

**'Der Balkon' by Felicitas Hoppe (from *Picknick der Friseure*, S. Fischer Verlag, 1996)
Translated by Emma Hall (2013)**

The Balcony

What a family, screeched the housekeeper, hitting me several times over the head, as was his way. He had found me in the queue and seemed to be trying to light a cigarette, striking the match just where I happened to be. My head shrank further between my shoulders; there is nothing wrong with our family. I am here in the queue simply because I am small and wily enough for my mother to drop me into a pair of oversized trousers each morning, into the inside of which she fastens the little purse with help of a large safety pin. She wraps me up in a sweater and a blanket is thrown over my shoulders; that should get me through the day. My two sisters lower me into my vanished brother's wellies, and, before pushing me out to the door, they quickly peck me on the cheek: one on the left, one on the right, because in our family we keep to strict rules.

Outside I watch a little boat floating by along the river, and wave at it amicably. My father, perched on the window seat amongst his beer and his spirit bottles, catches me enjoying myself, and comes and beats me black and blue, even though he's only just finished beating the living daylights out of my mother. Which is completely reasonable of him; she has ruined our family with her compulsive purchasing of haberdashery goods of every sort from the traders as they float by. Crates and boxes are piled up in our flat, filled with rubber bands, buttons, clothes pegs and shoelaces of all shapes and sizes; God knows who might find a use in any of it. And whilst my father attends to his administrative duties, my sisters serve the guests in the back room, friendly older gentlemen who generally go about without causing any great trouble.

We would most definitely be lost, should my aunt not live next door, the happy owner of a balcony, which at weekends she rents out by the hour to fresh air junkies, to people who adore to step out onto the balcony in the morning, dressed up in red silk bathrobes, to stretch out a while with a toothy smile, and to call out: HELLO, OH BEAUTIFUL MORNING, WHAT MIGHT YOU HAVE IN STORE FOR ME TODAY? Every once in a while one of them falls to the ground below, and within moments a large crowd gathers beneath my aunt's balcony, who on such occasions always rushes down the stairs, not as young as she used to be, and collects donations for the fallen in a tin can. With the help of my mother's rubber bands she bundles up the casualties into manageable packages, so that they can be picked up without difficulty. When the next of kin arrive we all report for duty and warble out a little ditty, to bring them some peace. My father hands out schnapps and lets the tips roll in.

What a family, screeched the housekeeper and hit me over the head for a fourth time, before I managed to scramble through the spread legs of the man in front of me, who had

just undone his trousers to relieve himself. *Do you think I didn't know?* bellowed the housekeeper, and waved his arms about so violently that he nearly fell over. The man behind him caught him, at which he turned around and struck up a conversation. Standing still out in the cold, any chatter is welcome.

I tried to work my way forwards in the queue bit by bit, because even though my father says every morning that my brother will come back and take my place in the queue, I know that I can't rely on that. I prefer getting things done off my own bat. Because I'd arrived late, it wasn't looking good; a sea of boots down below and winter hats up above stretched out as far as the eye could see. In front of me three men were sitting around the kind of table that many people bring with them when they're out shopping, because of the long waiting times. Around it they had set out little fold-up stools and were engrossed in a game of cards. At the same time they were eating indulgently large sausage sandwiches, of the kind you would rarely see in my neighbourhood. The fatty sausages came bulging out from between the two slices of bread, making my mouth water. I tried to get in the good books of the player sitting next to me by sneaking him clues in the game. Sure enough, his luck suddenly turned, and he patted me on the head in a comradely manner, pinched my cheeks, tugged my ear with glee, called me his little golden beetle and his lucky star, but did not show the faintest intention of sharing his prize with me, and in the end I snapped at his sandwich like a dog.

The others caught on to our trick straight away, jumped up and began to yell. *String him up, the little devil*, roared one of them, *no no no, we'll smother him with his blanket*, yelled another. I crawled under the table as fast as I could, and looked up to see the three men wringing each other's necks with delight. The queue became restless. Everyone saw the opportunity at hand and seized it jubilantly. It was gloves off, one man's strength against another, no holds barred. Hats were pulled down tight over ears and foreheads, fists curled into balls, and out of coat pockets came small bread, fish or steak knives for the fight. I was still crouching under the little table, because my braces had got caught up in its folding mechanism. All around me I saw stampeding feet and every so often the face of a human soul beaten to the ground. I gathered up a few teeth, because I thought they might please my sisters. I was getting uncomfortably hot from all the people steaming and seething around me. Without a moment to lose, they attacked the rucksacks of those in front, behind, and next to them in the queue and crammed as much into their pockets and mouths as they could get their mitts on.

Suddenly the housekeeper's face loomed in front of mine. *That's him!* he screamed, and his eyes gleamed with ecstatic anticipation, *just you wait my lad, I'll have your guts for garters!* But he couldn't get a proper hold of me as I swung to and fro, hanging from the table by my braces. I pressed my finger to my lips and shushed him, making a secretive face. He boggled at me for a moment, and then burst into uproarious laughter, *and how*, he wheezed, nearly choking on his chuckles, *and how exactly are you going to bribe me not to?*

Now the housekeeper is a good person, and people that can be bribed are good people. And so at last he lent me an ear under the table. I solemnly promised to take him to my aunt's balcony. I myself have never been in my aunt's flat. For a start, bathrobes are banned in my family on principle. And secondly, I have to spend all day every day out in the fresh air anyway, so have never needed to step out onto my aunt's balcony in that respect. *I shan't bribe you a penny*, I said, and I saw the housekeeper's eyes light up, *you shall have the balcony and my aunt and everything else besides*.

It was a Sunday morning when I took the housekeeper into my aunt's flat. Her hair was up in rollers, and she was in her dressing gown, which was adorned with blue and yellow stars, flapping about her body, the housekeeper's eyes watered and he lost no time in throwing my aunt onto the little sofa next to the cold hearth, to warm her through and through. I heard her call STOP IT, as I threw the red bathrobe over myself, opened the door to the balcony, stepped onto it, stretched out a while with a toothy smile, spread out my arms and cried HELLO, OH BEAUTIFUL MORNING, WHAT MIGHT YOU HAVE IN STORE FOR ME TODAY?

Leaning out over the railing, I saw that an even larger crowd than usual had already gathered below. My mother was making unclear gestures at me and waved a bundle of braces, which she must have just bought, whilst my father violently pulled at her hair from behind. I spotted my brother, who was signing at me with great sweeping gestures to get away from the balcony straight away. I saw my sister moving her lips without stopping, and blowing me kisses. I began to blow kisses too. I lent far over the rails to hear her better, and I fell.

The fall was short. I landed on the road surface, without causing any great damage to those gathered below. My aunt rushed down the stairs with her hair loose, elastic bands under her arm, and tied me up with a few quick movements of her hands. My father went to get the Schnapps glasses; my mother wrung her hands for a while. As she laid me inside the box, she began to sing, and I noticed, not without some surprise, that despite his long absence, my brother had not forgotten the ditty.