we were built to fall apart

by fairytiger

Summary

Houses need guests, and if there’s anything Bing loves more than collecting, it’s filling them up with laughter and companionship.

Darcy doesn’t understand the impulse buying part, or the playing host part.

But he doesn’t argue with the need for companionship.

Neither does Caroline.

or, the one where they're secretly hooking up

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

The trouble with Bing is that he collects houses like some people collect coins, or stamps, or rare manuscripts. Multiple properties up and down the state with the name “Lee” on the deed that only get lived in a few weeks out of the year.

So the purchase of Netherfield is neither surprising nor particularly welcome because if his best friend collected normal things, it would be of little to no consequence to Darcy.
But houses; houses need guests, and if there’s anything Bing loves more than collecting, it’s filling them up with laughter and companionship.

Caroline is the one to break the news.

“Brother is at it again.”

“He didn’t.”

“Afraid so,” she says, and through the phone he can hear the sharp click of heels on marble floors. “Though it is impressive, for such a small town. You’ll come this weekend?”

“I don’t suppose I have a choice.”

“I’ll pass on that enthusiastic agreement. Ciao.”

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It starts in college, helping her study for macroeconomics on Friday nights while Bing works late in the bio lab.

“Wouldn’t you rather be out?”

“Wouldn’t you?” She has a pencil tucked behind her ear, and her shorts embroidered with her sorority letters rise a little higher when she crosses one leg over the other.

He’s aware that this is his best friend’s little sister, though he’s never thought of her that way.

He’s aware that she and her brother have been the closest thing to family he’s had these last few years. He’s aware that as company goes, he enjoys hers. Their friendship makes more sense than his and Bing’s ever has, with their similar temperaments and tastes in food, wine, travel. They can spend hours in one wing of MoMa discussing the viability of installation art while Bing chats amiably with the curator.

He’s aware of their tension, a taut pull of a thread that may break any day now that they’re all under one roof in an off-campus house and he knows what she wears to bed and how even first thing in the morning, before makeup and coffee, she’s beautiful.

“No, I think I’d prefer to be here,” he says finally, eyes cast toward the perfect cursive in the margin of her text book.

That’s the first time she kisses him, and after the initial surprise, the pencil falls to the floor when he takes her face in his hands.

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Not long after, Caroline starts dating a pre-law senior from Berkeley. It’s right around the time social media becomes more than just ranking your top eight friends and Darcy’s too busy to make
any more out of it than what it was.

He is as much relieved as he is disappointed.

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Bing and Caroline are there for the ribbon cutting ceremony for the memorial hall. Gigi’s the one doing the actual honors at public relations’ insistence, and Darcy doesn’t blame them.

He thinks he might be crushed under the weight of the scissors anyway.

There’s a reception after, all black tie and small talk as donors tell him how proud his parents would be, how much he looks like his mother. He forces smile after smile and thanks them for their generous contribution.

An hour later, looking out over the city, he hears the stairwell door to the roof open.

“That was quite the disappearing act.” Caroline has a bottle of champagne in one hand and her shoes in the other, tossing the latter to the ground as she takes a seat beside him.

“Are they asking for me?”

“Gigi’s making your apologies. Careful there or you’ll be out of a job.”

“Gladly.” He takes a drink from the offered bottle.

“How did you know where to find me?”

“Who says I was trying to find you? I needed air.” She pulls her hair over one shoulder and leans back at the view.

“But if I had to look for you, roofs are a safe bet.”

“You’re afraid of heights.”

“I know.”

He swallows another gulp of champagne along with the guilt he knows is coming and ducks his head to her neck. She leans into him and lets him forget, if only for a little while.

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Their bedrooms at Netherfield are separated by only a bathroom. He hears her get up in the middle of the night and run the sink, and he cracks his door open, turns on his reading lamp. It’s a code of sorts, an unspoken invitation: he leaves a light on, she places a hair tie around her doorknob.

The water turns off and he hears her footsteps start toward her room, then suddenly stop at his door. It opens and closes behind her with a soft click.

“Good, you’re up.”

“And even if I wasn’t?” He makes room as she slides in next to him. Her skin is covered in goosebumps, likely from the matching set of silk shorts and top that he thinks might be for his benefit. Regardless, he pulls her toward him, rubbing the cold from her arms.

“I need a favor.”
“Oh?”

Her fingers trail over the faded lettering of his Stanford t-shirt. “The wedding this weekend. I need a plus one.”

“I thought James was flying up in the morning.”

“He failed the bar.” She shrugs in a way that says end of discussion, and doesn’t make clear if his sudden inability to attend is at his insistence or hers (though he has a guess). “It’d be rude to RSVP for three and only show up with two. Think of the poor dinner that’s paid for and will never be eaten.”

“I would imagine by that point, an uneaten dinner is the least of their concerns.”

She rolls her eyes. “Even still. Bing thinks you could use a night out.”

“Does he.”

“You work too hard.”

She curls closer, body pressed fully against his, and when she lays a freezing hand on his hip, his arms prickle too.

“Are you going to make me dance?”

“I would never.” She kisses his cheek quickly. “Thank you. You can go to sleep now.”

“Stay.” He stills the hand on his hip. “You’re freezing.”

He despises the word “cuddle”, and so does she, but they fall asleep with her head on his shoulder and his arm around her middle and sometimes there’s only so much vocabulary to choose from.

She’s gone by the time he wakes, her side of the bed still warm.

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Here’s the other thing about Bing.

The same emotional attachments he makes to houses in towns he’s never heard of extends to the people who live there.

So of course he finds the most charming girl at the wedding, dances with her, makes her laugh, brings her champagne, and expects absolutely nothing in return except, in Bing’s own words, the pleasure of her company.

“Do you see what I see?” Caroline rejoins their table with wedding cake.

“He’s hopeless.”

“What’s that oath he was supposed to take? ‘First do no harm...’”

Darcy picks at his slice, too chocolate and too sweet.

“No harm in flirting with the girl.”

Caroline hums something non-committal, raking the fork through her teeth.
“I’m bored.”

“Am I not living up to my plus one duties?”

“No, but there’s still time.”

She tilts her head toward a back exit of the hotel ballroom. He gives it all of two seconds thought before he downs the last of his scotch and follows her. But they’re not even halfway across the dance floor before he’s intercepted by Bing and a brash DJ announcing it’s time for the garter toss.

He’s watching Caroline wait by the door with a look of impatience that only she could make seductive when a piece of satin hits him in the face.

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Despite all promises to the contrary, he is not only forced to dance, but forced to dance with the only person who’s less happy about it than he is.

Who just so happens to be the far less charming, if not slightly better looking, sister of Bing’s current infatuation.

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“You’re going to abandon me in Hickville?”

“No choice,” Darcy replies, packing the last of his clothes while Caroline watches from the doorway.

“There’s a board meeting on Monday and Gigi has a tournament.”

“I haven’t seen her play in so long.”

He knows what she’s getting at and the offer isn’t entirely untempting.

“You should stay. Bing needs you here far more than he needs me. Left to his own devices, he could marry the girl by next week.”

“Bite your tongue,” she says as she swats at his arm. “She’s sweet enough, but that family...”

Darcy remembers the middle sister, her constant eye-rolling, her disdainful stare, and how it still bothers him nearly two days later.

“All the more reason for you to babysit.”

She pouts, only partly teasing, and he runs a thumb over her wrist.

“If you need to vent, call me. I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.”

“Unless, god forbid, we’re still here. And if we are, you’re coming back whether you like it or not and you’re taking me to dinner.”

He makes the deal, though he’s certain it won’t be necessary.

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Caroline picks the one French restaurant in town and silently gloats over bordeaux and foie gras.
There’s a period of two weeks where he actively, seriously courts her. Mostly because he wants to, but also because the lack of definition is exhausting. They’ve been a question mark for too long, and if it’s going to happen, like his aunt so desperately wishes it would, better now than more agonizing weeks of hands brushing thighs under a shared blanket while they watch a movie, Bing oblivious from the next armchair.

She scoffs when he initially suggests the idea, eyebrows raised in blatant skepticism.

“I don’t think you know what you’re getting into.”

“I readily admit that I don’t. That’s the whole point.”

She bites the inside of her cheek and runs her eyes up and down in assessment.

“Alright.”

It’s no different than the time they normally spend together. New restaurants, foreign films; the only difference are signs of affection that he tries out like he would a new word, tentative and careful. But she flinches when he holds her hand, tensing when he leads her to the car with a touch of the small of her back.

“Is something wrong?” he asks finally, when she actually jumps as he slides down the zipper of her dress in his bedroom.

There’s a long pause as she takes in a breath.

“No, nothing's wrong.”

She turns to face him and places a hand on his chest.

“Not yet.”

That need to put up walls to protect, to survive; it’s one more thing they have in common.

It takes a month and three dinners for Bing’s crush to turn into full blown adoration. Jane becomes a regular fixture around the house, as bright and shining as the original Victorian sconces she marvels over in the foyer.

She is impossibly kind, just like his friend. She cleans up after herself in the kitchen for her own meals as well as the endless parade of baked goods that come out of the oven. She suggests making french toast with her raisin bread one morning, and Darcy may never be able to have it any other way.

This is to say that Jane is as good for everyone as she is for Bing.

If only he could say the same for her family.

It’s the youngest that has him most worried, her mother a close second. Both have no semblance of a filter when it comes to innuendo, sexual or matrimonial. Bing laughs it off, uncomfortable but not enough to let it get in the way of his happiness. It’s no matter; Darcy is mortified enough for the both of them.
In fact the only other person with the decency to be embarrassed is Lizzie Bennet, and she’s another problem entirely.

Outspoken, a know-it-all, judgmental, not to mention irritatingly pretty when she’s disagreeing with him, which is almost always.

It’s conflicting, to say the least.

Caroline keeps her opinions uncharacteristically to herself, for Bing’s sake, he supposes. Even after dinner at the Bennets while Darcy’s away on business, she doesn’t volunteer information. He texts her from the airport.

*Well?*

It’s ten minutes before he receives a response.

*The salmon was lovely.*

The most important woman in William Darcy’s life and the man he most aspired to be are taken from him by a drunk driver just days before his 20th birthday.

Everyone seeks to comfort him through the usual means like floral arrangements and the names of grief counselors, nights out with friends and the promise of free alcohol. But his recluse instincts run bone deep and the ease with which he neglects his classes, work, and the people in his life is surprising to almost everyone.

“Here’s the work you’ve missed, plus notes.”

Caroline drops a stack of papers and notebooks on his desk, rattling the crystal tumbler of scotch perched precariously on the edge.

“You went to my classes?” Darcy mumbles in astonishment as he thumbs through the pages.

“God no. I paid a freshman to do it. He has a promising future in clerical work, by the way.” She pulls the spare chair in his room and sits next to him, opening the first of many binders.

“You have two papers and a midterm in economics, and a presentation for speech and debate next Monday. I figure we can start there.”

He stares at her.

“I’d assumed my professors would offer extensions.”

“They did. A couple of them even said you could be done for the semester if you wanted.”

“It’s probably a wise decision, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Please,” she huffs before turning to him with the most unforgiving look he’s seen in weeks.

“You and I both know you want the distraction. You’re hurting, there’s no getting away from that, but you’re wallowing just because you think you’re supposed to. Because you think you’re doing them a disservice by not.”

Her words cut him, more than the full page obituary in the *Chronicle*, more than having to choose
between mahogany and oak, and for maybe the very first time he is painfully aware that his parents are gone and will never see him turn into the man he wants so badly to be.

He puts his palms to his eyes and breathes, swallowing a sob. He feels manicured nails graze up and down his back and what little strength he had is broken as he collapses into her, tears staining the silk of her blouse. They stay that way for a long time, the quick but steady beat of her heart lulling him into something close to peace.

He finally gathers himself, wiping his eyes quickly with the back of his hands, ignoring the handkerchief belonging to his father that sits folded in his pocket.

“I apologize--”

“Stop.”

She kisses the corner of his mouth, then runs a thumb over the spot of lipstick left on his chin as she looks at him with sympathy mixed with something else, something that makes him place his hand on top of hers and lean in.

The sound of keys jingling at the front door reels them back. Bing’s home early, and rounds to the corner to Darcy’s room, pizza box in hand.

“Hey bud, I, uhh...I got dinner?”

He’s been so careful lately, treading on eggshells, practicing his bedside manner, Darcy supposes.

“And it’s half veggie, Caroline, so if you want to just eat the toppings...”

She rubs her lips together.

“I’ll get the drinks.”

The three of them gather on the couch, balancing plates and wine glasses, only half-watching the biopic Bing rented and for a moment, everything feels so normal, so as it should be, Darcy lets himself laugh. He catches Caroline’s eye and tries to convey “thank you” and “I’m sorry” at the same time.

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It’s all Bing’s fault. As most things are these days.

Darcy overhears half of the conversation from his place in the den, while Bing paces in front of the door, phone clutched to his ear.

“Jane, of course it’s okay. Yes, absolutely! Tell her I insist.”

Darcy darts his eyes over his book. Bing gives him a thumbs up.

“Great! We’ll see you guys Friday. I can’t wait.”

Bing hangs up and turns to Darcy, more upbeat than usual, like he knows whatever he’s about to say isn’t going to go over well.

“So guess who else is coming to stay?”

“Who?” Caroline asks behind him, just back from yoga in black pants and a tank top that does little
to hide the bite mark on her shoulder from the night before.

“Jane’s sister. She was going to be cramped with her parents at her cousin’s place so I just thought— I mean, if it’s okay with you guys…”

Caroline and Darcy share a look.

“It’s your house, Bing, you may invite whomever you choose. But with an invitation extended to the elder Bennet sisters—one that you cannot revoke without being impolite—I’m afraid it will be rather crowded. Perhaps it would be best if I stayed elsewhere.”

“Crowded? There’s more than enough room for everyone, plus Caroline’s shoes.”

Caroline swats at her brother with her towel.

“Very funny. I think it’s wonderful that Jane and Elizabeth will be joining us.”

“Lizzie,” Darcy corrects, just as startled by his own voice as the Lee siblings are. He clears his throat.

“I think she prefers ‘Lizzie’.”

-“To our last night of freedom.”

Caroline pours two glasses of brown liquor with a heavy hand. The house is quiet, Bing having gone to bed long ago with his phone pressed to his ear and a smile, small and quiet, like a secret.

“Whiskey?” Darcy asks, curious.

“I’m feeling rustic—when in Rome, and all that. Hit the fireplace, would you?”

He turns on the gas, watching the flames dance along the smooth white rocks, and through the glass he sees Caroline’s reflection settle into the couch, her legs tucked underneath her.

“Are we celebrating?” he asks, taking a glass and a seat beside her.

“Commiserating. It’s going to be too crowded this time tomorrow.”

“It’s temporary,” Darcy says, more to himself than to her.

“We said that weeks ago, and yet.”

She lays long-ways on the couch with a sigh, her legs stretched over his lap. Her dress rides up her thighs, the mark he left on the inside of the right all but faded. He takes a long sip to quell the urge to leave a matching one on her left.

“What are you thinking?” she asks, though it’s clear she already knows.

“Nothing.”

She challenges him with a pull on his tie, kissing him slow and deep. Nothing’s ever been quick with Caroline; haste is reserved for those who think what they’re doing is wrong. They’re many things to each other, but apologetic is not one of them.
“Here?” he asks when they part for a breath.

“Why not here?”

“He could come down.”

“He’s asleep.”

There’s a hushed laugh from upstairs and Darcy raises an eyebrow.

“Fine, he’s in Bennetland,” she dismisses, pushing him back against the couch and straddling his hips. This is her move, her position of choice.

“Caroline--” he warns through a groan.

“Don’t be a prude.”

“But why here?” he asks again, and she huffs in frustration.

“Because when this room is overrun with knitting and used textbooks tomorrow night,” she says, undoing his belt. “This is what we’ll think about to stay sane.”

- When Lizzie Bennet takes the same spot on the couch to read the next evening, he doesn’t dare look up from his laptop.

- It’s only two weeks.

That’s what Darcy tells himself, anyway. Two weeks of being the last ones up, he working in the den while Lizzie studies by the fire in the living room. There are plenty of ways to get to his room, but he chooses the route that takes him past the armchair she’s claimed as her own.

“I set the coffee timer,” he tells her.

“Super.” Then, after a beat, “thanks.”

“Goodnight.”

Two weeks, and he can get the sound of her begrudging “goodnight” out of his head.

- That same route to his room passes by Caroline’s door.

The hair tie is always there.

He’s always tempted.

He always keeps walking.

- Bing takes Jane’s departure as well as expected.
The house is noticeably quieter, darker, like she took the light with her, though maybe that’s just Bing’s mood. Darcy knows better than to celebrate in his friend’s presence, so he raps on Caroline’s door, a bottle of wine and two glasses in hand.

“Caroline?”

Silence answers, but boldness makes him push open the door anyway, just enough to peer inside.

She’s on her bed, clad in a bathrobe, hair wrapped in a towel while she paints her toes a dark crimson.

“Yes?” she asks, without looking up from her work.

“I thought we could toast to a Bennetless household.”

“Really.”

“I’ll miss the french toast, but little else.”

Caroline blows on her toes, running a fingernail along a cuticle.

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“Meaning?”

She finally looks up at him, bored and annoyed.

“Your room has been dark for four weeks, Darcy.”

“You never needed permission.”

“Neither did you.”

“There were guests. I didn’t want to draw attention.”

“Lest someone notice?”

She pins him with a look that makes him feel caught.

“Caroline--”

“It doesn’t matter,” she says with a dismissive wave, letting her hair free from the towel. Even from his place in the doorway, he knows it smells like coconut. There’s a bone-deep ache to be close enough to know for sure, to feel something familiar, to make right everything that’s been wrong since Lizzie Bennet first asked him if he enjoyed dancing.

“First Bing, then you,” she continues. “There must be something in the unfiltered water. If we stay any longer, perhaps I’ll meet a nice farmer. We can all live on the same block and borrow sugar from one another.”

Darcy clenches the neck of the bottle a little tighter, then sets it on her side table, along with the glasses.

“Believe what you’d like. I’ll leave you to your evening.”
He leaves the lamp on that night, despite everything.

He wakes later to the “click” of the switch. The mattress dips as she kneels on the bed, crawling over him until she’s straddling his hips.

“Prove me wrong,” she says.

It’s a challenge, a tipping point.

They go sailing over, together, in the dark.

End Notes

gigantic thanks to teresa and erica; this wouldn't exist without their /years/ long encouragement.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!