

*THE END OF
THE WORLD IS
ELSEWHERE*

Fragments of the World IV



Essential Translations Series 56



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Fragments of the World IV



Hélène Rioux

Translated by
Jonathan Kaplansky



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*For my friends Christine Champagne
and Hans-Jürgen Greif,
for their unwavering support.*

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1

The *End of the World*, Early Morning

*If it snows today, if it rains buckets, what does
it matter? The end of the world is elsewhere,
in other climates.*

Call it a childhood dream.

FOR SOME, THE word is, and has always been, a synonym for a dream. It has been that way since the world began. They have only to hear it for the desire to emerge. A spark immediately ignites in their eyes. They have only to hear it, to read it in a book. Or just to think it. Especially when things are going badly. But even when everything is going well. In the best of worlds, as Voltaire described with his legendary irony. He didn't believe in it, of course, how would he have believed in it? Our world was not, has never been, the best, far from it. And that explains perhaps why the idea arises as soon as the word is heard or read, as soon as it is uttered. A peal of thunder sounds, lightning flashes in a cloudless sky. The rainbow appears: it is a promise.

Elsewhere. The magic word, laden with all fantasies. A better world exists. Elsewhere. Where the grass is greener and softer, the sky bluer, where gold sparkles in riverbeds. Elsewhere, always farther, beyond futile borders. Think of Ulysses, of Sinbad in *The Thousand and One*

Nights, of Marco Polo, of Cook, of Magellan; remember Christopher Columbus when, on the morning of August 3, 1492 of our era, he set sail from Palos de la Frontera. It is that word and no other that he uttered on uncharted waters, Oceanus or the Ocean Sea, on highly unlikely routes.

Elsewhere.

Already I hear the skeptics and the sedentary protest. That's not it at all, they scold, shaking their heads. You are blinded by romanticism, as usual. The madness of men is the only thing to blame in this affair. Because, admit it, it's crazy to go away when you should be cultivating your own piece of land, erecting lasting monuments there. Crazy and irresponsible.

Others, less austere, will take a more nuanced approach, describe instead a kind of custom or tradition. At one time, they explain, for British dandies, for example, taking the grand tour of Europe after adolescence was an obligatory rite of passage. You had to visit the museums of the continent, gather your thoughts before its ruins, go slumming in the bordellos to then return enlightened, taking your place in the City or on the benches of Parliament. Reread the life of Byron or Shelley: you will see. Young people from rich countries still do it and you see them on the roads of exotic countries: Mongolia, India, Bolivia, their fair trade backpacks, their tattooed biceps, in running shoes or barefoot in their orthopedic sandals. They all have a telephone in hand, ready for a selfie. When they come of age, travellers agree to be called tourists, not before. They disembark from the cruise ship, step off the air-conditioned tour bus, follow their guide into these places that have marked the past,

invading the islands, photographing remains, splendours, and miseries with the same telephones whose untimely ringing, often ridiculous, punctuates the murmuring of the world.

Still others brandish their history textbooks, claim that it is wars, invasions—bloodthirsty hordes that swept through with a thunderous roar, making the earth tremble beneath the galloping of their horses—drought, famine, and other calamities that incited or forced them to move what ails them elsewhere: all great migrations are thus explained. Boat people, refugees, deportees of all kinds, nothing, alas, has changed since the dawn of time. Gaunt, scrawny, starving, their puny children in their arms. They dig tunnels, pile up in foul smelling holds like the slaves who in times past were transported from one world to the other, huddling in containers, airplane baggage holds, or whatever. The survivors knock on the doors of privileged continents, Europe or America. Or else they enter without knocking. Without money or papers, with nothing other than their hunger and their terror, their tears, their horror stories to tell in their language, their hope for a less cruel life, that illusion. If these catastrophes had not swooped down upon them, they would never even have considered leaving their village. And here they are quoting the wandering Jew, the lost Canadian, humming their sad songs.

Still others speak of the Crusaders who, abandoning their castles and their land, in the Middle Ages, went to combat the enemies of God in the Holy Land. They quote the Filles du Roy, the galley slaves—did they even have a choice? Exile is always an ordeal, they insist. Exile is always painful.

It's true. True for tourism, for the Crusades and for migrations, for the majority who cherish the place where they were born and grew up. But we speak here of adventurers, of those who left, wind filling their sails, searching for everything and nothing, spices and silk, tea, pearls, emeralds, slaves. Or simply for the euphoria of discovery, when the heart suddenly hammers in the chest. We speak of those dreamers. They returned—when they returned—transformed, covered in honours, bearing evocative scars and gashes. They had survived. Adventurers and conquerors, often without faith or laws, their names forever punctuate our history, beacons in our night. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan.

And the stories they told when they returned. What marvels they had seen elsewhere, over there, what extraordinary phenomena, sunken continents, cities as vast as the countries of the old world, the domes of which sparkled like a mirage beneath the sun; from afar, they looked like cities of gold. Those girls—people claimed they were virgins—with perfect bodies that could be discerned beneath their veils and who danced, at once shameless and graceful; still others, with light feet, entirely nude except for their collars, their belts of flowers, those emperors that the pagans venerated like gods incarnated on earth, those fertile fields as far as the eye could see—where there grew tubers in twisted shapes, weeds that people smoked solemnly at nightfall, grains that overcame the famines of the old world—the trees whose branches bent beneath the weight of fruits with flavours as sweet as honey. Aphrodisiacal plants, birds with multi-colour feathers, able to speak. Mermaids and unicorns, elephants, docile mastodons that children led

nonchalantly on long chains, giraffes and other even more fabulous animals, hanging on lianas, upside down, tamed big cats, sleeping in gardens like in the time of Eden, does curled up between their paws. Horrors too: sea monsters with tentacles bristling with poisonous stingers, cyclops, insects whose bites are fatal, forty-foot-long snakes that swallowed their prey alive. Cruel giants, amazons, cruel as well, cannibalistic pygmies. Human sacrifices—appalling ceremonies—in temples built to honour implacable deities. The sickening smell of blood, of charred flesh rising toward the blue sky. Horrors and marvels.

They had braved all the dangers. They had gone up rivers infested with caimans and ravenous fish, and walked in the jungle, beaten their path, thrusting swords in the pervasive vegetation. They had experienced hunger, thirst, fever and delirium, fed themselves on roots and bitter leaves, on insects that they felt squirm in their mouths before being swallowed, still wriggling as they went down into the esophagus, moving around in their guts. They faced storms, when waves as high as castle ramparts beat down upon their decks, with the wind splitting their masts, tearing their sails and, with sinister cracking, the hull of their vessel threatened to break apart beneath the impact. Captain and sailors found themselves on the ocean floor or in the bellies of sharks: the outcome of their journey, if not the meaning of their dream. They were captured by barbarian tribes, had sometimes seen their companions perish slowly, tortured at the stake, heard moaning and cries echo in the night, until morning, sometimes all the entire next day. But they were also invited to feasts in the palaces of idolized kings,

where, dazed by the intense scent of incense and flowers, they tasted the fruit, mangosteens and guavas, the *tumatl* whose seeds they brought back, and saw naked girls dance beneath their veils.

What does it matter, in the end, if these stories were true or not—doubtless some of them were—there were always some people to believe in them, to listen to them, to delight in them, wide-eyed. So it was that, from one heart to the next, the dream flowed like a spring, was passed on, and took hold forever.

≈ The traveller describes and, in the head of the person listening to him, a halftone image suddenly unfolds. In the captain's cabin, they see an old map spread out among navigation instruments on a mahogany table, as if straight out of a curio cabinet from some maritime museum. They recognize the sextant, the compass, the astrolabe that locates the position of the stars, the telescope. The goose feather and the ink bottle, the pipe, if indeed tobacco and its virtues—or vices—had already been discovered, the bottle of brandy three-quarters full or empty depending upon the captain's mood, the pewter tumbler, the pistol—at least one firearm of some sort—the dagger in its embroidered sheath, And then they finally see the one they wanted to see, the old seadog, the explorer, a pirate perhaps, bearded, cantankerous, his face gashed, leaning over it with a worried look. It: the map of the world.

Lying like that, the Earth is a flat surface, its two hemispheres projected side by side, as if, to better see it, to carry out an autopsy on it, it had been split by a meridian from one pole to the other. As if it had been quartered. That is how we imagine it in the past, immobile between

the sky and the abyss, or lying in unstable equilibrium on the nape of the neck of Atlas, himself lying who knows where, floating in empty space, perhaps. Only the foolhardy took the journey to the end of the horizon. Did they not know that the horizon recedes as one moves forward, that you never reach it? The horizon is an optical illusion, a utopia.

Some people ventured forth nevertheless, returning with new hypotheses. Their voyage led them to this wild conclusion: the Earth was a contained entity, a kind of rectangular chest set down on who knows what, a solid surface, a floor, and this container was hermetically sealed by the celestial dome which acted as a cover. As for others, people awaited their return in vain. For them, no cover; at the end of the horizon, there was only nothingness, and they had fallen into it. Shivers ran up spines when those who remained in the country imagined this fall into the great void. Do you fall eternally, and if not, when and where do you stop?

At present, the Earth is round and blue, we know: we've seen it in photos, it's part of a system, it turns among a multitude of stars in an infinite sky. And this very sky is perhaps not unique in its kind; perhaps others exist, identical or not—go figure how many—in other spaces just as infinite. Our galaxy is scarcely more than an atom in a limitless body constantly expanding.

Which is hardly more reassuring, you must admit. Before, we were the pole of attraction. Sun—one sole sun—stars and Moon turning without ever tiring around our immobile Earth. Chosen by God, our planet attracted them like a magnet. We were all, alpha and omega, promised to eternity, paradise or Gehenna.

We are, in the end, insignificant, and the ego has suffered a great blow. We thought we were unique, created in the image of a God who, severe as he is benevolent, watches over us as if over his children. From now on, it is Big Brother watching us and judging us, condemning us or saving us. We were destined to a hereafter of glory or sorrow, but to eternity rather than nothingness. Here we are regressing, like those sudden hurricanes reduced to ordinary tropical storms. Life used to have meaning and, viewed from that perspective, our ordeals seemed more bearable, explainable, at least. We believed in justice; we qualified it as immanent. We now know our insignificance: we have not been chosen, we will not be eternal. Dust, we will return to dust. That is our fate, and it is sad.

Some will say so much the better. Others, thinking over their dreary or unhappy lives, their errors, the missed opportunities, their cowardice, will remember the shame, yes, the shame, nevertheless buried deep in an obscure recess of their memory, and will regret that a second chance was not given to them to atone for the one they ruined.

≈ So that cabin, and that map of the world—dotted with grey areas—spread out on a work table in scratched mahogany. Words in Latin, names of seas, oceans, lands known or not, are carefully traced in black ink on the parchment. On the oldest map recorded—dating from five centuries before our era—that of Anaximander, never found, but recreated based on old manuscripts, three continents make up the world; the Aegean Sea is the centre. In the other still unsuspected hemisphere,

China—Cathay—boasted, it too, of being the centre of the universe, the Middle Kingdom.

The vessel we imagine, galleon or caravel, we nevertheless prefer it in the middle of the Atlantic, the Ocean Sea, rather than in the *mare nostrum*, as the Romans called the Mediterranean. We want it propelled toward an America still to be discovered and pillaged.

A lighted candle diffuses its meagre light upon this décor. Night has long fallen, the sky is black, no stars; the vessel sails on a shadowy sea. Drunken, this vessel, like that of the poet? But Rimbaud did not sail on the sea; he went down rivers, the Amazon, most likely, or perhaps even the St. Lawrence, why not, the Rio Grande, or the Mississippi, an American river. Because America had been discovered three and a half centuries earlier; it was not the Eldorado; Rimbaud's ship sank like Aguirre in his colourful heart.

Let's say that the ship left Saint-Malo, that it left Genoa or Cadiz at the summer solstice. Autumn had begun and the horizon continued to recede, without ever revealing anything. The navigator, a visionary, nevertheless sought another route, faster and more certain, to fabulous India, to Cathay, and when he returned to port, for he did not doubt he would return, his ship would be filled with spices, porcelain, and silk. Gold especially, another word that ignited sparks in people's eyes. He knew that his sponsors who remained there were expecting riches and seething with impatience. But he lost his way, no Asia—no hope—emerged and the exhausted crew grew discontented. The captain did not want to give up; he knew, or guessed, sensed that, like everything down here, the ocean had an end, that a world exists at

the end. He stood firm despite the grim looks, full of anger and resentment, that the sailors gave him. Some died during the crossing, of scurvy, dysentery, of fights that turned out badly, their bodies thrown into the sea after the priest's blessing. The captain stood firm. For how long?

* * *

Marjolaine looks up, places her cup on the saucer. A waiter, coffeepot in hand, all smiles—they always smile—approaches her table. She indicates no, and closes her book.

The life of Christopher Columbus, five hundred and thirty-two pages, not one less. She read it in scarcely eight days, a first for her. Because between work, home, and the family, she never had much time to devote to reading. Busy all day, too tired when evening came. Perhaps she didn't want to either. But all that is going to change. To start with, she registered as a member at her local library, in Little Italy. The first book she selected was a novel she wanted to read on the cruise. The title had misled her. And the purple orchid on the glossy cover. You mustn't go by appearances, as well she knows, having learned it at her own expense and on more than one occasion. While the back cover had not told her much—the author, a Finn with an unpronounceable name, had already published a half dozen bestsellers—the title had intrigued her. *The Pirate and the Orchid* had suggested romantic, even fantastic adventures, with attacks, hidden treasure on an island, a femme fatale, and a damsel in distress. The seductive pirate especially, as

pitiless as he was courageous. To make the journey in style, on the wings of a dream. To fill the hours of solitude, for that's what there would be. But none of that in this story. The orchid was the name of a cannibalistic sect at the ends of Indonesia, in the jungle, and the novel began with the description of its macabre rituals. Some details were bone-chilling—and Marjolaine had felt her blood run cold. Cannibals! They had them in Cuba too; Christopher Columbus had described them in his letters to the kings of Spain; she would never have believed it. She spent a week there with Marcel last year, for their twentieth wedding anniversary. In summer—less expensive. It had rained the whole time, a bit sad, even in a four-star hotel. As for the food, no point in mentioning it. But the Cubans were delightfully kind. The descendants of cannibals? Hard to imagine. To consume one's fellow creatures when there were all those exotic fruits, all those birds, all those fish. You had only to reach out your arm, throw your nets into the sea. To think about it, perhaps there were even some in Canada, who knows? When they bound missionaries to the stake, perhaps they ate them afterwards. She looks at the croissant she's started on: in her plate the raspberry jam resembles coagulated blood and suddenly she's no longer hungry. Incredible, what you can come up with to torment your fellow man. As for the pirate in the novel, he had yet to appear when she closed the book. But she no longer wanted to meet him: she'd read thirty pages and had had enough. She went to the ship's library and Béatrice was there. It was she who gave her Christopher Columbus.

It's such a small world. She scarcely believed her eyes when she recognized the passenger. A customer from the

End of the World, the restaurant where she herself had been a waitress and then a cook for about fifteen years. This one would often arrive in the evening to meet up with the tea drinker, a regular. They hadn't seen her in a while. There, on the ship, she was limping a bit. But it was her; impossible to make a mistake.

Marjolaine leaves the dining room, practically deserted at this hour. True, she rises early, a deeply rooted habit. In Montreal, it was always at six o'clock; she doesn't need an alarm clock, her biological clock never lets her down. She makes coffee, Marcel's lunch, breakfast for her teenagers—it's as if she spends her life cooking. But now, on the ship, she forces herself to spend at least one hour more in bed, daydreaming. After all, she is on vacation. She heads toward the deck. Most of the passengers are still asleep; they celebrated until late in the night and it's as if she had the ship to herself.

The cruise is drawing to an end. Tonight, the last one they'll spend on board, is the fall equinox. Ten days at sea, the Aegean, on a ship that is also called *End of the World*—the name is written in black italics on its spotless hull. A white ship with elegant lines, a floating palace.

The passengers come from all over, speak in languages with guttural or hushing sounds. Leaving from Venice, they made brief stops in the islands: Delos and Mykonos, Paros, Naxos, and Santorini, places whose existence Marjolaine hadn't known about until then. It hadn't rained one single day; not a drop fell from the cloudless sky. She thought she was dreaming. Perhaps earthly paradise is here—Christopher Columbus believed in it. He looked for it too far. Sometimes happiness

is within arm's reach. Now she is overcome by a wave of melancholy: she thinks of Marcel, of their children remaining over there, is angry with herself for enjoying privileges she has not shared with them.

The trip is coming to an end and she still has the impression of floating. They will dock in the port of Piraeus, this time, tomorrow morning. One day in Athens, with a few activities planned: visiting historical sites and an evening in a typical restaurant in the Plaka featuring a traditional menu and folk dances. She promises herself to take advantage of it. In Venice, she was too tired. Then, the day after tomorrow, the airplane to Montreal, a ten-hour flight. When she returns, she'll tell them about all she's seen during her journey, all she's learned. She sees them already, Marcel and the children, her friends, Laure perhaps, Denise, surely, and the others sitting in her living room and listening to her, wide-eyed. When she tells them, for example, that the most ancient habitats in the Cyclades date from thirty centuries before Christ. Three thousand years, yes, before Christ, if indeed Jesus was really born when they said he was. The world is small, but also so old—and life is so short. She's eager to go home, and, at the same time, wishes the journey would never end. Because returning is coming back to things the way she left them; they will not have changed during her absence. It was John Paradis who told her that. John Paradis, a Québécois like Béatrice and her. The three of them always eat together.

Easy for him to say that. A retired university professor, he has no money worries, that's obvious. Besides, the things he left behind, waiting, he does not often find

again. He's been touring, gallivanting around, as he says, for close to six months; he went as far as Russia. Apparently in St. Petersburg in summer, the sun does not set before midnight.

"That's where the great Pushkin died," he said, his voice quavering.

"Poutine died?"

He rolled his eyes.

"No, not Poutine. Pushkin, Marjolaine. A great poet."

Sometimes he makes her dizzy. She is naïve, she knows, she lacks culture, but is not stupid. Not everyone has had the opportunity to go to university. It is as if he forgets that.

He said that after the cruise he intends to stop off in Vienna. He wants to see Mayerling, where an archduke died—in the end, the world is a vast cemetery. Assassination or suicide, the affair was never cleared up. A light went on in Marjolaine's brain. She understood what he was talking about.

"Suicide," she said. "With the wife he loved. I know, I saw the film early in the summer."

Since being unemployed, she has lots of time to watch TV. There's a station on cable that shows old movies, often in black and white, all day long. That's how she saw *Mayerling* with Charles Boyer.

"Because you think that movies always tell the truth?"

"His name was Rudolf, and hers ... Marie. And yes, I believe in them."

"Mary, Mary Vetsera. But the truth, Marjolaine, was never known. They spoke of a duel, of a crime of passion or political crime, and of suicide also, for all kinds of

contradictory motives. History is not an exact science, fortunately.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“What do you mean, fortunately?”

“Fortunately, because that’s how people can continue researching: nothing is definite. Whatever the cause, the event was the prelude to the fall of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. And to the First World War, of course.”

Of course.

“Did you know that Adolf Hitler was born two hundred and fifty kilometres from there three months later?”

She did not know that.

The sea is as calm as a lake. A great deal of wind this week, but this morning it let off, and the ship seems to be rocking itself.

≈ Actually, for Marjolaine, all of it, the cruise, the ship, the Greek islands, began with a nightmare or almost when, last July, the End of the World—that is another End of the World, the greasy spoon where she toiled like a slave, on Rue Saint-Zotique in La Petite-Patrie—was about to close for renovations and Jean-Charles Dupont, the owner, suddenly informed her that she would not be coming back. He didn’t put it that bluntly, but for her it was crystal clear: she was a part of the old things they were getting rid of. After fifteen and a half years of loyal service, and for starvation wages yet, they were tossing her out like an old rag. Not even in the recycling bin, straight into the garbage. You have to wonder what the point of loyalty is. Had the sky fallen on her head, she could not have been more stunned. Knocked senseless. Gratitude, like many other words—justice, freedom—is

a word void of meaning. If she hadn't known that, she would have learned it at her own expense that evening.

To be fair to Dupont: he seemed to have a heavy heart as he informed her of the news. It was eleven thirty; she'd finished her day or evening of work, everything was shining in the cubbyhole that served as a kitchen, the dishes washed, the night's offerings—Chinese macaroni, stuffed green peppers, turkey (the leftovers from the day before) to be served as is (the holiday special) or à la king on a vol-au-vent, carrot coins, peas, mashed potatoes, everything ready to be heated—the lettuce spun, three quarters of a marble cake under the plastic dome, the goblets of mango Jell-O, a new flavour she wanted to try out, and butterscotch pudding in the fridge. For the “chiffonade gaspésienne,” a name invented by Louison, she'd mixed three large cans of pink salmon with mayonnaise, diced celery, shallots—oops, green onions—and parsley. All that remained was to set the concoction on lettuce leaves, surround with tomatoes and pre-sliced radishes, and top it with a stuffed olive. Nothing too complicated. She planned to go home and have a cup of tea on the porch with Marcel if he hadn't already gone to bed. He works in construction and, in summer, the days are long on the building sites.

Strange how all that is clear in her memory; there are moments like that which are imprinted forever. Marjolaine remembers the slightest detail; it's as if the scene had taken place yesterday. She must have played it over a hundred, a thousand times in her head, inventing all the replies she hadn't said: it's always after the fact that we find what would have allowed us to shut up the enemy, reduce him to nothingness. The program *Romantic Cities*

had just started on the radio. A vocalist was singing at the top of her lungs in English about the charms of New York. On the silent TV, a disputed tennis match from early that evening in Jarry Park was being rebroadcast. The restaurant was deserted. Gabriela, the waitress, had left a few minutes earlier; the nighttime regulars—taxi drivers who stopped long enough to gulp down a meal on the run, young people who were famished after the neighbourhood bars closed and other insomniacs—had not yet arrived. Had there been people there, she would have of course remained until the owner's son came to relieve her at midnight. She did that often, not even counting the overtime. As meek as they come, a pushover, sometimes people murmured about her behind her back.

But there was not a trace of a customer, and Jean-Charles Dupont was going to guard the fort. So she'd removed her apron, picked up her purse and was almost at the door when Dupont called her back. He placed two glasses on the counter, and a bottle of cognac—an innovation of Louison—the one they sold at eight dollars for a thimbleful, a finger, not a micro-millimetre more she insisted, tax and service not included. But, at that price, no one ever ordered any.

“A small drop, Marjolaine?” he'd proposed. “For the road, as they say.”

She didn't know they said that. How would she have? In any case, drinking cognac with the boss was a first. A coffee, a beer at the most discussing the week's menus—always the same ones, in fact, it reassured the customers, always the same as well—events that had disturbed their daily routine. And they had more than their share of them in the last year: Doris' death in the bathroom, for

example, an aneurism while the others played their game of five hundred, an extension of euchre. Nine months ago today the tragedy occurred, nine months to the day, Marjolaine suddenly realizes and her heart stops beating for a moment. Not to mention the time when Raoul Potvin burned Diderot Toussaint's winning lottery ticket. An incomprehensible act, even if had tried to justify it with an explanation too lame to be believed: he and Diderot, both taxi drivers, were associates, it appeared: they'd bought their lottery tickets together for years without ever winning anything. Diderot had betrayed him when he surreptitiously bought one for himself alone. Marjolaine hasn't come close to forgetting the commotion that followed the auto-da-fé. No, it's not because you're in a small neighbourhood restaurant that nothing ever happens. Finally there had been the boss' request for divorce, the arrival of Louison, his new flame, who turned everything upside down; that is her arrival upon the scene led to the separation of the couple united for better or for worse for twenty-five years. That Louison was stuck up, snobbish, and underhanded. What on earth did he find in her? Not even that pretty, to Marjolaine's mind. Not a natural beauty, in any case. Reconstructed, redone from head to toe at great expense in private clinics. Marjolaine had been wary of her from the start, as had Laure and Denise. But that was a topic that the boss had never addressed.

So, the cognac and the glasses. On the radio, a singer whimpered that Capri was "fini." Monsieur Dupont had a guilty conscience, that was clear. He beat around the bush for a good half hour speaking of this and that, the renovations they would do this summer, the turquoise

back wall and the whole shebang, the big mirror behind the bar “to give the impression of depth” —for from now on it would be a bar, gone would be the days of the good old scratched counter where the loners liked to sit and chat with the waitress while drinking their coffee—the vintage stools. “You know all that is going to cost me a fortune, Marjolaine.” And she, none too clever, nodded her head, feigned enthusiasm and acquiesced, not suspecting a thing. Unaware of the famous sword of Damocles hanging over her head. She even made a few suggestions.

“Why not parlour games? Organizing tournaments, perhaps? This has always been a place where people like to play. At home I have dominos, checkers as well; I could bring them if you like.”

And he:

“That’s an idea, Marjolaine. We’ll think about it.”

“We,” excluding as it often does the person who spoke, was of course Louison.

And then the cat was out of the bag. They always end up getting out. Impossible otherwise: shut up for too long in a bag, they would not survive.

That guilty look on his face as he filled her glass for the third time, with her protesting: “No, no, I’m not used to drinking, you know full well. And tired from working all day ...” She can imagine the expression on Marcel’s face were she to come home loaded. Because her vision was starting to blur, things around her were swaying. What did he want? To get her drunk before taking advantage of her?

Instead it was to deal the final blow, and the cognac at eight dollars a sip, a drop, was indeed the last drink of the condemned. For that’s when he opened his briefcase

—lying on the counter next to the bottle—rummaged in his papers, removed a sealed white envelope and handed it to her. He cleared his throat. The cat was out of the bag and now he appeared to be tongue tied.

“It’s not a lot, Marjolaine, a small token, if you will. Of my ... my ... friendship. My gratitude, I mean.”

“Gratitude?”

“For all these wonderful years that you had the kind ... kindness to give us.”

“I just did my job.”

“Yes, and you did it very well, Marjolaine ... This is called severance pay.”

She acted as if she didn’t understand. In fact, she didn’t understand. Or didn’t want to understand. Her head was spinning.

“What do you mean, severance? Is somebody leaving?”

That forced him to explain. In this case, leaving meant dismissal, and he was referring to hers. It was not his decision, at least not entirely, not exactly. If it were only up to him, she would remain. She must know that. He had absolutely no criticism of her.

“But, you understand, for the End of the World, Louison has ideas, plans ... for which your ... your style, your style of cooking, I mean, and I enjoy it, please don’t think, I’ve enjoyed it for years, especially your shepherd’s pie, of course I will miss it ... for which your style of cooking is not suited—any more, I mean. Canadian cooking ... as we used to call it, is no longer suitable. The neighbourhood has changed, you know as well as I; it’s become gentrified and people now have other requirements. More refined. We must adapt, if not we’ll go bankrupt.”

That stilted way of expressing himself. As if he’d

memorized the text—written by Louison of course—and was trying to recite it as best he could. It couldn't have been easy; the bravura performance stuck in his throat. He stammered. In the background, a nostalgic tune: Beau Dommage sang its lament about Montreal. Marjolaine looked up at the television. One of the players, the one with the yellow headband in his hair—a Spaniard who made Gabriela swoon—brandished his racket, looking determined to crush everything around him.

“To tell the truth, Louison has found a young chef, a graduate of the Institut d'hôtellerie, who, apparently, is second to none when it comes to tapas and zakuskis.”

The last sentence, the conclusion, came out in one breath, in one go.

“The director of the Institut is a client of Louison,” he said.

Because the traitor sold houses as well.

A kind of Pontius Pilate who washes her hands when the time comes to deliver the blow. In any case, she didn't understand a word of what he was saying. She'd never heard of zakuskis. What were they, exactly? Flying fish? Prickly tropical fruit? She still doesn't know and doesn't care.

She opened the envelope of pain and misery, hands trembling. Inside was a cheque in a carefully folded white sheet. She had to take her glasses to decipher the amount written in a spidery scrawl. Four thousand dollars.

“We're closing in a week,” Monsieur Dupont said as if nothing had happened, clearly relieved now that the damage was done. “I could have waited until the last minute to give it to you. But I preferred to be alone just the two of us ... Louison doesn't know about the amount.”

Because surely she would have found it exorbitant. “Come on, Charlou—she called him Charlou—it’s just the cook, half, even one quarter would have more than enough. If that.” That’s what she would have said in her high-pitched voice. Marjolaine felt, still feels, as if she can hear her. Whereas bankers, managers and other crooks receive millions when they bow out after swindling the public.

Four thousand dollars was in fact a lot of money. Nevertheless, she almost tore the cheque into pieces. She was not for sale. She decided otherwise, fortunately.

He said that if she chose to not return to work for the last week, he’d understand. He’d pay her just the same.

“It’s up to you. And don’t worry. We’ll manage. Even I know how to make poutine.”

Was this a joke? He smiled sheepishly—a two-faced smile. Not her.

“A polite way of saying I’m not indispensable?”

“Not at all, Marjolaine, No. You know full well that ...”

“Well, no, in fact, I don’t.”

He swallowed his last sip of cognac.

“I understand that it’s not easy. For me either, believe me.”

Believe him?

“Liar!” she wanted to shout. But not another sound would come out of her mouth. A lump in her throat.

“If you’d rather, I can send you the forms for unemployment in the mail,” he hastened to add. “You’ll receive it for a year; that will give you time to prepare. And if you want a reference ...”

She did not reply.

“Otherwise I can bring them to you at home myself. The forms. I’ll place them in your mailbox. Or, if you like, I can help you fill them out.”

Did he take her for an illiterate?

The purr of his voice. He gave her one final piece of advice. Friendly advice, he clarified.

“Take advantage of this break to register for courses, Marjolaine. In nouvelle cuisine, for example. It’s never too late. You have potential, believe me.”

The program *Romantic Cities* was about to end. One hour, not even, to settle her fate. An execution quickly carried out, very clean, flawless, like those supposedly intelligent missiles they talked about on the news during the Gulf War. And now, Charles Aznavour—Venice that was sad. A cult song that listeners requested at least once a month. To think they would all drown their romantic disappointments in its polluted lagoon. She had a vision of gondolas gliding along canals of salty tears.

Venice was not alone in being sad that evening. Marjolaine seemed to be on the verge of bursting into tears. Monsieur Dupont offered to drive her home. She refused. Out of the question to give him the satisfaction of seeing her break down, the pleasure of trying to console her. One has one’s dignity. Besides, it was a way for him to crash into a lamppost, with his blood alcohol level, for them to both find themselves in emergency with three broken ribs or worse. Boris Savine, the taxi driver, had just entered. She said: “He will drive me home.” She folded the cheque, tucked it away in her purse, stood up, took Boris by the arm, and led him, dumbfounded, to the exit without giving him the time to order his coffee.

In the taxi, her nerves gave way; she began to sob.

When they reached her place, Boris, both upset and appalled, didn't want to take any money. "The dirty dog. The bastard," he said, fists clenched. And other words, maybe in Russian. "You can be sure I'll never set foot in there again. Nor will my brother."

≈ But Marjolaine had not cried for long. She slept on it, and the next morning made her decision. Marcel also slept on it, had a few ideas about how to spend the money. He alluded to it at breakfast.

"I was thinking that a new car ..."

A car? Marjolaine remained silent.

"I'm not talking about a new car," he said, retracting immediately. "But with our four thousand and what they'll give us for our Honda ..."

What did he mean, "our" four thousand?

"It's still good enough, the Honda."

"It's already seven years old. That's not new for a car ... Okay then, an alarm system? Lately there've been robberies in the neighbourhood."

"I don't see what they could want to steal from us."

"An air conditioning system, what do you think? When there's a heatwave, with the smog and pollution, you can hardly breathe in Montreal."

But, for once, the submissive wife who always said yes said no. Heatwaves occur one week a year, ten days at the most, and some years there's not even a summer. She was through with generosity: she'd given enough. The money was hers alone, she had certainly earned it with the sweat of her brow in the un-air-conditioned kitchen, feet swollen from remaining standing for hours in front of her stove, not to mention the shooting pains

in her back at the end of the day. She had indeed earned the money, and it was hers to blow. “The boss said it was severance pay. Well, I’m going away.” It was more than time: fifteen years at the End of the World without ever leaving La Petite-Patrie, other than—aside from the vacation in Cuba—a weekend up North when Marcel went fishing—the mosquitoes and the deerflies ate them up alive. After a couple of these expeditions, she’d given up.

The most incredible thing was that she wanted to go away alone. No one could believe it. Marcel, their two children, the regulars at the restaurant—Diderot, Laure, Denise, Boris, his brother Feder—they were all dumbfounded, “Call it a childhood dream,” she said, justifying herself. “And you don’t share a dream. Aside from our sorrows, it’s the only thing that belongs to us.” The moment had come to fulfil one, before it was too late. Of course she was thinking of all the times that Doris had spoken to her of California, her dream, Los Angeles, Santa Monica, especially Hollywood, where you can come across legendary stars, actors and actresses at every step on Sunset Boulevard, and who had passed away in the bathroom of a small restaurant on Rue Saint-Zotique without ever getting on a plane. The farthest the poor woman had gone was to Niagara Falls, the honeymoon of a marriage that hadn’t lasted.

That was how she told everything, in those words or almost, to Béatrice in the ship’s library on the third day of the cruise.

There was something else, however, something she kept to herself: she did not want, or could not face, to be in the vicinity when the new End of the World, renovated, spruced up, sophisticated, opened its doors with its

chef, second to none, its exotic recipes, and its large mirror behind the bar. The opening was planned for September 21, Charlou Dupont's birthday. This evening, in fact. And come to think of it, it was also that evening that the weekly card games would start up again. They were held every Wednesday evening in the back room of the restaurant. Six players: three forlorn women, Doris, Laure, Denise; three taxi drivers, Diderot, Boris, Raoul Potvin. Doris' death had interrupted the ritual. From now on, the players would meet at Denise's place. Marjolaine and Marcel would take part.

To return to the opening of the restaurant, she knows herself; she would not have been able to stop herself from going to see and it would only have aggravated the wound. Because regardless of the result, failure or success, she would have been excluded. And there's the rub.

They must have put up posters in the neighbourhood to announce the event, she now thinks. Or else they sent invitations, and only their close friends and relatives will be at the celebration. She wonders where they are at with the preparations. What time is it, over there? A seven-hour time difference between Montreal and the Cyclades. So it's the middle of the night. Are they sleeping? She thinks not. Must be pandemonium. Perhaps they're having flowers delivered to place on the tables. Or candles of all colours. And what if one of them falls, if the tablecloths catch fire and the whole restaurant burns down? That thought snatches a smile from her. She knows there will be an upright piano in the back room, the one whose wall will now be turquoise. Denise learned that from Gabriela — she they kept, to clear away the tables, and bring water and coffee. Vanessa — the boss' daughter (he has three

children)—will play; she's talented. Marjolaine hopes that it rains buckets, that there is a power failure, that their fiesta is a complete flop. That the young chef has broken a leg. Was scalded. Or Louison. Yes, Louison, that's even better. She imagines her, in a comforting vision, slipping on a banana peel and falling face first into the pot of mushroom soup. Oops, porcini velouté, that's what you have to call it now.

The song about Venice has remained in her head; it was to Venice that she would go to begin. And out of the question for it to be sad. So, when she saw that advertisement in the Travel section of her Saturday newspaper —“Greek Island Cruise aboard the *End of the World*, departs Venice September 12” —she understood it as a sign of destiny, a revelation.

“There is an end of the world elsewhere,” she proclaimed, to whoever wanted to hear it. “And that's where I'm going.”

That is how Marjolaine went from the End of the World on Rue Saint-Zotique to the one on the Aegean Sea.

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

Born in Montreal, **Hélène Rioux** has published ten novels, notably *L'amour des hommes* and *Traductrice de sentiments* (*Reading Nijinsky*), short story collections, including *L'homme de Hong Kong* and *Pense à mon rendez-vous* (*Date with Destiny*), narratives and poetry. A literary translator, she has translated seventy works from English and Spanish to French as well as books and picture books for children. Shortlisted six times for the Governor General's Literary Award, she received the Prix Québec et le Prix Ringuet of the Académie des lettres du Québec for *Mercredi soir au Bout du monde* (*Wednesday Night at the End of the World*), the Grand Prix littéraire of the Journal de Montréal and the Prix de la Société des Écrivains canadiens for *Chambre avec baignoire* (*Room with Bath*) and the QSPELL Translation Award for *Self* by Yann Martel. Member of the collectif de rédaction of the XYZ magazine, she also wrote a column on literary translation in the *Lettres québécoises* journal. In addition to being translated into English, her novels have been translated into Spanish and Bulgarian.

About the Translator

Jonathan Kaplansky won a French Voices Award to translate Annie Ernaux's *La Vie extérieure* for the University of Nebraska Press. His recent publications include Jean-Pierre Le Glaunec's *The Cry of Vertières: Liberation, Memory, and the Beginning of Haiti* and Lise Tremblay's *Chemin Saint-Paul*. He has sat on the juries for the English-translation category of the Governor General's Literary Awards and the John Glassco translation prize. He is currently translating the libretto of an opera written by Hélène Dorion and Marie-Claire Blais: *Yourcenar An Island of Passions* (music by Éric Champagne).