

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINALITY OF LOVE

In November 2018 I sat at the side of an indoor pool while my son Rohan took his swimming class. It was already dark, the way it gets on winter afternoons in Denmark. The sports centre was stoked with artificial warmth and light, and the sound of children's voices filled the glassy space. Rohan dived for weighted plastic in a squall of other eight-year-olds. A swimming teacher stood and cast rings for them, one by one, into the water – a green one to the right, a blue one to the left, the look on his face of someone feeding ducks in a pond. My coat and hat were spread beside me on the slatted bench and I'd taken a novel from my bag. I see myself now at a distance, as if looking back into that terrarium of human life: a woman watching her child plumb the depths of the pool. From the outside, she seems to have been many places and read many books. Less visible are the thoughts of the love affair, just started, trumpeting silently through her head and out into the chlorinated air.

It seems unlikely that falling in love could do much to a life as well populated and extended as mine was then. Hans and I had been together for decades. We lived in a nice part of Copenhagen, in a building by a canal lined with blue and

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pink houses and weekend sailing boats. Hans had renovated the flat, carved out a kitchen from an old beer cellar and decorated rooms for the kids. I had a job at a university in England and commuted most weeks of the term between our home and London, teaching literature classes prepped on the plane to well-read students. When I wasn't travelling, my days were filled with smaller routines. I biked around the city and met friends for coffee. I read bedtime stories, spent weekends at the summerhouse in Sweden, cooked meals, spoke at conferences, researched life in England in the eighteenth century. The book on my lap that day at the pool was *Pride and Prejudice*, carried in my bag because I'd agreed to produce by the end of the year an introduction for a new edition of the novel.

In taking on the project, I'd said I would describe the different kinds of love represented by Austen: between sisters, and between friends; love that is just lust; love that connects parents and children, even when they seem not to like each other much. More precisely, I wanted to explain the case Austen makes for reconciling romantic and heartfelt love with the kinds of socially productive marriage promoted in the early nineteenth century. At the time when Austen wrote there were plenty of reasons to get married, but little basis for believing in romantic and conjugal life as the same thing. It remained rare in her short lifetime to think that one had to fall in love with the person one married, or to assume that one could marry the person one loved. Children were cared for, obviously, but they were also routinely sent away to wet nurses or to school, or out early to work. The family at the centre of so many novels wasn't yet there as the