

CHAPTER FOUR

Still jet-lagged, Rizler was trying to snooze through Maya's morning routine. She'd sprung out of bed at the crack of dawn. First, there was the lengthy shower at full water pressure, followed by the deployment of various heavily aromatic substances, the excruciating buzz of a hair dryer with the decibel level of a chain saw, and, finally the dreaded whirr of the electric toothbrush, cruelly designed to imitate the pitch of a dentist's drill (or so Rizler imagined). This sequence lasted close to an hour. The routine also included stretching exercises—unnerving motions that resembled the creeping and crawling of a cat burglar.

She was scrubbed up, dressed and ready to go; it dawned on Maya that she wouldn't be able to reach Michaelman for at least another hour.

Time was of the essence. The embassy was the key to saving their visit (certainly they could get the media out for Rizler's guest appearance at that kid Irina's book club). The local organizers weren't even worth bothering with. They could hardly manage in English, and were out for themselves—on about whether Rizler could endorse their books, or pay their way to America, or get the Bland people to make a donation for a new literary review. At least, she could leave a voicemail for Michaelman; it would be the first thing he heard when he got in.

Carrie Michaelman, however, was a clock-watcher of the old school. After five, and before ten in the morning, he forwarded his line to the general embassy switchboard. The recorded message began in Czech; Maya took that as an insult to the American taxpayers who were footing the bill. Finally, in heavily accented English, she was told the hours the embassy was open for consular services and a number that Americans could use in an emergency. Indignant, she had half a mind to ring that hot line, imagining she would wrest Michaelman from bed and thus remind him how she could make his life miserable. But Maya's realist streak reminded her that she needed Michaelman on her side; she'd already blown up at him once, when they landed at Prague only to find no welcome party awaiting them. She cooled down and made herself useful (a favourite expression of her mother's) by tidying the suite.

How paper litter accumulated on the road! Foreign exchange receipts, stubs from boarding passes, tourist flyers. Then of course there was the fax traffic related to Rizler's many other commitments, which Maya had neglected for two days now to file properly.

That chore accomplished, she rummaged through Rizler's shirts and ties, and made a pile for the dry cleaning service. (She

also used the occasion to discard a couple of items that she deemed unfashionable or shabby but which Arthur—no doubt just from inertia—had failed to weed out himself.)

This segued into straightening the vials, tubes, bottles and appliances in the bathroom, repositioning the pillows on the couch, and wiping the coffee table free of crumbs and dust. (These last duties Rizler, neat as he was, would gladly have left to the maids.)

Just as she was finishing up, her mother called. Mrs.

Svobodnik's words leaked out from the defective handset at high volume; Rizler, with his sensitive hearing, could track her side of the conversation from the bedroom. Well, he had already given up on sleep, more or less . . .

Her voice was so arch, so controlling, so full of presumption—and so close (less than a thousand kilometers away, in Austria).

"The rental car was horrendously expensive . . . Miles was forced to drive standard the first time since he was in medical school . . . the food is awfully fattening, even in the better-rated places . . . yes, humid, not *really* comfortable for sightseeing . . . we have the tickets . . . Mozart, of course." Then, "How is Arthur doing, was he okay with the jet lag? We're looking forward to seeing both of you in Salzburg."

Arthur: Rizler knew the pleasure that Mrs. Svobodnik took in the use of his first name—the pretension of familiarity with a cultural god. In protest, Rizler had stuck to "Mrs. Svobodnik." She had objected, "You *must* call me Midge—you're senior to me, after all!" "Old enough to believe in titles of respect," Rizler had shot back.

He brought up the usual excuses for ducking out of Salzburg—he was tired, the visit in Prague was complicated (the Stones and the problems with the embassy), the lack of direct flights at convenient times. The truest explanation of his reluctance was (as Thucydides said about the start of civil war in Greece) the one least mentionable: To Rizler, Mrs. Midge Svobodnik was an insufferable horse's ass.

There were her rules about family gatherings. No topic of conversation should overstay its welcome; none should provoke a "debate" (a term that Mrs. Svobodnik uttered as if it were a curse).

And she'd be looking out for "momentum." This meant some kind of novelty or innovation in each of their lives—taking up Pilates or Spinning, the Atkins Diet or the South Beach, hiking in a jungle or rain forest, hydroponic gardening, a reinvention of *gestalt* therapy, Zen Judaism.

Last fall, in the French countryside, had been absurd.

As Rizler saw it, the Svobodniks had commandeered him into their entourage. They were entering multiple-starred restaurants like an occupying army. Prof. and Mrs. Woodbridge,

and young Dr. Glass and his wife Cindy Marsh were tagging along. All of them happened to be in France in October. Such a coincidence, living as they all did in a single subdistrict of Toronto's Forest Hill Village.

He was their special weapon (an exploited one, he felt, since, most of the menu was off-limits for health reasons): Thanks to him, they would avoid being seated in the section of the restaurant reserved for the most vulgar Americans. Mrs. Svobodnik announced the presence of Arthur Rizler, *le grand écrivain américain*, which got them placed in a slightly better corner. The restaurant probably inflated the bill—for who would argue about the total, in front of *le grand écrivain américain*?

Certainly not Dr. Stuart Glass; he picked up the whole tab. A hospital psychiatrist, Glass made a claim to letters. He had bought out a failing left-wing poetry rag. Now the magazine printed multi-page verses by Glass that ranted against deconstruction and free love. Rizler was slightly spooked by this Glass, a poet who administered electroshocks rather than receiving them. Could one imagine Pound or Yeats *running* a mental hospital?

Glass was on about epic. It had fallen victim to the smallness, the lack of grandeur in modern life, to the triumph of egalitarianism. But Rizler did not want to converse on literary matters with Dr. Glass. "Poetry," Rizler demurred, "I know nothing of. Poets and novelists, it's like dentists and doctors a bit. You expect all sorts of things in common, but it doesn't turn out that way."

Rizler switched the topic to psychiatry. He had just finished a life of Hemingway. Might incompetent head shrinking have hastened Papa's demise? Could different treatments have saved him? When he did pick up other people's works, Rizler parsed them closely (including the footnotes). Rizler managed to bombard Dr. Glass with questions about medications, their doses and side effects.

Glass had awarded the Hemingway medical team top marks, "The best that could be done in their time, though of course nowadays . . ." (Unlike poetry, where he was a declinist, Glass worshipped progress when it came to headshrinking.) As soon as Glass was finished, Rizler turned to Svobodnik for a second opinion about the case, in the hope of a diverting cockfight between the two medical gentlemen. He was amused by the prospect of a showdown in these gastronomic circumstances—Glass the drugs-and-shocks man and Svobodnik the couch doctor duking it out over Papa's illness amidst the antique crystal, the vintage Bordeaux, the *chariot* of exquisite runny cheeses.

Alas, Dr. Svobodnik would let down the side. He was too wrapped up in the wine and Cindy Marsh to be bothered making

a run at Glass's view of the Hemingway problem. So Rizler didn't even get his live entertainment.

Despite those memories of Provence, Rizler had little choice but to cave on Salzburg. Mrs. Svobodnik had made it clear that their festival tickets were already paid for; hundreds of dollars added to Dr. Svobodnik's credit card balance cemented an obligation to attend. It would be stormy if he were to take the hard line.

After getting his go-ahead, Maya retreated to the bedroom for a nap; she was fagged out from all the tidying.

Yolanda Walden, the Prague bureau chief of the *Washington Standard*, stumbled out from the Diplomatic Club. An immense gym bag strained her shoulder, and she was half-blinded by her own tangled wet hair.

Again this morning a line up for a shower, they were down to a single functioning cubicle, at least if hot water were included in the definition of function. And the fuses were blown in the hairdryer—why had she not learned to bring her own device? She'd been through the door of the gym at the crack of dawn, but now was going to be late for work. And, worse still, in the un-breakfasted, frazzled state that bespoke being single.

It might hardly seem to matter, since she was the boss. What the interns thought didn't matter. But then there were the locals, her hardened, streetwise Czech employees. What *they* saw did concern Yolanda. She had grown up with servants, in a Georgetown mansion and her mother had been very particular as to how one appeared before the help.

Rising so early meant that yet another of Yolanda's relationships was on the wane. Nothing as dramatic as a break up had happened, but Carrie Michaelman had been sleeping over at her place less often, pleading the usual excuses (press of government business, early morning squash commitments), sort of sliding away, as painlessly as possible. At least she hadn't told him she was *in love*.

He was a fungible male: midforties (like her), thinning hair getting close to bald, French blue shirts with starch, ties just a little more daring and colorful than he would wear back at Foggy Bottom, presentably athletic, not overly hairy in the chest, polite and a welcome member of any brunch party or hiking or sailing expedition, with genitalia of normal size and no particular distinguishing feature, and with little baggage (only one ex-wife). He would do, for a while.

She could probably do without, as well.

Yolanda was in the bureau by half past nine. Having already taken the first flurry of messages, the locals were now ready to sit down for a coffee break, which meant forwarding the phone to an answering machine during their fifteen minutes of gossip.

One of the interns, a senior from Smith, said she had left

two voice mails on Yolanda's cell; she was keen to get the go-ahead for a story idea on the telecom deal. She'd gotten a tip-off that Russian gangsters were in on it.

Yolanda queried, "From whom you heard about Russians? . . . Jeremy Stuart? Who? . . . Oh, I see, the Global Bank, sure."

Why hadn't she come forth with a word of congratulation or encouragement for Rebecca? She just wasn't any good as a mentor figure for these kids, she chastised herself.

As for the locals, the youngest was ten years senior to Yolanda. She sensed that these people looked on her as a sitcom character—the unwed American career girl who never quite had her act together. When *men* called, Ludmilla the receptionist would unfailingly ask, "Business or social?" On the latter messages, which would always be handed first to Yolanda so as to observe her reaction, Ludmilla would write "social" in wide, florid script.

Today Yolanda had not one, but two, slips from Carrie Michaelman. Ludmilla watched her carefully as she read. On the earlier message, the habitual "social" was missing. What could this mean? After a consultation with Vlad, the driver/photographer, Ludmilla had concluded that Michaelman was nervous; this was instantly fantasised into the notion that a proposal of marriage must be on its way.

Yolanda was piqued. Two messages, that was awkward and fodder for wagging tongues. Michaelman had been keeping his distance from her, more and more; *now* he had to go and make himself conspicuous among her staff.

Michaelman—as socially astute as they came—felt keenly his clumsiness with Yolanda's receptionist.

Ambassador Horvat had been on his case about Rizler. Something needed to be done to raise the profile of the Mozart lecture. The *Standard* could be his salvation. If the prestigious daily were to cover Rizler's presence in Prague, lack of local attention wouldn't matter so much. The telecom restructuring could be pushed back into the business section. As for the Stones, embassy pressure on Rizler's local organizers could get his talk postponed until the band was far out of middle Europe.

All he needed was one favour: Yolanda had to interview Rizler. The trick was to coax that, while continuing the process of dumping her.

Awaiting her callback, Michaelman stared blankly out of his office window; he'd asked the receptionist to screen everything incoming, to avoid another dunning from Maya Svobodnik. He sipped his *latte* and savored a moment of peace—for now no one was prevailing on him to drudge.

The framed artefacts on his walls told Michaelman's story: the diploma from Amherst *sine laude*, signed portraits of several secretaries of state and one president, whose bags he had carried on delegations and missions; most originally, an enlarged

childhood photo depicting Michaelman as a toddler on the lap of Dean Acheson at a Christmas party in some Greenwich, Connecticut manorhouse.

With nothing to propel him through adulthood but prep school spit and polish and family influence, the state department had been the logical option for Michaelman. Investment banking, software, consulting, journalism all required at least a decade of ambitious energy. But the most Michaelman could ever manage for careerism was the “old college try.”

At State, the younger Michaelman was like the wooden trim on a Rolls—not really that functional, but indisputably tony, and you expected it to be there.

“A lecture on Mozart is newsworthy?” Yolanda asked rhetorically, when she got Carrie on the line.

“Yolanda, you must have read some of his books in college—*Blumberg’s Predicament?* And the first one, *Washed Ashore*, about the young man discharged from the merchant navy at the end of World War Two, trying to make a new life in the Midwest. Quite good, actually . . .”

She interrupted, “Okay, fine for the *Chronicle of Higher Learning* But we’re a newspaper, Carrie, as in *news*.”

“He’s in thick now with the neocons. You could do something like ‘America’s Culture Wars and Postcommunist Europe.’ The Czech president is a major literary figure—contrast Rizler’s politics with Havel’s. They could have met during the time of Charter 77. That might make a real story.”

“Okay, I’m going to dig around and see if I can find anything.”

“I’ll owe you big, *really* big.”

“Carrie, you left that second message—“social” I think. What was that about?”

A hesitation. Then, “Squash, Yolanda, I was wondering about squash—next Monday, the Dip’ Club?”

“Fine. And, if I go ahead with Rizler, I’ll feel free to contact him directly.” He gave her Rizler’s whereabouts, and a warning about Maya—Rizler’s “Alsatian guard dog,” as he called her.

“You see, faster than computer!” boasted Milan, the eldest of Yolanda’s Czech helpers.

He had kept meticulous paper files through the decades of service to the *Standard*. For most of that time, it was a privilege just to have access to Western newspapers and magazines. (Milan had started with the *Standard* in ’68; somehow the authorities had overlooked the former sociology student; the paper had been allowed to keep him, despite the crackdown.)

He seemed to have clipped out everything; as if the archive itself was a hedge against darkness and oppression.

So Yolanda was now staring at a yellowed scrap of newsprint from the early ’80s. Rizler’s debate with Hans-Jürgen Roth, leading German novelist of his generation, socialist, orphan of the war, child

of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, winner but refuser of the Nobel Prize—refuser because of the munitions money whence the Prize originated. The Reagan people thought the West Germans lacked backbone in their dealings with Moscow. Roth was a pacifist, or at least, a disarmer. He had signed a petition declaring America a dangerous and decadent power, lacking a moral center, and moreover, he was opposing on these grounds the placement of American missiles on German soil.

Radio Free Europe had organized a debate in Berlin. Rizler had defended America.

Or rather, he had decried the decadence of Europe. “Today West Berlin is on a lower cultural level than Sao Paolo; Paris is pedestrian—you could have a richer spiritual life in Denver or Santa Fe.”

Then a more recent item extracted by Milan from “Literature and Dissent.” This was about Rizler standing up for Walter Knapp, the Chicago professor charged with sexual harassment. *Dissent?* What did sex abuse have to do with dissent? Perhaps Milan had been noticing the file photo of Rizler with Andrei Sakharov next to the article—that must be it. Or was it was the reference to Rizler’s activism in PEN?

Yolanda couldn’t figure out why a famous writer would waste his moral capital with a cause like Walter Knapp. If she were to go ahead with the interview, much more digging would be needed. In a busier week she’d have taken a pass on Rizler. But he was a better bet for her than the other current stories. The telecom sell-off bored her, as did all financial news. The Stones—she was happy to leave that with the kids, her interns—they’d be thrilled to hobnob with the glitterati. Apart from flirting and getting drunk, Yolanda didn’t have much use for rock; she preferred Mozart.

“Am I disturbing you? I tried earlier, but the line was busy.”

It was Michaelman; the idler had managed to catch *her*, Maya, asleep and at midmorning yet.

“I’m afraid,” he told Maya, “the organizers of Dr. Rizler’s talk have had some difficulties securing an appropriate audience for Saturday night. They have proposed a postponement until three days later. Such a date, I understand on good authority, would be advantageous for press coverage; I can’t promise for sure, but the *Washington Standard* has expressed a serious interest in running a story early next week. Of course it is you who are in charge of Dr. Rizler’s schedule.” Michaelman now shut up, and listened closely for the tone that Maya would adopt in response.

“This turn of events will require us to get back to you,” said Maya. Michaelman upped the ante. “In addition, I would think it to be the case that the ambassador would welcome yourself and Mr. Rizler to stay in her residence for these additional unexpected days you would be in Prague.”

“Well, on that,” Maya answered, “the ambassador might want

to call Mr. Rizler privately, just to be able to talk on a one-on-one basis as it were about his personal accommodation needs.”

Maya suggested this as way of testing what Michaelman was about with all these propositions—she didn’t exactly trust him.

Michaelman concluded, “So I leave it with you. You have agreed in principle to the change of date. I can put you in touch with the ambassador and the *Washington Standard* bureau.”

“You’ll hear from us before end of business. The embassy voice message system seems unreliable. You don’t happen to have a cell phone?” Maya asked.

“Not standard issue,” Michaelman prevaricated.

Maya was on the horns of a dilemma, a very uncomfortable place for her. Rizler’s visit could be salvaged, but at the price of altering the plans for Salzburg. A few years earlier, her parents would have thought nothing of such a cancellation, determined by Arthur’s professional needs. Yet, not unlike their Mercedes four by four or their Jennair stove or any other fashionable and expensive thing that they called their own, Arthur had come to be taken for granted. He was expected to perform.

While Maya was thinking this through, Rizler was doing his own plotting. The wily street kid was still there inside; mix-ups and disruptions provided openings—windows for entering places that might otherwise be off-limits, boarded up. Now could be the time to bring up something he had been wanting from Maya for ages, but was hesitant to propose—a few days on his own. None of his earlier wives would have denied him that, but Maya was much more clinging and protective.

Rizler opened on a positive note, “Well, at least the embassy seems to be getting its head around the lecture.”

“Maya,” he went on, “I’m thinking of starting to write again. I mean something big, ambitious. To do that, I need to find the energy, the space. I’m going to need to be alone; I’ve always had that before starting a new project, even when it was more difficult, with kids and all. Now that we have to postpone my talk, I’ve got the chance to leave Prague, and go some place quieter, lazier. Why not see your parents in Salzburg, and let me fend for myself around here?”

While saying this, Rizler adopted an air of high seriousness. He tilted his head upward, his glance intense, that of a mind projecting its beam far beyond the objects immediately present. It was just such a pose that, appearance-wise, made Rizler so plausible a savior of the West.

“Dear Arthur,” Maya inveighed (getting up from beside Rizler on the sofa and now standing in front of him), “of course, in principle, fine. But nothing of this sort has been set up. Transport, lodging, how you would get your meals—that would take time to arrange.”

“The embassy will deal with it. Horvat probably has a country

house not more than a couple of hours from Prague, on a lake.” The scenario was losing some of its terror for Maya, just as Rizler had hoped. “There would be personnel and amenities?” “I would certainly assume so.”

Maya resumed her seat and nuzzled up to Rizler’s shoulder. She threw him a smile, flashing her symmetrical, blanched teeth. “Now, do tell—what is this new opus to be about?”

Rizler hadn’t worked that through. “Well,” he ad-libbed, “it goes something like this. A type along the lines of that pushy suitor of yours is named dean of a great undergraduate college. I mean, someone young, liberal out of convenience, ingratiating, a great fundraiser, a modern manager. And then there’s a noisy, older professor, say Walter Knapp, the victim of those trumped up sexually harassment charges years back in Chicago. A fellow who is not ashamed of his own prejudices; a man of the old school, who speaks his mind. The Stuart character, let’s call him Dean Macklem, Harris Macklem, tries to get rid of Knapp, force him out of the college. So there’s a great struggle—and we see just what mettle each of these men is made of.”

“Arthur, you were very brave, I remember, standing up for old Knapp. But in your plot, who wins, the Knapp character, or Stuart?” Now Maya was completely engaged, and had almost forgotten the context of the whole conversation: Rizler’s intention to go off on his own.

“I’m not sure, Maya, about how it ends. Well, that’s exactly why I need to get away. I have an idea, a concept, but it requires the soil to grow in.”

He had no intention of being sequestered in a nearby chalet, surrounded by nose-y embassy underlings; he had to be at peace and had set his heart on camping out in some lazy corner of the former Austro-Hungarian empire, a town that he might have passed through in his youth. He asked Maya to go fetch the English-language papers from the gift shop. She could also find something for the evenings when he would be away from her. Poetry, ideally. “Select it yourself; that will mean a lot to me,” Rizler emphasized.

Making a choice of verse would occupy Maya for at least a half hour. Once she was out of the suite, he rang the ambassador. Rizler told Her Excellency he had been counting on getting medical treatment in Austria. There was a specialist in Graz whom he had known on a personal basis for many years. “No, not in Graz itself, but outside. Actually, mostly retired and living in seclusion, but still seeing old patients.” Could he rely the ambassador to understand this predicament, and kindly arrange for his travel to Graz? *Discreetly*. No one was to know. Now came the really tough part—“no one” included his wife, Maya. “It’s a very sensitive condition, if you understand, Ambassador.” Matilda Horvat didn’t have much time for Rizler. The

thought did go through her head for a millisecond (all she could devote to such an issue) that it might not be kosher to conspire with an American citizen abroad in keeping his whereabouts unknown to his wife. But Horvat had not been in a relationship for ages, and she was inclined to interpret Rizler's behaviour in light of her general absurdist view of man/woman relations. She brought in Michaelman right away to handle the details of Rizler's escape to Graz. If there was an exception to Michaelman's general un-enthusiasm for toil, it was the opportunity to plan this sort of duplicity—a little oldfashioned cloak-and-dagger, a touch of *commedia del arte*.

There was the further bonus that he would be plotting the deception of that shrew, Maya Svobodnik. He did not buy the medical story for an instant. For Michaelman, it was as clear as day that what Rizler was planning was a sexual liaison in Graz. But with whom?

"I let that girl know the book club was off because you're going away," Maya told Rizler when she returned from the gift shop with his poetry reading.

In plotting his getaway to Graz, the promise to Irina had completely slipped his mind. Now Rizler was angry with himself. He should have got to her before Maya; hearing it from his wife, she would probably take the cancellation as a rebuff.

The oversight struck Rizler as a foreboding: his Graz strategem might not be foolproof. What else could he be neglecting to consider? He felt his heart speeding up. "I'm going to lie down," he informed Maya.

Among the items Maya had put away when tidying was a print out of the last communications from Jeremy Stuart. There was the message saying he might be "overlapping" with her and Arthur in Prague; and there were also translations of a poems by Rilke that Jeremy had sent her but a few days before that; he had been at loose ends on the flight to Cape Town and had done the translation to while away a few hours on the plane.

Although Maya never answered Jeremy's missives, she had hoarded them, starting with the postcard from his Florence year (when he had fled Toronto to get over his obsession with her). The image on the front, she recalled, was a detail from a fresco in the rival Tuscan city of Siena—Lorenzetti's *Effects of Good and Bad Government*. Jeremy had been reminding Maya about one of his pet theories: Machiavelli had been inspired by the Lorenzetti paintings in writing the *Prince*.

He had pitched that to their common mentor, Norman Hancock; all psyched to detail Machiavelli's use of painterly imagery and analogy, Jeremy had barged into Hancock's office. Hancock was dismissive: Who did this pretentious young man think he was, a freshman purporting to have discovered something in Machiavelli that escaped Norman Hancock's own notice?

Maya had thought to show the postcard to Rizler. She tried to interest him in Jeremy, as material. "I've already put enough chubbies in my plots," Rizler had replied.

She glanced at Jeremy's Rilke translation. "Love Song" was one of the poems. She liked the musical imagery in that piece. "Across what instrument are we stretched like this?" Not a bad rendering.

She remembered what Arthur had said about his novel-to-be. Finally, he had come around on Jeremy's potential as fictional antagonist. It had just been a matter of time. Arthur would thank her when she told him about all the offerings from Jeremy that she'd squirreled away; his research on the Stuart-based character would be already half-done.