Summary

Jack Benedict's life was perfect, until Narcissa Fitzwilliam happened across his path.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Janine Gardiner was the perfect woman. She was strong and sweet and beautiful and sensible. Jack, her boyfriend, received envious glares wherever he went with her.

Their relationship was perfectly harmonious. They had met at Powell's Books in Portland, gone to a nice café, discovered some common interests, and gone on from there. They never quarrelled, and always enjoyed themselves when they did anything together. Jack was bored out of his mind and, in his phlegmatic way, immensely guilty about it.

"Hello, Jack," said Narcissa, Janine's cousin and roommate. Jack had never liked her; she was cold, arrogant, and generally treated him with a sort of amused disdain. He couldn't have explained why he was so relieved to see her, and only her, when he arrived at the cousins' dormitory.

"Morning." He flung himself into a chair and watched her. There was nothing of Janine's languid domestic grace in Narcissa — every movement was quick and sharp, tranquil or panicked with nothing in between. He noticed with some amusement that a long tendril of hair had fallen into the white bubbling leprous thing she was cooking.

She gave whatever it was a nervous tap.

"You might do better if you didn't read while you cook," he said. "What are you reading, anyway?"
"King Lear."

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child?"

"Right."

It was, he reflected, peculiarly satisfying to sit there with his books and essays, the stomach-turning odor of Narcissa's cooking and her blaring classical music assaulting his senses. Well, and with Narcissa herself; he didn't like her, but he did rather like being around her, needling and tormenting her, and talking to someone who — He cut off that line of thought.

"Any insider scoop on the clan, Narcy?" he enquired laconically.

"Don't call me that. And they're going to hate you."

"Oh, please." Jack leant back, summoning a relaxed, confident smile. "How could anyone hate me? I'm the perfect man."

Narcissa threw him an incredulous look. "You?"

"I like to shop — I have excellent taste in clothes — I read Jane Austen for pleasure."

"That's only because you think she's been usurped by the feminist establishment."

"That's not the point. And I'm clever, charming, attractive — "

"And so modest!"

"See? I'm perfect."

"No, you're a girl." She crouched down to peer at the Thing on the stove. "What would you call this, Jack?"

"Garbage," he said. "You should have made me do it. I'm an excellent cook. Did I mention that before? Pretend that I did."

"Fine, you're not a girl. You're a fifties' housewife." Narcissa dumped her primordial goop into the trashcan. "And they won't like you. They never like Janine's boyfriends, especially the ones who aren't serious about her."

Jack stiffened, his head jerking back, then caught himself and smiled with as much sangfroid as he could muster, "I love Janine. She's perfect."

Narcissa fixed her cold dark eyes on him, her voice cutting right through the opening strains of Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-Sharp Minor. "And you want perfect, do you?"

Jack stared at her, his mouth drying, and found he could neither speak nor turn away.

End Notes

In case it's not clear:
Eliezer "Jack" Benedict = Elizabeth Bennet
Janine Gardiner = Jane Bennet
Narcissa Fitzwilliam = Fitzwilliam Darcy

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