

Guillaume Musso

# **WILL YOU BE THERE?**

**a novel**



# 1

## **First Encounter**

*One fine day, the future becomes the past.  
It's then we turn around and see our youth.*  
Louis ARAGON

## **Miami International Airport**

**September 1976**

**Elliott, aged 30**

Early on a Sunday evening under the Florida sky.

At the wheel of a Thunderbird convertible, a young woman turns onto the road leading to the airport. She drives very fast, her hair whipped by the wind, overtaking several cars along the way. She stops in front of the terminal just long enough to drop off the man in the passenger seat. He leans over to give his driver a quick kiss before retrieving his bag from the trunk. As he runs towards the glass-and-steel building, she pulls away from the curb.

The young man is Elliott Cooper. Slim and attractive-looking, he is a San Francisco doctor, but his leather jacket and unruly hair make him look like a teenager.

He goes to the check-in counter to get a boarding pass for his Miami-San Francisco flight.

“I bet you already miss me...”

Startled by the familiar voice, Elliott turns around.

The emerald eyes that meet his own have a look of boldness mingled with vulnerability. The woman is wearing hip-hugger jeans, a close-fitting suede jacket sporting the Peace and Love symbol, and a green and yellow T-shirt, the colors of her native Brazil.

“So remind me, when was the last time I kissed you?” he asks, resting his hand on the nape of her neck.

“At least a minute ago.”

“An eternity.”

He wraps his arms around her and pulls her close.

She is Ilena, the only woman in his life. He has known her for ten years and owes her credit for everything that is best about him: his choice of profession, his openness with other people, even the standards he lives by.

He is surprised she has come back, for they have always agreed it is best to avoid long goodbyes, knowing that those few extra minutes end up costing them more pain than comfort.

Their story is complicated. She lives in Florida; he in San Francisco.

Their long-distance love spans four time zones and the three thousand miles separating East coast from West.

After all these years, of course, they could have chosen to live together. But they decided against it. At first they feared the effects of time and familiarity. The daily routine that comes with a more settled existence would deprive them of the emotional rush they experienced every time they met. That passion was their oxygen.

So they built their lives around their respective careers. One turned toward the Pacific, the other toward the Atlantic. After interminable years of medical training, Elliott took a job as surgeon in a San Francisco hospital. Ilena was a veterinarian, caring for dolphins and killer whales at Sea World in Orlando, the largest marine park in the world. For the past few months, she also devoted a great deal of time to a budding organization: Greenpeace. Founded four years earlier by a group of militant pacifists and ecologists, the league of “rainbow warriors” was best known for its campaign against nuclear weapons testing. However, Ilena’s main reason for joining was to help in their effort to stop the slaughter of whales and seals.

Elliott and Ilena both led full, productive lives. They had no time to waste on brooding. And yet...each separation was harder to bear than the last.

*“Final boarding call, Flight 711 to San Francisco, Gate 18...”*

“That’s you,” said Ilena, loosening her hold.

He nodded. Then, sensing something was on her mind:

“You have something to tell me before I leave?”

“Yes,” she said, taking his hand. “I’ll walk part of the way with you.”

“Good,” Elliott told her, “but talk fast. The plane’s about to leave without me.”

As they hurried along, she launched into a speech. She had a slight South American accent that he always found irresistible.

“I know the world is headed for disaster, Elliott: the Cold War, the Communist threat, the nuclear arms race...”

Every time they part, he looks at her as if it is the last time he will ever see her. She is as beautiful as a flame.

“...the depletion of our natural resources, to say nothing of pollution, the destruction of the rain forests, the---“

“Ilena?”

“Yes?”

“Where are you going with all this?”

“I want us to make a baby, Elliott.”

“Here? Right now? At the airport? In front of all these people?”

It was all he could think of to say. A touch of humor to cover his surprise. But Ilena was in no mood for jokes.

“I’m serious, Elliott. I’ve thought about it, and I’m asking you to do the same,” she said. Then she let go of his hand and started for the exit.

“Wait!” he shouted, trying to hold her back.

*“Last call for passenger Elliott Cooper, Flight 711 to San...”*

“Well, shit!” is all he could say. Resigned, he stepped onto the escalator leading to the gates.

Nearly at the top, he turned around to give her a last wave.

A September sun flooded the lower concourse.

Elliott waved.

But Ilena had already disappeared.

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It was dark when the plane landed in San Francisco. The flight had taken six hours, and it was past nine p.m. California time.

Elliott was about to leave the terminal and hail a cab when he changed his mind. He was starving. Unsettled by Ilena's last words, he had not touched his tray of airline food and he knew that his refrigerator was empty. He spotted a restaurant on the second floor, the Golden Gate Café: he had already been there with Matt, his best friend, who occasionally came along with him on his trips to the East coast. He sat at the counter and ordered a salad, two bagels and a glass of Chardonnay. Tired and jet-lagged, he rubbed his eyes and bought some tokens for the phone booth at the back of the room. He dialed Ilena's number, but there was no answer. The time difference meant it was well past midnight in Florida. Ilena was certainly at home, but clearly she did not want to speak to him.

*No surprise, really.*

Still, Elliott did not regret his reaction to Ilena's proposal. The truth was he did not want a child.

And that was that.

The problem had nothing to do with feelings: he was crazy about Ilena. His love for her was boundless. But love was not enough. Here in the turbulent mid-Seventies the human race seemed headed in the wrong direction, and he was unwilling to take on the responsibility of bringing a child into the world.

It was not an argument Ilena wanted to hear.

Going back to the counter, he finished his meal and ordered a coffee. He was nervous and cracked his knuckles, almost without knowing he was doing it. The pack of cigarettes in his coat pocket kept tempting him to light up, and he was unable to resist.

He knew he ought to give up smoking. All around him, there was more and more talk about the dangers of tobacco. Over the past fifteen years, various epidemiological studies had proved that nicotine was addictive. As a surgeon, Elliott was

particularly aware that the risk of lung cancer, as well as the increased likelihood of heart attacks for smokers. But, like many doctors, he paid more attention to other people's health than to his own. Besides that, he had grown up in an era when the majority of adults were smokers and it was normal to smoke in restaurants and airplanes – an era when cigarettes were still associated with glamour and with cultural and social freedom.

*I'll give up soon*, he thought as he blew a cloud of smoke, *but not tonight...* He felt too depressed to make the effort.

Aimlessly staring about, he happened to glance through the restaurant window, and there he noticed for the first time: a man standing in the corridor just outside the restaurant was observing him intently from the other side of the glass. Bizarrely, the man was dressed in pale blue pajamas. He was perhaps sixty years old, still fairly athletic-looking. His short beard, barely tinged with gray, made him look like an older Sean Connery. Elliott frowned. What was the guy doing in the middle of the airport so late at night, wearing pajamas and no shoes?

It occurred to the young doctor that he ought to shrug it off, but a strange impulse made him go out to investigate. The fellow seemed disoriented, as if he had appeared out of nowhere. The closer Elliott got to him, the more uneasy he felt. Who was this man? What if he was a patient escaped from a hospital or an asylum... In which case, wasn't it Elliott's duty as a doctor to help him?

When he was less than ten feet away he finally realized what was troubling him so deeply: the man reminded him strangely of his own father, who had died five years earlier of pancreatic cancer.

More shaken than ever, he drew closer. Now the likeness was truly striking: the same features, the same dimple on the cheek which he had inherited.

*Could it possibly be...?*

No! He had to get a grip on himself. His father was dead and gone. He had seen him in his coffin and attended his cremation.

"Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

The man stepped back a few paces. There was a conflicting impression of strength and helplessness in his demeanor, and he seemed as shaken as Elliott.

“Do you need help?” Elliott asked.

The man murmured:

“Elliott...”

*How does he know my name? And that voice...*

To say that he and his father had never been close was an understatement. But now that he was dead, Elliott sometimes regretted that he had not tried harder to get to know him.

Stunned, and fully conscious of the absurdity of the idea, Elliott could not help asking, in a voice strangled by emotion:

“Dad?”

“No, Elliott, I’m not your father.”

Astonishingly, this rational response utterly failed to reassure him. He had a feeling that an even bigger surprise lay in store.

“Then who are you?”

The man put a hand on his shoulder. A familiar light shone in his eyes, and he hesitated a second before answering:

“I am *you*, Elliott...”

The doctor took a backward step and stood still, as if struck by lightning. The man facing him completed his sentence:

“...I am you, thirty years from now.”