

# *Schöffling & Co.*

## **foreign rights**

English sample translation

Author	Franziska Gerstenberg
Title	HOW MANY BIRDS
Original title	WIE VIEL VÖGEL
Copyright for the translation	Schöffling & Co.
Translated by	Edna McCown

contact	Kathrin Scheel
email	<a href="mailto:Kathrin.Scheel@schoeffling.de">Kathrin.Scheel@schoeffling.de</a>
phone	+49 69 92 07 87 16
fax	+49 69 92 07 87 20
mail	Schöffling & Co. Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH Foreign Rights Kaiserstraße 79 60329 Frankfurt am Main Germany
www	<a href="http://www.schoeffling.de">www.schoeffling.de</a>

((pp82-94))

*Fortune Cookies*

Kissing Marianna was one thing. Marianna had a blond pigtail, dark eyebrows and dark fuzz above her upper lip. Her body was heavy and solid, like a stollen sprinkled with powdered sugar. On the day I kissed her, a day in August, the rain started. We were standing on the village square, the moisture in the air and on our lashes was so fine that for a few minutes I couldn't tell whether it was rain or fog rising from the ground. We were standing on the village square, Marianna tasted like beans and chewing gum, she unlocked her lips from mine and slapped me. She had strong arms, my ears were ringing. Sorry, she said, someone may have seen us. She pulled me behind the hedge by the house, wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me again. The rain dripping from my hair ran down my neck and back. I pressed my hands against Marianna's hips and our teeth knocked against each other. The rain grew stronger, Marianna bit my lower lip, our legs were trembling though it wasn't cold. The skirt I had put on that morning stuck to my thighs. We looked at the cats, crying and scratching at the back door to be let in.

Kissing Marianna was one thing. Her father was bent over bills and advertising brochures in the office of the vacation farmhouse. He'll strike me dead, Marianna said. I gathered that she was exaggerating, but I didn't want to let it come to that. Maybe it wasn't she he would kill, but me. Marianna had told me on my first evening at the farm that her father once had knocked a young guest from Stuttgart down the stairs adjacent to the threshing floor, because during the communal evening meal--of fried potatoes, eggs and bacon--he had brushed against Marianna's breast. Her father didn't let on that he had noticed, but was lying in wait for the young man a few hours later. Bruises on his ribs and hips, she counted off, both wrists sprained. The young man from Stuttgart couldn't prove it was anything other than an accident. Evening after evening he spooned his soup with bandaged wrists, and never again dared to even raise his eyes when Marianna went from one guest to the next with her basket of spelt bread.

Marianna was sixteen, I had rented a narrow little attic room in her father's vacation farmhouse for three weeks. I liked the scruffy cats, the hot milk with honey that was served with breakfast. After Marianna kissed me on the village square, it didn't stop raining for twelve-and-a-half days. We met neither in Marianna's room nor in my attic room, but in the hayloft, a spot, according to Marianna, her father had forgotten about. Hay hadn't been stored there for a long time, and the room couldn't be rented. It was accessible only by a wooden ladder that led up to it. High, slanted walls, whitewashed, with four narrow crossbeams and a skylight. On the floor were mattresses with stained covers, Marianna swept the dust out through the door and placed candles around the room, lavender candles with a lilac scent that made my eyes water and caused me to wheeze. Outside, the cats were crying. The voices of the guests sitting beneath the striped umbrella in the fruit orchard were muffled by the rain. Loose tiles clattered above our heads, as if someone were balancing on the very top of the roof.

One could still see how the farmstead once had been used. Marianna's father called the large hall the "threshing floor." From there, iron-barred doors led into the former stable, which now housed the TV and breakfast rooms. In the so-called library a narrow bookcase was filled with picture books on the area and a few well-thumbed novels. Hip-high stone troughs stood to the right and left of the entrance, and iron rings were attached to the uneven walls. Hoes, pitchforks and scythes hung above the corner benches of the room with the fireplace, and next to the kitchen door hung something Marianna called a potato rake. The fact that the farm hadn't operated as such for over ten years so disappointed me on my arrival that I got very little sleep for several nights following. Soaked in sweat and furious, I would toss and turn and count the hours until morning. I had looked forward to sharp-beaked chickens and foul-smelling pigs when I booked my vacation at the farm, to the mooing of cows at five in the morning, and to being able to help with watering the cornfields, grooming the horses, whatever. But the only crops were carrots and lettuce, and the only animals were the cats with broad brown stripes down their heads and backs and fat spiders, whose webs trapped the morning dew. Perhaps there were mice in the cellar and in the

pantry, a few times I thought I heard something squeaking, but I wasn't sure and Marianna didn't want to discuss it.

Marianna led me up to the hayloft, I pushed the mattresses under the skylight. I wanted to see her body, wanted the light to fall on her skin. In an hour, she said, I have to be in the kitchen, to get supper ready. I put my finger to her lips, she opened them and said: Mashed potatoes and liver! and ran her tongue over my fingernail. When I kissed her she began to tremble, I stroked her muscular back with my hands, up and down. With onions? I asked, and she nodded. She was wearing a tight cotton skirt, blue as the flowers on the hand towels in the shared bathroom, her t-shirt had a hole under the left arm, which got bigger when she pulled it over her head. I'm hot, she said, my teeth are numb and throbbing, does that mean I'm in love? Marianna, I said, shut your mouth.

You're not here, Marianna shouted, you're in my head. Every day, the clouds grew heavier and more ominous, Marianna and I pushed our way through the corn in the warm rain, Marianna took off her red blouse and held it above her head with both hands. The corn leaves cut into my skin, the tips of the stalks were the horizon, I stumbled and fell, Marianna's breasts loomed against the sky. Kiss me, I said. We have to get to the middle, said Marianna. She threw back her head, inhaled the rain and choked, spots appeared on her cheeks when she coughed. Somewhere beyond the clouds the sun had to be shining. In the middle of the cornfield a clearing opened up, nine feet by nine feet, Marianna smeared her legs with the wet dirt and wrote our names in the mud with her fingers. She grabbed me by the hair and pulled my head back. Look at the rain, she said, look at it closely. Water was pouring into my eyes and though I wasn't looking at her, I knew Marianna was crying. She placed my hands over her eyes and said, Stay here, don't go back, there's a job opening up at the ice-cream shop.

In a brochure that Marianna's father handed out to all the guests I read that the town had 7,400 inhabitants. It emphasized the housing developments and commercial areas that had been added in recent years and the pilgrimage church, first mentioned

in documents in 1151 and expanded in 1961 with the addition of stations of the Cross. In addition to two hotels, the town offered outstanding dining opportunities, a network of hiking trails that extended over 15 miles, and sports facilities, playgrounds and outdoor grilling. The broad-based economy provided 2,000 jobs, the available healthcare system included dentists, an apothecary, an animal clinic and a home for seniors. The existence of over 70 associations and clubs, a large number of riflemen's associations among them, gave proof of the extraordinary sociality of the population.

I've got to leave, Marianna said. She got up, dressed and ran her fingers through her hair, pulling it back with a green rubber band, and then climbed down to the kitchen, to once again cook dinner for the guests, breaded schnitzel with vegetables. Later, when I passed by the open kitchen door, Marianna was just tying on her apron; she waved a cooking spoon in my direction and said, Get out of here, my father will be here soon. I stumbled through the back door, I was dizzy from lying for so long under the skylight, I was dizzy from Marianna's lilac candles and also from Marianna herself, I stumbled across the village square and down the main street. Brightly painted plaster cast animals stood in the front yards, and on a bench sat a life-sized replica of a little boy and girl, holding hands. Rain ran down the little girl's light-blue dress. Upturned amphoras of clay leaned against ivy-covered hillocks, tiny hedges were trimmed in geometric patterns and chairs with fake patinas, narrow paths leading up to them, stood before the clinker brick walls of the houses. In the glass display case in front of the pilgrimage church a poster of the Kolping Society advertised the traditional blessing of the vehicles. We bless everything, it said, from children's bicycles to trucks. It was signed by the current members of the Society's board, among them Marianna's father.

Marianna's father was a small man, his scalp showed through his sparse hair. He wore pants with badly ironed creases, brown suspenders over white or pale checked shirts. The corners of his mouth turned down, his eyes were the only thing that moved in a face marked by high cheekbones. Marianna said her father was an extraterrestrial who was using her to study the lifestyle of young women. When he took her away from her mother he tampered with her memory, she said. He had led

her to believe that she had always lived in this village with him and the scruffy cats, one of which died every now and then, to be buried under the plum trees in the orchard. But every spring, she said, there was a new litter. We went walking, it was the middle of the night, after two o'clock, almost three, and the rain had subsided a bit. We walked past the meat plant, it stank, Marianna said, of pig's blood, we held hands behind our backs. Up on the mountain the lights at the tops of the windmills were blinking. There were twenty-one windmills in all, on the first afternoon of my vacation I had stood at the top of the radio tower and counted them. The warning lights shone for seconds at a time, like red stars in the heavens. Signals for the spaceships, Marianna said, they want to come and pick up my father, but he's not finished with his experiments yet. Maybe it's the other way around, I said, maybe you're the one who's not from here. Marianna said: Come back later--for years now that's been his message to the others of his species. She held my hand even tighter. There was nothing in the world stranger to her, she said, than her father.

Though the rain held, it remained hot in the hayloft. One Friday I was lying naked on the mattresses, asleep. I awoke with a start as Marianna came up the ladder. She locked the door and came over to me. Under her skirt her thighs rubbed together. She smelled of fruit, I suddenly thought of plums, of using four fingers to split them open and pull them apart before removing the pit. In her right hand Marianna carried a package of Chinese fortune cookies, she tore it open and scattered the individually wrapped cookies over my body and the mattress. I've brought our future, she said. Get dressed, she said, we're eating fortune cookies. I got dressed and we sat next to each other. Marianna's face was red and she was careful not to touch me. We ripped open the plastic with our nails and teeth and cracked the dry shells. The strips of paper inside were narrow, the cookies dissolved on the tongue and tasted old and scorched. At your place of employment, Marianna read aloud, you will soon have the best position. I don't have a place of employment, she said. I pinched her arm and asked what we were having for dinner. Marianna laughed and said: spirelli with goulash and cheese. She reached for another cookie, then knocked my piece of paper out of my hand as I read: You will go on a long journey. I know that already, she yelled. I don't want to hear about it. The rubber band holding her pigtail slipped, she furiously

braided the strands together again, I saw that she was pulling her hair. It's true nonetheless, I said. Marianne squinted her eyes, I took a cookie from her lap and asked: Shall I look at it for you? She whispered: Read the English version, then I can say I didn't understand it. An emptiness, I read, is going to be filled up. Marianna's eyes were light green, the irises rimmed in gray. She looked at me. I stretched out my hand and ran the nail of my index finger down her neck, from the bottom of her hairline to her shoulder blade, felt her veins throbbing in the tips of my fingers. Marianna's classroom English was good enough for fortune cookie sayings. She bit her lower lip to keep from laughing, and shoved her hands between my knees. You're powerless against your fate, I said. Fill it up, Marianna said, her lips at my ear, I felt her breath on the tiny hairs of my ear canal. An emptiness is going to be filled up. I pushed the crackling cookies off the mattress, the rain was no longer falling on the roof and the skylight. Fortune cookies, Marianna said, they're fortune cookies.

The man at the produce market told me that eight years ago Marianna's mother had been run over by a van with Dortmund tags, at the village's only stoplight, the Dortmund van had a red light. There had been six people in the van, he said, they were returning from an away game. As they drove away, they waved long scarves out the open windows, it looked as if they were waving goodbye to Marianna's mother. I closed my eyes and saw before me, not Marianna's mother, but Marianna, her legs drawn up, her arms stretched out, looking into a peaceful sky. I bumped against a crate of fruit with my hip, to my left were jars of preserved tomatoes, the produce market carried a selection of Italian specialty items. The man interrupted his report to instead enumerate the merits of the tagliatelle and various wines. I asked for a dry red, as dry as possible. It's my last evening, I said, the bus leaves early tomorrow, at quarter-to-eight. The man at the produce market wrapped the wine in pink paper, which he fastened with tape, then put his hands around the neck of the bottle and said, Already? I feel sorry for Marianna. I stared at him. I could see the strands of his hair trembling on his head, which he had lowered. The night before, Marianna's tears had dried to bits of crust on my face before she fell asleep. I thought about how I had licked the corners of my mouth, then I paid and let the change clink into my coin purse without counting it. The man from the produce market handed me the bottle of

wine across the counter, looked out his front window and said: I'm sorry, it's none of my business.

We didn't drink the wine. As I entered the threshing floor, the bag from the produce market banging against my knee, Marianna's father was coming toward me. He ran out of his office right past me, heading for the TV room, his rain boots slapping against the stone floor like flippers. I wanted to laugh, but he raised his fingers to the swollen veins of his forehead and cried: Do you know about it already, I heard it on the radio. The television warmed up slowly, first came the sound, then the picture, as always. Marianna's father and I sat close together on the black leather sofa, I could smell the cigarette tobacco that had settled into the pores and lines of his skin. Holding the remote with both hands, Marianna's father constantly switched channels, but all of them were showing the same pictures. I thought the image of the second plane crashing was a computer simulation, until the station management decided to run the original sound with it. The window glass of the burning towers gleamed, the sky was as blue as in the brochures for the vacation farmhouse. Marianna's father pressed the buttons on the remote. His right foot tapped against the flower footstool, I leaned my elbows on my knees, the footstool had a beech veneer, with two cyclamen painted on. On the screen, the first tower was collapsing into itself. The commentator didn't grasp what was happening, for several minutes he kept going on about a new explosion. Marianna's father threw the remote on the floor, slapped the arm of the sofa with his palms, shook his head and screamed: They're all dead! I think I wanted to put my arm around his shoulders, perhaps I wanted to take his hands in mine, touch his temples, but then Marianna jerked open the iron-barred door and asked, What are you two screaming about? She looked at the TV screen, opened and closed her mouth, her teeth gleamed whitely. Somewhere a clock struck the hour and suddenly I thought, Marianna is ugly, an ugly fish, her mouth opened and closed. Maybe it was the flickering light from the television or the people who, thirty-six-hundred miles away, were leaping from the bursting windows, carried along by the wind like scraps of newspaper, or maybe it was that Marianna, as she spoke after a long silence, said only one word: Cool. I turned my eyes back to the commentator in his lemon-yellow studio. Marianna's father stood up, I think he grabbed Marianna by the ear, as if she

were an obstreperous young horse. She shrieked, he took her by the arm and they went outside. I knew that Marianna kept looking at me until her father closed the door. I put my hands to my face, the second tower had collapsed, in the TV studio the experts were arguing about the most conclusive definition of terrorism, someone said: the politically motivated threat and use of force by individuals or small groups. Only a little light was coming through the windows of the former stable, my back hurt from sitting on the sofa's cushions, which were too soft. I stretched out my arms, the clock struck again without my knowing how late it was. Too late, at any rate, to do anything. I thought of my aching back and blinked a lot. They showed the images in an unending loop, the professional as well as the amateur videos, accompanied by solemn music, I turned off the sound, but remained where I was. Perhaps Marianne was preparing dinner, she had mentioned roasted leg of duck, though that was a Sunday dish. She had mentioned roast leg of duck in a tarragon sauce, on a Tuesday, with red cabbage and dumplings. The bag from the produce market was sitting next to my foot, it held the wine I had bought for our last night. I couldn't hear either Marianna or her father. Nor could I hear any of the other guests, I imagined they all had gone for a walk among the quietly humming windmills up on the mountain. At any rate, it had stopped raining.

For further information on international rights for this title please contact Kathrin Scheel at [kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de](mailto:kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de)

This excerpt is presented for informational purposes only – any use or copying for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited.

# *Schöffling & Co.*

## **foreign rights**

author Franziska Gerstenberg  
title How Many Birds  
original title Wie viel Vögel  
© 2004 by Schöffling & Co.

## **English sample translation**

»Quails, Children, Concentration«

translated by Lida Lamza  
copyright for the translation Lida Lamza

contact Kathrin Scheel  
email [kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de](mailto:kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de)  
phone +49 69 92 07 87 16  
fax +49 69 92 07 87 20  
mail Schöffling & Co.  
Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH  
Foreign Rights  
Kaiserstraße 79  
60329 Frankfurt am Main  
Germany  
www [www.schoeffling.de](http://www.schoeffling.de)

(pp 26-34)

*Quails, Children, Concentration*

There has been no other reason to go to the wild animal park except a sunlit holiday. Gernot ties the bicycles together and puts the key back into the windbreaker pocket. Ulrike is standing beside him with her arms twisted and crossed over the belly. She has pulled black cotton track mitts over her wrists and says: the food vending machine is up front. Her voice is hoarse from the cold Gernot gave her, she has been coughing and had trouble breathing for days. Gernot thinks about how she said very little the previous evening, as well as during breakfast that morning.

They stop in front of the first boards. The distribution from the tree line in the north to the moderate areas all over the world, Gernot reads out loud. A woman with a baby stroller has stopped and is listening to him. But it has been eradicated in Central Europe, says Ulrike. Gernot cannot catch sight of the lynx anywhere, not in the hut, not on the sawn off piece of a tree trunk. Maybe in the back of the enclosure, right in front of the fence, his ears stick out of the grass like brushes. But Gernot cannot quite make it out. He left the new glasses on the kitchen table. They took off like they were in a hurry, leaving the newspaper opened over the egg shells, black grained coffee residue in the cups.

It's nice here, says Ulrike. He lowers his head towards her and smells the back of her head until she puts her arm around him and his nose touches her skin. He does not know what he is suspicious of. Do you really think that?, he asks.

The path is strewn with red sand, does and goats come really close to the wire fence and take the offered acorns and blades of grass from the palms of their hands. Gernot notices how many children came to the park, how many small families, how many grandfathers and grandmothers who are encouraging their tottering little granddaughters to pass their hands over their knees and be cute. A little boy, barely three years old, is pressing a metallic car to his chest. Heavily pregnant women are walking quickly and tensely by the birdhouses. Gernot grabs hold of Ulrike's hand and releases it again. It must have looked like he wanted to show they were together. She asks: Do you have any more acorns?

The board next to the otter enclosure announces the next feeding to be at half past one, still ten more minutes away. A woman in an apron with a yellow bucket across her hand is feeding the minks in the neighbouring enclosure. Gernot asks if the otters really get fish. She shakes her head, not always, fish are only on weekends, then the children stand in line in front of the electric fence. They would all like to see it, she says. Two otters glide through the water next to each other, strong, shallow tails showing when they dive. There is a racoon sitting over there, says Ulrike. Gernot wants to stay for the feeding because he has never watched an otter feed before.

Ulrike turns her head towards the sun. It is hot on one side, she says, but I am chilled on the other. Especially around the shoulders and neck, she says. With her eyes closed and her chin stiff, she walks towards the racoon enclosure until she hits the wooden

fence with her belly. Gernot, she says, I have to tell you something. He starts after her, notices the vein skipping on her temple and looks away. Do you know, he asks, if there are any owls here? Maybe the owls are getting food right now too, he thinks. Those birds always excited him with their immobility and silent beating of the wings.

It was raining the day before, for hours, slanting on the roof of the house, and Ulrike stood in front of the windowpane, covering now her left, now her right eye with her hand, looking out. Now the sun has dried most of the puddles, some water remains only in the middle of the path in an elongated hollow. It looks brown and thick, the light is falling through the tree tops and breaking on the surface. Gernot is watching the child with the metallic car who runs into the puddle in his rubber boots, stands with his legs apart and spreads his arms. Then he bends his upper body and looks between his own legs at his parents who are coming towards him. His blue hood is touching the water. Björn, shouts the mother. The child pulls himself upright, takes the hood off with a sudden movement and dips his head in the water again. The mother shouts: Björn, stop it! She quickens her pace. The child lowers his head carefully until the water covers half his forehead. Then the mother comes and pulls him up. The blond hair sticks out over the top of his head like a cock's crest, the child lifts a hand and feels the wet locks.

Gernot sees Ulrike looking. She is gaping at the child's blue eyes. I have to talk to you, she says, they fired me yesterday. At first he thinks he heard wrong. A brown drop is trickling down the child's cheek so he twists his mouth, and Gernot says: What?

Feeding, shouts the animal carer with the yellow bucket in her hand. People are pushing back and forth in front of the otter enclosure doors. I want to see this, says Gernot. He takes Ulrike's hand and drags her across the path, but she resists. Quick, he says, we will not get good seats. He is trying to think about the otters. He didn't even find out if there were owls here.

On one side in front of the entrance, the otters are running up and down, moving like ungainly snakes, their backs hunching, slippery and brown. One of the otters is making cough-like sounds, and the other is squeaking. Male and female, says Gernot, can you hear? He asks: Ulrike? She is silent, trying to push his hand off hers. He notices that he is still clutching the fabric of her jacket. The carer opens the wire door and throws two skinny, white birds to each otter. The otters jump up into the air and catch the bird's bodies with their teeth, then carry them to the shallow water and start eating. There is a one-meter gap between them. They do not eat everything.

Excuse me, Gernot says to the carer who took a wheelbarrow and is making her way through the crowd. He asks: What kind of birds are these? Quails, says the woman, latter they'll each get one more. And in the morning, she says, a nice rat every time. Have you been listening to me?, asks Ulrike. He feels his eyes watering. He knows the feeling, it means he slept either too much or too little. The woman is wearing woollen gloves with holes on the fingertips and rubber boots that somehow seem cubical. He asks: They can eat that much? She laughs. Well, these quails are nothing special, they are only a few days old. At least look at it now, says Ulrike. This is what you wanted, isn't it?

The otters are eating the quails, starting with the heads. They stretch out the necks and sink their teeth in the down, skin and bones. Disgusting, says the mother with a baby stroller. Gernot tries to remember if this is the same woman they saw a little while ago by the lynxes. The child with the metallic car is standing next to the fence with his mouth wide open. The father is standing behind him and says: Don't look there. The otters are devouring the quails, throwing back their heads every now and then, catching and swallowing. The teeth are processing whatever is in their snouts so it fits into the pharynx. They're munching, says the kid with the metallic car. They called my office, says Ulrike, I hadn't even locked my briefcase. Of course she'll get more money, but they told her she could go home right away. Do you want me to hold you?, asks Gernot. Leave it, says Ulrike, they just don't need me any more.

The otters have finished with the first quail at the same time and are searching for the other in the water, amidst the rotten plants. Where do they get that kind of concentration, says Ulrike. Gernot is thinking about the breakfast that morning, about the bread crumbs on the floor tiles. He lit the first cigarette over the soft-boiled egg and let it burn out, looking for a station on the radio, until the ember burned his fingers. He doesn't know what to say to Ulrike. The cigarette didn't agree with him. He is listening to the otters munching and breaking the quails' bones. The otters are throwing back their heads, quails hanging from their snouts, and a splashing sound is heard when the birds touch the water. Ulrike in her work place, among expensive patent leather suitcases and briefcases from foreign firms, that was concentration. Her high-bound hair, gold roses on her earlobes, gold roses for each single buyer; he asks:

What did you do wrong? She whispers: Are you out of your mind? and grabs his ear. Turnover reduction, she says, the last one hired, the first one fired. Out of the way!, shouts the carer, here comes more food. But she goes to the minks first.

Ulrike stares at the baby stroller. Gernot cannot see the otter, a man has pushed himself in front of him. Excuse me, says Gernot, do you know if there are owls here? Some of the grandparents want to move on, and so the little granddaughters also loose interest in the feeding otters. There are no fights for food, no snorting or biting. The grandfathers are saying: It looks different with you and your brother. Only the child with the metallic car is still watching, his mouth agape. The mother kicks pebbles with her foot. Well, you wanted to come here at all costs, she tells the father. Björn, she says, let's go! The child opens his eyes wide and does not blink. One otter is less than two meters from his face. It is eating the quail, the fair body disappearing, orange claws sticking out rigidly from both sides of its snout. At the end of each long, thin leg there are four claws. Four claws and a thorn. Gernot is pushing the man aside. The child presses the scratched car more firmly to its chest and softly says: only the little legs. Phew, yells the mother.

Ulrike laughs. Gernot, she says, I know what'll we do. She says: Now, when I don't have a job any more, we can have a baby. She is standing in front of him, her mouth the same as her mother's. He turns his head, thinking about the people who will no longer buy leather suitcases, about words like recession and optimization, high-bound hair, courteous client service; just what he needs right now. Ulrike, he says, have you now lost your mind?

The carer stops in front of him. She is holding the yellow bucket by the handle. This kind of a quail is nothing special, she says and points to the interior of the enclosure, do you see? He nods his head three times without lowering the gaze. Do you also have owls?, he asks. What do you want them for, she says, they are fed only with chickens, and they wait for hours before devouring them. Owls, she says, can bore you to death. He nods again, wants to ask her where he can find the owls. But the woman suddenly presses the bucket to her belly and yells at Ulrike: What are you doing?

He didn't notice that she came to stand beside him. He didn't notice any of her movements. She has bent over and pulled a bird from the bucket. She is holding its neck with two fingers. The bird is swinging. The head with the almost imperceptible beak is hanging loosely. The body looks like it belongs to a tiny chicken, Gernot cannot help but think about broilers. He thinks that there can be no meat on these bones, not really. Ulrike, he says. But she is passing him by and heading towards the child who is still standing agape next to the fence. She pushes the quail in front of his face, swinging it and smiling. The child stretches his little hand and asks: Can I hold it a bit? The mother screams. Ulrike lowers herself into a crouching position, as if she has folded in some way, slips her hand under the child's blue windbreaker and presses her nose to the hood. My baby, she says, my quail. The child is breathing softly. Gernot pulls Ulrike up. Go to your mother, Björn, he says.

He wants to take Ulrike's hand, but she shakes him off. She has raised the bird towards the still blue sky. A circle has formed around her, people are stopping. Give me the quail, says the carer. Ulrike lets the animal fall into the bucket. Gernot does not think she is running from his gaze, she is simply not looking at him. Imagine, she tells the people around her, this man doesn't want a child from me.

For further information on international rights for this title please contact Kathrin Scheel at [kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de](mailto:kathrin.scheel@schoeffling.de)

This excerpt is presented for informational purposes only – any use or copying for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited.