



She looked up from her book. How irritating all these old refrains on noncommunication were! If we really want to communicate, we manage to do so more or less successfully. Not with everyone, of course, but with two or three people. André was sitting in the seat next to her, reading a thriller. She kept from him certain moods, some regrets, some little worries; doubtless he, too, had his own little secrets. But, by and large, there was nothing that they did not know about each other. She glanced through the plane window: dark forests and pale grassland stretching as far as one could see. How many times had they forged forward together, by train, by plane, by boat, sitting side by side, with books in their hands? There would still be many occasions when they would glide silently side by side over the

sea, the earth and the air. This moment had the sweetness of a memory and the brightness of a promise. Were they thirty, or sixty? André's hair had turned white quite early, and at one time the snowy white colour that enhanced his fresh but matte complexion seemed stylish. It was still stylish. His skin had hardened and become lined, rather like old leather, but the smile at his mouth and in his eyes had kept its sparkle. His face today was preferable to that of his youth, despite what the photograph album might show. Nicole did not see him as having any particular age; probably because he himself seemed not to either. Although, in the past, he was so fond of running, swimming, climbing, and looking at himself in the mirror, he bore his sixty-four years nonchalantly. It was a long life behind them, with laughter, tears, moments of anger, caresses, confessions, silences, surges of affection [élans], and it sometimes seems that time has not passed by at all. The future still stretches out ahead, to infinity.

‘Thank you.’

Nicole took a sweet from the basket, intimidated by the plumpness of the air hostess, and by the severity of her stare, just as she had been three years earlier by the restaurant waitresses and hotel chambermaids. You could only approve of their refusal to affect friendliness, and their keen

awareness of their rights, but you felt yourself at fault in their presence, or at least suspect.

‘We’re landing,’ she said.

She looked rather nervously at the ground coming up to meet them. An infinite future. But one that could be shattered from one minute to the next. She was very familiar with these sudden swings of mood, from smug security to pangs of fear: a Third World War was going to break out; André had contracted lung cancer – two packets of cigarettes a day was too many, far too many; or the plane was about to smash into the ground. That would’ve been a good way for it all to end: no complications, and with the two of them together. But not so soon, not now.

‘We made it safely again,’ she said to herself once the wheels hit the runway, albeit rather violently. The travellers put on their coats, gathered their hand luggage. They were standing around waiting, standing around for some time.

‘Can you smell the birch trees?’ André asked.

It was very cool, almost cold: 61°F according to the air hostess’s announcement. How close Paris was, at three and a half hours of flight time, and yet how far away. This morning Paris had been sweltering under the first great heat wave of the summer, with the smell of asphalt and a storm in the air. How close Philippe was, and yet how far away . . .

A bus took them – across an aerodrome that was much more extensive than the one at which they had landed in 1963 – to a glazed building in the shape of a mushroom, where the passports were checked. Macha was waiting for them at the exit. Once again Nicole was surprised to see, harmoniously blended in her face, the very dissimilar features of Claire and André. She was slim and elegant: only her over-permed hairstyle marked her as a Muscovite.

‘How was the flight? Are you [*vous*] well? And how are you [*tu*]?’

She addressed her father informally, Nicole formally. It was to be expected, and yet at the same time peculiar.

‘Hand me your bag.’

That was to be expected, too. But when a man carries your bags, it’s because you are a woman: when a woman does, it’s because she is younger than you, and you feel old.

‘Give me the luggage slips and sit there,’ Macha said authoritatively. Nicole obeyed. She was old. With André she often forgot the fact, but dozens of little irritations periodically reminded her of it.

‘An attractive young woman!’ she had thought, on spotting Macha. She remembered having smiled at the age of thirty when her father-in-law had used those very words to describe a forty-year-old. She, too, now found that most

people seemed young. She was old. And she wasn't accepting the fact very easily (the combination of astonishment and distress that she felt was one of the rare things that she kept from André). She told herself: 'In any case, there are some advantages.' Being retired sounded a little like being on the scrap heap, but it was pleasant to take your vacation whenever you wanted; or, more precisely, to be on vacation all the time. Sweltering in their classrooms, her ex-colleagues would be beginning to dream of getting away. And she herself had already left. She looked around for André, who was standing in the crowd, next to Macha. In Paris, he allowed himself to be put upon by too many people. As much as he possibly could, he was always ready to come to the aid of Spanish political prisoners; Portuguese detainees; persecuted Israelis; rebels in the Congo, in Angola, in Cameroon; Venezuelan, Peruvian, Colombian partisans. And there were others she was forgetting. Meetings, manifestos, rallies, tracts, delegations – he took on all kinds of tasks. He belonged to a great many groups and committees. But here no one would be asking anything of him. Macha was the only person they knew. They would have nothing to do but look at things together: she loved discovering things with him and finding that time, usually static in the well-established routine of their happiness,

could again become an outpouring of new experiences. She stood up. She would have liked to be out in the streets already, under the walls of the Kremlin. She had forgotten how long the waiting could be in this country.

‘Is our luggage coming?’

‘It’ll come eventually,’ said André.

Three and a half hours, he thought. How close Moscow was, yet at the same time so far! Why, at just three and a half hours away, did he see Macha so rarely? (But there were so many obstacles, not least the cost of the journey.)

‘It’s a long time, three years,’ he said. ‘I must look older.’

‘Not at all. You haven’t changed.’

‘You look even more beautiful than ever.’

He looked at her with great delight. You think that nothing can happen to you any more; you have even resigned yourself to the fact (and that hadn’t been easy, although he hadn’t let it show). And then along comes a wholly new major affection, which lights up your life. He had scarcely taken any interest in the frightened little girl – she was called Maria at the time – whom Claire used to bring to see him for a few hours from Japan, Brazil, or Moscow. And the young woman who had come to Paris after the war to introduce her husband had remained a stranger