

## 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 Ukrainian 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 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 son et lumière 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 *Verkaufsenɡnier* 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."

## 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 poet-revolutionary-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.”

## CHAPTER THREE

**J**eremy Stuart was working up a sweat, trying to get fit.

Though very overweight, Jeremy was not the jovial, slip-on-a-banana-peel type of fat man; his corpulence was muscular and could appear menacing, like that of a bouncer or a mob enforcer.

His facial features projected gravitas: a creased forehead, dramatic brows that tended to be raised, deep eyes with bags beneath, a powerful, thick neck below, copious dark hair peppered with grey on top. His default expression was a frown. Smiling could hurt—those particular facial muscles didn’t get enough use.

The stationary bicycle was the latest high-tech model—standard issue at the Seapoint Health Club on Cape Town’s harbor. Monitors, displays, light emitting diodes: what were they trying to signal or warn about? He didn’t much care. Watching the light show helped break the tedium of exercise.

As did the TVs overhead. In several days of hanging around the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he had counted fewer black people than in the Spice Girls video that was now playing; he suspected that the Truth hearings were stagemanaged by well-meaning whites, who hoped chatter would fend off retribution. They were awarding amnesties hand over fist to all the worst thugs of the apartheid regime, in return for confessions—mere words.

Did a grudge lurk somewhere behind these thoughts? The Commission was keeping his girlfriend away from him. Nora Appleton was a legal intern there, a sparkling twenty-seven-year-old spirit, over-endowed with smarts and drive.

Their reunion in the Cape had been a sexual disaster. He should have expected that. He could hardly blame her. Only a psychopath would come home aroused from dealing with torture and dismemberment.

Tomorrow he would be gone, on his way to Prague.

He was consulting to the Global Bank on the telecom and broadcasting sell-off in the Czech Republic, the latest in a string of missions since graduating from Yale Law and then the Kennedy

School of Government at Harvard.

He was a freelance agent of global capitalism and democracy, a citizen of the world, and much in demand as a speechwriter, an adviser, a behind-the-scenes man, transnational troubleshooter. For all this, he hadn't advanced through the normal ranks in any of the organizations that had used his talent. He was too rebellious, too idiosyncratic, too taken with his own opinions on how the world should be. So he was living the peripatetic existence of a consultant.

Things were coming to a head in Prague, where his mission was to foil the bid by a consortium of family-owned German companies. These noble houses had been enthusiastic contributors to Hitler's war machine. They already had much of the electronic media under their thumb in Hungary and Slovakia, and Croatia was about to fall to them, as well. He didn't like the Germans and their renewed (if peaceable—for now) designs on central Europe. Jeremy was pitching an alternative plan—wider shareholding, with the foreign investment stake led by American interests, but the Czech public and its government retaining significant control.

The German group aimed for mastery of multimedia, including broadband, throughout central Europe. But the Czechs desperately wanted into the European Union; if the German offer won, serious questions about monopoly could arise with the European merger authorities. The Czech Republic, and even Hungary, could have entry into the common market held up even longer. If this he could play this anti-trust card, the outside minority shareholders assembled by DeutscheRad would get very cold feet.

Juliette Casanova, his study group partner from Yale Law—at a tender age, she had been the mistress of Pierre Lamarre, founding father of the European common market. The mergers commissioner, Claus-Dieter von Fincklestein, owed his entire career path in Brussels to Lamarre. A word from Lamarre, and von Fincklestein would be warning the Czechs about competition headaches.

The European Infrastructure and Transitional Facility had endorsed the DeutscheRad proposal. But the effete Italian count heading the EITF was locked in mortal combat with the Texas cowboy billionaire who ran the Global Bank. So the Bank had hired Jeremy to prepare a breakout on the deal; they knew he would use every milligram of his thinking matter to tear the German submission to shreds. A mere expert opinion wouldn't shake the markets very much, even with the Global Bank imprint. But, if there were ominous noises from the Brussels Eurocrats around the same time, the double whammy could sink DeutscheRad's stock and send the outside investors scrambling: While the German families behind DeutscheRad held a controlling bloc, there were enough footloose shares to make the

price move big-time.

The neurasthenic redhead on the neighboring treadmill was throwing Jeremy a worried glance. Maybe the big guy was overdoing it; he could drop any minute, in total cardiac arrest. She made him self-conscious. He dismounted, not bothering with the cooldown recommended by the fitness gurus, and headed for the steam bath. There, black, white and “colored” (mixedrace and Asian) men sweated themselves side-by-side, naked, each absorbed in solitary enjoyment of this innocent relaxation—the bodily proximity generated no racial tension, no manifest unease. To Jeremy *that* was real, even if the Truth Commission was largely for show.

His thoughts switched back to Nora. How was it going to end between them?

She was the latest in a series of brilliant and ambitious young things. Like the others, she was a combination of brains, beauty and pathologically low self-esteem. The low-self esteem bit puzzled him, in such overachievers. At least, it made seduction easy. All he had to do was really *listen*, and take their ideas and intuitions seriously (about which he was sincere; you never knew where you could pick up something useful).

As far as self-esteem went, Nora’s case was unusually bad.

Thus, the giant professional misstep of sleeping with the judge she had been clerking for.

Nora had spilled those beans when they’d first hooked up at a conference in London. (Land mine treaties or the Kyoto Protocol? It was half a year ago, almost.) Knowing the justice in question, he couldn’t resist answering her confession with some gossip. “The last time Dick Kent fell for a clerk, his wife went off the handle. She was so furious, she screamed threats at his secretary and assistant and she went out and bought up a department store on his credit card.”

“She’s very sick, isn’t she? A hospital basket case.”

“Not in the least. Of course, after the wild shopping spree, her wicked elder sister, who had always envied her marriage to an important judge, had her thrown in the bin. Got some shrink to sign that she was psychotic.”

“She’s not loony?”

“*Loony?* She’s a big name in the art world, represented by a leading gallery in New York, and the top agents in Berlin and Palm Beach. Besides, looks-wise, she’s a bombshell. I saw that photo of her in *Art News*, at the opening of the retrospective here in London: a short red dress, tight ass, spiked heels—something to die for.”

Hearing this, Nora became visibly upset—Jeremy had feared that he’d gone too far with the crass language.

“Nora, I’m sorry. I’ve been offensive, insensitive. I really like you; this is awful.”

But it turned out that he, Jeremy, wasn't the problem. She was in rage, in hatred against Kent. She had fantasized that he was trapped in a marriage with a chronic mental patient, starved for company but too noble and caring to have yet demanded a divorce. Now a very different picture had emerged: a libertine with a beautiful, bohemian wife, to whose bed he could always make his way back after straying with his young helpers. Blaming the volcanic curry for a stream of tears she couldn't stem, she asked him to excuse her; but he insisted on following her back to the hotel.

It ended up with Nora drinking too much, and a few hours of wicked sex in her room. He had expected to be out of there by the crack of dawn, leaving her to sleep off the booze.

Instead, she went and almost died on him.

How long had it taken to figure out that she'd lost consciousness?

At least, the ambulance had come quickly; and he was with her for the twisting, turning journey at high speed from one side of Kensington to the other. He used the last juice in his mobile to reach Lucy Napier, his ex-girlfriend and the head surgeon at Chelsea Hospital. He hadn't set eyes on Lucy since their breakup years ago. Now he was waking her up to get some help with the medical complications of a one-night stand. Was that arrogance or just quick thinking?

Whatever, Lucy promised she'd be there.

She ordered her taxi to stop for take-out at an espresso joint on the Old Brompton Road; it now ran 24/7, catering to the American brokers and bankers in the 'hood. Minutes later, she burst through the hospital doors with a paper demitasse in each hand. Braless, a Benneton T-shirt covering her torso, Harvard Medical School sweatpants threatening to fall off at the waist, curly dirty-blonde hair restrained in a ponytail, thick-lensed, wirerimmed spectacles perched on her nose, she charged into Emergency.

Her entry did not go unnoticed. Lucy Napier was the wonder doctor of Chelsea (a type that was supposed to exist only in the silly world of prime time Yankee TV drama was here a reality). Childless, without life-partner, self-described part engineer, part shaman, part alchemist—this slight, wiry woman was at her best in the OR when hope, and time, were running out.

"Nora revived very quickly," Lucy filled Jeremy in. "Now she's sleeping, but we've got her on the monitors, and there's frequent checking by the nurses. The cardiologist thinks it could be something rare, a chronic fainting condition like Vesal Vegal. You wouldn't happen to know any history on her?"

"We hadn't been that close 'til recently."

"Jeremy, she's not a hooker, now?"

"God, no, Lucy—don't be flippant."

"The admitting resident reported there was semen in her mouth, throat."

“Lucy, it might surprise you, but there are good girls who like to swallow, too. A professional would probably have insisted on a condom.”

“*Touché!*” Lucy conceded, gallantly.

Then he remembered. The cold metal he had slid along the inside of her thigh, teasing the soft skin. “The Bracelet! MedicAlert, when I think about, most likely.”

“Brilliant!” But where is it?”

“Well, she wasn’t wearing it.”

“You took *that* off?” she asked, accusatorily.

“Yes,” he had to admit.

Only an ex-lover could pull out that “hooker” business in the midst of a medical emergency. Was there a hint of jealousy in Lucy’s sharp tone? A pang or two in one’s ex never hurt. Nora’s parents had hopped on the first available discount flight from Toronto.

She was out of danger by then. The senior Appletons made Jeremy’s acquaintance in the ward. He sized up Mrs. Appleton: she was the sort who made lasting judgements from first impressions. And what she had to see in Jeremy was a stout middle-aged man who hadn’t slept or showered or shaved for forty-eight hours.

Mrs. Appleton addressed Lucy Napier, who had come by to check on Nora (and on Jeremy), as “Nurse.”

“It’s *Dr.* Napier,” Lucy instantly set her straight, throwing a rather sly glance at Jeremy. “Doesn’t our hero look adorable,”

Lucy now suggested to Professor and Mrs. Appleton, “not even leaving Nora’s side to brush his teeth. He’s as sleep-deprived and unkempt as any junior resident on call for the OR. The dear would be utterly believable as a surgeon, don’t you think?”

Jeremy remembered that, listening to the eulogy, he hadn’t been able to stop his face turning red; he had actually blushed.

Only Lucy could ever make him do that.

Jeremy emerged from the Seapoint Club into the sunshine.

Should he call a taxi, or stroll along the boardwalk? The crisp sea air of the Cape winter was invigorating. And if he walked back he could loiter at a café or two, killing some time before Nora’s return from the Truth Commission.

But there was more. Maya Svobodnik, his obsession.

It was attacking him, singing a siren song to his soul. The obsession had haunted him for twenty years; he stored it in some durable compartment of his psyche, separated by firewalls from the Jeremy known to the rest of the world.

The obsession was played out in the anonymity of public cyberspaces, Internet cafes, Kinko’s copy shops, and so on; he used Hotmail addresses registered with false or incomplete personal data.

He perambulated towards the downtown. The E Space was

near the truth headquarters where Nora now toiled; he had spotted it the other day, when visiting her there. He walked past, then back again, and retraced his tracks once more. Get a grip, he said to himself, but without success.

With the Internet, he could follow Maya's movements; it wasn't hard to learn where Arthur Rizler happened to be on tour, defending American civilization and the West. Maya had been reduced to an appendage of Rizler, his glorified bag carrier. Jeremy was hoping somehow to insinuate himself into her life. He had sent to her Yahoo account the texts of speeches he'd drafted for politicians, translations of poetry from French and German, and essays on global warming, nuclear terrorism and the digital revolution (most were too original and countercurrent to have a hope of seeing publication).

She was drawn to him back then, when they were students; he *knew* that—he could read it in her eyes. She had told him, “You're the freest spirit I've met; you're the greatest!” But she had refused his kiss, turning away with fabulous coldness and decisiveness. And soon she had disowned him even as a friend. To be still burned up by that, two decades later—what did he want from her now? A relationship? Or revenge? Perhaps it was an accounting or reckoning, like what they *said* they were doing up the street at the Truth hearings.

Jeremy double-checked the site of the Horton Bland Foundation. Next, he surfed to a web page with a calendar of cultural events for the Czech capital. Now he had the exact time and venue.

After logging off, he noticed the man who had been standing behind him, waiting to use the PC—a lanky Afrikaner with a withered face, partly concealed by large aviator sunglasses. “Bland Foundation?” the fellow queried in a soft voice. “Good people. Are you involved with him?”

“Just surfing,” he answered, resolving to disclose as little as possible.

“I'd like to help out,” offered the Boer. “Bland stuck with us right to the end, on the ANC being terrorists, our right to defend ourselves. I was upstairs, over *there*, last week”—he pointed towards the Truth Commission offices—“humiliating myself, forced to grovel for amnesty.”

So this was a member of the Security Services, an apartheidera goon. Images of all that the Afrikaner could have eyeballed were flashing through Stuart's mind at high speed. Could the interloper uncover the connecting thread, Maya Svobodnik? He could easily track down the keywords that Jeremy had put into the search engines. Jeremy realized he had been sloppy in thinking that he could count on the anonymity of a public Internet point. There was someone who already shared the secret of his obsession. It was Maya herself. He had been counting on her to

cure him, to force closure. She could send a cease-and-desist notice; she could cancel the email account he had discovered. She could have her husband tell him off; or she could hire an attorney. If he was still at it, that must be *her* fault, for not laying down the law.

## 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 Paulo; 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 nosey 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-tobe. 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.