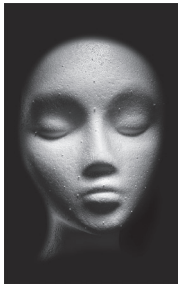
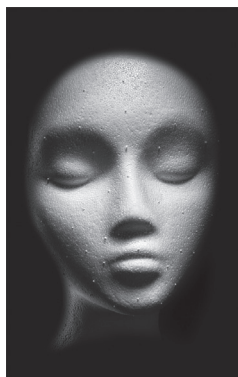


DATE WITH DESTINY



SHORT STORIES

DATE WITH DESTINY



SHORT STORIES

Hélène Rioux

Translated by
Jonathan Kaplansky



GUERNICA
EDITIONS

TORONTO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)

2016

Original title: *Pense à mon rendez-vous* (2008); Éditions XYZ

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Cover & Interior design, David Moratto

Guernica Editions Inc.

1569 Heritage Way, Oakville, (ON), Canada L6M 2Z7

2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

www.guernicaeditions.com

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,

5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8

Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills,

High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—Third Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2015956460

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Rioux, Hélène, 1949-

[*Pense à mon rendez-vous*. English]

Date with destiny : short stories / Hélène Rioux ;

translated by Jonathan Kaplansky.

(Essential translations series ; 35)

Translation of: Rioux, Hélène, 1949-. *Pense à mon rendez-vous*.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77183-102-4 (paperback).--ISBN 978-1-77183-103-1 (epub).--

ISBN 978-1-77183-104-8 (mobi)

I. Kaplansky, Jonathan, 1960-, translator II. Title. III. Title: *Pense à mon rendez-vous*. English. IV. Series: Essential translations series ; 35

PS8585.I46P4613 2016 C843'.54 C2015-907643-9 C2015-907644-7

*For my children:
with life they give me my date with destiny*

*That is why I also find death frightening,
It looks lovingly at me;
A great voice in my ear murmuring:
Here's your date with destiny.*
—Jean Cocteau, *Plain-chant*

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"You're not sleeping?"

"I never sleep."

"Aren't you tired? It's been so long since you ..."

"I don't experience fatigue. I am the outcome of fatigue."

"At the end of the road?"

"All along the road."

"How long have you been there?"

"Where?"

"Here ... over there."

"Always."

"Where are you?"

"I am where I happen to be. Here and there."

"Everywhere at once?"

"In a way."

"When did you begin?"

"I do not begin. I'm the end of everything."

"I can't see your face."

"You'll see it."

"A voice in the distance. Is someone crying?"

*"Someone is always crying. Haunted or sad faces at the
windows, helpless people walking along the highway."*

"Lost souls."

“And others as well who choose to lose their way. I console the afflicted. I place my hand on a shoulder, I murmur in an ear.

“Your hand is cold.”

“Cold. Warm when it needs to be.”

“Gentle, too. But your long nails are like claws. Your red nails look as if they are stained with blood.”

“Sometimes I put on gloves and my touch becomes a caress.”

“Someone is crying.”

“Someone is crying; someone is calling me.”

“Who are you?”

“I’ve been waiting for you forever.”

ANNE ... WHO SEES NOTHING COMING

“Anne, sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?”

*“I see nothing but the sun, which makes a dust,
and the grass, which looks green.”*

— Charles Perrault

Thirteen Chrysanthemum Avenue. In one of the suburbs south of the city. A nondescript street, in what, realistically or derisively, is called a bedroom community. The house was built recently, but in a rustic style, with pinkish bricks, and a sloping, pale grey roof. In front, a perfectly mowed lawn, lush and dense beneath the feet. So impeccable, in fact, that apparently no dandelion or other flower of such humble extraction has dared to grow there. A rock garden, a few rose bushes, some brilliant yellow and red French marigolds, a slender young fir tree, and a cedar hedge. Behind, in the yard, a treated wood deck, built this year, a white round table in synthetic resin with a floral fringed umbrella on top, four matching chairs covered with cushions in the same pattern as the umbrella, and a large swimming pool that reflects a cloudless sky in unreal-looking turquoise water. Two weeping willows near the fence. It is one o'clock — thirteen o'clock — and the sun is beating down.

The sounds are those often heard on summer Saturdays in suburbia: lawn mowers, shouting children playing in swimming pools; a neighbour's radio broadcasting a popular song in between advertisements; far off there's a baby screaming, a dog barking. The smells go with the sounds: charcoal-grilled meat, sunscreen claiming to be exotic, freshly cut grass. Slightly nauseating, except for the grass. In this heat, the scents don't move, become almost tangible. Harder to detect is the smell of chlorine that creeps in.

Thirteen Chrysanthemum Avenue. Upstairs, a dormer window. At the dormer window, the face of a teenager looking out at the street, chin in the palm of her hand. She's in her bedroom. Let's call her Anne, like the young woman in the cruel children's tale who saw nothing coming. Because nothing is coming. The street remains irrevocably empty. Only a metallic grey car, depressingly ordinary, went by earlier, stopping for a second at the intersection before continuing on its way. Undeniably depressing.

The teenager scans the landscape. Outside, the sun calls to her: her salmon-coloured bathing suit lies on the bed. She got it for her birthday. Salmon, what a colour! Her mother wanted to make her happy and her mother understands nothing.

Her parents went to the mall, as they do without fail every Saturday afternoon. When she was younger, she'd always go with them and the ritual had something almost magic about it. Back then, everything fascinated her: the loud colours, the neon signs, the many sounds, the smell of fried food and sweets, the hustle and bustle. Sometimes there would be a surprise, if you were lucky: a sandwich-

board man strolling down the wide aisles, a man selling balloons in a corner.

Now, the displays of food repel her, as does any association with family and suburbia, a life she didn't choose. Her father, whose hairy legs emerge from a pair of tartan Bermudas, her mother with her deformed body marked by cellulite. These parents she didn't choose. They'll return later, trunk overflowing with food. They'll unpack, put things away, and freeze certain items. It's always the same. Her little brother was invited to a children's birthday party a few streets away. She's alone at her window, looking at this street where nothing ever happens. She watches, disillusioned. Her bathing suit lies on the bed, very close to the black angora cat, exhausted by the heat, who sometimes opens her big eyes imploringly. She is a large spayed cat who sleeps a lot, has never hunted and never ventures beyond the fenced area.

Thirty-two in the shade — what shade? — and not a breath of wind. For a week, a heat wave has descended upon the area. Thirteen Chrysanthemum Avenue, July thirteen, thirteen o'clock.

She looks at her watch. She thinks: this must be my lucky day — I'm thirteen, it's July thirteen, thirteen o'clock. Nothing ever happens. What is luck waiting for to knock at my door? Why am I here in this ugly suburb leading this boring life? She thinks: the telephone could ring now, and it'd be Julien inviting me to the movies tonight. Julien is probably the boy she desires. Perhaps she's also thinking that, in the dim light of the theatre, we'll kiss passionately, and perhaps after the show we'll go to the park and smoke cigarettes or something else, and he'll tell me he loves me.

Maybe he'll ask me to run away with him. But Julien is seventeen, camping on a beach somewhere in New England, having fun with a group of friends his own age — he won't phone. Later, it is thirteen thirteen. She sees the numbers clearly on her clock radio, and thinks: the telephone could ring now, and I'll discover I've won a trip for two to Japan or Australia. I'll ask Julien to go with me. How could he refuse? Or I could leave on my own and meet Australians, Japanese, other travellers, none of whom would know one another. The telephone could ring, and a director who noticed me would be on the line. He'll have selected me to play the lead in his film; I'll be Lolita, my face appearing on posters pasted on the walls of every city in the country. Anything could happen. Just an event that would change my life.

Luck seems to be elsewhere. Anne wonders: who's trapping me in this life, what's stopping me from spreading my wings? Will I open them one day? She turns away from the window and the dreary street. She runs her hand over the head of the cat who moans softly in response and rolls over, offering her tender belly. If I were a cat like you, she says, I'd ask nothing of life; I'd be happy to eat and sleep. Everything would go smoothly; perhaps I'd even purr. Why wasn't I born a cat? She removes her oversize tee-shirt and slips on her bathing suit. Diving into the pool now, into the very blue water, taking advantage of the absence of her parents and little brother to do so in peace and feel as if she is at sea. I could be on the deck of a sailboat, she thinks, imagining herself leaning nonchalantly on the rail, wind in her hair; her skin brown, her clothes white and flowing. The wind from the sea rushes in, billowing her dress. We'd berth at an island in the Pacific, she dreams. The setting has existed for

a long time in her head: the wahines come to greet her, arms filled with orchids, palm leaves and birds of paradise. She waves to them graciously. Later, from atop a cliff, I plunge into the waves. It's like a movie — such happiness.

Afterwards we see her floating on her back, on the surface of the cool water. She is so still we almost panic for a moment, but now she turns over and swims to the side of the pool, then lies down on a towel in the grass. She sips lemonade, turning the pages of a novel. The heroine has her features or else she has the heroine's features, another name; it is she who runs away to another life. Later she falls asleep on her stomach, head in her folded arms, the book in the grass, wide open. Her parents return and find her like that. They shrug their shoulders, dismayed. Our daughter is bored. A shame she wouldn't go to summer camp. It's the middle of the day and she's feeling down. What is she reading now, her father grumbles. Another one of those novels that depresses her.

Afraid she'll get sunstroke, her mother wakes her, anoints her shoulders with aloe sunscreen. Later, her father puts charcoal in the barbecue and her mother opens a bag of chips. They eat outdoors; Anne remains glum throughout the meal, nibbling at her hamburger, not hungry, answering her parents' concern in monosyllables. Here, have some salad, it's full of vitamins, her mother urges. She shakes her head. She doesn't want any. What about cake or ice cream? She shakes her head. She's always been like that, to her parents' dismay; even as a little girl she refused to eat. It was as if she didn't like life.

As her brother is teasing her, she takes refuge in her bedroom and lies down, headphones over her ears. A

woman's voice screams *I am calling you* in her head. Evening falls. Through the dormer window, she sees the orange-coloured moon shrouded in the mist. Distressed, she thinks: in a few hours, it will be over. It will never again be July thirteen at Thirteen Chrysanthemum Avenue the year I am thirteen. She doesn't want the day to end this way. It would be so unfair, a voice inside her protests. This is not the life I desire. This isn't even living.

She applies lipstick and eye shadow. Her beach sandals, her faded old blue jeans that she deliberately cut off at the knee, her big sea-green tee-shirt, featuring the head of a Garfield cat. She carefully brushes her blond hair. The entire family is in the yard. Couples will come later, neighbours. They'll drink beer, perhaps cocktails concocted by her mother, exotic beverages with rum and pineapple juice that they'll sip through striped, pastel-coloured straws. Their voices will grow increasingly loud. Raucous laughter will be heard. They'll take out a deck of cards. It's always the same on summer Saturday nights in their suburb. And when night has really fallen, they'll go downstairs to the basement to watch movies or videos of past vacations. She slips out the front door without saying a word.

The street welcomes her. Sprinklers spray the lawns — a spattering of water projected in a fine mist. Farther on, the boulevard. Farther still, she thinks, the city. Hitchhiking on a night like this — what temptation! She sticks out her thumb: the thirteenth car will stop, it has to, the charm has to work.

She'll say she wants to cross the bridge. On the other side of the river, the lights twinkle. Something will happen: there's a full moon tonight. Anne feels her heart slam against her ribs.

The thirteenth car, a midnight blue American model, pulls noiselessly over a few metres in front of her. She runs over to open the door. I want to cross the bridge, she announces. The driver nods in agreement. Anne settles into the leather seat. Out of the corner of her eye, she observes the profile of the man at the wheel. His eyebrows are bushy and a thin moustache fringes his upper lip. Curly black hair adorns the nape of his neck. Not bad, she thinks, he looks like a foreigner, but old, yes, almost my father's age, far too old, what a shame.

The car is air conditioned. The windows are tightly sealed and music — a cello quartet — fills the space. They drive past houses that are like hers, everything is always the same, from the flowerbeds to the cedar and rhododendron hedges. And no doubt, in the back yards, couples sip punch alongside the pool. For everything is the same everywhere: the smell of chlorine, the sweet flavours, the same comments about events that make the front pages of the newspapers.

After a few seconds, the windshield is flecked with dead insects. A spritz of water, the windshield wipers move back and forth, the stains disappear, cleanliness returns, death is erased. For these insects, it's the end of the world, she thinks. Yet the world goes on. Will it be the same when our world ends? Will things go on?

In the distance, past the bridge, a riot of neon lights and colour; songs are played. Past the bridge, life beats like a big heart. Pulsates. Boys with slim, supple limbs are probably leaning on lampposts and will see her pass when she walks in front of them on the sidewalk. Boys with dark eyes and long hair that seems to float, far more handsome than the ones in the regional high school she attends, wearing baggy

sweatshirts featuring the image of rock stars, their idols. Boys like Julien. They will be there to see her walk by and perhaps one of them will break away from the group to approach her. Who knows what words he'll use to convince her to follow him, who knows toward what pleasures he'll lead her. That's when real life will begin.

Before reaching the bridge they drive past a small forest. Anne shudders: July thirteen, the summer I am thirteen, alone in a car with a stranger when the moon is full. What if misfortune knocks at my door? She follows the driver out of the corner of her eye. It seems to her as if something is swelling between his thighs; a kind of latent violence hangs in the air. What if he touches me, she thinks, suddenly chilled. You read about atrocities like that every day in the newspaper. Her parents make remarks about them, as if to warn her. Girls' swollen bodies are fished out months later from the river, mutilated, unrecognizable. She has to get out of the car, but where would she go? The cellos screech — such mournful music. She looks out the window. Along the road, the trees sway their leaves imperceptibly. They couldn't care less, nor could the moon. Idiotically, it keeps shining as if nothing were wrong — a false light. For Anne knows well that the moon has gone out, that its brilliance is only a reflection, an optical illusion. I won't look, she thinks, no, I won't see when he lowers his zipper, I won't see his thing spurt, or the stains on the leather seat.

But the bridge that spans the black water of the river is crossed and the car pulls over silently to the side of the road. This is the city. What happened to the lights that danced so wildly? Despite the streetlamps, it's dark. I want to go farther, she says. The man nods his consent. I want to

go where people are having fun. The car starts up again softly. And I'd like different music. He changes the cassette. This one's a piano sonata. Something gay, she insists, on the verge of tears, music to dance to. Don't you have anything like that? He ejects the cassette and turns on the radio. The disc jockey introduces the next piece. Finally, she relaxes, finally a human voice.

Now the man has opened the windows, but the sounds of the city have faded by the time they reach — it is so hot. On café terraces, waiters watch for unlikely clients, napkins over their arms. Everything is in slow motion. As if the city were in mourning, she thinks. As if I'd come on the wrong night. No boys on street corners to ask me to go dancing.

She turns toward the driver. Couldn't we continue, she asks, couldn't we go farther?

They leave the city and drive slowly on the highway. Later, they're in the country; they take secondary road number thirteen. The weight in Anne's chest has lightened. She is no longer afraid, and begins to talk, about her parents, Julien, the monotonous life, Chrysanthemum Avenue. The man listens. When he answers she detects a singsong accent. She thinks that maybe he's a spy or a terrorist.

At one point he opens the glove compartment. Has he hidden a weapon there, a dagger with which to threaten her? No, it's just a flask of cognac, a small silver travel tumbler. Still driving, he pours himself some, drinks, pours some more and hands her the tumbler. It warms its way inside her. She's already drunk beer and cheap wine with her friends at improvised parties in basements when parents were away, but this is the first time she's tasted such strong alcohol. Drinking and driving is dangerous. What if he loses

control? She likes the sensation of brushing with danger. Death always lies in wait. She feels herself grow more important. We're being hunted down. When the enemy is too close, he'll hand me the microfilm and I'll flee into the woods. A forest at night time: I'll be so scared, but I'll show how brave I can be! He'll jot down a phone number on a book of matches; I'll run to the first gas station and dial the number, finger trembling. I'll whisper the password to his accomplice and we'll arrange to meet. I'll enter a hotel where sparkling chandeliers hang from high ceilings. I'll walk on carpets thick as grass that have intertwining shapes. I'll knock on door number thirteen. Finally I'll embody the heroine hidden inside me who asks only to express herself.

She thinks she will never want to go home again. A secret agent, yes, or perhaps a cocaine dealer. And what if he forces me to snort some? What if he sticks a syringe in my arm to put me to sleep and tomorrow I find myself in some brothel, in Damascus or Rio?

In the sky, the moon is turning red. Anne turns toward the driver. The moon looks like a ball of fire. Where are we going? she asks. But he smiles without answering. Who are you? she asks again. Are you a murderer, an important man, are you a diamond smuggler? But these questions are asked only in her mind.

The landscape becomes increasingly lush. Trees, trees, even more trees. The sound of water nearby — it must be a river. Wind in the leaves, crackling, screeching. Cruelty is shrouded at night; vultures prepare to swoop down on careless prey.

I so want life to be different, she thinks. I want life to carry me away.

The car drives up a path, to the left. After the grove of firs and spruces, Anne suddenly makes out, in the glow of the headlights, a big garden of chrysanthemums, then a house. The smell of humus permeates the area, and strangely, the smell of fresh cement, mixed with the scent of flowers. A setting that is familiar, yet unreal. The man turns off the engine.

Here we are, says the stranger. Where? she asks. I don't hear laughter from the party. Here we are, he repeats.

It is midnight. Anne gets out of the car. She rubs her eyes. Outdoors, everything seems to stand still, as if the landscape itself were holding its breath. She recognizes it all, yet at the same time recognizes nothing. She has no more certainty.

Are you my death? she thinks, finally. And strangely, this question that torments her gives rise to a kind of voluptuousness at the heart of her being, like a moment of grace. She asks it aloud, in a clear voice, but silence is her only answer.

"You are lying when you say you console."

"I'm lying and I'm telling the truth."

"That type of paradox is only a way of evading the issue.

People answer like that when they don't want to answer."

"Stop questioning me."

"I want to know."

"The ear hears what it wants to hear. Conscience decides."

"Truth is absolute."

"I am the absolute."

*"Sometimes you go towards people who don't call you. I say
you're imposing."*

"I act the way I like. I am omnipotent."

"Let human beings live in peace."

"Do they live in peace?"

*"If you would just haunt the battlefields. But even in the most
bucolic settings, your horrible image suddenly appears."*

"Battlefields make me weary. Even I need some fresh air."

*"You don't always go toward people who are crying. Sometimes
you suddenly appear in the middle of a song, you shatter
hope."*

*"Their sugar-coated songs get on my nerves. When they sing,
I make them stop."*

“You prefer shouting?”

“All in all I prefer silence.”

“You don’t console the afflicted, you frighten them. Your eyes are alight with cruelty. I know you often attack the most fragile prey.”

“I act the way I like. Sometimes consolation, sometimes terror.”

“You don’t always console people who cry. Some people cry in vain.”

“And I don’t always terrify people who sing. Sometimes I show indulgence; I put up with the violins. At other times, tears are my music.”

“You shatter hope.”

“I am the ultimate hope.”

KATE ...
WHO DREAMS NEAR THE SEA

*“No! My fiancée with the sweet
clear eyes is waiting for me ...”*

— Leconte de Lisle

To begin: the setting. The city is in Europe, let's say, in a country where it often rains. For rain brings the little touch of melancholy essential to this story. I'd like it to be Prague, that's a name I like. Prague: it's evocative. It conjures up an image of the café I went to faithfully as a teenager, owned by a Czech immigrant, on the mezzanine of a dilapidated red brick building downtown. I remember stucco-covered walls, checked tablecloths and candles on the tables, dripping wax congealed on the straw of Chianti bottles. In a corner of the room, there would often be a guitarist with Berber features playing gentle, sad melodies, a bearded man who improvised as a singer, humming songs by Brassens and Brel. I remember the winter when the door opened and at the same time the wind swept in figures that shook the snow off their duffle coats; the glow of flames made the snowflakes on their hair or their pom pom toques glisten. You could hear the joyful commotion of people greeting and calling out to one another momentarily dominating

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Jeanne ... or A Woman, One Ordinary Morning,” translated by Jonathan Kaplansky (“Jeanne ... ou Une femme, un matin sans histoire”) has been previously published in *TransLit Volume 9: An Anthology of Literary Translations*, edited by Yukari Meldrum, Edmonton, TransLit, ATIA, 2012.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hélène Rioux has published poetry, short stories, translations and nine novels. She received the Prix France-Québec and the Prix Ringuet de l'Académie des Lettres du Québec in 2008 for *Mercredi soir au Bout du monde* (*Wednesday Night at the End of the World*), which was also a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award. Rioux was awarded the Grand Prix littéraire du Journal de Montréal and the Prix de la Société des Écrivains canadiens for *Chambre avec baignoire* (*Room with Bath*) in 1992. She has been a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award six times; *Pense à mon rendez-vous* (*Date with Destiny*) was shortlisted for the GG for fiction. For the last ten years, she has written a column on literary translation for the magazine *Lettres québécoises*. Her novels have been translated into English, Spanish and Bulgarian.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Jonathan Kaplansky works as a literary translator of French in Montreal. He won a French Voices Award to translate Annie Ernaux's *Things Seen* (*La vie extérieure*). His translations include *Days of Sand* by Hélène Dorion, *Reading Nijinsky* and *Wednesday Night at the End of the World* by Hélène Rioux, and *Fugitives* by Lise Gauvin. He has sat on the jury for the English-translation category of the Governor General's Literary Awards and has participated in various literary festivals. Two of his short stories, translated into French by Hélène Rioux, have appeared in the journal *XYZ: la revue de la nouvelle*.