

PROLOGUE

“Tell us your name, boy!” the fat man shouted.

The youngster froze; had they caught him out?

He was underage for the beverage room of a hotel, barely fifteen in fact. He was skipping school, too.

Did it matter? He was a street kid, the offspring of indigent and alcoholic parents, a mongrel (half French Canadian, a quarter each Ukranian and Jewish). He had flunked English and history. It was Depression-era Toronto; the teachers had him down for a life of petty criminality.

“Rizler’s the name,” he answered, as adultlike as possible,

“Mr. Arthur Rizler.” He had a book and a newspaper under his arm (he used them to appear older than he was); he sported a chic jacket and a flamboyant cravat (both shoplifted).

“Why, Arthur Rizler looks like an aspiring writer,” the fat man ventured. The speaker was Edmund Wilson, the American belletrist; this speculation was addressed to his friend Morley Callaghan, a local novelist.

Wilson continued, “Come here, son, and rhyme a sonnet for us!”

“Or an ode,” Callaghan added.

“I . . . I can’t as such really . . . write,” he stuttered.

“Don’t be modest!” bellowed Wilson.

“No, no, I failed it at school, penmanship. Can’t read much either. Paper’s mostly for the sporting news.”

“And the book—*Paradise Lost*?” asked Callaghan.

“Oh, I picked it up out of the trash. I sell that sort of thing for a nickel here and there, for my drinks.”

Wilson now displayed the indignation of a social reformer.

“A decade of so-called schooling and a teenager who can’t write—or read, so it seems! I could teach this young fellow in weeks what the public schools have been unable to impart in years.”

“Really?” queried Callaghan in a pointedly sober tone of voice, “how would you do that?”

“By machine. The typewriter!” announced Wilson. “Shortcut all the fancy penmanship for young ladies and gentlemen of quality, we’ll teach him the kind of composition that will allow him to earn a living in the industrial age.”

And they took it on together, Wilson and Callaghan, as their project for the coming month.

Rizler’s troubles involved reading and writing backwards certain letters of the alphabet, and combinations of letters. Wilson taught him how to make out characters by touch not sight, through their location on the keyboard. What was confused became clear—Wilson was a whiz.

Before heading back down to New York, Wilson bestowed a present on Rizler; it was the Underwood portable with which they'd been drilling him. Wilson also supplied two pieces of advice. "Get an education," he exhorted, "and, above all else, get out of Canada!" Shaking his head, Wilson pointed to his friend Callaghan. "In any civilized country this man would be revered as a genius, a Hemingway, perhaps even a James Joyce. Here he remains the talk of a few dinner parties and radio commentators." His difficulty sorted out (today we'd call it dyslexia), Rizler devoured Wilson's and Callaghan's writings; from there, he went on to Conrad and Hemingway. Using Wilson's gift, he started composing his own stories, inspired by the neighbourhood yarns of misadventure that had so delighted him as a child. But he lacked a means of supporting the literary habit. The higher education that Edmund Wilson had prescribed was but a pipe dream—not only unaffordable, but cut off as well due to his spotty report card. He enrolled in the merchant navy. In his spare hours at sea, he began a novel. A couple of years later, he had a first draft.

CHAPTER ONE

"Mr. Arthur Rizler is waiting. Where are you? We've been expecting the ambassador."

The fourth wife of Arthur Rizler shouted these words into an airline courtesy phone. Carrie Michaelman, the cultural attaché of the American embassy, was getting a piece of her mind. The plane landing early took Michaelman by surprise. He had been counting on the usual delays; it was Eastern Europe, after all, and not everything had changed just because the communists were gone. Now he'd have to race out to the airport.

Caught in traffic on the edge of Prague, Michaelman dialled his intern; she recited Arthur Rizler's bio, cooked up in DC by the United States Information Agency.

"Greatest living novelist without a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize . . . Canadian by birth, a high school dropout, Arthur Rizler began writing when he was a merchant seaman during the Second World War. He obtained a university education in Chicago, at an extension program for returning servicemen. After his first novel, *Washed Ashore*, was published in 1949 to critical acclaim, Rizler spent a year in Paris on a fellowship, where he befriended many of the leading artistic and intellectual figures of the time. It was in the New York of the 1950s and 1960s that Rizler crafted his major works. These are bold, kaleidoscopic books about ethnic striving in urban America, from the stockyards in Chicago to the fate of German émigré philosophers in the Ivy League seminar rooms. Two of his novels are American classics, staples of the

liberal arts curriculum.”

Those Michaelman remembered fondly from college—
American lit class at Amherst.

Rizler’s more recent activities were another matter. He had resurfaced as a mouthpiece for the Reagan revolution, a neoconservative; now, in the last decade of the century, he was defending the Canon against French deconstructionists and postmodernists on his own side of the Atlantic.

A lecture about Mozart was the official reason for his visit to Prague. (How music went downhill after the Classic Age?) Bornagain Christians—the Horton Bland Foundation—were bankrolling this venture. They had furnished Rizler with a princely, six-figure sum; all he had to do was give the Old World a dose of real Western culture.

Pulling up at curbside, Michaelman recognized the author at once. The spitting image of his book jacket photos: the elevated brow, over which a brilliant shock of silver hair fell with no little drama; a wide and nobly sculpted forehead; the thinker’s capacious, oval skull tapering toward a square jaw, ruggedly male. Maya Svobodnik Rizler couldn’t be much more than half her husband’s age. She reminded Michaelman of the icons in Eastern Orthodox monasteries: There was beauty, but it was austere and static—devoid of human plasticity. Only the lines on Maya’s face foretold the onset of middle age; they were jarring, like cracks in the paint surface of an old master. Michaelman noticed the elegant summer ensemble (Prada?), the fitness club toning on her upper arms and her calves. But he also detected symptoms of peasant ancestry: a wide pelvis and low hips, held up by short legs. No matter how many dance lessons, she’d never have the carriage of a blue blood.

“Tired, very tired,” Rizler whined, letting his body slump into the embassy sedan’s plush back seat. With his blazer, he organized a makeshift blanket then pulled a well-worn Greek fisherman’s cap over his eyes. Despite Maya’s chagrin, Rizler was pleased the welcome party had been downgraded from ambassadorial rank; it meant he could avoid the social grace of small talk. (Who cared about Michaelman?)

The voyage from Chicago had taken its toll. First class hadn’t really made things better. Rizler’s body was compact; he didn’t need the gigantic seat, which was proportioned for bloated tycoons and basketball stars. The champagne tempted him, but he couldn’t yield; Maya had vetoed any in-flight tipping, for health reasons. He was already in his midseventies—could he blame her for making an issue of his diet and drinking?

“Try the opera channel. It’s Mozart, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*,” she had suggested; she was easily affected by his restlessness. “Too close to the ears for me, those headsets,” Rizler had complained. That silenced her into reflection. As usual, she

limned for the deeper meaning—was he saying something about culture in the age of mass electronic reproduction? But his grievance was physical. He couldn't stand the buzz, right inside his aural cavity.

He was sensitive even to minute changes in the sonic and visual environment. Onboard, every variation in the engines' pitch and torque captured his attention. So did the occasional dimming or brightening of the cabin lights, and the passengers' reading lamps flickering on and off.

He had tried to discern rhythms and order in all of this, the sonnet of light and shadow of the night flight. He hadn't been able to close an eye. The Envoy Hotel, their address in the Czech capital, towered above a northern industrial suburb. All mirrored glass and glimmering steel, the thirty-storey structure was a phoenix of capitalism rising from the ashes of communism. The crumbling charcoal grey concrete of Stalin-era factories surrounded the Envoy; some were abandoned, others still running, the smokestacks spewing acid rain or worse. A shrub with the hue of Kentucky bluegrass functioned as a buffer zone, setting apart western-style luxury from the surrounding world of industrial decline.

Between that hedge and the hotel façade, Prague was adrift in a sea of Mercedes Benzes, Land Rovers and Lexus SUVs, BMW station wagons. Vehicles were valet-parked and un-parked; sentries in Hapsburg costumes ushered busy modern people through the revolving doors; these patrons seemed not to notice the smell of Eastern Europe in the warm early evening air: coal, acrid cigarettes, un-neutralized human body odor, a unique staleness. But Rizler breathed in deeply; the scent bespoke otherness and adventure, perhaps danger. "The smell of Eastern Europe"—he fancied that turn of phrase, from a movie by a great Hungarian director.

He and Maya had the penthouse suite. Worldwide, such quarters usually bore a title of grandeur. "Royal" or "Presidential" most likely. This time it was the "Kaiser."

The decor was eclectic, *ersatz*. The furniture aped Scandinavian Modern—clean, sleek geometry of the '50s with a touch of Bauhaus fantasy. By contrast, dainty floral patterns adorned the drapes—the kind of thing you might run across in Georgia or Tennessee, at a colonial-style inn or guesthouse.

Once unpacked, Maya booted up the laptop, readying it for Rizler's words. Now, he dictated everything.

Before Maya, he had favored a manual typewriter. Back then, his girl Friday had handled the mail and kept his calendar. But Rizler had insisted on taking care of the Underwood portable himself. He scrubbed the keys with a brush, like a pro. Maya took over from the girl Friday; she got rid of the Underwood, as well. "The dinosaur," she had called it (thinking the same, he surmised, about his venerable assistant).

“Better to stay up, if you want to beat the jet lag,” Maya was urging him. Rizler placed his arm loosely around her shoulder, a tentative love gesture. She met his move with a start and a grimace; they had serious work to do. She refastened the top button of her blouse—it had somehow popped open in the car—and donned a pair of half-moon reading glasses.

Maya recited the embassy fax, portending disaster. “Due to other high level guests in Prague, we can have only modest expectations re official attention to Mr. Rizler’s presence.”

The competition was the Rolling Stones, a benefit concert for Bosnian children under the sponsorship of the Castle, the *Hrad* (meaning the Czech President and his circle). A state gala for the Stones overlapped with the lecture. Mick Jagger was routing Mozart.

Rizler couldn’t resist a wisecrack. “So the forces of decadence have made a preemptive strike.”

She was unmoved by his levity; their mission to the Czechs could be a wipe out, a non-event. “Michaelman, he seems weak, inefficient. Snobbish state department hack, probably with an axe to grind over the conservative revival. We need to go higher up—the ambassador or the number two.”

He objected, “Aren’t Clinton people in those jobs? I thought Matilda Horvat was a feminist battleaxe.”

“Not so bad,” Maya briefed him. “In the seventies and eighties, Horvat was tough on the Soviets. She worried about the missile gap and human rights in the East bloc. She almost joined Democrats for Reagan.”

“I can’t very well ring her up and plead for attention.” The idea of begging annoyed Rizler, but he raised his voice only slightly. He wanted to put his foot down, but without provoking a spat.

Maya backed off an inch or two. She said, “Let me first try pushing Michaelman. Then we’ll see about the ambassador.” She pointed to her Rolex. “It’s your bedtime, Arthur.” Rizler was thus dismissed from their parley. She would join him later, after catching up on email. “Dream of Mozart!” she added.

Maya searched again for the silver filigree pendant that had eluded her when they unpacked; it was a keepsake from her grandmother, and of no small sentimental value. She had emptied everything onto the floor, and the item wasn’t there.

She had thrown it in on top at the last minute, along with the other stuff from their bedside table. Had a thief been through the luggage? Why take only that?

She had been on edge before leaving Chicago. Spots—discolorations—had recently appeared in odd shapes on Arthur’s skin. First, the family doctor checked him out; then specialists were called in. Maya had insisted on scans with the latest technology. Mysterious images turned up, requiring analysis and

explanation.

A day ahead of their flight, he got a clean bill of health. And then she had remembered all that needed attending to before their departure.

Pruning her Yahoo account, for example.

Another message from Jeremy Stuart, tagged “urgent.” She had spurned Stuart twenty years ago, when he made advances to her in a philosophy seminar. He hadn’t gotten over it. He was tracking her. Now he was threatening to show up in Prague around the time of Arthur’s lecture. “We might bump into each other,” suggested the email, ominously.

He was a success story—an international lawyer, a jetsetter.

He bragged about his conquests and connections. Why did he bother her? Toronto was ancient history for both of them.

Maya’s thoughts reverted to the missing jewellery. Should she file a report, if only for the insurance? They were in Eastern Europe; the language wasn’t anything she could recognize. Who would take a complaint seriously—the airline, the hotel, the police, the embassy? Thanks to the Stones, Arthur’s Mozart gig was in enough trouble. Better not be distracted.

She had a hunch: perhaps the unaccounted for object had dropped on their bedroom floor and never made it into the luggage. Tomorrow, she was going to call the cleaning lady in Chicago.

Rizler woke up in the wee hours; he puzzled over Maya’s absence from bed (she had fallen asleep on the couch). What kind of unwelcome nocturnal behaviour was he guilty of: mere snoring or something worse? Just being an old man, Rizler feared. His muscles were still firm but the skin surface was leathery, and blotched with the spots that the doctors now assured him were harmless. For occasional lovemaking, this could easily be finessed by the proper drama of sheets, incense, and candles. Nearness to death and decay staring out through hours of the long night—that could be the real challenge.

He had been dreaming of Marie-France, his first bride. The time she had gone down on him in a private box at the Paris opera house, during a production of Mozart’s *Così Fan Tutti*. Marie-France had worn a short black cocktail-type dress; it draped onto her slender, almost waiflike body with a suggestive casualness. It was designed for jazz clubs and sin and was out of place, even shocking, at the opera. Marie-France had been making a statement: The war is long over, so we should be young again, and free spirits.

The Foundation certainly wasn’t paying him to speak about these associations with Mozart. But, then, what could he say?

He felt in Mozart the exhilaration of beauty breaking away from conventions and creating its own rules. A release that never lasts long, and for which the escape artist usually ends up paying

a price. An epiphany of liberation, always needing to be re-conjured by art and punished by society. Like Don Giovanni's seductions. Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* was commissioned for performance in Prague (Casanova apparently attended the opening). The piece would have been too racy, too politically iffy, for ecclesiastical and official Vienna, the center of the Empire.

The margin freer than the center. An idea to be dictated, yet Rizler didn't want to wake up Maya. He wondered what the Horton Bland people would think. Did it sound too postmodern?

Once back in dreamland, Rizler didn't rise until noon. Starved, he snuck off to the bathroom. He furtively consumed some cheese and crackers; he had lifted these Maya-prohibited items from the in-flight desert tray and, later, concealed them behind the whiskey and schnapps in the minibar. Cholesterol-drenched gorgonzola and camembert. He didn't want the crunching of the crackers to give him away, so Rizler ran the tap and flushed the toilet twice, camouflage techniques that he had learned as a masturbating adolescent.

Maya had been on the job for hours. She would soon bring him up to speed. "It's arranged, I'm meeting Michaelman at the embassy this afternoon. So you can stay here, get some more rest if you like."

"I'm off to the pool," Rizler announced. "See you in a couple of hours."

"Be good!" Maya said with a little grin; a typical goodbye—hinting about the various dietary and other restrictions.

SUMMER READING—the sign in the gift store window caught Rizler's eye as he crossed the lobby—an inviting image of a young woman beneath a parasol, stretched out on a beach blanket, poolside. She was contently perusing a paperback. He went in and discovered a large fiction shelf, all Englishlanguage.

He instinctively checked for his own works. He was sandwiched between Dorothy Parker and Philip Roth. His first, *Washed Ashore*, was there, and so was *Blumberg's Predicament*, the bestseller of 1960. To his surprise, he had been put in the series with the black covers. He was no longer framed by the bolder, brighter hues reserved for demanding twentieth century writers; instead, he was among the deadmen, the "classics." Not even Conrad or Hemingway had been issued between those somber jackets—nor James Joyce or Virginia Woolf.

Who took such decisions? Rizler wondered. They hadn't made any effort to consult *him* on this elevation to immortality (or perhaps Maya had handled it on her own—the reprint date was recent).

The checkout clerk, a youth with an intelligent, studious demeanor, had been intermittently staring at Rizler—peering out from under her textbook every so often. Rizler thought, don't I

come off as too old and well-heeled to be taken for a cutpurse? He picked up a translation of Stefan Zweig stories and took it to the register. He signed the bill to the Kaiser Suite. The clerk asked him to print out both names in block capitals under his signature (which was difficult, if not impossible, to read). Watching as his hands slowly and awkwardly formed those characters, she exclaimed, "Yes, Rizler! I thought I recognized you. We have several of your books here. All the important ones, if I may say so."

"So how do you know these?" Rizler followed up.

"I am a graduate student at the Middle European University," she replied. "They're part of our core curriculum; we study everything in English."

"You've *read* them?"

"No, no—I mean to say that those who take the core program all read them. Myself, I am in international business law. My boyfriend takes the core. He's waiting to be accepted to engineering. I'll tell him I met you. He'll be amazed."

In a gesture that struck Rizler as confident if not brazen, she held out her hand for the shaking, and said, "I'm Irina. Welcome to Prague."

Not that he should be noticing such things, but she had a thin, elegant body—much like his first bride, Marie-France. He stole a glimpse of her hard, contoured stomach (her blouse stopped before the waist, exposing the midriff). How had she avoided the Imperial costume required of the other staff? Probably the gift shop was contracted out.

"I know you must be awfully busy," she said, "but I'm part of a book club, just a bunch of my girlfriends. Could you join us Saturday afternoon, if you're still in Prague? The café across from the National Theatre."

"What are you discussing?"

"Last time, it was *Corelli's Mandolin*. But now we're on to Conrad—*The Secret Agent*."

Saturday? That was just before his lecture. It could work. But—

"The Rolling Stones?" he queried. "Your friends aren't going?"

"That's *your* generation," Irina replied.

She had just made him fifteen years younger.

"I'm honored," he said, "and I think it will work out. I'll let you know."

"Maybe next we'll read one of yours!"

"That would be fine," he answered, accepting with grace the implied flattery.

"Well, you know where I am," she concluded.

For some reason, he shook her hand again, giving a couple of squeezes before he let go; he noticed her dark, intense eyes, full of young adult brightness and longing.

Rizler held the brochure tightly in his hand, as if he were

Shylock clutching the bond of Antonio. “Olympic-sized, three diving stations, snack bar, sauna, and Turkish bath”—*but it didn't exist.*

Turning his own copy of the flyer on its back, the assistant manager pointed to a statement in large black letters: TO OPEN IN DECEMBER. “I’m sorry Dr. Rizler. The hotel is not in business officially until the end of the year.”

A disclaimer! Like in Vegas, or Lauderdale. Now they had American-style legalism in Prague.

The deskman elaborated, “There was at one point a very bad shortage of rooms in the city. Under pressure from the local authorities, we booked those that were finished, while continuing the construction of the rest.”

“Why is no work going on now?” Rizler queried.

“The clients we *were* able to accommodate didn’t want to put up with the noise and dust. So we are a third full, and blocked from building more. But I can do this for you as a favor: we will send you in our minibus to a private club and you will have a membership there for your stay in our hotel.”

Rizler knew better than to feel special. He, Arthur Rizler, was just another American Express card number here, albeit a Gold Card renting the Kaiser Suite. They probably thought the money came from golf carts or diet pills.

There was the title “Doctor.” But every *Verkaufsingenier* or *notario* would get that—*Herr Doktor* or *signor dottore*, as the case might be. Mick Jagger, though, would be another matter. It would be grand: Lord Jagger, *Graf Jagger*.

Rizler couldn’t risk crossing Prague to get his swim; Maya would be irked if he went AWOL. So he made for the coffee shop in the lobby, full of chattering businessmen. They were downing the espresso that Maya counselled him against—the caffeine jolt could speed up the heart, she had heard, and make it go out of control.

He settled for an orange juice. It appeared on a silver tray, in a half-full glass with a large plastic swizzle stick; on the side was a carafe of flat water. Rizler sipped the lukewarm nectar slowly; he could have done with a little ice, but asking for it would seem crassly American.

The commercial travellers came and went, snapping open and shut their laptops and flip phones and attaché cases. Charts were studied, cards exchanged, orders taken and contracts signed. Rizler envied their apparent sureness of purpose, the focused activity; much less clear what *he* was after in Prague, with his Mozart talk, and all. It couldn’t just be the honorarium. Saving the West is what Maya would have claimed.

He had mounted that hobbyhorse in the ’80s.

New York had become too much—AIDS, junk bonds, Schnabel, Madonna. He dumped his shabbily elegant brownstone

near the Columbia campus and fled to the woods of Maine, close to the Canadian border.

Out there, he cleared leaves; he shovelled snow. He cycled along country paths, dodging the squirrels and chipmunks, even braving the winter slush. He played Handel and Mozart on the stereo.

The purity of that life made the *urbs* seem even sicker than he had grasped before.

He steered clear of the critics. None rated him poorly. Rather, the typical epithet was “leading *realist* writer in America today.” “Realist” wasn’t a bad label. Balzac and Henry James were called that. But was there also a subtle reproach—that his writing lacked *twentieth century* depth and imaginative range? Sticking close to what he observed on the surface, had he been able to reach fully the tormented depths of the Modern Soul?

In the countryside, he cranked out a single opus; politely received, then ignored. The Sunday book reviews and the magazine covers were full not of Arthur Rizler, but of Anthea Chapman, a twentysomething African American who narrated the experience of femaleness in the ghetto. And the image also, of Lynn Kraut, author of *Fearless Journey*—a winding gritty postmodern tour through Lower Manhattan; cocaine, kinky sex, corporate raiding. A black woman and a white one who wore only black, these had completely upstaged his latest work.

His finest prose celebrated immigrant striving and success.

The underdog proved himself in an America that gave special privileges to none. But today’s new fiction reeked of special pleading, claims to victim status, sour grapes. Ask not what you can do for your country, but what your country can do for you.

A chair opened up at the University of Chicago, on the Committee of Humane Studies. Rizler’s New York friends, the neoconservatives, urged him to accept. No less was at stake than America’s will to survive as a civilization of freedom. The political correctness Gestapo had the campuses under siege. Truth and Traditional Values needed a strong voice.

Thus called, he had to report for duty—high time to leave the countryside and do battle with the Enemy.

Maya was now hovering over Rizler’s table in the coffee bar, a nervous, uniformed bellhop at her side. Rizler picked up the tension beneath her forced smile. The trained happy face was imposed by her mother’s ideal of female etiquette—the notion that in public a well-bred woman never *fully* sets aside her charm, no matter what trials and tribulations. How different from the frowning and sweating hotel worker, with his exploding acne and tremulous limbs.

When Maya, calling in, had asked to be connected to the pool, the clerk explained about the construction delays. This information was startling. Then came the surmise that Rizler had been driven to some spa far away. Finally, while Maya waited on the line for the deskman to call over there, another functionary tipped off the

receptionist that an American answering to Rizler's description was in the lobby bar. Maya quickly commandeered a taxi back to the Envoy.

"Dear Arthur, you should have let me know," she chided.

Damn! She was dragging the staff into the little drama of overprotecting him. He blurted out gruffly, "Well, we don't have a cellular, do we? And I thought that the general line for the embassy would be terribly busy."

"Never mind, Arthur, the embassy is a zoo. Artists, poets, philosophers, they're all trying to get through Michaelman's office. He has absolutely no conception of your importance. It's first come, first served. Except probably for the Hollywood drug addicts who bankrolled Clinton's campaign."

"What now?"

"Call the ambassador."

"She's a *Clinton* appointee—we've been through that before."

"Arthur, *phone her!*" Maya was laying down the law, making a demand that was non-negotiable.

Back in the suite, a flashing red light awaited them. Maya retrieved voicemail. "It's our faithful Nadia," she reported, "I thought maybe I'd lost that old silver necklace on the way over from Chicago; I asked her to see if I'd forgotten it in the apartment. She was telling me its back there, safe."

"Well, that's good news!" he offered. He saw that she was put at ease—a welcome change of mood.

Clearing her throat, Maya continued, "There's something else that I've been meaning to say to you, Arthur. That crazy exsuitor of mine could show up here, even at your lecture."

"He's been in touch?"

"He's figured out my Yahoo address."

"Isn't that top secret? How did he get it?"

"I'm not sure."

Rizler couldn't believe that Stuart heading for Prague was a coincidence. Within the last half year or so, they had bumped into him several times; his loud greeting—"Small world, eh!"—and his boasting self-description as "an old friend of Maya's."

"He's after you," Rizler put it to her.

"I'd bet he's stalking half the entries in the *World's Who's Who*," Maya retorted.

Rizler had his own brushes with unwanted attention. Obvious wing nuts, mostly, wearing their kookiness on their sleeves. Stuart did not fit this pattern. Rizler suspected, instead, a rationally selfinterested agenda of some sort. But he couldn't figure it out.

For Maya, Jeremy Stuart was the only remaining link—albeit tenuous and bizarre—to the world she had given up in becoming Mrs. Svobodnik Rizler.

Her circle of friends from college days in Toronto now had a radius of zero; the graduate school set she'd killed time with at Chicago had become null. For those old acquaintanceships, her

husband's celebrity was the final nail in the coffin. Arthur being the august figure he was, she could hardly share confidences about what he was like in bed—even less, his private views on faculty colleagues.

When the Rizlers entertained, it had to be people of prominence, in the arts, or politics, or the media. This glitter didn't produce any new intimacies for her; to the notables, she was Arthur's chattel, a prized possession, like a Ferrari or a Matisse.

These days, even her sister Amy was distant; a marine biologist on the West coast, absorbed by the breeding habits of sea horses, and breeding her own brats, too.

"I love you, Arthur," Maya purred while putting her arms around him, "and you *will* ring the ambassador, first thing tomorrow morning, won't you? If she doesn't get back to you, fine. We'll cancel for health reasons, and spend a couple of days with my parents while they're at the festival, in Salzburg. Then we'll go back home."