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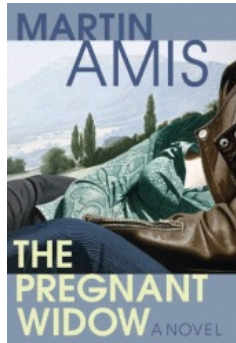
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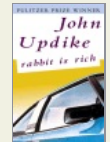
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Book One

Where We Lay Our Scene

I

Franca Viola

It was the summer of 1970, and time had not yet trampled them flat, these lines:

Sexual intercourse began

In 1963

(Which was rather late for me)—

Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban

And the Beatles' first LP.

—Philip Larkin, "Annus Mrabilis" (formerly "History"), *Cover* magazine, February 1968

But now it was the summer of 1970, and sexual intercourse was well advanced. Sexual intercourse had come a long way, and was much on everyone's mind.

Sexual intercourse, I should point out, has two unique characteristics. It is indescribable. And it peoples the world. We shouldn't find it surprising, then, that it is much on everyone's mind.

Keith would be staying, for the duration of this hot, endless, and erotically decisive summer, in a castle on a mountainside above a village in Campania, in Italy. And now he walked the backstreets of Montale, from car to bar, at dusk, flanked by two twenty-year-old blondes, Lily and Scheherazade . . . Lily: 5' 5", 34-25-34. Scheherazade: 5' 10", 37-23-33. And Keith? Well, he was the same age, and slender (and dark, with a very misleading chin, stubbled, stubborn-looking); and he occupied that much-disputed territory between five foot six and five foot seven.

Vital statistics. The phrase originally referred, in studies of society, to births and marriages and deaths; now it meant bust, waist, hips. In the long days and nights of his early adolescence, Keith showed an abnormal interest in vital statistics; and he used to dream them up for his solitary amusement. Although he could never draw (he was all thumbs with a crayon), he could commit figures to paper, women in outline, rendered numerically. And every possible combination, or at least anything remotely humanoid—35-45-55, for instance, or 60-60-60—seemed well worth thinking about. 46-47-31, 31-47-46: well worth thinking about. But you were always tugged back, somehow, to the archetype of the hourglass, and once you'd run up against (for instance) 97-3-

97, there was nowhere new to go; for a contented hour you might stare at the figure eight, upright, and then on its side; until you drowsily resumed your tearful and tender combinations of the thirties, the twenties, the thirties. Mere digits, mere integers. Still, when he was a boy, and he saw vital statistics under the photograph of a singer or a starlet, they seemed garrulously indiscreet, telling him everything he needed to know about what was soon to be. He didn't want to hug and kiss these women, not yet. He wanted to rescue them. From an island fortress (say) he would rescue them . . .

34-25-34 (Lily), 37-23-33 (Scheherazade)—and Keith. They were all at the University of London, these three; Law, Mathematics, English Literature. Intelligentsia, nobility, proletariat. Lily, Scheherazade, Keith Nearing.

They walked down steep alleyways, scooter-torn and transected by wind-ruffled tapestries of clothing and bedding, and on every other corner there lurked a little shrine, with candles and doilies and the lifesize effigy of a saint, a martyr, a haggard cleric. Crucifixes, vestments, wax apples green or cankered. And then there was the smell, sour wine, cigarette smoke, cooked cabbage, drains, lancingly sweet cologne, and also the tang of fever. The trio came to a polite halt as a stately brown rat—lavishly assimilated—went ambling across their path: given the power of speech, this rat would have grunted out a perfunctory *buona sera*. Dogs barked. Keith breathed deep, he drank deep of the ticklish, the teasing tang of fever.

He stumbled and then steadied. What was it? Ever since his arrival, four days ago, Keith had been living in a painting, and now he was stepping out of it. With its cadmium reds, its cobalt sapphires, its strontian yellows (all freshly ground), Italy was a painting, and now he was stepping out of it and into something he knew: downtown, and the showcase precincts of the humble industrial city. Keith knew cities. He knew humble high streets. Cinema, pharmacy, tobacconist, confectioner. With expanses of glass and neon-lit interiors—the very earliest semblances of the boutique sheen of the market state. In the window there, mannequins of caramelised brown plastic, one of them armless, one of them headless, arranged in attitudes of polite introduction, as if bidding you welcome to the female form. So the historical challenge was bluntly stated. The wooden Madonnas on the alleyway corners would eventually be usurped by the plastic ladies of modernity.

Now something happened—something he had never seen before. After fifteen or twenty seconds, Lily and Scheherazade (with Keith somehow bracketed in the middle of it) were swiftly and surreally engulfed by a swarm of young men, not boys or youths, but young men in sharp shirts and pressed slacks, whooping, pleading, cackling—and all afficker, like a telekinetic card trick of kings and knaves, shuffling and riffling and fanning out under the streetlamps . . . The energy coming off them was on the level (he imagined) of an East Asian or sub-Saharan prison riot—but they didn't actually touch, they didn't actually impede; and after a hundred yards they fell like noisy soldiery into loose formation, a dozen or so contenting themselves with the view from the rear, another dozen veering in from either side, and the vast majority up ahead and walking backward. And when do you ever see that? A crowd of men, walking backward?

Whittaker was waiting for them, with his drink (and the mailsack), on the other side of the smeared glass.

Keith went on within, while the girls lingered by the door (conferring or regrouping), and said,

"Was I seeing things? That was a new experience. Jesus Christ, what's the *matter* with them?"

"It's a different approach," drawled Whittaker. "They're not like you. They don't believe in playing it cool."

"I don't either. I don't play it cool. No one'd notice. Play *what* cool?"

"Then do what they do. Next time you see a girl you like, do a jumping jack at her."

"It was incredible, that. These—these fucking *Italians*."

"Italians? Come on, you're a Brit. You can do better than *Italians*."

"Okay, these wogs—I mean wops. These fucking beaners."

"Beaners are Mexicans. This is pathetic. *Italians*, Keith—spicks, greaseballs, dagos."

"Ah, but I was raised not to make distinctions based on race or culture."

"That'll be a lot of help to you. On your first trip to Italy."

"And all those shrines . . . Anyway, I told you, it's my origins. Me, I don't judge. I can't. That's why you've got to look out for me."

"You're susceptible. Your hands shake—look at them. And it's hard work being a neurotic."

"It's more than that. I'm not nuts, exactly, but I get episodes. I don't see things clearly. I misread things."

"Particularly with girls."

"Particularly with girls. And I'm outnumbered. I'm a bloke and a Brit."

"And a het."

"And a het. Where's my brother? You'll have to be a brother to me. No. Treat me as the child you never had."

"Okay, I will. Now listen. Now listen, son. Start looking at these guys with a bit of perspective. Johnny Eyetie is a play-actor. Italians are fantasists. Reality's not good enough for them."

"Isn't it? Not even this reality?"

They turned, Keith in his T-shirt and jeans, Whittaker in his horn-rims, the oval leather elbow-patches on his cord jacket, the woollen scarf, fawn, like his hair. Lily and Scheherazade were now making their way towards the stairs to the basement, eliciting, from the elderly all-male clientele, a fantastic diversity of scowls; their soft shapes moved on, through the gauntlet of gargoyles, then swivelled, then exited downward, side by side. Keith said,

"Those old wrecks. What are they looking at?"

"What are they looking at? What do you think they're looking at? Two girls who forgot to put any clothes on. I said to Scheherazade, *You're going to town tonight. Put some clothes on. Wear clothes.* But she forgot."

"Lily too. No clothes."

"You don't make cultural distinctions. Keith, you should. These old guys have just come staggering out of the Middle Ages. Think. Imagine. You're first-generation urban. With your wheelbarrow parked in the street. You're having a little glass of something, trying to keep a grip. You look up and what do you get? Two nude blondes."

". . . Oh, Whittaker. It was so horrible. Out there. And not for the obvious reason."

"What's the non-obvious reason?"

"Shit. Men are so cruel. I can't say it. You'll see for yourself on the way back . . . Look! They're still there!"

The young men of Montale were now on the other side of the window, stacked like silent acrobats, and a jigsaw of faces squirmed against the glass—strangely noble, priestlike faces, nobly suffering. One by one they started dropping back and peeling away. Whittaker said,

"What I don't get is why the boys don't act like that when I walk down the street. Why don't the girls do jumping jacks when you walk down the street?"

"Yeah. Why don't they?"

Four jars of beer were slewed out in front of them. Keith lit a Disque Bleu, adding its smoke to the sulphurous snorts and sneezes of the coffee machine, and the ambient mist of superstitious distrust: the bar-goers and their cataract gaze, seeing and dismissing, seeing and not believing . . .

"It's your own fault," said Whittaker. "Not content with being naked—you're blondes."

The girls were still quietly colouring and bristling, and blowing the stray strands from their brows. Scheherazade said,

"Well we're sorry about that. And next time we'll wear clothes."

"And we'll wear veils," said Lily. "And why blondes?"

"See," he went on, "blondes are the opposite of their pious ideal. This gets them thinking. Brunettes are hopeless—they're Italians. They won't fuck you unless you swear you're going to marry them. But the blondes. Blondes'll do *anything*."

Lily and Scheherazade were blondes, one a blue-eyed, one a brown—they had the transparent complexions, the candour of blondes . . . Scheherazade's face, Keith thought, now had about it a look of quiet surfeit, as if she had hurriedly but successfully eaten something rich and greedy. Lily seemed pinker, puffier, younger, the eyes inward, reminding him (as he kept wishing she wouldn't) of his little sister; and her mouth looked taut and underfed. They were both making the same movement, beneath the brow of the table. Smoothing their dresses kneeward. But the dresses wouldn't go.

"God, it's almost worse in here," said Scheherazade.

"No, it's worse out there," said Lily.

"Mm. At least in here they're too old to leap up and down."

"And too hoarse to yodel in your face."

"They hate us in here. They want to lock us up."

"They probably hate us out there too. But at least they want to fuck us."

"I don't know how to break this to you," said Whittaker, "but they don't want to fuck you out there

either. They're fruits. They're all terrified. Listen. I'm friends with the top model in Milan. Valentina Casamassima. Also a blonde. When she comes to Rome or Naples and they all go crazy, she turns on the biggest guy there and says, *Come on, let's fuck. I'll suck your cock here in the street. I'm going down on you right now.*"

"And?"

"They quail. They back off. They crumple."

Keith uneasily turned his head away. And felt a shadow cross the harlequinade—the harlequinade of his time. Near the centre of this shadow was Ulrike Meinhof, strolling nude in front of the Palestinian recruits (*Fucking and shooting, she said—they're the same*), and even further in there was Cielo Drive, and Pinkie and Charles. He said,

"That's too high a price."

"Meaning?"

"Well they're not *really* trying to pull you, are they, Lily. I mean, that's not how you set about it, is it. Their only hope," he said, "is to stumble on a girl who dates football teams." This was perhaps obscure (and they were staring at him), so he went on, "That's what Nicholas calls them. My brother. I mean, there aren't many of them, but they do exist. Girls who like dating football teams."

"Ah," said Lily, "but by pretending to like dating football teams, Valentina proves that they don't even want girls who like dating football teams."

"Exactly," said Keith (who was in fact quite confused). "Still. Valentina. Girls outtoughing the boys like that. It's . . ." It was what? Overexperienced. Uninnocent. Because the young men of Montale were at least innocent—even their cruelty was innocent. He said helplessly, "Italians are play-actors. It's all a game anyway."

"Well, Lily," said Whittaker, "now you know what to do. When they whoop and leap, you know what to do."

"Vow to go down on them."

"Yeah. Vow to do that."

"I was in Milan in the spring, with Timmy," said Scheherazade, leaning back. "And you didn't have to vow to go down on them. You got stares and whistles and that gurgly sound they make. It wasn't a . . . a circus, like here."

Yes, thought Keith, a circus—the highwire, the trapeze, the clowns, the tumblers.

"You didn't get crowds. You didn't get *queues*."

"Walking backward," said Lily. Who now turned to Scheherazade, and said with a solicitous, almost a motherly urge, "Yes. But you didn't look like you look now. In the spring."

Whittaker said, "It isn't that. It's Franca Viola."

So the three of them attended to Whittaker, with the reverence due to his horn-rimmed gaze, his fluent Italian, his years in Turin and Florence, and his unimaginable seniority (he was thirty-one). There was also the fact of Whittaker's *orientation*. What was their attitude to homosexuals, around then? Well, they accepted them utterly, while also congratulating themselves, every couple of minutes, for being so amazingly tolerant. But they were moving beyond that now, and homosexuality had the glamour of the vanguard.

"Franca Viola. Incredible girl. She changed everything."

And with a proprietorial air Whittaker told the tale. Franca Viola, Keith learnt, was a Sicilian teenager who had been kidnapped and raped by a rejected suitor. Which was one thing. But kidnap and rape, in Sicily, provided the alternative route to confetti and wedding bells. Whittaker said,

"Yeah, that's right. What the penal code calls *matrimonio riparatore*. So, Keith, if you ever get tired of playing the guitar under the balcony with a flower in your mouth, and if the jumping jacks don't work, remember there's always another way. Kidnap and rape . . . Marrying the rapist. That's what Franca Viola's family was telling her to do. But Franca didn't go to the church. She went to the police station in Palermo. And then it was national news. Incredible girl. Her people still wanted her to marry the rapist. So did the village, so did the islanders, so did half the mainland. But she didn't. She pressed charges."

"I don't understand," said Scheherazade. "Why in the world would you marry the rapist? It's prehistoric."

"It's tribal. Shame and honour. It's like Afghanistan. Or Somalia. Marry the rapist, or your menfolk'll kill you. She didn't do that. She didn't marry him—she put him *in jail*. And she changed everything. Now Milan and Turin are partly civilised. Rome is beginning to get better. Naples is still a

nightmare. But all that shit is draining southward. Sicily will be the last to go. Franca was sixteen when it happened. Incredible girl."

Keith was thinking that his sister Violet, another incredible girl, was also sixteen. In any kind of shame-and-honour arrangement, Violet would have been murdered long ago—by Keith himself, and his brother Nicholas, and his father, Karl, with the moral and logistical support of Uncle Mick and Uncle Brian. He said,

"What happened to her, Franca?"

"She got married properly a couple of months ago. To a lawyer. She's your age now." Whittaker shook his head. "Incredible girl. The balls on that girl. So when we go outside again, and the boys swoop down on you, you'll have two choices. Go with Valentina Casamassima. Or think of Franca Viola."

They drank one last beer and talked about the May Events, in France in 1968, and the Hot Autumn, in Italy in 1969—and the slogans. Never Work. Never trust anyone over twenty-five. Never trust anyone who hasn't been to prison. The Personal is Political. When I think of revolution, I want to make love. It is forbidden to forbid. *Tutto e subito*: All and Now. The four of them agreed that they would settle for that. They would all now settle for All and Now.

"That's how babies feel," said Keith. "Apparently. They think: I am nothing and I should be everything."

Then it came over them that it was now time to go, to go out there, and Whittaker said,

"Oh yeah. Another thing that drives them crazy is that you're almost certainly on the Pill. They can't get over it—what that means. Contraception is still illegal. And abortion. And divorce."

"How do they get around that?" said Scheherazade.

"Easy. Hypocrisy," said Lily. "Mistresses. Backstreet abortions . . ."

"How do they get around contraception?"

Whittaker said, "They're meant to be great experts at coitus interruptus. Great artists of timely withdrawal. Oh, sure. I know what that means."

"What?"

"They come up your arse."

"Whittaker!"

"Or all over your face."

"Whittaker!"

And Keith felt it again (he felt it several times a day): the tingle of licence. Everyone could swear now, if they wanted to. The word *fuck* was available to both sexes. It was like a sticky toy, and it was there if you wanted it. He said,

"Yeah, Whittaker, I've been meaning to ask you. You say ass just like we say *arse*. Without sounding the *r—ahce*. Lily and Scheherazade say it like that, but they grew up in England. Like you say *lahndscape*. And those aunts that bothered you at the picnic. Those *aunts* crawling up your shorts. That gave me the horrors. What's that accent?"

"Boston Brahmin," said Scheherazade. "Posher than the Queen. Now if we may be excused . . ."

As the girls moved off again Whittaker said,

"I think I see how it's going to go. Out there. What happened? Earlier. Tell."

"You know, boys are so cruel. And so fucking *rude*." Keith said that the mimed rampage, out there, the sexual revolution, was also a kind of plebiscite. "On the girls. And guess who won. I found myself thinking, Would you please insult Lily too?"

"Mm. Would you have the common courtesy to treat Lily like a stripper in a bear pit?"

"Scheherazade's the people's choice. By acclamation . . . She's transformed, isn't she. I haven't seen her for a few months, and I barely recognised her."

"Scheherazade, in general, is absolutely glorious. But let's face it. It's her breasts."

". . . So you understand about Scheherazade's breasts."

"I like to think so. I paint, after all. And it's not the size, is it. It's almost despite the size. On that wandlike frame."

"Yeah. Precisely so."

"I read something the other day," said Whittaker, "that made me warm to breasts. I saw them in a different light. In evolutionary terms, this guy says, breasts are there to imitate the arse."

"The arse?"

"The breasts ape the arse. As an inducement to having sex face to face. When women evolved out of oestrus. You must know what oestrus is."

Keith knew. From Gk *oistros* "gadfly or frenzy." Heat. Whittaker said,

"So arselike breasts sweetened the bitter pill of the missionary position. Just a theory. No, I understand about Scheherazade's breasts. The secondary sexual characteristics in their Platonic form. Plan A for the tits. I understand—in principle." He looked at Keith with affectionate contempt. "I don't want to squeeze them or kiss them or bury my sobbing face in them. What d'you guys do with breasts? I mean they don't lead anywhere, do they?"

"I suppose that's true. They're sort of a mystery. An end unto themselves."

Whittaker glanced over his shoulder. "I can tell you they're not universally admired. Someone I know had a very bad reaction to them. Amen."

"Amen?" Amen—pronounced *Ahmun*—was Whittaker's reclusive Libyan boyfriend (who was eighteen). Keith said, "What's Amen got against Scheherazade's breasts?"

"That's why he never goes down to the pool any more. He can't take her breasts. Wait. Here they come."

Did this mean—could this truly mean—that Scheherazade, down by the pool (as Lily had hinted), sunbathed topless? There was still time for Keith to say, "Are you seriously telling me her tits look like an arse?"











He himself paid a quick visit to the basement—before they all filed out into the street . . . The Italian toilet, and its negative sensual adventure: what was it trying to say? Southern Europe in its entirety had it like this, even France, the grime-scored crouchpads and flowing knee-high stopcocks and the fistfuls of yesterday's newspaper wedged between pipe and brickwork. The stench that threaded acid into the tendons of the jaw, and made the gums sting. Don't flatter yourself, the toilet was saying. You are an animal, made of matter. And something in him responded to this, as if he sensed the proximity of a beloved beast, moist and leathery in the spiced darkness.

Then they all filed out into it—past the female mannequins in the boutique windows, and into the swirling oestrus, the pitiless verdict, the mortifying unanimity of the young men of Montale.

So they drove from town to village—to the castle, perched like a roc on the mountainside.

You know, I used to have a lot of time for Keith Nearing. We were once very close. And then we fell out over a woman. Not in the usual sense. We had a *disagreement* over a woman. I sometimes think he could have been a poet. Bookish, wordish, letterish, with a very peculiar provenance, a committed romantic who, nonetheless, found it fairly difficult to get any kind of girlfriend—yes, he could have been a poet. But then came his summer in Italy.

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