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RATIONAL CREATURES

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**For Miss Austen…**

**FOREWORD by DEVONEY LOOSER**

(to come)

**DEVONEY LOOSER** is a literary scholar who specializes in women’s writings, particularly of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She is a Professor of English at Arizona State University and is the author or editor of six books including *The Making of Jane Austen* and the new Deluxe Classics edition of *Sense and Sensibility*. Looser was named a 2018 Guggenheim Fellow in support of her next book project on the once-celebrated, now-forgotten sister novelists, Jane and Anna Marie Porter. She also is renowned as “Stone Cold Jane Austen” in the roller derby world.

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**(2) Mild: kissing**

**(3) Moderate: some sexual references but not explicit**

**(4) Mature: some nudity and some provocative sex**

**(5) Erotic Romance: explicit, abundance of sex**

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS by the Editor, Christina Boyd**

**N.B. For authenticity, each author has written in the style and spelling pertaining to their story setting and era or proclivity to their prose. In the spirit of the collective and to be consistent throughout, this anthology adheres to US style and punctuation. Additionally, as a work inspired by Jane Austen’s masterpieces, her own words and phrases may be found herein.**

**ELINOR DASHWOOD**

After losing her father, home, and the gentleman she loves, Miss Dashwood’s altruism is nothing short of heroic. A model of decorum and grace, she appears cool while everyone and everything around her seems to be at sixes and sevens. Even as her heart yearns for what is now out of reach, this rational creature remains true to her principles by relying just as much on her artistic sensibility as her levelheaded good sense. **“I will be mistress of myself.”** **—*Sense and Sensibility*, Chapter XLVIII.**

**SELF-COMPOSED**

CHRISTINA MORLAND

**NORLAND, SUSSEX, AUGUST 1797**

Falling in love, she supposed, was not unlike sketching a nose. Others made it seem simple enough, yet when one tried for oneself, it came out all wrong—a smudge at the center of things, impossible to erase no matter how hard one rubbed.

“Surely,” said the man in her sketch, “the drawing cannot be *that* bad.”

She jumped at the sound of his voice, dropping her India rubber and nearly knocking over a pot of ink. At least she had managed to keep herself from looking up at him. Had their eyes met, he would have seen in her expression all the feeling she had been trying to channel into the portrait. How mortifying, knowing he stood just inches behind her, peering over her shoulder to stare down at himself!

Then again, perhaps the misshapen nose had fooled him.

“Is that…?” he began, and she shoved the sketch beneath a pile of completed landscapes.

Rising from the desk, she took a slow, deep breath. (“The best cure for any ill!” Henry Dashwood had liked to say, before death had taught him otherwise.) Catching the scent of fresh pencil shavings, Elinor closed her eyes and envisioned blank paper, flat and crisp; she imagined lines and circles with no clear end or beginning; she thought of her steady hands, of straight edges, of ink as smooth and black as night. As each image formed and dissolved in her mind’s eye, her heartbeat slowed to its regular, dependable rhythm. Only then did she turn to face him.

There was a curve to his nose she had not noticed before.

“Forgive me for startling you, Miss Dashwood,” he said, bowing and turning away in one fluid movement. Another man might have stumbled, but Edward Ferrars retreated with an odd, unexpected grace.

He ought to have been as awkward in motion as he was in speech. She recalled his reading of Cowper several nights earlier. His voice had tripped over words that should have flowed from his tongue, at least according to Marianne. But then she, that most observant of sisters, had not seen what Elinor had: Edward’s fingers, stroking each page of the book, as if they felt all that his voice had been unable to convey.

She watched him go with equal parts relief and regret. Since when had he become Edward in her thoughts?

He halted abruptly, almost as if he had heard her think his name. She waited for him to move, to speak, to open the door and leave. Instead, seconds ticked past on the mantelpiece clock, and she found herself wondering if she could draw this other side of him—long spine and broad shoulders, with hair that curled slightly at the base of his neck.

Then he turned to face her. She had not captured his eyes properly, either; they were larger than she had made them in the drawing, with crinkles that appeared in the corners when he smiled, as he did just then.

“I seemed to have forgotten,” he said, “my purpose in coming to the library.”

Offering a hesitant smile of her own, she wondered how he saw her. Did he, too, wish to trace the lines of her jaw? Could he have been memorizing the shape of her mouth? It struck her then: she could not have sketched her own face half so well as she had drawn his. She did not know if her eyes crinkled when she smiled, or if her nose possessed that same graceful curve along the bridge. When she sat before a mirror, it was only to check the pins in her hair or to ensure she had not rubbed ink onto her cheek by mistake.

How, in a matter of months, had she come to know his face better than her own?

Another deep breath, and then, in a voice as steady as her hands: “I suppose you came to the library for the usual reason.”

He raised one eyebrow. “To avoid the company of others?”

She laughed before she could help herself. He was as witty as he was graceful, a fact no one else in the household, himself least of all, seemed to recognize. She wished that she, too, had remained ignorant of this truth.

“If that is your idea of how to make use of a library,” she said, turning back to the desk and gathering her pencils, “then I will leave you in peace.”

“No!”

The word shot through her, a frisson of hope and desire that took her breath away.

*Breathe, Elinor.*

“That is, please,” he said, “do not…you must not leave.”

She heard footsteps and knew, without looking, that he had come to stand beside her.

“The aspect from this window—it is, it is…” He sighed, and she allowed herself a quick glimpse at him. She judged his shoulder to be but six inches from her own, and his long fingers grasped the back of the chair she had only just vacated. He stared out the window, his face a ghostly reflection in the glass.

“It is lovely, the view,” he said.

She did not need to follow his gaze to know what he saw: the line of sycamores that separated the park from the pastures beyond. They were indeed lovely, those ancient trees with their wide white trunks and multitude of thick branches. In this rain, they also appeared muddy and tired—sentinels near the end of their watch, ready to be relieved of duty. Somehow, the verdant summer foliage, which on every other tree brought zest and vigor, made the sycamore appear a little less noble in Elinor’s eyes. She preferred them in early spring, when they stood bare to the world, grasping for the weak March sun.

She would never see them like that again.

“I should have drawn them,” she murmured, realizing only when he turned to look at her that she had spoken aloud. Blushing, she returned to gathering her things. “The library is yours, Mr. Ferrars.”

“No, no, you must not go, I…” He leaned forward, reaching out with his hand, as if he would touch her.

Her heart beat furiously and, though she urged herself to be steady, to think of lines and edges and all the straight and reasonable shapes in her life, her mind kept coming back to the same wild hope: he wishes to declare himself.

But he dropped his hand, stepped back, and said, “You must not leave on my account. I am the one who has intruded upon your work.”

“I would hardly call it work.” She offered a wan smile. “Work is what Thomas does when he chops the firewood, or Mary when she washes the linens.”

“Ah, so you believe physical labor alone qualifies as work?” He cocked his head to one side, a movement he performed whenever he wished to engage her in debate or discussion. She had come to think it of as the “Elinor tilt”.

He had developed movements for all the family: there was the “John Dashwood head nod” (up and down in time with the monotony of her brother’s platitudes) and the “Margaret eyebrow waggle” (he never failed to make her youngest sister laugh); with Marianne, he propped his chin on his thumb so that the rest of his fingers covered his lips (“He listens with such seriousness!” Marianne had exclaimed, but Elinor suspected he was in fact hiding a smile); and, in the presence of Elinor’s mother, he clasped his hands behind his back (a schoolboy, hoping to impress). Oh, and one must not forget the “Fanny Dashwood shoulder slump” (no explanation required).

She had not, at first, known what to think of the “Elinor tilt”, but after months together at Norland, she had come to love that gesture. Why he did it, or if he even realized he was doing it, she could not say. But she thought he was trying to tell her, with that one small motion: *When you speak, I listen.*

So she spoke, this time aiming for a laugh: “If I defined work as something more than hard labor, you and I might be accused of serving some useful purpose in the world.”

Her aim was poor indeed. His face fell, and she cursed her carelessness. If there was one subject to make him despondent, it was his lack of independence. “I feel”—he had admitted to her once, picking up one of his sister’s knickknacks from the mantelpiece—“about as useful as this ridiculous bauble.”

“Of course there may be other kinds of work,” she said in a rush, as if the rapidity of her speech might make up for her error. “My father did a great deal of work at this desk, writing letters and keeping the ledgers.”

“This desk was your father’s?” Edward asked, his voice so gentle she found herself blinking back unexpected tears.

She stared resolutely at the wooden tabletop, smooth and shiny except for one barely noticeable scar. How her heart had pounded that night she had come into the library to find her father asleep at his desk, a candle tipped on its side, the flame hopping from wick to paper, paper to wood. The fire had been small enough that she had doused most of it with her father’s half-finished cup of tea, but one stubborn spark had continued to smolder. In thoughtless desperation, she had slammed her thumb upon it and pressed until tears came to her eyes. Her thumb, oddly enough, had not been scarred; only the wood had been marked.

“So steady!” her father had exclaimed, taking her uninjured hand into his. And it was true; though his hands had trembled, hers had been as still as stone.

“Yes,” she said to Edward now. “It is…was my father’s desk.” He had often called it *their* desk, even after he had purchased Elinor a drawing table of her own. But the light in the library was the best in the house, and so she had always been welcome to draw here.

She cleared her throat and forced a smile. “And now, if you will excuse me, I will—”

“But I thought…” Edward shook his head. “Fanny said this piece was to stay with the house.”

“So it will.” She reached for the pile of sketches. “In fact, I am here now only to remove my things.”

“No, you came here to draw. I saw you drawing when I entered.”

She laughed softly. “You are not the only one, Mr. Ferrars, who may forget his purpose when entering a room. I came across a piece of blank paper and could not resist sitting down to fill up the page.”

“May I see your work? And yes, I have determined that it is indeed work—manual labor in its purest and best form.”

He smiled at her, and she handed over the pages without stopping to consider. Then, a moment too late, she remembered. What would he think when he came to that unfinished portrait of himself? She could not claim she drew him because she often drew people; there were no other portraits in the stack. She was a landscape artist, depicting inanimate objects and faraway places. She captured life from a distance.

But then she’d had the idea that drawing him might help her put life in its proper perspective; if she could draw his portrait, if she could but capture the details of his face, she might finally accept the situation as it really was. And it was all but hopeless, for she had heard enough of Fanny’s snide remarks to guess that Mrs. Ferrars would never approve of Elinor Dashwood as the wife of her eldest son.

Marianne would have scolded her for coming to this conclusion. “How can you care—either of you!—what Mrs. Ferrars thinks? Who is Mrs. Ferrars? She is nothing if you love each other, Elinor!”

She was nothing at all—only the person entrusted with the entirety of Edward’s fortune. Mrs. Ferrars alone would decide her son’s wife, and Elinor would never be her choice.

But he was *Elinor’s* choice. Oh, if only the world were upside down, and *she* might be the one to decide their future! She would have handed him her drawings and said, “Here, Edward, this is who I am,” and he would have flipped through the pages, just as he was doing now, stopping here and there to admire the perfect symmetry of her landscapes. And then, when he reached his own portrait, he would look up at her and know exactly how she felt.

*Elinor*, he would say. *Elinor, Elinor, Elinor.*

It took her a moment to realize he was staring at her now. He has found it, she thought, not daring (not wanting) to break the intensity of his gaze. Could he see, in that drawing and in her face, all she wanted of him? What would he do if she were to reach out and touch him—to feel for herself the line of his jaw, the arch of his brow, the fullness of his bottom lip?

Clearing his throat, he glanced away, and only then did she see the flush creeping up his neck and into his cheeks.

“This one,” he said, holding out the drawing, and she had to take two long breaths to steady herself this time.

It was not the portrait, after all. He had chosen her illustration of a dilapidated house. It was not one of those fashionable ruins, with roses and ivy growing in the cracks and crevices. No, this was a square, two-story edifice, the shutters hanging at odd angles and the roof sagging as if it were only moments from collapsing in on itself. Though she had drawn stately trees, rolling hills and even a hint of the sea in the background, the drawing as a whole gave the appearance of drab reality.

“What an…intriguing sketch.”

She managed a soft laugh. “It is not very picturesque, is it?”

He laughed, too. “No, not at all. I feel almost sorry for the house, but at least the scenery around the place is welcoming. Where is this meant to be?”

“Devonshire.”

He looked up sharply. “Devonshire? That is where you…it is all settled, then? Your removal?”

“Yes.”

“Devonshire is very far from Sussex,” he said softly.

“Two days’ travel, I am told. Have you been?”

“Yes.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, I have been to Devonshire— at Longstaple, near Plymouth.”

“And what did you think? I have heard it described as pretty.”

“Pretty!” He gave a cheerless laugh. “Yes, very pretty.”

He looked so miserable in that instant that she forgot all her embarrassment, all her pent-up desire, and smiled, as one friend smiles at another. “You sound as if you blame Devonshire for its beauty.”

“I did not say beauty.” His voice was clipped—no, angry. “There is a difference, you know, between beauty and mere prettiness.”

Now she was tilting her head at him, and his expression softened, as if he recognized the gesture.

“Forgive me, Miss Dashwood. I was in Devonshire at such an age when *I* did not yet know the difference. I doubt you would ever make such a mistake.”

She did not know how to respond to such a statement, and silence fell between them. It would have been the proper moment to take her leave, yet even sensible Elinor could not deny herself these last minutes alone with him. She would depart Norland in a matter of days, headed for this pretty and beautiful place that held nothing but uncertainty for her.

“And when were you last in Devonshire?” he asked after the silence had grown too long to be ignored.

“I have never been.”

“Then this drawing—how did you compose it? Is it a copy of another’s work?”

“No, it is my own. The house is meant to be Barton Cottage. Our cousin, Sir John, described the place in his letter to my mother, and I thought I would attempt a rendering.”

He glanced between her and the sketch. “This is where you are meant to live? But it is in complete disrepair!”

She laughed. “Do not fear. Sir John has assured us that the house is structurally sound. This picture, Mr. Ferrars, comes solely from my imagination. I decided to draw the most wretched house I could, supposing I should then be quite pleased with the actual Barton Cottage.”

He tried for a smile, but his lips faltered. “It is not fair.” With a vigorous shake of his head, he exclaimed, “It is not fair, nor is it right!”

“Mr. Ferrars,” she said softly. “Please do not be distressed for my sake.”

“Perhaps it is not for your sake.” His eyes closed briefly, and she wondered what he imagined as a way of calming himself. Whatever his method, it was faulty, for when he spoke again, his voice still shook with emotion. “How do you stand it, Miss Dashwood? How do you face the future, knowing that what is ahead of you will be so much more difficult than anything that has come before?”

“I know no such thing,” she replied brusquely, “and neither do you. I cannot say what is fair, or what is right. I can only say that this is life, Mr. Ferrars, and life means change.”

He gazed at her, saying nothing.

“I have no reason to despair,” she continued in a gentler tone. “I have my mother, my sisters, and my own good health. I can surely wish for nothing…”

*More*. She had been about to say “nothing more,” but she could not lie, not to herself. She could indeed wish for more—she did wish for more! She wished for her father, for Norland, for days when she did not worry about how they would make do on their reduced income. She wished for the tree outside her bedroom window and the mare she used to ride across Norland’s meadows. Most of all—and she knew it was wrong to feel this way, given all she had lost—most of all, she wished for Edward, for this man with the face she had come to know better than her own.

One breath, two, three breaths, four. Black ink, blank paper, straight lines, an India rubber.

But no. Her method, too, was faulty. The smudge would not disappear.

“I *will* be content,” she said, pressing her hands against her legs to keep them from shaking.

“So brave,” he murmured. “Would that I had half your courage, Miss Dashwood.”

He handed her the rendering of Barton Cottage and then, gently, placed the remainder of her artwork in a neat pile on the desk. Bowing and turning (all in one fluid motion), Edward Ferrars retreated, and Elinor saw, when she looked down at her sketches, that his portrait was on the top of the stack.