

Marlene Streeruwitz

Yseut.

© S. Fischer Verlag 2016

Translated by Kathy Derbyshire

Episode 1

Lughetto. Lugo. Lova. Conche. Valli. Chioggia.

The road from Valli to Chioggia led right across the sea. Yseut drove with the windows open. The sea. The sea a thing full of promise, too. Always a promise and never a miracle. But she was glad. The sea. The smell. The light. She sat up straighter. Switched on the radio. Ads. She listened to the Italian voice. A man's voice. Deep. Full. A melodious announcement tone. She was there. She was in Italy. She was driving across a cool blue lagoon. Fishing boats. Fastened to poles. In the middle of the water. Swaying in the wind. The sun was already low. Intermittently covered by clouds. Then the water reflected the clouded sky until the sun came out again and made the waves glint. She couldn't help sighing. How wonderful to be here. How wonderful to be alone. How lovely to be zipping along here. The next brand of washing powder was being praised on the radio. She switched it off. Just look. She wanted just to look. She drove the prescribed 80 kilometres per hour. Glided along the right-hand lane. Looked out at the water. Cruised. Lagoon. It was still the sea. Hooting at her from behind. From a truck. Yseut looked in the rear-view mirror. The driver was leaning forwards and gesticulating at her. Coming closer. The truck almost nudged her. Then pulled out. Drove alongside her. Very close. Yseut decelerated. The driver pulled back to the right. In front of her. Then he braked. He braked sharply. Yseut had to slam on her brakes. She had to brake so hard that the alarm indicators came on. The truck driver had forced her into an emergency braking manoeuvre. Yseut put her foot down. She switched on the turbo drive. Overtook the truck with her lights still flashing. She stayed in the left-hand lane. Switched off the alarm lights.

Drove fast. Very fast. Surrounded by glinting water, she sailed away. Ships on the left. A shipyard. One ship nothing but a metal corpus. Rough and dark. Next to it a white-painted passenger ship. The kind that ferried people from Chioggia to Venice. Venice. She wouldn't get there now. This time. Did she want to. Did she even want to go to Venice again. She'd been there so often. With so many others. With a grandchild perhaps. She could imagine it that way. One more trip to Venice. But grandchildren. In Mexico. Maya wanted to wait. They ought to find a vaccine. She'd said in summer. Over schnitzel at Gasthaus Ubl. Yseut had nodded. What should she say. That she was waiting for grandchildren. That wasn't true. She wasn't waiting. She would have liked it. But if Maya was scared of the virus. She understood that. She had to understand it. She remembered waiting for the vaccine against AIDS. Goggo seemed to be fine with it all. They could have her apartment in Vienna and live there, she'd suggested to Maya and Goggo. They'd moved onto dessert by then. Goggo had just laughed. In this country. he had asked. In this bourgeois country. She managed to live there, she had said. At least they didn't have the zika virus. Maya and he had laughed and called out "Not yet." Would she have had a child. Under the circumstances. Yseut considered. She had experienced epidemics. Polio. Thalidomide. AIDS. She knew they were tragic fates but then lives as well. She sighed. It probably wouldn't work out, another trip to Venice. Or with Alfred. No. He must have been there with all his women. From Vienna. All Vienna's lovers had always gone to Venice. On the night train. The first cappuccino at the station buffet and then into Venice at seven in the morning. No. Not that. Not again. She wanted new things. Entirely new. That was why she was here. She switched the radio back on. Violin music and then more ads. For furniture. She thought of the end again. She was thinking about what would work out. Yet again. Yseut leaned back. She drove into the right-hand lane. Drove more slowly. Drove along. Alfred. She shouldn't be thinking about Alfred. And the thoughts that the subject brought in its wake. All they did was create more mess. All these thoughts did was remind her of time and how little she had left. Yseut sighed. She could think about it over the next few days. About everything. At her own pace. That at least. After Alfred's proposition. Everything was as it had always been. Yearning. She couldn't help laughing. Desire. Yseut often wished her father had got his way and she hadn't had such a Catholic upbringing. Chioggia. The exits had street names. Warehouses on either side of the road. Harbour bays. Ships. Buildings. Business parks. Factories. The road made a

slow curve towards the sun. Yseut took her sunglasses from the compartment above the rear-view mirror. Everything was in question. Alfred's proposition. No. Her reaction had led to this confusion. Her yearning. Her desire. She hadn't known she could do that. Could still do it. Yearning. Desiring. She had thought herself far off from such states of mind. She had thought herself predictable. But his question. She had become unknown to herself again. Love. Falling in love. She wanted it. She could imagine it. But it would have been better if Alfred hadn't said it so indirectly. An embrace outside the house. He put lube in her jacket pocket. Murmured "This is what I'd like." He probably meant it as a declaration. That nothing about her bothered him. It was pragmatic. Practical. Not romantic. Or particularly romantic. Thinking ahead on her behalf. Levelling her path. Alfred knew her history. Yseut laughed. It had still been as difficult as always. She had expected to be able to talk at some point. At some point everyone had enough experience to understand that everything could be said out loud. But that wasn't the case. And probably it was Alfred's code. Yseut considered. How did this code continue. What did she have to put in his jacket pocket to express her wishes. And she did have wishes. Or did she only have reactions. And wasn't that the difference between loving and falling in love. Falling. An act of involuntary failure. Fall victim. Fall short. Fall down. Falling as decline. Decay. Destruction. That was what she'd intended, wasn't it. She'd wanted to put an end to all restraint through the Sermon on the Mount and skip to the Old Testament. She had obtained the means to do so. She had equipped herself. Armed herself. She had wanted an opportunity and now. Against it all. Was it sufficiently against it all to imagine launching herself into someone's arms. Falling into someone's arms again. Should that be enough. Did it change everything. Sometimes it seemed that way. Yseut couldn't help laughing. She remembered the aggressive truck driver. She slapped the steering wheel. That guy. He had no more right to the road than she did. She'd had to buy the road as well. Toll fees. Borders and fees everywhere. No freedom of movement. Not for a long time. Freedom was nothing now but the decision on how much to pay. The payment method. The end of the expressway was announced. Yseut braked. Got in lane. Was this the Romea. The road that led to the south via Ravenna. She still had to learn what it meant to want to be a person. A whole person. To stand up for herself. Stand up for herself and demand her dignity. She'd never learned all that. She hadn't ever learned all that. She had to learn it now. Still. Over and over. She still had to go on learning over and over. And it would stay that way. Yseut smiled. How great it had been.

1967. California. She should be grateful to Ed for that. The women there. Back then. How adventurous it had been. How brutal. How absolutely perfect. How appalling it had been. Taking life seriously and not being allowed to know nothing about life like the inmates of a penal colony. She hadn't experienced that before. Taking life seriously. Learning. The knowledge. Lessons learned. They'd been blows. Blows dealt by herself against herself. They were shattering. Inside her. Breathtaking. But simple too. She'd already known it. She had always known it and just not been allowed to know. It had had to be excavated from herself. Like every person. Probably every person knew all about this right to life. Just as every person learned to speak. There was this right to life. Hers had been bricked in from the very beginning. Walled in. Austria – what else could you expect. The sky was growing paler blue. The sun was now to her right. Everything around her was flat. The sun's rays fell from the sky to the ground in batches. Short. The feeling of his arms around her again and his breath on her ear. "This is what I wish for." Yseut drove through the flat landscape. Wooded areas. Then broad surfaces again. Fields and meadows. A police car. Flashing blue lights. A carabinieri gestured to drive slowly. A road block. Traffic jam. Alarm indicators. Brake lights. Standstill. Moving on. Stopping. Standstill. Moving on. Inching forward the length of the car. Lauritz. She had been so certain. She had banished Lauritz. Incanted the spell. Hooting behind her. The queue had driven another car's length. She had stayed put. She caught up. Switched off the warning lights. It was quiet in the car without their ticking. Huge piles of earth on the right. Mountains piled high. Some densely overgrown. Others freshly dug. Tyre tracks led back to the road. They stood still. Should she turn off the engine. Ahead of her a woman in a white SUV. Behind her. Reflective windows. All was calm. No one got out. Everyone behind their steering wheels. Standstill. She sighed. Then inched forward again. She could see the first police officer. The man was standing by the side of the road. Assault rifle cradled. His hand on the trigger. Yseut leaned forward and looked at him. He was wearing the grey-blue combat fatigues of the GIS. Gruppo Intervento Speciale. They had taken over control of the armed forces in Italy. This one was wearing a red beret. The Austrian Bundespolizei and the GIS had formed an alliance. First they had founded a purchasing syndicate and bought the same weapons. Synergies. They all used Steyr assault rifles. This one even had a night vision device attached. They were all diverted into the middle of the road. A bus stood parked on the edge. The passengers sat and leaned against the crash barrier in a long row. Yseut

had to drive very slowly. Mounted police were positioned. The cars had to steer between them in a slalom course. Carabinieri with their automatic weapons cocked stood on the right. The traffic in the opposite lane was normal. The cars zipped past. No eye contact. She told herself. No eye contact. But then she did look. She saw how she was being looked at. These men's scrutinizing looks. Brief. She felt herself being broken down into data. Mid-range car. Vienna plates. Single driver. Inconspicuous. Female. Not young. Not dangerous. Then the look proceeded to the car behind her. These men showed no sign of emotion. No emotion. Silently cradling their guns. She had passed the carabinieri. She had remained unnoticed. She was allowed to keep driving. Those singled out were by the side of the road. She had to drive along the middle for a short way. Then the road was free again. Yseut was enraged. That scrutinizing look. The waiting bus passengers. The cars that had to wait. She hated it. She hated herself. And she stayed obediently in her seat. That was sensible. But she felt like an object. Treated. Assessed. Judged. Yseut put her foot down. Drove off. The road empty. She drove far too fast. She had quickly caught up with the flow of traffic. Had to dawdle in convoy. Evening traffic. The road led over a number of small steep bridges. Across small rivers. Across canals. The road wide but only one lane in each direction. There were risky overtaking manoeuvres. The continuous white line in the middle had no effect. Yseut drove on the edge. Ochre-brown little houses. The houses built lower. Lower than the road. The road a dam in the landscape. The fences around the little gardens made of cast concrete. The cast concrete imitated other fences. There were fences like woven branches made of cast concrete. Imitation wooden posts in cast concrete. Thick cast iron garlands in cast concrete. Japanese anemones blossoming in the gardens. Phlox. Asters. Then warehouses again. Dusty car parks outside. No cars. Shopping malls. Closed down. The windows covered in newspaper. To the left of the road, an ocean liner in the middle of a field. A gigantic ship rose up out of the grass and the trees. Nothing but the ship's corpus. Rusty red. The ship was as large as the ferries that crossed from Trieste to Athens. Yseut took a closer look. This ship seemed to be even larger. It took a while to drive past the ship. The prow had pointed northwards. It had looked as though the ship was steering across the field. Then on the left a globe. The size of a house. The globe had once been a restaurant. Closed down. Then on the right a pale pink hall with yellow polka dots on the façade. Clothes had once been sold there. Closed down. The doors locked with chains. The road seemed to climb higher and

higher above the fields and grassland. The buildings were only accessible via bridges. The road secured with double crash barriers against the embankment. On the right. The harvested fields. Dark brown. Flocks of seagulls alighted from the earth. Flew in large circles to the next field. On the left. The woods shady and green. The summer's record-breaking heat had done no harm here. The clouds rosy in the sky. The sun's rays now only brushing the tips of the trees. Yseut looked for her phone. Switched the GPS back on. She had almost made it. She had arrived in the Po Delta. She'd soon be there. The GPS voice commanded her to turn right. "Now turn right." She was driving across a long bridge. High lattices blocked the view. They wrote the names of the rivers in Italy, didn't they. They were blue signs at each end of bridges. She must have missed it. Was this the Po. Had she just driven over the Po or not. The bridges also crossed swampy land or flooding areas. She followed the GPS instructions. She turned off. The exit took her past a shopping mall for wedding dresses. Then a housing estate. Houses in small gardens. The traffic was dense here. "Viale John Fitzgerald Kennedy" it said on the display. Then the GPS took her into a series of one-way streets. On the third tour of Viale Alessandro Manzoni she could be certain she'd been led around in circles. She took the opposite direction as soon as she could. She came to a cemetery. A funeral seemed to have finished. A group of people in dark clothing gathered around a Catholic priest. They all watched her as she turned around. The faces were nothing but pale surfaces in the twilight. She could make out their curiosity though. Yseut drove the entire stretch back to the Romea. At the shopping mall for wedding dresses she looked for a way south. She passed through another estate. Nothing but shell constructions. Some had their windows boarded up. Others stood without roofs. Fences. No construction equipment to indicate work would continue. The gates to the driveways locked. An estate full of construction ruins. Suddenly the GPS knew where she was. A Street Number 46. It was growing dark. "Please. Turn right." Yseut hesitated. She saw a narrow sand road. Actually a country lane. A convoy of cars behind her. She had to go on driving. "If possible, please turn around." There was no way to make a U-turn though. There was a steep embankment down to the fields on either side of the road. The cars came very fast from ahead. After a long time. Yseut came to a left turn. She had to wait until she could turn off the road. She held up the traffic. Drivers hooted far behind her. Then she had to wait a long time before she could turn around. She drove back towards Taglio di Po. This time she followed the GPS instructions. She wanted to turn left. Another long wait for

a gap in the convoy of approaching traffic. More hooting. She drove down onto the sand road. This narrow road also higher than the fields. She drove slowly. Looked around. The view. This ploughing through the landscape. That was still a reason to travel by car. Throwing herself into the landscape as she drove. Stopping whenever she wanted and continuing on foot. Walking and getting lost. She could see herself parking the car. Taking one of the paths between the fields and walking off. Losing sight of herself. Could have lost sight of herself. That was how far she'd once got with herself. She'd lost that again now. The lightness of taking leave of herself. That had been lost at that moment. She grieved for it. But she didn't want to give herself up to that lightness any more. Life had returned. Life had settled in. Or whatever had happened. Imprecise and difficult. Uncertain and painful. But it was all back. All of it and above all desire. The strongest buzz of desire. Just as every desire had been the strongest and most buzzing. But now. She'd had other plans. She had other plans. But it took no more than the thought of his whisper by her ear and the yearning was there. Yseut saw a collapsed farmhouse far off in the fields to her right. It was almost dark. She could just about see in the rear-view mirror that she was whirling up a cloud of dust. A black cloud. The lights on the road far behind just perceptible. A bridge over a deep ditch. Dams on either side of the bridge. She drove straight ahead. Then lights at last. She breathed a sigh of relief. That must be the villa. A wall. The driveway. High trees. The road made a sharp turn to the left. Behind a large stretch of grass was the villa. A wide façade. The windows illuminated. You had to park behind the villa. It had said so on the homepage. She drove carefully. Here too the road seemed to be a dam with ditches on either side. She drove around the building. A small terrace right behind the balustrade to the large terrace in front of the villa. A young woman in the uniform of a maidservant from a nineteenth-century comedy came running over. She should park right there. The young woman called out. Yseut parked the car. She got out. Took her case out of the boot. The young woman took it from her. Was there anything more to carry, she asked. Yseut said no. She fetched her handbag out of the car. Followed the young woman to the house. The young woman turned around. "Benvenuto" she said. Yseut's phone rang. It was Madeline. Was everything OK, she asked.