

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

The Balcony

What a family, shouted the landlord, and struck me on my head, as he always does, he did this several times when he discovered me in the queue. He pretended to light a cigarette, using my head as if where he would strike the match. I tucked my head between my shoulder blades. I reckon we're a pretty average family, and the reason for me standing here is that I am small and slight enough to be thrown into a pair of gigantic trousers every morning by my mother. She attaches a little purse inside them with the help of a large safety pin. I am wrapped in a jumper and my shoulders are covered by a blanket, which I shall wear throughout the day. My two sisters drop me into the wellingtons of my long lost brother and, before pushing me out of the door, kiss me tightly on my cheeks - one on the left, the other on the right cheek, as my family lives by fixed standards.

Once outside, I am staring at the barge gliding by on the river and greet it politely. My father, squatting between beer and schnapps bottles on the windowsill, catches me in the midst of his delight and hits me until I am purple, although he has just beaten the living daylight out of my mother - understandably, as she has ruined my family by purchasing haberdashery of all sorts from merchants passing by. Crates and boxes filled with elastics, buttons, pegs and shoelaces of various sorts and sizes, are piling up in our apartment and only heaven knows what to do with all of this. As my father wades through paperwork, my sisters serve the guests in the back room; friendly elderly gentlemen, who normally get to it without too much fuss.

Surely we would be lost if my aunt did not live in the house next door. She who is the lucky owner of a balcony, which she lends hourly over the weekends to fresh-air-junkies, people who love to sashay on balconies clad in red-silken bathrobes, to stretch and flex themselves, expose their teeth and burst out: GOOD MORNING SUNSHINE, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO BRING ME TODAY? Occasionally someone takes a nosedive, and immediately a rather big crowd gathers under my aunt's balcony, who in such cases usually leaps down the staircase - she is no spring chicken -, collecting money in a little tin can for the people killed in action. Using my mother's elastics, she bundles the fallen up into handy packages,

so they can be fetched without objection. In the case of relatives coming, we gather up and belt out a ditty to move them. My father hands out some schnapps and collects the tips.

What a family, cried out the landlord and punched me on my head a fourth time, before I glided through the splayed legs of the man in front, who had just undone his flies to pour water. Do you really think I don't know, bellowed the landlord and waved his arms about so wildly that he was on the verge of falling backwards. The person behind him caught him, and he turned around and had a chit-chat. Standing motionlessly in the cold, one appreciates the news.

Little by little I fought my way up to the front of the queue, for although my father claims my brother will come back one day and take his turn at queuing, I know exactly that I cannot rely on that. I prefer to make headway of my own bat. Because I was late, the prospects were not looking good, boots here and hats there, as far as the eye could reach. In front of me sat three men at a little table, of the sort one carries about for the long waiting hours when one is shopping. All around they had put up little folding chairs and they were passionately playing card games. They ate huge, unsustainably thick sliced sausage-sandwiches, of a standard rarely seen in our area. The fat sausage cascaded out of the slices, and the sight of this made my mouth water. I tried to win over the player who sat closest to me in a few whispers. Truth is, he started winning non-stop, and then patted me comradely on the head, pinched my cheek, happily pulled my ears, called me his lucky mascot and his lucky star, but did not take any initiative to give me a share in his winnings, so that I finally snatched the bite like a hungry dog.

The others knew immediately what was going on, sprung up and started to shout, hang him, the little bastard, bellowed one of them, o no, o no, let's suffocate him with his blanket, yelled another. As swift as the wind I crept under the table, from where I watched the three of them wringing each other's necks, which proved a pleasurable entertainment. The queue started to move. Everyone happily seized their chance, so that each one ended up pummeling the other recklessly, for all one was worth. Winter caps were lowered over the ears and over the brows, fists were balled, some drew bread, fish and meat knives from their coat pockets to harass each other with. I was still crouched under the little table, as my suspenders had become entangled with the folding device. Close to me I saw stamping feet and every now and then the face of a poor soul being knocked down to the ground. I

collected a few teeth, because I thought they might make my sisters happy. I was totally warmed up as it all swirled and steamed around me. In a fit of hysteria people started tampering with the rucksacks of the customers standing in front of, next to, and behind them, and hastily stuffed anything they caught hold of into their mouths and pockets.

Suddenly I became aware of the landlord's face right next to mine. Ah, got ya, he shrieked, and his eyes glistened with a thrill of anticipation, just you wait, you cheeky devil, we're going to chop off all the bits hanging from you! But he did not manage to catch me properly as I was bobbing up and down under the little table with my suspenders. By putting on a secretive face, I placed my finger on my lips and hushed him. For a moment he hesitated and then let out a loud guffaw, with what, he puffed and nearly choked, what on earth do you want to bribe me with?

But the landlord is a good man and only people open to bribery are decent people. So finally he lowered his ear down to me under the table. I solemnly declared that I would show him my aunt's balcony. I myself have never been in my aunt's apartment. Firstly bathrobes are not worn in my family, on principle. Secondly I am forced to spend the days outside in the fresh air anyway, and so I never walked on my aunt's balcony. Not a penny, I said, and saw that the landlord's eyes started to beam, you shall have the balcony and the aunt and everything on it.

It was on a Sunday morning that I took the landlord to my aunt's apartment. She wore curlers in her hair and a dressing gown which, patterned with blue and yellow stars, seemed to flutter over her body. With misty eyes, the landlord hurried to throw my aunt on the little sofa next to the cold oven to warm her throughout. I heard her shouting OH DEAR, whilst I threw on the red bathrobe, opened the door to the balcony, stepped outside, stretched and flexed and exposed my teeth and spread my arms and burst out: GOOD MORNING SUNSHINE, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO BRING ME TODAY?

When I leaned over the balustrade I realized that a big crowd had assembled down there already. My mother made vague signs to me and waved a bundle of suspenders, which had likely just been purchased, whilst my father pulled her hair from behind her. I spotted my brother who, with a warning gesture, led me to understand that I had to leave the balcony immediately. I saw my sister incessantly moving her lips and blowing me kisses. I myself

also started blowing kisses. I leaned far over the balustrade to catch her words and fell to the ground.

The flight was short. I landed on the pavement without causing too much harm to the crowd. Hair loose and carrying elastics under her arm, my aunt flew down the steps, and tied me up with a few sleights of hand. My father left to fetch the schnapps bottle, my mother wrung her hands in desperation for a while. They started singing as they placed me into the box, and I noticed not without astonishment that my brother, despite his long absence, had not forgotten the lyrics.