

Sketch of an Accident

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He had the right of way, so was not at fault. The truck and trailer entered from an avenue shortly before Montpellier. It was midday, sunny; there was little traffic—

She has short blond hair, wears a brass belt buckle and purple sunglasses. She's thirty-five, from Basel, witty. They've known each other for a year.

Or should I drive?²—these are not (as he perhaps thinks later) her last words before the accident; she asked the same question many times on this trip.

In Avignon, alone behind the bathroom door—which he bolts, though she's still asleep—he decides: No more! He will tell her at breakfast (without arguing): Let's turn back! It makes more sense.

She got to know him in the hospital, a doctor to whom she, so to speak, owes her life; for his sake she is getting a divorce.

Nights in bed, then sightseeing: Romanesque, Gothic, every day like an examination. She is always asking him things he doesn't know, or only half remembers, so that he becomes unsure of himself. Why did the pope emigrate

to Avignon in the fourteenth century?—which she could certainly look up herself, if she really wants to know. But it's not about the popes. Later, in bed, she gives him back his confidence.

He is unmarried.

She thinks the trip a success. She has been saying so since Genoa, where it rained in streams. Later, the weather improved. She says: You aren't even looking! Provence in particular inspires her; she sings as they drive.

He is balding, and knows it.

Aix-en-Provence: of course he finds it lovely, even beautiful. But she doesn't believe him, because he looks at different things than she does.

The famous asparagus town is called CAVAILLON, not CAVILLION. As she told him yesterday, incidentally. And she is right: it is in fact called CAVAILLON, as it says on the sign: CAVAILLON. He sees it, is silent, and shortly thereafter runs a red light.

Hotel room with king-size bed, where afterwards she reads the newspaper, LE FIGARO LITTÉRAIRE, of which, as they both know, he cannot understand a word. She has a Ph.D. in Romance Languages.

In Nice they dine with friends, a pleasant evening, but afterwards she tells him that throughout the entire meal (bouillabaisse) he spoke of nothing but food. One is of course permitted to say such things to one's partner. He has resolved to never again talk about food—but now he overdoes it, is emphatically silent when Marlis herself mentions food, as is after all natural in France.

It's not their first trip together. Last time, he had a sense of humor—because he knew that she admired him as a doctor. That first trip together, after she recovered, was through Alsace.

Though he has never had a serious accident, he would prefer Marlis to buckle her seatbelt. She is afraid that if she does, he will drive even faster. He promises to keep his promise, and, since Cannes, has done so. But when he notices that she, without saying anything, is watching the speedometer, he forgets what he was talking about. He is boring, and knows it.

In Avignon, he comes out of the bathroom and says: I'll wait downstairs. What's the matter? She really doesn't know. Maybe he's overworked.

She admires clever people—especially men, because she thinks men cleverer than women. She will say of someone: He's quite clever. Or: Not exactly clever, that one. But she never lets a person know that she doesn't find him clever. She considers it a sign of her love that it annoys her when he, Viktor, speaks less cleverly than she does when they are out with friends.

He has no intention of getting married.

Now you're going one-forty! He's been expecting that. Please don't shout at me! First, he isn't shouting, only saying that he was expecting that. She is always glancing at the speedometer. Second, he is going, as the speedometer shows, exactly 140. That's what she said. Yesterday he went 160 (on the highway between Cannes and St. Raphaël), and 180 before that, which was how Marlis lost her headscarf. They agreed: maximum 140. Now she says: It's just too fast for me. When they're being passed by every Volkswagen. She says: It scares me. He tries to make a joke of it: Maximum one-forty yesterday, maximum one-twenty today, by the time we get to Bilbao it'll be maximum thirty. Please! Since he himself thinks it a stupid joke, there's no need for Marlis to think it a stupid joke. She stops singing, he stops passing, they both are silent—

Her husband, the first, was (is) a chemist.

She doesn't complain that, because of his impatience, she was unable to buy shoes in Marseille; she says only that her shoes pinch, and that there are, in Arles, where he is patient, no shoes to be had.

He would rather have breakfast alone, actually. He doesn't know what the matter is, either. He can think of no woman he would rather wait for at breakfast than Marlis. She knows it.

How clever is Marlis?

He knows that it's his fault.

Later, he wonders whether he did not awake with a feeling of foreboding, whether he did not already, under the plane trees in Avignon, somehow know that the day would end in disaster.

Her childlike joy when shopping; even if she needs nothing, she will stop at display windows, interrupting the conversation. But then it had hardly been different with other women.

He comes from Chur, the son of a railway worker, a graduate cum laude who will probably soon become chief surgeon.

The famous town where the gypsies congregate is not called SAINTES-MARIES-SUR-MER but SAINTES-MARIES-DE-LA-MER. She doesn't say so. Indeed, so as not to correct Viktor, she avoids the name, hoping he will notice it himself.

She calls him Vik.

She doesn't want to be superior to him: no man can stand that, least of all Viktor. As a surgeon, he is used to having people trust him—and Marlis too trusted him, back then.

Marlis's constant question: Are you sure? She wants to know whether C., a mutual acquaintance in Basel, is a homosexual; almost sooner than he can utter his opinion, Marlis asks: Are you sure?

Suddenly, waiting for her under the plane trees in Avignon, he feels his sense of humor return; it comes on like a haunting. Sun in the plane trees, wind, most likely a mistral. Today will perhaps be better. He will not suggest that they call off the trip. It's a stupid idea, really. He sits at a little round table under the plane trees and studies the *GUIDE MICHELIN*, so that he later will know the best way to Montpellier.

He is forty-two.

Once, as a student, Viktor spent a week in Provence. As they drive towards Arles, he thinks he recalls the amphitheatre there. Marlis reads from the *GUIDE MICHELIN*: the diameter of the amphitheatre, number of seats, height of the facade, year of construction, etc. She reads it in French. It is written in French; it is hardly Marlis's fault that the mere sound of French makes him feel as if he's being tested. When she reads the *GUIDE MICHELIN*, she isn't watching the speedometer. Back then, as a student, he was with a woman from Hamburg; all that remains is a memory, albeit a vivid memory, of how they sat on the perimeter wall of the amphitheatre in Arles. He describes it in advance. A lovely evening, Viktor, animated, speaking more than usual. She likes it when he talks this way. They drink (which he otherwise—when on duty—does not do). The next morning they visit the amphitheatre of Arles. He realizes that the amphitheatre he has described from memory is not here but in Nîmes; Marlis doesn't notice, but he does.

She is slim. She has big teeth and full lips that leave them showing even when she isn't laughing. She has no patience for anyone who tells her that she is beautiful; on the other hand, she goes to great lengths to appear beautiful to men who find her clever.

An hour after Arles, he confesses that he mixed up the amphitheatre in Arles and the amphitheatre in Nîmes.

She knows that Viktor is waiting. They have time, she thinks. Why does he always hurry ahead?—only to wait. She can go no faster. It's always the same. As he sits at the little round table under the plane trees, he admits to himself that it's his fault—because he hurries ahead. She's right: he can enjoy himself in Avignon. And he does. Sun in the plane trees. When he spots Marlis, and sees her stop (though she knows that he's waiting) in front of another display window, he resolves: Patience. She tells him that, as she has just seen, there are no shoes for her in Avignon either. Adding: she feels too lightly dressed. Will it be warmer in Spain? He suspects it will, but says nothing, so that he cannot, if they really get to Spain, be proven wrong. Instead he asks: Do you want a brioche? but what he offers is a croissant. He catches his mistake, but doesn't need to correct himself: she didn't hear. He catches every mistake that he makes now. For example: he fails to notice that she is waiting for him to light her cigarette. Sorry! he says, lighting it: Sorry. The second apology is overkill.

She no longer lives with her husband in Basel, but doesn't live with VIK, either: that would complicate the divorce proceedings.

The way he looks at her, after lighting her cigarette: not angrily, but impersonally, the way one looks at an object. She asks, doesn't he like her necklace? Suddenly resolute, he calls: Garçon! He caresses her cheek, but the meaning of the gesture is unclear. Unfortunately, the garçon does not come, but stands five steps away, wiping a table. The caress has ruffled her. He is determined to stay relaxed and cheerful. He says: Marvellous weather! She

asks: Haven't you paid? A question is not a reproach; he raps a coin on the metal tray, till Marlis calls: Garçon? Now he comes. The fact that she, while Viktor pays, questions the garçon in detail about how to get to Montpellier, should not annoy him; Marlis can hardly know that he has studied the map. When the garçon finally disappears, she says: You understood?

What is he afraid of?

Once (not on this trip) she said to him, half joking: You're not my surgeon anymore, Vik; you have to get used to that.

Alone in the station with the man who washed the car, he says (nasally) BENZINE instead of ESSENCE; it doesn't matter: Marlis isn't there. He gets what he wants.

In Basel, everything is different—

Only one time during the trip, in Cannes, does she say: Idiot!—when he, ignoring her directions, enters up a one-way street. Why does he take it seriously? Now he awaits the next criticism.

She looks forward to Spain.

She has, after all, a Ph.D. in Romance Languages; if now and then she corrects his French, he should be grateful.

In Avignon, he waits, smoking, with the top down, while she buys something. There is time. Holidays; he smokes. He wants to make an effort. At last she comes; he greets her like a gentleman, climbs out of the car to open her door, says: I found your sunglasses! They were under the seat. Marlis says: You see! as if he lost them, the second pair this trip. She wanted to buy, but could not find, another nailfile; instead she got a pair of beach shoes, which he finds funny. Why is she upset? Always, she can feel Viktor's

impatience. Like in Marseille. She has a suitcase half full of shoes, and he doesn't understand why, since Marseille, she wears only the ones that pinch. His suggestion that they return to Marseille is not ironic, but she doesn't believe him. Now they're both upset.

A pity about the nights in bed.

Everyone knows that MANCHA is not north of Madrid, as Marlis claims; all the same, he has a look at the map before she comes to breakfast. Not to bring it up again! Just to make sure.

They drive with the top down, after he has promised not to speed. Sitting at the wheel is different than sitting beside it. He ceases to pass altogether, tailing instead every truck that gets in his way (as he did between Cannes and St. Raphaël), which is of course ridiculous; he starts to annoy even himself.

He hates his name: VIKTOR, but also dislikes it when she says: VIK—especially when the people at the other table overhear.

It is his opinion that Europe must and will adopt a common currency; Marlis is not convinced; she listens to his reasons and says nothing. Why is he annoyed? It is not the reasons that fail to convince her.

She is fully recovered.

When she is silent, he criticizes himself. Why does he talk about the asparagus in Alsace (food again!) instead of keeping an eye out for the exit to Montpellier? She puts up her sunglasses and says: This'll take us to Lyon!, and because he says nothing: I think you want Montpellier. To relax, he hangs his left arm out the window. Shortly thereafter a sign: TOUTES LES DIRECTIONS. In Alsace, on their first love trip, she had simply trusted him. Again a sign: TOUTES LES DIRECTIONS. No mistakes yet.

When he thinks he's being funny, she usually thinks otherwise; on the other hand, she will sometimes burst out laughing at a remark of his, and he has no idea why.

In her hair she ties a headscarf, a new one, also bought instead of the nail-file; Viktor first notices it when she asks if he likes it. He suddenly tells her that he once drove through the desert from Baghdad to Damascus and managed to find it without her help. Then he laughs in outrage: Well, we're fucked!, which astonishes Marlis, because he usually doesn't swear. They are in an industrial area, facing a sign that says: PASSAGE INTERDIT. He shifts into reverse; she says: Don't get nervous. When, after a series of mistakes (which the gearbox betrays), he finds the road that every idiot manages to find, he still hasn't said whether he likes her headscarf.

She is clever, and needs no reasons.

If he could now put on his white lab coat, things would be different; the idea of him, in his white lab coat, driving through Provence to Spain—

Why does he tell her nothing?

It isn't true that he has never had an accident. Marlis knows nothing about it, that's all; it was a long time ago. A lucky accident. He himself has, as it were, forgotten it. He glances sideways at Marlis—as if it is her silence (after he sped up to pass a Citroën) that has reminded him of the incident.

What does "plexus" actually mean? It would be funny if he, a surgeon, didn't know. Nonetheless he waits for her to say: Are you sure? But she says nothing. Only when Viktor mentions that the route through Aigues-Mortes is shorter does she say: Are you sure?

In the car, Marlis sits barefoot, because her shoes pinch—not that she complains. So, instead of telling her something, he feels sorry for her.

Why does he lay his hand on her thigh?

He yelled at her in Antibes, he no longer knows why. Later, he tries to apologize: All right!—pale with rage, not believing he is in the wrong: I apologize!

Whether the flat landscape that so delights Marlis is Provence or Camargue makes no difference. Why does he insist that it's Camargue? He may be right.

No word till AIGUES-MORTES.

Wordlessly, despite her warning, he pulls in to a narrow parking space—without a scratch, and on the first attempt. A hundred steps nearer they see many empty spaces, and in the shade. But Marlis can't have known either. And she says nothing.

An aperitif under the plane trees alone while she looks around the little town. Suddenly he feels on holiday. Sun in the plane trees, this light, etc.

He never has felt that she owes him her life: the operation is usually successful. She, perhaps, has felt it—

Why not stay here? It's eleven, too early for lunch. But why not stay here? The old castle wall keeps the mistral off. When Marlis comes back, he will be transformed: cheerful, serene. It's his fault, no one's but his.

Sometimes he wants to have a baby with her.

She doesn't know what causes blowups like the one in Antibes. First he yells at her, then he suggests a restaurant, BONNE AUBERGE, three stars. She doesn't believe in these stars. He insists. Annoyed again already (because

she resists his suggestion), he lets her saunter around Antibes for an hour on her own. What, meanwhile, does he do? When they meet up again, there's the same yattering about where to eat. Her objection: but there are plenty of restaurants around; why three stars, etc. The area to which he drives them doesn't look like one with restaurants; when she finally asks: Are you sure? he wordlessly turns off the main road, then again turns off; and there it stands: BONNE AUBERGE. The headwaiter leads them to a table on the patio that Sir himself selected an hour ago. Unfortunately it is now too cool on the lovely patio; inside, painted scenery and waiters in folk costume; the food is mediocre and expensive, but it doesn't matter. Marlis is pleasant, though he yelled at her an hour ago; she feels sorry for him.

Mistral is also the name of a writer—as Viktor well knows. The wind, however, likewise called mistral, does not come from the ocean, as Marlis thinks. Incidentally. On the other hand, she is of course correct: LETTRES DE MON MOULIN, which he read in school, is by Alphonse Daudet, not Mistral. Incidentally. Actually, all she said was: Mistral is a writer, you know.

He drives a Porsche.

Under the plane trees of AIGUES-MORTES: he feels in his jacket pocket to make sure he has his passport. Viktor has never yet lost his passport. Horror at not finding it in his pocket—but, at the same moment, he remembers: it's in the car. He is sure; he can exactly recall putting it in the glove compartment; but he will check. He is not sure.

If he had stuck to his resolution to cut the trip short, they would now be in Lyon, and in Basel by evening. But it is beautiful here: the light under the plane trees, this light, etc. When she comes, he'll suggest a saunter down to the ocean together.

Hopefully she'll find shoes.

Under the plane trees in Aigues-Mortes: an hour before the accident, he wants another black coffee. Is he too tired to drive? He praises the light under the plane trees, etc., pigeons cooing around the statue of SAINT LOUIS. Marlis wants to go on; she isn't hungry, doesn't want an aperitif. Now it's Viktor who feels that there's plenty of time. An old man with three long loaves of bread under his arm—

Spain was her idea.

He is no egoist. Making another person happy is the only thing that makes him happy; failing to make another person happy appals him. He takes everything personally.

An observer would not find it strange that she reads LE PROVENÇAL while he, long legs outstretched, drinks coffee and awaits the miracle. It must come from without. From the cooing pigeons, perhaps ... He would be prepared to marry. It's only a matter of sense of humor. How much longer do you want to sit here? she asks. Sorry! he says: You're the one reading the paper, not me. He doesn't mean for it to come out like that. Conciliatory, he carries her handbag—but that she takes for granted. And so no miracle.

For the first time, it's Viktor who wants to see a cloister. Romanesque. She'd rather not.

They walk arm in arm.

For the first time, it's Viktor who stops everywhere. A fruit and vegetable market. Here are shoes!, he says—which is touching: obviously he still has no idea what she's looking for.

Must they really go to Spain?

He waits in an alleyway; Marlis has forgotten her headscarf; he isn't really waiting for her. What would he be doing if he were alone? He sees her coming, sees her stopping in front of another window display. He buys a HERALD TRIBUNE, to find out what is going on in the world. When after awhile he looks up from the newspaper, Marlis has disappeared.

Tourists having lunch.

Later, she says: Sorry! She has bought a jaunty beret. No! she laughs: For you! Marlis in high spirits. Her question as he unlocks the car: Or should I drive? He drives. Why always only he? He implores her to let him drive. Inexplicable now. Don't you like it? She means the colorful beret. For the first time, he dreads the road.

She is a child.

His passport is in the glove compartment.

She puts the beret on him, so he won't look so serious: Very jaunty! To his surprise, Marlis fastens her seatbelt. Without being asked to. He leaves the beret on, starts the car, and with a glance over his shoulder, pulls out. No mistakes now—

And so Aigues-Mortes is behind them.

She has a son, old enough for school; she was a student in Paris; she's getting a divorce; she is no child, but a woman.

Horses of Camargue. Sometimes she says something; sometimes he says something. Fortunately little traffic. He wonders medically: When is a person dead? Heart transplants ... He catches himself saying: Tomorrow I'll have to change the oil! instead of telling her what he's thinking. He's too easy on himself.

When she was a child, she rode.

Driving behind a Belgian camper van. When at last he passes it, he doesn't leave himself enough time; the maneuver, though successful, is dangerous. She says nothing.

Patients esteem him: his calmness, his confidence, his competence, etc.

Now she wears the jaunty beret. Everything suits you! he says—but he looks at the road. Is he listening at all? She reads from the GUIDE MICHELIN, so that he will look forward to the cave paintings, so that he won't think of only his oil change, so that he will know why they're going to Altamira. She means to be kind.

Compared with other people, he has always been lucky: lucky in health, in his profession, perhaps above all in mountaineering (that climb of Piz Buin)

She says: Thinking of food again already! He was thinking of nothing at all, nothing but the road; he only said something about Montpellier because they passed a sign: MONTPELLIER 12 KM. He would have done better staying quiet.

He comes away with light injuries, some cuts on his temple; he doesn't remember the truck with trailer at all. She dies on the way to the hospital in Montpellier. He doesn't even recognize the intersection where it happened; where the trailer now lies, overturned, between the plane trees; where he seems to find himself for the first time; where he is being interrogated (in French); where he finds out that he had the right of way, and is therefore not at fault.

Later he becomes chief surgeon.

For a decade he says nothing of the disaster outside Montpellier; he doesn't understand how it happened.

A few acquaintances know a little about it.

He is head of a clinic, father of two children; he travels often, but never to Spain.

He knows that for a doctor to speak of himself, the night before an operation, is unjustifiable; nevertheless he suddenly mentions his accident outside Montpellier in France: I had, as I said, the right of way, and so was not at fault ... Later, he says: How in the world did we come to talk about this? The patient doesn't know, either. Why doesn't he simply say the usual goodnight?: Sleep well, and if you need anything, ring the night nurse. But he has already said that. He picks up a book from the nightstand, reads only its title, lays it back down. All he actually came to say: No need to worry, I'll be close by tomorrow; I won't myself be operating, but I'll be close by, no need to worry, etc.

He never has another accident.

The patient, obviously disappointed, dares not ask why the chief surgeon will not himself be operating.

Her question: Are you sure?

He never says anything more about the accident.

Marlis saw the truck, and warned him; he saw the truck, but didn't slow down: he had the right of way. He might even have sped up, to show that he was sure. She screamed. The gendarmes proved him right.