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Portrait of a Lady

by Elaine Weddle

She had lived in a smart white-washed townhouse in South Kensington for fifty years. Although she had been considered by her peers to be quite a beauty in her youth, the years had been a little unkind. Her slim frame had swelled and her clear grey eyes, behind her small round glasses, had become pink and rheumy.

Around the sitting room in which she sits are photographs of her father; a distant man who as far as she could tell, and she didn't like to ask, never had a job at all. As a child, he dressed in tails every night and waved to her from the door or even blew her a kiss from time to time. Her mother, a tall austere woman, had insisted that nanny keep strict bath times and bed times no matter what. She insisted on lessons and games and had encouraged her studies but that was, unfortunately, where things had started to go wrong.

She was a bright girl. In fact, she was a very bright girl. But by the time she was sixteen she had read every book in her father's library, sneaking the dusty old items up to her room and studying them at length under the cool cotton sheets. She mastered algebra and Latin and knew more about the sciences than her own tutor.

When the time came for her brother to go to Oxford, she had made the most terrible scene, demanding the right to apply the following year. Her father, who couldn't abide histrionics of any kind, agreed, much to the disapproval of her mother.

'You'll never get married.' exclaimed her mother, 'men hate clever women, you mark my words.'

Indeed, although she would have hated to admit it her mother may have been right. But it wasn't just the 'cleverness', there simply were no longer enough men to go round and she simply wasn't interested in fighting over the scraps. Instead, she spent her time visiting galleries and gazing upon the genius of others. She travelled Europe and the Americas.

And everyone one she met fell in love with her, just a little. She filled a hundred journals with her neat and tidy script. Once she met a man in Caracas who could have been her husband, if he hadn't been married with five small children.

On her return she wrote it all down and sent it to a publisher in Bloomsbury who published each and very chapter of her travels and of what the world had taught her. Now, she sits in her study, her frail fingers still writing, writing writing. Her students sit at her feet their eyes wide with awe.