

## **Katharina Born**

### **Fifty-Fifty**

Jürgen Fehn's womanising stopped the evening their daughter left. He still sometimes drove into town, went shopping or to the post office. But he never stayed away long, and Hella no longer heard a voice in the background, if he rang when he was out. She rarely found letters now, and usually they were unopened.

After breakfast Fehn went up to his study. And Hella didn't see him again until the early afternoon, when he was hungry. With calm, regular movements he spooned up his soup, cut the bread she had put out for him. He looked out of the kitchen window, where the snow in the drive had melted into deep puddles.

Only once, late one evening, had one of the women come as far as Sehlscheid. She had driven right up to the steps, had gone over a flower bed in the dark and almost the dog as well. When Hella got to the hall, her daughter had already opened the door. A notably tall woman was standing in the light of the little lamp.

"The bastard," said the woman, who was evidently drunk.

"I beg you pardon?" asked Judith.

Hella gently pushed her daughter aside. "Can I help you?"

“I have to see Fehn,” slurred the woman.

“He isn’t here,” said Hella.

The woman rolled her eyes. “And who are you?”

“I am his wife.”

“The bastard.”

Hella had to threaten to call the police before she could get rid of the woman. With a squealing V-belt drive the car disappeared into the night.

Perhaps they should have been able to laugh about the story, Hella thought afterwards. But when they stepped back inside the house, she thought she sensed Judith’s rage at her back. It was only rarely that they still had conversations which went beyond everyday matters. Sometimes, no doubt, it was her fault. But often Hella thought that her daughter wanted to punish her with indifference for the enforced new beginning in this remote place in the Westerwald hills.

Not until Fehn and Gellmann at one of their meetings in Frankfurt decided that Judith could translate Gellmann’s plays did the nineteen year-old suddenly appear less withdrawn. On her return she had let herself fall into the easy chair in front of the book cases with a show of exhaustion. Hella waited for her to start talking. But then Judith got up again, went across the hallway to the kitchen, and Hella would have had

to follow her daughter to find out anything. Instead she called after her, you can't live on translating.

In the morning Hella got worked up talking to Fehn, Judith was too young, could have no feeling for Gellmann's texts. She had to get some experience of life first.

"Experience isn't everything," Fehn had replied.

"Gellmann, of all people," Hella tried again. "I don't like the way he treats women."

"You liked it once." Fehn looked at her sharply. Only for a moment did Hella think about what he meant. "Apart from which Judith is our daughter," he continued. "Gellmann has known for ever. He's our friend."

Fehn had always underestimated Gellmann.

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The cars were parked in a long line on the muddy strip of grass at the entrance to the inn. The men wore dark suits, and the women stood in groups in long shiny black clothes on the forecourt, on which the morning sun threw hard shadows.

The reddened eyes of the widow of the dead man looked small and anxious under her hat. She was leaning on the arm of her sister-in-law as she entered the building. The flower arrangements had been put down in

the lobby, the tins of cakes that had been delivered were stacked up in kitchen serving-hatch, the clinking bottles were being placed on the tables. A fat girl in a dark blue frock, laughing loudly and sticking out her tongue, pushed past the guests who were still crowding in.

Hella leant against the door frame of the bar. Her mother was busy greeting the relatives. From time to time during the conversations she pointed to her daughter. Shyly Hella responded to the curious glances. She was glad that her mother didn't call her over. She was embarrassed now that she had insisted on having her hair cut short at the hairdresser's. Then suddenly she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"How are you?" A tall, somewhat gangling boy with slightly sticking-out ears and cool blue eyes had come up to her.

"OK, thanks," said Hella. "I hardly knew him. Actually I don't know anyone here."

"I don't mean that." The boy looked at her in amusement. "It's no great loss with most of the people in Sehlscheid anyway."

Hella was unsure how to react.

"We once played together. I'm something like a cousin of yours. Jürgen Fehn."

He waited. Hella had to think, but he was already shaking his head. "I know. You've forgotten me. Doesn't matter. I'm telling you, the only person worth knowing in this family is my little Gertrud here. Isn't that

so, Princess?” The fat girl, whose round face almost seemed to merge without a neck in the plump body, had now put her arm through Jürgen’s arm and was grinning. “Do you still remember little cousin Hella? The last time we saw her, she hadn’t even started school yet. And now?”

“I’m studying medicine,” said Hella.

“The beautiful aunt’s most beautiful daughter,” said Jürgen, and Hella wasn’t sure if he was laughing at her.

Gertrud had now taken their hands and pulled them behind her onto the terrace. Some of the younger guests were leaning on the railing and looking out across the valley. The blossom from the apple trees collected in the hollows of the slope like late snow. Hella thought she could now remember the view after all. There was a smell of grass wet from rain.

Jürgen flicked open his firelighter and took a deep draw on the cigarette. “That’s my friend Gellmann.” He pointed at a young, good-looking man, who was talking to two girls. “Beware of him. He’s a devil of a fellow.”

“Devil fellow, devil fellow!” shouted Gertrud laughing loudly.

Gellmann turned towards them and rolled his eyes.

“It’s Gellmann’s fault that I didn’t leave here long ago,” said Jürgen. “But someone has to watch out that the Nazis don’t throw their weight around too much.”

Gellmann grinned, the women looked shocked.

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t like me saying things like that. But everyone knows that the dear dead uncle here was a Nazi, don’t they, little cousin? You knew that, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I knew that,” said Hella.

“Nazi, Nazi!” cried Gertrud and stuck out her tongue between her teeth.

“You’d better stop that, little Princess. Otherwise the dear neighbours will hang Gertrud from the cherry tree the day after tomorrow.”

Later they sat on the wooden crates in the wine cellar. Jürgen said they used to play hide and seek there. A single lamp illuminated the rooms from the hall. Jürgen had pushed down the cork of a bottle with his thumb. They drank the dark somewhat sour wine in turn in small mouthfuls. Hella was cold and Jürgen rubbed her arms. First he kissed her forehead, then her mouth. Hella wanted to free herself, but Jürgen held her tight.

“You know we’re allowed to do it,” he whispered. Hella didn’t understand what he meant. “You know my father was adopted, don’t you?”

“By whom?” she whispered back.

“By grandma, silly girl.”

They heard Gertrud groping around in the next room. A tin bucket clattered. A full jar broke.

“Princess! We’re here!” shouted Jürgen and pulled Hella closer. She felt his heart beating at her chest. For a moment it was very dark in the room, as the body of the fat girl almost completely filled the doorway.

The district administrator, who had to leave early to keep an appointment in Frankfurt, drove over the dog as he was reversing his Opel. Murmuring quietly and shivering in their clothes the mourners went back inside after the short interruption. The funeral guests had meanwhile moved on from coffee to schnapps. The men leaned further over the tables, to follow the ever louder conversations. Thick clouds of pipe smoke billowed round the legs of the chairs. Hardly anyone noticed the quiet whimpering of the widow.

“Let’s go,” said Jürgen to Hella. “I’ve got a car. We could drive up to Strassenhaus.” Hella felt dizzy. She nodded.

Gertrud squeezed into the back seat of the sports car. Jürgen had opened the hood and the cold airstream burned her cheeks. Hella looked through the stands of beeches down into the valley, then she felt sick. Gertrud shrieked loudly on the tight curves.

“Please don’t go so fast,” said Hella.

“Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

“But if someone comes towards us.”

“Jürgen grinned. “Then our chances are probably fifty-fifty,” he said.

The car went even faster.

“You don’t have to impress me,” said Hella.

“But I’m not trying to impress you.” He didn’t look at her.

At the exit for Irlich the car came to a jolting halt at the edge of the main road. Hella opened the door and let herself fall from the seat. Bent forward she ran onto the embankment, Jürgen followed and tried to grab hold of her. She stepped in a puddle, stumbled, he reached out for her. She ran on. The she fell, he was lying on top and kissing her fiercely. From far away she heard Gertrud calling.

When they got back to the road, the occasional cars sweeping past had already switched on their headlights. They walked along the grass verge for a long time and at last saw the car at the edge of the road. They didn’t immediately notice that the back seat was empty. Gertrud was nowhere to be seen.

They looked for a long time, on the muddy embankments, calling, running over the slopes, with the torch Jürgen had in the glove compartment, at first hurriedly, through nettles, dirty scraps of paper, pitch black drainage ditches. Until they paused, panting, hoarse, shivering



and with reddened cheeks. Once Hella thought she saw something lying in the dark. They stood still, went on, stopped again. The clouds of their breath whirled around each other in the beam of the torch. Something snapped. Jürgen called again. Gertrud had disappeared, and remained missing on all the days that followed.

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All afternoon it never really cleared up. It poured with rain. Gellmann had planned to cook with Ingeborg. Such days had become rare. Usually they were busy with meetings now, in cellar rooms or shared flats, were planning actions and preparing leaflets for the demonstrations.

Ingeborg was strict when it came to political commitment. And Gellmann went along with it, because he liked her. He liked her nervous enthusiasm, her cat-like little movements and her generosity. He was no longer interested in where people wanted to go with their ideas. The “revolution” – with its many rules. And the most important was that no one was allowed to admit that it was all a game.

Only when they had begun to go all out, did Gellmann distance himself again, sometimes slept with other women, without Ingeborg responding with more than an insignificant absence from him. And he soon appreciated what had at first irritated him, the feigned or truly felt equanimity with which everyone slept with everyone else, without a strategy or even a will being required.

So Gellmann still printed, but he didn't go putting up posters any more nor did he go along to bigger actions. Nevertheless he felt good. He made

notes, began to work on a project of his own again, for which he wanted to use his observations – in the shape of a diary or a documentary play – it was to be something for the times, a bull's eye at last.

And then Hella had suddenly been on the phone. She announced herself in a thin voice. Gellmann immediately passed the receiver on to Ingeborg. He thought it was one of her colleagues from the music academy. Only when Ingeborg fell silent, did he grasp that it was Hella Fehn. He was overcome by a kind of consternation, an almost physical turmoil at which he was surprised himself. And only at that moment did it become clear to him, how afraid he was of the two women meeting. He told himself he had to protect Ingeborg from Hella's naked, brittle existence.

When Fehn came back from America with Hella, he had wanted to see Gellmann right away. His friend had returned as if from a future world. With ideas and words that were new and fascinating and not only to Gellmann. Now when they had a good drink in a pub, they no longer talked about the past, about the house or about Hella. There, too, something had changed. Hella stayed in Sehlscheid, without Fehn giving any explanation.

When they weren't talking about their affairs with women, then Fehn and Gellmann talked about their work, that was the rule they had always kept to. Gellmann was all the more surprised at the sudden uncertainty, which repeatedly took hold of his friend despite his increasing success.

So when Hella stood at his door, soaked through, a small, dark green travelling bag in her hand, and when she also said, she hadn't been able to

find a hotel room, Gellmann didn't immediately know whether she was serious or whether he should laugh.

Hella looked tired, with hollow cheeks. She still had long hair, but it looked uncombed, her shoulders thin, the skin in the low neckline of her blouse transparent. And yet it seemed to Gellmann that Ingeborg literally paled beside her.

"Come in," was all he said. "Warm yourself up first. We've opened a bottle of wine. I'm cooking."

As he busied himself with vegetables, meat and pots he tried to spread a light-hearted mood. He said, "Tell me, how have the two of you been," or, "What's happening to the house?" Ingeborg, too, seemed to be trying to skate over the tension, ran back and forward in high spirits, poured out wine, asked about Fehn, whom she knew from before.

Hella said Fehn was writing poems again. Now she sat hunched up at the kitchen table, made pellets out of the bread, drank with nerve-rackingly tiny sips, replied to questions, but her speech seemed thin-skinned.

Gellmann took the grindstone out of the drawer and with vigorous movements began to whet the knife. Had she imagined, she would arrive here, after all that time, and he, Gellmann would just be waiting for her?

Not until Ingeborg went to the phone, presumably to organise the meeting on Sunday, did Hella suddenly seem to awake from her stupor. She stood up, came up to Gellmann, said something about how he had changed, and how different everything was altogether. As she did so she slowly ran her hands up and down her arms. She still thought about the early days in the

house, she said. As if she had completely forgotten, that nothing had happened then. Nothing for weeks.

Gellmann could guess what was coming next. He knew it all too well. The untouchable, who's suddenly kneeling in front of him. In his best days he had been able to work towards such a moment for months. He'd also wanted Hella. Perhaps more than all the others. But now, right now and from her he didn't want to hear this whining. It disgusted him.

He threw the onion knife onto the board and turned to Hella. She seemed startled. He went up to her, grabbed her hair at the neck, pulled at it so that her throat became quite sinewy and hard. With his other hand, which was still wet from the juice of the onions, he grasped her breast, tugged at it, through the smooth material of the blouse, until she groaned.

“What do you want here?” he whispered.

At that moment he heard Ingeborg's footsteps in the hall. He let go of Hella, turned round, glanced back once, as he was already holding the knife in his hand again. Hella was sitting on her chair once more. Her eyes dull, as if nothing had happened.

Ingeborg was still on the phone, talking away about something to do with the demonstration. Gellmann tried to concentrate on the chopping. It had got dark outside, he saw his reflection in the window, his face massive, coarse, with an ever receding hairline. He sniffed suspiciously at the meat, a heavy shoulder of lamb not yet taken off the bone, which they had bought at the market yesterday and which was already beginning to discolour.

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Judith had suddenly started talking about love as if she was in an early evening soap. She hoped her parents would respect her decision. Hella felt paralysed. It must be the same for Fehn.

“Gellmann and love,” he had roared. “Don’t make me laugh. Do you know how many women the man’s already had?”

“As many as you, daddy? Or even more?”

Hella thought she knew what her daughter was thinking now. The same thing she herself had thought once: What did those women, most of them old and forgotten, have to do with her? But Judith seemed so certain of herself, as Hella had never been.

Hella loathed Gellmann now. Childless Gellmann, the voyeur. He had always taken more than his share from others. And as some kind of delayed revenge, which took everything personally, Gellmann must now have set his eye on her little piece of reality. On the last thing that she and Fehn had in common.

Fehn’s face turned deep red. His glass had tipped over, the wine was a dark stain spreading on the table cloth. Judith had stood up, took her jacket from the peg by the door and looked round once more. Hella saw her daughter’s handbag still lying on the sideboard. Not until weeks later would she open the bag and then close it again immediately, before putting it in the cupboard below with the cloth napkins.

Fehn was shouting now, repeating just a single word, shit, shit, shit. Hella stood silently, the big soup ladle, a present from Fehn, which she had just been laughing about, still in her hand. The moment drew out like a noise, but it seemed to her, as if it could just as well be past. This emptiness, the feeling of having missed something important at some point.

Judith pulled the door shut behind her. Then she was gone.

For a while Gellmann had shown Judith off in Frankfurt, had been seen with her at parties and receptions. Fehn and Hella had repeatedly been congratulated on their beautiful daughter. There had been an undertone of sympathy and a kind of intrusive curiosity in such compliments, and some friends quite openly asked, how it could have happened that the teenager Judith had run off with Gert Gellmann. Some also wondered jokingly how Fehn was thinking of paying his friend back.

One evening after a cold and damp February day, almost three years later, Judith had suddenly called. She was standing at the station in Aulich and didn't have any money. - Hella instantly thought she must have gone out without her handbag again.

When she entered the house with her daughter, Fehn was standing almost motionless in the middle of the room. He appeared uncertain and suddenly aged, since Hella had left the house just under an hour before.

He had cooked, said Fehn, roast lamb. She should first of all fortify herself. She didn't eat lamb, said Judith. Meat yes, but no lamb. No problem, she'll eat the vegetables. No wine.

Now for the first time Hella looked more closely at her daughter, who had sat silently beside her in the car during the drive. She was beautiful. The childishness, but also the certainty seemed to have vanished from her eyes. Judith had left Gellmann. He probably hadn't wanted to let her go. Because her jacket, a light-coloured thing, sewn of thin cloth was torn at the collar. An oddly intimate detail, so Hella thought, which she would rather not have noticed on her daughter. She had left. And yet it now seemed like her, Judith's defeat.

She pushed the beans around her plate with the fork. Then Judith said a short, muttered sentence, which Hella, however, understood immediately.

Fehn chewed, looked up, went on chewing. "I beg your pardon?" he said.

"I'm pregnant," repeated Judith.

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)

