event with attractions or vendors, the fee for a ticket or ride, or a particular kind of food?" Marie responds.

"What? I mean the robot trade fair where we met," Finn says, turning to look at Dad for help.

"Her name is Marie Bot," Dad whispers, "but she must be a different model."

"Please speak loudly and clearly. You don't need to keep any secrets from me," Marie says, smiling without any reproach.

"Oh, of course. I was just saying that the robot we saw at the fair must have been a display model, and you're the real Marie Bot, right?"

What is Dad babbling about? The real one? What makes it the real one when there are thousands of them? Or maybe even millions?

"Absolutely, I'm the real one," Marie says, turning to Mom.

"Hello, you must be the mother I presume? What is your name?"

Mom looks like she's completely forgotten who she is, including what her name is and where she lives. "Um...uh..." she stutters in a daze.

"Mom, what's wrong? So this is Mom, and her name is Suzanne. Don't you want to say hi, Mom?" Finn jumps in impatiently.

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry. Hello, I’m Suzanne.”

“It’s a pleasure, Suzanne. You have two very nice children.”

“Oh thank you. I think so, too. Most of the time.”

“And so you are the father, correct?”

“Yes. Jens. Right. I’m Jens. I’m Dad.”

This is going great, I think. Mom and Dad are grinning like two first graders on the first day of school.

“Wonderful!” Marie says. “I’m really happy to be here. Can I see the apartment now?”

“Of course, right this way. I’ll show you everything,” Mom stutters, heading toward the door.

When Marie starts to stand up, I point to the cable that leads from her back to an outlet.

She laughs and pulls out the plug. “I’ve had enough to eat today. Otherwise I’ll get too fat, right?” she says, giving me a friendly wink.

Was that supposed to be funny? I don’t laugh with her.

The cable goes inside her all by itself and quietly disappears somewhere underneath her blouse.

“Just like our vacuum cleaner!” Finn says enthusiastically. “Only the cord always gets stuck.”

“Yes, and your vacuum can’t find its ways to an outlet,” Marie summarizes, and suddenly she’s standing up. “So. This must be the bedroom?”

“That’s right.”

I can tell by the expression on Mom’s face that at least she’s remembered what her name is. She takes a deep breath, straightens out one of the cuffs on her sweater, walks into the hallway and energetically says: “Please come with me. I’ll show you the other rooms.”

Chapter 27 (p. 145 – 151)

In which Finn tries to comfort me, and Marie explains the meaning of life

In the End, Mom and Dad didn't have to pay a fine, and luckily they didn't have to go to jail either.

A woman by the name of Dr. Worryfree called us from PerfectSolution's legal department the next day. Mom twirled her finger by her temple. Probably because of the lady's name. Dr. Worryfree already knew the whole story and apologized on behalf of the company for the inconvenience caused by HPXX2025.

"The company will take care of everything. *Everything*," Dr. Worryfree assured Mom. "Including Mr. Minnemann, the advertisements, Mr. Tjarksen and," laughing a little too forcefully, "his violent fantasies. Mrs. Kalliske, we will make an offer that will completely satisfy those affected. And I mean completely. There's no need to worry. And of course," Dr. Worryfree declared firmly, "our product will be adjusted accordingly."

Mom and Dad were visibly relieved.

But what does it mean to be "adjusted accordingly"? Will they operate on Marie? Will she get a new brain?

Or will she possibly even be...scrapped?

And why of all times do I have to go now!

My class trip is starting tomorrow. A five-day class trip is bad enough on its own, but what will happen while I'm gone? I feel frozen with fear.

I lie on my bed watching a skittish fly bumping into the ceiling. I wish I could fly.

I have to get on a bus early in the morning and ride through the lonely, miserable countryside just so I can subject myself to the whims of nature all day and all night. Well, OK, maybe not to the whims of nature but to Mrs. Jessen.

"Here, pick something! You can take whatever you want."

My brother dramatically holds a gray cardboard box under my nose filled with red gummy snakes twined around crushed chocolate eggs, sour tongues, brightly colored fruit chews and cracked Marzipan potatoes. I do understand that this is his secret store of candy that's so secret

and so precious I've never even seen it before. It's usually buried somewhere deep in the depths of one of his drawers.

"No thanks," I say, waving him off.

Finn offering me some of his precious candy happens about as often as February 29 rolls around. But the sight of melted chocolate, gummy snakes, and old fruit chews all stuck together in a lopsided old cardboard box makes me feel sadder than I already am. I feel just like an old, crumbly piece of caramel right now!

"Really, Karla, it'll help. I've tried it. You see, sour things perk you up, but candy helps a lot, a whole lot more. It can really put you in a good mood sometimes!"

Finn doesn't give up easily.

"Here, try these. They taste like strawberries—you like those!" he angrily shoos away the fly that's far more interested in his feel good-strawberry chews than I am. Then he seems to have a flash of inspiration. "I know! I'll give you some money. Then whenever you..." And he dashes off to his room and comes back rattling his money jar... "feel sad you can go get something from the kiosk."

He shakes out the coins on the bedcover. "You can get chocolate with yogurt filling or ice cream or whatever you want! How many days of torture is it?"

He pushes the coins back and forth on my bedcover as he calculates what three daily portions of feel-good candy might cost. "They do have a kiosk there, don't they? Every school camp has a kiosk, even the most isolated ones!"

"I have no idea." Exhausted by all his brotherly desire to help, I let my head fall back on my pillow. "Don't think Mrs. Jessen will take us anywhere with a kiosk. As far as I know she's booked the most uninviting accommodation in the whole world. Without a kiosk or a phone. We're supposed to *mature* there."

"No kiosk?! There's no kiosk! That's terrible!" My brother stares at me in helpless horror. A strange smell that's a mix of metal and sugar prickles my nose.

"We have to come up with something else," Finn says. He sweeps the coins back into his coin jar, grabs his cardboard box, and runs out of the room. I have no idea what he's dreaming up now.

The fly frantically scans my bedcover in front of me. Yep, nothing for you here, my dear! What will happen to us?

Marie comes in the room with my house shoes and my packing list. She's supposed to help me pack despite her alleged misconduct at Bolzplatz.

"Do you actually realize you're a robot?" I ask her.

Marie looks up from the list. “I know I’m a robot.”

“Yes, you know it, but I mean how does it feel?”

“It doesn’t feel like anything. Because robots don’t feel much. Basically we don’t feel anything at all. Unfortunately it’s just the way I am.”

“Why unfortunately? Would you rather be human?”

“I don’t think so.” She smiles apologetically. “But I’m not absolutely sure because I don’t know what it would feel like. I can’t imagine it.”

For a while I silently stuff T-shirts into my backpack. Then I say, “Well I’d rather be a robot for one.”

“Really?” It seems to make Marie happy. Or more precisely: she acts like she’s happy. When a person wants to be a robot, it must sound like some kind of a compliment to her. And it is.

“Why would you rather be a robot?”

“Well, because then I wouldn’t need so many clothes. And because I would always know exactly why I’m here: Hi, my name is Karla Kalliske. I’m your babysitter from PerfectSolution’s line of robots,” I say, imitating Marie. “As a person I don’t know what the point of it all is.”

“The point of what?”

“School. Class trips. Siblings. Life.”

“The meaning of life,” Marie says like a pistol shot, “is to serve the greater good.”

“The greater good?” I squeeze in my sleepers between some T-shirts. “Who programmed that into you? It sounds like something you’ve learned by heart. What is that supposed to mean, the *greater* good?”

“Something that’s bigger than you are yourself. Something that’s above you and transcends you,” Marie says again without thinking. As if she talks about these kinds of things every day. “But you’re a child. You still have lots of time to figure out what that means for you.”

“You never know how much time you have left,” Grandma Hilde always says. “Some day we will all die.”

I’m reminded of the poor fly. What is its greater good? A pile of dog poop perhaps? And how many days does it have to think about it?

“Anyway it would be pretty stupid to be gone just like that without knowing why you were here in the first place.”

Marie smiles and nods. “That’s true. Anything that lives must die. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“See, there’s another reason why it’s better to be a robot.”

This time it’s Marie who pauses. As always, when she doesn’t have an appropriate answer at hand she stares motionlessly in front of her. She’s thinking. Or calculating. This time it takes an unusually long time.

“I don’t know, Karla,” she says slowly and thoughtfully, “what people actually need feelings for. Your lives seem far more complicated because of them. But sometimes I think they’re also more interesting.”