

CHAPTER TWO

"Matilda Horvat—*Ambassador* Horvat—it's Arthur

Rizler, from Chicago. I'm in Prague."

"Ah, Rizler, yes, of course . . ."

Horvat's mind had been focused on economic matters—a possible American bid for telecom and broadcasting, which the Czechs were privatizing. Rizler, who exactly? Must be the scribbler.

Had they crossed paths? Was there a promise made ("When you get in Prague, yes, for sure, ring me")? How had he accessed her private extension? (Maya had glimpsed the number while in the embassy the previous day, and resourcefully transcribed it.) Horvat improvised, "Well, I'm delighted. Short notice I guess, for both of us. But I am having a dinner for some interesting people

Saturday. I'm sure you'll make it more interesting. I'm glad for your

call—now we'll have a guest of honor!" Her list had been down a few notches, thanks to the Castle banquet for the Stones; how convenient that Rizler, a VIP of some sort, had dropped in her lap.

"My speech is around then, on Mozart," Rizler clarified.

Mozart? Was this the literary Rizler? Or Reisler, the conductor who had packed them in at Ravinia the last couple of summers? Horvat silently praised herself for not having revealed who she thought Rizler was; once again Michaelman had failed to keep her in the loop.

She assured Rizler, "Don't worry. I'll have an invite faxed to you at your hotel. Call my driver after your talk—he'll bring you here right away."

As Rizler hung up, Maya exclaimed, "The book club, the book club! You forgot to tell her."

He had filled Maya in about the invitation from Irina in the gift shop. Maya was keen on the book club idea—something could be made of that. "A media opportunity, Arthur. Television! The café where they are meeting was a famous gathering-place for dissidents. The embassy would get out the networks for sure. Those kids will be thrilled to be seen with you on TV."

"Sorry, I forgot about mentioning it to Horvat," Rizler now lied, "maybe you can discuss it with Michaelman." (Rizler wasn't going to grovel for media attention; just having to call the ambassador was bad enough.)

Maya quizzed him about the Mozart lecture. "I'm not sure," he replied, "something on Don Giovanni and the literary tradition—

why Mozart's Don might have been the last great iteration of this theme. What do you think?"

Maya couldn't follow this. But his sounding of her views brought back the original thrill of being courted by him when she was a graduate student.

She proposed a different theme. Recently, she'd listened to some bleeding heart liberal on National Public Radio regretting Mozart's early demise—imagine, the talking head had conjectured, what Mozart might have achieved if he had lived on to be an octogenarian. Arthur should challenge this claptrap about everyone having the right to a productive and fulfilling life past middle age. Maya suggested, "Perhaps Mozart was *fated* to burn out by his early thirties. He could have lost his touch, if he lived through middle or old age. We overvalue longevity. It's our modern, anti-aristocratic prejudice to value mere life, not just the worthy life. Isn't the proof that Mick Jagger is a fraud, that he's still alive?"

Rizler paused—how, he wondered, did his own case fit with that line of thinking? Then he answered, "Your thesis is original—that no one should have wished for Mozart a happy old age. But the Bland people won't like the implications for the euthanasia question; down to a man, they're right-to-lifers." "Still," he added, "that we shouldn't let Mozart's early death foreclose the possibility of wholeness or completeness in his *oeuvre*, this is really a helpful, perhaps quite important thought. I mean, he could have churned out many more symphonies, or concerti, or sonatas, but we can't suppose that there is any lopsidedness or essential gap in what he *did* do."

This little colloquy made Rizler think back on how he had become hooked on Maya in the first place. Unlike the previous wife (his third), Maya aided Rizler's processes of thought; she freed up his mental associations, and then got him going down unexpected paths. Number 3, the beautiful Arsine, was a professor of acoustics, at the top of her field. Rizler had felt she was, in her own bailiwick, his mental equal. But Arsine wasn't a conversationalist. In Arsine's universe, words were broken down into sounds, and sounds into symbols. (Her lasting legacy was the stereo she'd had custom built, by the world's top engineers, for their Morningside Heights brownstone; when the marriage broke up, Arsine had refused to take it—the technology was no longer the best, three years later. In New York, once parted from Arsine, Rizler never turned it on. Perhaps that was superstitious—it might be haunted with her ghost. But when he left Manhattan for Maine, he had it reinstalled by a professional, everything hooked up right; and he mastered the instructions. In the idyllic country setting, that equipment had brought Mozart to life for him, again.)

Maya wasn't a genius—Rizler knew that. But she could talk up a storm. She was the perfect *bourgeoise*: she blended the dreamy

high-mindedness of Emma Bovary with the attention to detail of Martha Stewart. She was born to the chattering classes, her father a trendy psychotherapist, her mother an eager consumer of everything that caste called culture, from Motherwell to made-for-

TV Middlemarch. Mozart included. The adolescent Maya had practiced Mozart on the cello, receiving advanced lessons at Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music, which set back Dr.

Svobodnik a small fortune. At that age, Rizler was eking out a living for himself, swabbing the decks of a tramp ship.

Rizler had been mixing with intellectuals since his first novel caught the attention of the New York literati, but he had never acquired their instinctive comfort with Big Ideas, with isms, with

what the old German philosophers had called the Concept. All that was second nature to Maya.

He had a debt to his then-Marxist *haute culture* friends: They had brought him, despite his limited formal learning and roughedged

(though never rough) manners, into the salons and country houses of the establishment. With their polished phrases and grand

style, they made the Toronto-born Rizler into something big—the start of a non-parochial American literature of ethnicity.

Then they turned to the Right, and had convinced Rizler to come with them.

But not without a struggle. "Stay off talk shows long enough to figure out why you got it wrong with Stalin, *then* ask me to vote Republican." This had been Rizler's response when beseeched in 1979 by Al Abramowitz, co-editor of *New Comment* magazine, to join a petition of famous Democrats for Reagan. Abramowitz's own shot at the great ethnic novel had resulted in charges of Jewish self-hatred from his own people, the work in question being a celebration of every crude form of assimilatory ladder climbing short of conversion. He was, by turns, envious and genuinely admiring of Rizler, the latter, according to Abramowitz,

done out of his Nobel prize by the East Coast liberals (at whose homes Abramowitz had been happy to take cocktails when climbing his own ladder).

Back in the Carter years (*détente*), Abramowitz had been on about the missile gap—the Russians were ready to lick America in an atomic

dustup. Nuke Stuttgart and Amsterdam and then what US President would risk America itself in order to stand up to Moscow?

"Nonsense," Rizler had come back. "They're soft—decrepit from vodka and whores and bad medicine. Even the deluxe Party hospitals have rats and rusty needles, I hear. Nuke Stuttgart? Hardly. They need the antibiotics too much."

But soon enough Abramowitz was playing a different card to woo Rizler, this time with success. The *Kulturkampf* card. For

now the tone was not being set by the retired Rand nuclear plotters, but rather by Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*. The threat to America was not German peace marchers or Soviet warheads—it was Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, etc., German or Russian philosophical nihilism, packaged by sexy French intellectuals for smuggling into Palo Alto and New Haven and Durham, then cut with a little '60s radicalism by the Yankee professors, finally sold on the street as postmodern multiculturalism (Had Bloom been shrewd enough to foresee the end of the cold war, to grasp that the Right would need to find a new kind of menace, that in a few years the jeremiads of aging rocket scientists and the diatribes of disgruntled Dulles-era

diplomats would count for nothing against the liberals?) After their chat about Mozart's lifespan, Maya had decided to cut Rizler some slack. He should take time for himself in Prague; she had shopping to do and other preparations for Salzburg (the visit with her parents).

Once out of the suburbs, Rizler dismissed the hotel shuttle Maya had insisted on. Knowing his *flaneur* tendencies, she had warned him about smog and respiratory hazards. But he decided to walk anyhow.

Everyone was renovating down there. Boutiques and coffee shops were "Now Open!" according to the English-language signs in the windows. High-energy, beeper-toting property brokers could be spotted waiting anxiously for the workmen to let them into structures not quite ready for human occupancy. Rizler observed people with designer togs and the latest eyeglass frames.

No wonder the tourists came *here* to see the post-Soviet East. Unlike Bucharest or Belgrade or the industrial ruins just beyond the Envoy, in central Prague you could almost believe that business

about the End of History: The whole world sandblasted, with a Starbucks on every other block. It was the closest you could get to the theme-park version of the death of communism.

Rizler's eye was caught by a second-hand store—what looked like a pawnshop—in an alley just off Wenceslas Square. It was sandwiched between a Benetton outlet and Prague's own Texas LoneStar Steakhouse and Tavern.

The operation was identified only by the sign "Bultmann." In the window, a rich lode of defunct technology was displayed with no apparent organizational plan: super-eight movie projectors; Soviet-era binoculars; a few old Leica cameras (rangefinders); and what attracted Rizler's attention in the first

place, a pre-World War II Underwood portable.

He asked to inspect the machine. He knew by heart the features of the one that Edmund Wilson had bestowed on him; he could make a drawing of it with his eyes closed. The merchant was scrutinizing him: did this elderly American gent have the look of a shrewd buyer or a sucker?

"How much do you want for this in US?" Rizler asked.

"Two hundred, let's say, if you are agreed."

He was sure that he had stumbled on the same model and year as Wilson's gift. The condition was near perfect. How had it arrived in this store in Prague? Such a thought opened up a whole can of worms, all the dubious transfers of property that had happened in the East since that typewriter had been built in Depression-era America.

"I can't tell you, it's been here so long," the shopkeeper replied

to Rizler's inquiry as to where he had obtained the machine.

"I guess that's not important anyway," Rizler conceded, "I'll take it."

He withdrew the plastic gold from his wallet.

"I'm afraid we don't take credit."

Rizler glanced back at the door. He had not been mistaken—there was an American Express decal.

The shopkeeper clarified, "We were getting all set up, but I changed my mind. I'm about to sell the store. Just waiting for the final decision, but I am expecting that Victoria's Secret will

want it. Ladies' things—you heard of them? They will make me a well-off man. Then I am going to your America, Florida, for retirement. With my son and grandchildren, he is a dentist near Jacksonville."

He promised to hold the antique; Rizler could come back with cash in a day or two.

Rizler welcomed the delay; it would allow him to spin the purchase with Maya. No, he wasn't going to try composing on it; he'd bought it as a collector's item. The value was sentimental

not worldly. Like the silver pendant Maya thought she'd lost, from her grandmother.

Before releasing him into downtown Prague, Maya had put into Rizler's hands an alphabetically ordered stack of calling cards—Czech writers and critics that he had met on previous visits. These were distant connections. Some were party hacks from the old regime, and Rizler couldn't really say now who were and who weren't. Others, doubtless, had emigrated. Some must be dead.

But there was one that meant something—Vera Maly.

They had been lovers, in Yugoslavia. That was the dark period after the Prague Spring had been shut down and before Charter 77 had been born. Dubrovnik was one of the few places that the likes of Vera Maly could go to for a taste of (relative) liberty; at

the Inter-university Center—and on the beaches—free thinkers from the East could mix with western intellectuals, largely without

fear. It was in Dubrovnik that Rizler had taken to wearing his Greek fisherman's cap. This was now a trademark. Maya hated it, but he was not going to let her make him part with that look. When he dialed Vera's number, he was greeted by a voice with a strong Bostonian accent. "No, she doesn't live here herself

anymore. The apartment is rented out." The genial expatriate

accountant explained, "I haven't bothered to change the land line.

The digital network is more reliable." Without hesitation, he gave Rizler the number he was seeking, apparently happy to have been of service to a well-spoken fellow-countryman.

Vera picked up, but there was a weird echo on the line. It reminded him of the old days, when the secret police were listening in. Of course, she remembered him. "Can we talk now?" Rizler asked. "Obviously," she replied. Then, catching his meaning,

she laughed. "You're hearing that because the apartment is nearly empty. I'm in the course of moving."

She would be delighted to see him.

Rizler sipped a cappuccino. The copper-plated beauty of a coffee machine was among the few artifacts not yet shipped out of Vera's place; a kitchen table, a couple of chairs, and a grand piano kept it

company. This one time, he could make excuses to Maya for the caffeine (assuming she even noticed his breath); Vera had nothing else on offer, and so to refuse would have been ungrateful.

"I've been appointed consul-general in Venice," Vera explained.

"The piano is a real problem. The idiots in the foreign ministry think it's an excess to ship it. They say there's one already in the

residence there. Two keyboards would be corruption! But mine is a Bösendorfer, which I inherited from my grandparents. The closest thing I have to a family of my own."

Vera squatted on the hardwood floor, balancing a huge bowl of latte between her long, bony hands. She was wearing black stovepipe

jeans and a v-necked T-shirt. Her hair was still blonde, her body taut.

She had a bitter story to tell. She'd been in the front lines of the Velvet Revolution. But now she was sick of politics.

"It wasn't too bad at first. We had a leader who believed you could govern people with a guitar and nice lyrics. While he was singing these songs about community and civic morality, we had the other guy with shorter hair, making the country free for Mickey

Mouse, and Gucci, and all that kind of thing. At least these two, whatever their vices, each still had his own kind of revolutionary

fervor. But things have changed. Now the people running things, they're dissolute, petty, without much to compensate."

Vera had been the mistress of a midlevel cabinet minister; then the government named her to a new agency to modernize telecommunications and broadcasting. With the government sensitive to the rising political fortunes of the social democratic

party, they had picked Vera (the people's favorite) over the candidate of the business community, the latter a twenty-six-year-old computer genius fresh from a couple years of bondtrading experience in the West, a protégé of the mustached capitalist with the German-sounding surname.

Vera had launched her crusade with a speech cleared by the very top, the poet-revolutionary-statesman. A fundamental principle for telecom reform must be universal access, she stipulated. The US Constitution, she had noted, gave the people the right to bear arms. "In our times," she had said, "electronic means of communication and interaction is the real guarantee of liberty. And this includes the right to be able to afford them." Reading it at his girlfriend's place after a few beers, the poetrevolutionary-statesman had loved her draft. But for nearly everyone else, it marked the beginning of disaster. The old, incompetent government managers knew they had an enemy in someone who insisted in no-holds-barred private ownership, auctions, arm's-length sales of assets. On the other hand, the new capitalists were alarmed by the idea of universal access. The "market" did not work that way. To get a technology going, you had to price it high, with access only affordable by a few. Then, you had, as by magic, the "trickle-down" effect. The poet-revolutionary-statesman didn't stick with her. She acknowledged, "He had more pressing preoccupations—*grosse Politik*, as it were, with the Germans, the Americans, all that NATO stuff. And of course the minor issue of membership in the European Community. With Russia in chaos, and murderous thugs and mobsters running the Balkans less than a thousand kilometers away, who could blame him for not going to the wall on my behalf?" "But now they treat me like the whore of some dictator. Consul-general in Venice. Of course, there was no such diplomatic position. It was invented so I could be sent to a place where I wouldn't cause trouble. What am I supposed to do there—sell Pilsner to the gondoliers?" The phone. "Aren't you going to answer?" Rizler queried. "Long distance—the length of the rings. I think I know who that is," Vera said. "There's a wild American who is trying to sabotage the privatization—I mean the sale to the Germans sweethearts of our ministry. He's interested an American group in buying it. He wants me as Chairman; there would be a veto by a majority of Czech board members, and a golden share for the Czech people. Jeremy Stuart. Maybe you've heard of him?" "Yes," Rizler admitted, "I know the name. Highly questionable, from what I can gather." "Well, at least if you've heard of him he must be some kind of major player." "No," said Rizler, secretly chagrined she had distilled the message of Stuart's power from his oblique response, "it's just a coincidence of sorts." He was minded to change the subject—to himself. "I can certainly understand your woes," he empathized, "These days they don't have much interest in me either around here." The comparison did not sit well. "You think that being a famous Western writer entitles you to a hero's welcome? We had a revolution *despite* America—the European Community taught us that liberalism could mean social as well as political rights,

and we had a few dreams of our own, too." Rizler shifted and shuffled and glanced about. Sensing she had made him uncomfortable, Vera apologized, "Look, I was hard on you just now. Dubrovnik was very nice. At that time the personal connections did matter to us, despite what I just said."

But do you really need our applause now? Prizes and honors are for has-beens. You look fit and able. And as dashing as ever, in

that Greek fisherman's cap. Don't you write books anymore?"

The phone again. Double short rings once more.

"Stuart," Vera divined. She sighed, "I may as well pick up."

The s.o.b., Rizler thought to himself, now he's stolen Vera's attention.

He got up. Half-heartedly, Vera motioned to him to sit back down; but he could see she was absorbed with Stuart.

So Rizler made for the door; he waved goodbye, threw her a smile, and then was gone.

Don't you write books any more?

Vera's question kept racing through Rizler's mind as he wended his way back to the Envoy, on foot.

He had not exactly been unproductive. There was *A Civil Union*, a campus novel he had penned in Maine, heavily remaindered within a year of its release date—he couldn't blame Vera for not knowing it. And then in the Maya period, he had extended a few odd short story ideas into novellas; there were travel articles, op-ed type pieces on America's decline, the destructive

cultural politics of the Left, the end of literacy, courtesy, decency,

virtue, etc.

In the most important sense, though, Vera had to be right.

The kind of book that had made Rizler his name—rich, complex, passionate, full of characters at the edge of current American life—

could not be found in this latest stage of his career.

Those large, take-the-world-by-storm novels had been produced on the Underwood, draft after draft. The pages of typed manuscript would pile up—there would be hard, physical evidence of production. The sparser works that Rizler had crafted since Maya lacked an obvious, material center of gravity. Until publication, there was no authoritative version in the phenomenal world. The corrected printouts disappeared into the editor's conferences that Maya, not Rizler himself, would usually attend. The galleys would arrive months later. Rizler often had the impression that there were changes that he had never agreed to—but how, exactly, to check or trace it?

At the University of Chicago, he had been put in the pulpit, the podium. He'd been turned into a character in one of his most successful novels—the disgruntled, divorced, aging humanities professor, proclaiming Sodom and Gomorrah, judging politicians cowardly, deans duplicitous, colleagues cravenly ambitious for lucre and vulgar TV fame.

With *this*, Maya had fallen in love. He was among the last

Great Men; one of the few who actually remembered what greatness was. He had been formed before the Levelers—the believers in universal education, in public TV, in Everyman, in affirmative action—had gotten a stranglehold on the American academy. He could be “our” Goethe, if only he had an Eckermann to whom he could pronounce his maxims and observations for recording and wider dissemination. Was that Maya-Eckerwoman?

And what stake did he himself have in all the pontificating? He didn’t like orthodoxies and dogmas, especially those that cut off his

own audience. So his new Right friends had, at first, set him up as a

dogma-slayer, a naysayer to the postmodernist groupthink strangling

freedom in the intellectual world of America, closing the American

mind, as their best mouthpiece, Allan Bloom, had put it.

But these people had soon wanted him to preach other dogmas—their dogmas.

“Mr. Rizler! Hi!” Irina had caught him just as he was bounding toward the elevator banks on his way up to the suite.

He explained to her, “I’ve got my lecture early Saturday evening. A big deal, supposedly. If I come to the book club, there might be media-TV. Would your friends mind?”

Irina frowned. “Wait a minute. I’m going to lock the shop.”

She ran back in, grabbed her keys and came back out, hanging a clock image on the window: “back in 10 minutes.”

She took him aside, to a deserted bank of pay phones and Internet stations.

“Some of the girls, they wouldn’t want that. They work parttime in . . . clubs. Gentleman’s clubs. You understand, the economy is difficult—the university, it’s private and expensive.” She watched his reaction. So far, hard to tell. He was waiting for her to say more.

Irina continued, “I mean the clients in those places—you wouldn’t want them recognizing you on TV.”

Rizler’s was annoyed—at Maya, for suggesting the bright lights in the first place. He felt the embarrassment, or at least discomfort, that Irina must be going through, having to explain turning that down.

“No television! I promise,” he replied. “I’ll stop by Friday to get the details.”