The End is Where We Start From

by Shem

Summary

The death of Elizabeth’s husband upends her world, and forces her to confront her past. In doing so, she has to come to terms with the fact that making amends with her estranged family might bring her back into the sphere of a man she thought she had long forgotten.

Notes

This story was originally posted at the Derbyshire Writers Guild in 2008-09. It was written in installments not as a complete work. No editing or cleaning up of the text has been done since original posting.
The window was lightly frosted, obscuring the view over what was once her home. If one spoke technically it was still her home, but in her heart she knew it would never be the same.

Elizabeth found she didn't mind the cold; usually it had her pulling a shawl around her shoulders and teasing her husband about the drawbacks of having, as her mother would have called them, such spacious rooms. Today, however, it seemed to suit her mood.

She was looking down upon a coffin. Well, the hearse, but it was impossible not to visualize what was inside, even from this distance.

It was unthought-of that a woman would follow the coffin from the church to the graveyard. Women did not attend funerals.

Elizabeth, ever impertinent, wished to buck that trend.

Inside was a man she loved with all her heart; how could she not want to never let it from her sight?

Of course, he would not have wanted her to make a spectacle and cling to the coffin weeping and wailing. She did not want that either; she did not want pitying eyes turned on her by everyone who knew of her loss. What the loss of such a man meant to her, and her family.

So she waited. She stood stock still in that room, overlooking the grounds and thought of how long she'd been mistress of all she saw. How she had never dreamed she would ever get the chance to be loved by and love in return that honourable and decent man.

It should not have happened -- not after Lydia. But she should have trusted in the generosity of spirit that so often resided in the hearts of men. Jane had so often chided her over her negative view of others, her making sport of her neighbours and human folly. She'd become so entangled in that forest that she'd lost sight of the trees: that there was human goodness in the world. Those who would not turn their backs on friends, people who would open their hearts to others -- all those truly good things in the world that Jane saw in everyone and Elizabeth had always thought were merely illusions.

With the benefit of hindsight, Elizabeth now she'd wished she'd told him every day how much she appreciated and valued him. Of course he'd known. How could he not know? He'd always said how expressive her eyes were. They would tell him the moment he'd stepped inside the house after a ride that she'd found his coat stained with ink, or they'd tell him that their son had spoken his first word. Surely he had seen her care for him in them as well?

Elizabeth had not believed in their kind of love. It was such a different love than she'd experienced before she'd met him. She'd told Jane that she would only marry for the deepest love. She'd meant it, but she'd not known of what she spoke.

That conversation between sisters had been about an idealized form of love, one that didn't really exist. What she and her husband had had was real. It was the kind of love that supported them through their days, and brought comfort and peace.

Elizabeth gave a small smile; of course it was not devoid of passion, quite the opposite. How could any relationship with her at its core be anything less than fiery and challenging?

With that thought, she turned from the window and slipped from the room. She deftly avoided the gathering of villagers and family alike -- at least those able to come to her side when they'd read her
halting express. The smudged ink and tears should have alerted them to the seriousness of her missive even if she wondered whether they could have made out the words she found so hard to put on paper.

Why had he gone riding? He'd loved riding; Elizabeth secretly suspected he liked the idea that his wife was not proficient on horseback. It allowed them their own space. She'd had interests that never interested him. The difference in their degree of sociableness alone meant that she'd enjoy activities that would only mortify him.

Again, one of those idealised notions of love: that the happy couple would always wish to be by the side of each other. That nothing could part them. They needed nothing when they had each other. Elizabeth had found that was all folly. She could she could readily support absences of her husband; whether they be measured by the hour or the day or the week, without even a twinge.

It did not mean she loved him any less, indeed after attending to one of Jane's lyings in, all she could think about in the carriage was how she longed to see him and share with him all that she could not in a letter. But separations, happy separations, meant she was still Elizabeth. She was not merely a wife or one half of one entity. She was her own person.

Her musings carried her along the path she knew so well to that familiar church. She'd found the spot and sunk to the ground.

It all seemed to mean nothing now, except for possibly the fact that at least she had not disintegrated on the spot when she'd seen him brought in lifeless. If she was one of those couples immortalised in books she would have died with him.

She was determined not to be like that; they were connected but she could survive without him. It did not feel like that at the moment but she knew it to be true. She had everything to live for, after all.

Except, nothing was there. No headstone marking his achievements and she felt empty.

Why had she expected a monument to miraculously appear the moment the last shovel full of dirt had been -- her shoulders heaved with the effort to stop the sobs mounting in her throat.

"Mama?"

That voice, calm but hesitant, made her double her efforts to still her countenance. After all he was her everything, he and his sisters.

"Thomas," she gave him a thin smile.

"You should not be here."

"Do not deny me this," she replied.

"There is nothing here," Thomas looked angry and confused. At the tender age of seventeen he was the man of their family and he had been raised to believe in that. Elizabeth would not be able to shoulder a burden that Thomas would not share and she was not sure she was ready to hear him give her the type of instruction he thought that an adult man should give his mother. He was still her baby.

"There is everything here, Thomas," came another voice that understood everything too well, having buried her husband some years previously.

Thomas looked like he might spar with his aunt but he gave into cold politeness, so like his father, in the face of the unfamiliarity of the situation and the feelings with which he was grappling.
"Yes, Aunt."

Elizabeth rose and kissed her sister on the cheek, "Thank you for ...

"Lizzy, do not thank me."

Elizabeth thought again of the many times she had thought badly of her sister-in-law's manner; her lack of strong will. She had been so kind to her and her children. She knew what Elizabeth was thinking, because she had thought it too; Elizabeth had not given her that credit before and now she could only reflect upon her own behaviour as a sister.

"What shall I do?" whispered Elizabeth, "I am so lost."

"You have me..."

"It is all right, Aunt, I have already --" Thomas sounded convinced that he had solved all the family's problems but trailed off in the face of his aunt's searching look. Elizabeth's heart broke for him, but she could do nothing in the face of her heart breaking, too.

"Come, Thomas."

Elizabeth let out a breath she was not even aware she had been holding as she watched Thomas submit to his aunt's command. It should be her comforting him, but she did not know how.

Elizabeth did not know how long she stood there watching and contemplating, some unquantifiable period of time, until she heard footsteps behind her. It would be someone coming to fetch her inside from the cold.

"I'm so sorry, Lizzy. I'm so sorry."

Elizabeth turned to see Kitty, her coat firmly buttoned. Elizabeth stood for a moment just staring, the tears she had almost contained, straining to burst forth once again.

"I'm sorry, I am late."

"No," said Elizabeth, "I am so glad you came."

"Do not say that, Lizzy. Why should I not come?"

"I'm sorry. But it was good of you to come. I know you -- " It was the truth; Elizabeth had been surprised to see her. It had been some years since they'd set eyes on each other, and many more since they had spoken to each other more than simple pleasantries. Elizabeth was not even sure who had told her of her loss.

"It is in the past, Lizzy. I wish I'd been a better sister to you."

Elizabeth shook her head. How that statement should be the reverse! "I think, with my own children, I see the pain caused by our parents and their favourites, I cannot blame the rifts between us -- between all of us, by that alone, but ..."

"I do not think this is the time to rake over old troubles, Lizzy."

"Not even if it would distract me from what -- " Elizabeth's gaze had turned back to the fresh dirt.

"You and the children are welcome to stay with us --"
"I could not impose."

"It would not be an imposition. Jane too -- "

That at least explained who had told Kitty. She could see Jane conspiring, although she would never call it that, to discover who should take the poor nestlings in. For that was how she felt, alone and abandoned.

"Of course any decision must be made amongst you all, but we love you, Lizzy. You must not shut yourself off from us anymore. I have forgiven. I am not even sure there was much to forgive."

Elizabeth shook her head mutely.

"I have a letter for you." It seemed such a non sequitur that Lizzy could not help but blink rapidly. She searched her sister's face and only saw a sort of resolve. The kind of resolve made instantaneously because one was not sure what one should do. Kitty had never had a great amount of resolve as a girl, but she'd grown into the kind of woman who once she'd made a decision stuck with it.

"I do not know if it will anger you or -- " Kitty held out a sealed letter with a finely gloved hand.

Lizzy took it and stared at the writing. She knew that writing and her heart sank.

"Mr Darcy? Mr Darcy has written to me?"
The End of Deep Mourning

One Year Later

"I do think something more timeless would be better," said Elizabeth to her high-strung daughter.

Henrietta's face fell as she admired herself in the mirror. She was wearing a dress that to Elizabeth's eyes was too puffy in the sleeves. Yet that was the fashion; gone were the empire line dresses of her youth and the obsession with the Grecian form. Elizabeth mourned it; she knew that it had not suited women of her mother's generation who had clung to their girlish fashions, and that it was unlikely to suit her now at her age, but neither did these voluminous dresses suit her figure now, not after several children. But it was not just vanity that caused Elizabeth's thoughts; they were most impractical for long walks, something she could never give up, no matter how many people scolded her for it.

Elizabeth might privately rue the new fashions for dresses but it was the amount of ruffles and ruches that Elizabeth publicly objected to on this particular dress. They seemed to her to be something that would date the dress, not to mention Henrietta's mourning period for her father was only just complete. The magazines the design was drawn from were out of date, after all, and they circulated around the village before they arrived at Davis Lodge.

It was a source of contention between Elizabeth and her daughter. If Elizabeth made it known she'd liked to see the magazines, Henrietta was sure they'd receive the magazines first. They would receive them even quicker if she would just order them directly from London herself. But it had seemed extravagant to do so before Henry's death, and during her period of deepest mourning inappropriate, and now it was back to extravagant. Although she admitted it would not seem extravagant if Elizabeth herself really wanted to admire London fashions.

"Nonsense, Elizabeth, she looks charming," Isabella Wainwright, Henry's sister, looked approvingly at her niece.

"Thank you, aunt," smiled Henrietta winningly.

Elizabeth caught herself before she rolled her eyes. Isabella had taken it upon herself to look after Elizabeth and the children after Henry's death since Elisabeth had insisted on remaining at Davis Lodge rather than take shelter with any of her family. Isabella's manner of assistance grated upon Elizabeth's nerves, but she could not deny the other woman's kindness, even if it was unneeded. How those who had seen her in her youth would laugh now at her ability to internalise her reactions to the human folly around her.

"I never said she did not look charming," Elizabeth merely remarked.

"And it is my first assembly, Mama," reminded Henrietta.

"As if I could forget," smiled her fond mother, "You have reminded me daily."

In truth, it worried Elizabeth slightly. Henrietta's constant chatter about the dances, and 'do you think there will be punch, mama?' and 'did Mama think that there would be enough men for her to dance with?', and her giggling with her younger sister Emily, it reminded her so strongly of Lydia and Kitty.

It was not a reminder that reflected well upon Henrietta, or on Elizabeth's success as a mother.

"Yes, Elizabeth, her first assembly and of course the dear girl needs to be a la mode. First
impressions last the longest..."

Elizabeth knew the truth of that statement, but before she could respond, a teasing voice sounded behind her.

"It's only York, not London!"

"Thomas!" cried Henrietta, throwing herself into the strong arms of her brother; at eighteen he was looking more and more like a man, not a boy.

It had taken all the combined powers of herself and Squire Albright, who had the ear of the village and was a friend of Henry's, to convince Thomas that despite of his father's death, indeed even because of it, that he should continue up to Oxford.

Henry had not been university educated and it was his one strong desire for his son. That and of course happiness for all his children.

Thomas had resisted, he had been angry with the world and his father. At his father for dying and at the world for making him succeed to a position he had not thought to succeed to for years, and one he was not ready for. It seemed foolish for him now to continue his learning, when clearly there had been other plans for him.

So Elizabeth had fought for his right to continue his youth. There had been too many people affected by their father's dying young and having to shoulder too much responsibility. If Elizabeth was thinking of one young man in particular, then she had not acknowledged it.

"Now you have someone to dance with," remarked Elizabeth as her son kissed her cheek dutifully.

"Mama!" exclaimed Henrietta, "I could not dance with my own brother."

"You might have to. Who else would dance with you?"

"Thomas!" said Elizabeth, "Do not tease your sister!" But Elizabeth was happy to see him much improved. University was the right option. She had worried that he might get into scrapes like young master Albright, who'd been sent down twice and caused the Squire to race down to Oxford at least twice more to untangle his son from bad company. But Thomas appeared to be a model student.

Not that he would write about anything untoward in his letters to his mother, but Elizabeth knew those kind of things did tend to make their way back to the ears of worried parents.

"You must be so proud of him," whispered Isabella as they watched the three children on the rug.

"I am," replied Elizabeth.

"He is so like his father," said Isabella sadly. "Henry was such a dear good fellow."

"The best of men," replied Elizabeth. It had been a year; she could think of him without feeling her stomach fall away from her.

"And so tall and handsome."
Elizabeth could not help but laugh at that. Not that she disagreed with Isabella's pronouncement. Henry had been tall and good looking. Not as good looking as other gentlemen of her acquaintance but he had been by no means ugly. And her son had inherited a good blend of both his parent's looks, and they suited him. Elizabeth could not help but think of Maria Lucas's young son who took after both his parents and it was not a combination that did any credit to anyone. Elizabeth felt terrible for thinking so, but she could not help it. She'd always cringed when her mother talked about other children slightly in comparison to her own. She'd learnt apparently the thinking of such things was a universal motherly trait, but she was determined never to let such a deficiency in thinking ever become spoken conversation.

Thomas looked up at his aunt's comment and looked disconcerted, like the Lucas boys had, fearing the next step was to get their cheeks pinched.

"And doing so well at university," added Isabella, oblivious to her nephew's attention.

"He says he is doing well at university," said Elizabeth, pretending not to see her son's outrage.

"I wouldn't lie to you, Mama!"

"She's only teasing," said Emily wisely. "and it depends on what exactly you are talking about when you say you are doing well. Your studies? Friendships? Eating more potatoes than everyone else?"

"That was years ago," said Thomas darkly. Elizabeth restrained her giggles, he was a proud boy and didn't like to be reminded of his ‘childish’ follies.

"You should invite your friends home," said Isabella suddenly. Ignoring of course the fact that it was not up to her to open up Davis Lodge; a sudden sting reminded Elizabeth that really it was not up to her either. Thomas was not of age, and legally his guardian was Squire Albright, but this was his home, not hers, under the eyes of the law.

"That would depend on Thomas having any friends," giggled Emily.

"I have friends!" exclaimed Thomas at the same time Isabella defended him with "Of course your brother has friends."

"Are they handsome?" was all Henrietta wanted to know.

"Moments ago you were going to meet your future husband at the York Assembly!" said Emily, wise beyond her thirteen years.

Henrietta blushed, "I know it is not likely to happen..."

"I do not think you should be thinking of husbands for years, Henrietta," said Elizabeth.

"Did you think of husbands at my age?"

Elizabeth had been too engrossed in thinking of ways to prevent Jane from saying ‘yes' out of pure niceness to the many marriage proposals thrown at her by eager men encouraged by their mother, to think of her own prospects. "No, I did not."

"You never thought of any gentlemen did you, Mama," said Emily pleased by her mother's lack of flightiness.

"I did not say that, Emily. Just I did not think of husbands."
Even Henrietta seemed slightly put out by this comment, "You would not have thought of anyone but Papa!"

"Your father was not the only man in this world," said Elizabeth. It was better that Henrietta lost this notion of the perfect man. She had known it in her lifetime, and seen it in others, that there could be more than one man to love and cherish.

Elizabeth noticed Thomas's sudden stiffening. Her brow creased; she wondered what it was that troubled him, perhaps it was just that he did not like to think of his mother before she was his mother. Elizabeth understood that, she had never thought of, or wanted to think of her parents before she had existed. At least not until she was a little older and had seen something of the world and then she'd wondered constantly just what it had that had drawn them to each other, and what other options they had.

But that had been because she had seen an imperfect marriage in operation; Thomas had not had that experience. He'd seen two people perfectly united, although maybe he did not understand this was different from two perfect people perfectly united.

Or maybe his worry was connected with the idea of inviting friends to visit. He would not wish to do anything that offended his mother or his sisters, or looked as though he was taking his position to the extreme. Elizabeth silently thanked the guidance of Squire Albright once again. Without him, she had no idea what notions her son would have acquired about his rights and responsibilities. Henry had guided him well, but Henry thought he had years more to complete the task.

She did not have a chance to watch him closer, because her daughters claimed her attention.

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Elizabeth folded the sheets and counted them off to match them to her linen record. She heard her son's footsteps before she saw him.

"Thomas, do you wish to lend me a hand?"

The footsteps faltered and she heard a muffled curse. She frowned but let it go, it must be disconcerting to never understand how there could be a parental eye in the back of the head.

"Not particularly, Mama," said Thomas, but he held out his hand to receive some napkins to count.

Elizabeth smiled, and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Did you wish to speak to me?"

"I know Aunt Isabella -- " he started and then stopped. "About inviting friends..."

"Thomas, it is your home, you may invite friends. You might have invited them even if your father was alive. I trust that if you wish to invite them, that they are people I, and your father, would be happy for you to know."

"University might have turned my head."

"I doubt it."
"Twenty."

Elizabeth turned to her son, "I beg your pardon?"

"There are twenty," Thomas handed her the napkins. "Perhaps I should be asking if you have changed since I left..."

Elizabeth turned away. They had not spoken of her feelings. As much as she loved her children, she was not sure that her children could even understand her feelings and that was not a negative reflection on their characters.

She had also kept so much from her children, both before and after Henry's death. She would not spoil their image of the world, or her, for anything.

"Mama..." Elizabeth knew that voice; it was the voice Thomas used when he wanted to ask about something he was sure his parents would not approve of. Elizabeth doubted this time it was about wanting to build a tree house, or whether his allowance could be advanced because he spent it all, or would they explain what Sally the nursemaid and Charles the ostler were doing in the hayshed.

"Yes?"

"Why did you say Aunt Lydia was dead?"

Elizabeth stiffened. She had never said that Lydia was dead. When Emily had found her family bibles, years ago now, she'd asked about Lydia. Elizabeth hadn't scratched her name out or done anything dramatic like that. As far as she knew, her father had not done that either. But Lydia had never been spoken about. Even when the gulf between herself and her family had been so great, she'd always mentioned them. Her children had heard of her other sisters. But they had never heard her mention Lydia.

Elizabeth had told the truth, and answered Emily's question. Lydia was her sister. She knew that her children had assumed that Lydia must have been a sister that had died young. Nothing contradicted that notion; her parents had never mentioned her. Her father through some mistaken notion of pride, and her mother through what Elizabeth realised was a true sense of grief and loss. As far as Mrs Bennet had been concerned, Lydia was dead. They had been parted forever and she did not know where she was. That was enough for Mrs Bennet to grieve. Not even the notion that she might be the first of her daughters married and living some grand life could console Mrs Bennet. She wanted her child with her.

Elizabeth had decided then, when she was young and foolish, that it was just because her mother wanted to flaunt her newly married (if indeed they were married! Or could be made to marry) daughter around the village. Lording it over Lady Lucas and her merely for convenience Mrs Collins. Now she knew that her mother did have the strong maternal feelings Elizabeth so often denied her. She might not be sensible or strong witted, but she loved her children and wanted the best for them. Her heart broke when she did not know that was true for her youngest. Her heart had been still breaking on her deathbed, when she'd asked them all where her darling girl was and all Elizabeth could think at that time was that she would have given anything to be able to answer her mother's question.

Elizabeth had unwittingly broken her mother's heart for the second time by leaving, and it was that realisation that made her reconcile with her parents.

"Mama?"
"I do not know if she is alive, Thomas."

"You wish her dead?"

"No." Elizabeth was more vehement than she expected to be. "It just seemed easier. It's history. Painful history."

"I've been taught we are supposed to learn from history."

Elizabeth smiled sadly, it was true. If Lydia had known about Wickham's history... Well, perhaps if her father had known Wickham's history...no.

"I'm interesting in who has been teaching you this history! Are you taking lectures?"

Thomas didn't smile at her teasing. "My cousin is at Oxford."

Elizabeth was puzzled. Jane's boys were younger even than Emily, and Mary only had daughters, and Isabella's marriage had not produced any children. Then she remembered Kitty's eldest.

"He knew who I was, but I did not know who he was, not at first. He and his cousin..."

"And his cousin is?" Although Elizabeth knew the answer.

"Fitzwilliam Darcy."
The End of Childhood

Thomas looked at the Spartan room. When he imagined Oxford, he hadn't imagined it quite like this.

Indeed he had never really dreamed of Oxford. He hadn't particularly liked school. But his father had always spoken of the pride he would have to see his son go up to University. He'd made sure to pave the way for Thomas to have that experience, that honour, that opportunity. Of course if Thomas really had set his mind against it, Thomas was sure his father would never have pressed the matter.

He'd never disagreed with his father's choice for his path in life while he was alive; it seemed dishonourable to do so after his death. It would seem as if Thomas was merely a coward, unable to stand up to his father, when it had been simply the fact he hadn't put his mind to much beyond tomorrow. Why should he have?

His father had taught him some estate matters, but Thomas had not seen their use. Of course he had seen the practicalities and the reasoning behind them all, just not how they were of use to him; as far as he was concerned he would not have to use them for years. He'd even said as much out loud and his father had laughed, a short barking laugh, and tousled his hair and told him that it would have its uses.

Thomas thought he should have insisted more on staying with his mother and sisters. Taking command of the property immediately -- of course he was not of age, but he doubted the Squire would prevent him from running the estate, unless he ran it into the ground. The idea had terrified him. That and the fact he was now responsible for his mother and Henrietta and Emily. At some point, perhaps not in the distant future if Henrietta was anything to go by, would a young man, possibly older than himself, seek a formal hearing with him? It seemed ludicrous, what did he know about choosing husbands!? Or wives for that matter. Yet all these tasks were now his.

Thomas shook his head, and levered open the window that looked out on the courtyard. Boys, or should Thomas say men, were milling about. None of the boys from the small school he had attended in Yorkshire had come up to Oxford. One of Squire Albright's sons had been bookish, though Thomas had heard things that made him think perhaps he was no longer bookish. Either way, he would be close to leaving and Thomas only had vague recollections of him, since he had gone further afield for school and then on to University.

The Squire had been instrumental in getting Thomas to Oxford, telling his mother not to worry her pretty little head over him. Thomas was surprised that comment had not roused Mama's wit, but he supposed she was used to the Squire. So no doubt the Squire had asked young John to look out for him. Whether he did or not was another matter.

"Davis!"

Thomas turned at his name and saw John Albright, who looked too like his father to be anyone else, picking his way through the crowd. "Albright."

Thomas tried not to let his relief show when Albright introduced him to several of his acquaintances. At least he would not be completely alone here.

He let their conversation trickle over him instead of joining in enthusiastically. The Squire had taken him aside and given him ‘the talk’ during their time in the carriage. Thomas had thought it was going to be the sort of embarrassing talk his father had given him the year previous. It wasn't, but it was no less embarrassing.
The Squire had told him not to fall into bad company. Bad company seemed to mean Thomas would have a very small pool of people to associate with. He could not engage in friendships with any young lady; he had to mind himself that he did not fall into company with wild young men; he should not fall into company too above his station because that might cause awkwardness; he should not fall into company below his station because that would cause awkwardness. Thomas wondered who this left him with.

Thomas wondered if John was given the same talk, because it did not appear that he'd taken any of it on board, if his and his friends' conversation was anything to go by. Or perhaps John was the reason that the Squire could be so knowledgeable.

Not that Thomas would consider ignoring the Squire's advice, he could not! He had responsibilities now, and he could not afford it. He could not afford it because he knew his means were not plentiful. They were by no means meager, but he didn't have money to waste on larks or women. And he could not afford to upset his mother; he did not wish to upset his mother. She had been upset enough already, she didn't need a thoughtless son on top of it all.

So he was quite willing to take the Squire's advice and attempt to focus only on his studies. Although he did not understand all of the Squire's maxims, his mother and father had never taught him to regard social rankings. It was the person that mattered, not their position. Of course Thomas understood such things, and in some respects they did matter; money mainly. Perhaps that was what the Squire had meant, that associating with boys from noble families would mean Thomas would feel it necessary to keep up with them when his means would not allow it. Not that the Squire had suddenly turned into Aunt Isabella, who as the parson's wife and even as his widow, had kept the village in strict stratification and who poured over the newspapers to read the court circulars and the ton gossip.

"Davis!" barked John, "are you paying any attention?"

"Sorry," said Thomas, "miles away."

One of the other boys smirked, "I'll bet. We were just removing to the Four Dials."

Several hours later Thomas wondered what had happened. He had been determined to be responsible and he was in a scrape already.

He'd accepted the ale. Squire Albright and his father had often given him ale, and he'd sat around the table after the women had retired, drinking port with them on occasion. He had not meant to over imbibe and even now he didn't feel drunk. But he must be four sheets to the wind. Otherwise, how had he come to play cards in that crowded taproom? Crowded with young undergraduates all eager to start learning, or perhaps that was eager to start enjoying themselves? Thomas was not even sure that they were allowed to be here, surely there were rules at the colleges about their students roaming the streets of Oxford? It was not even the cards that were the problem, the problem was it was for stakes and --

No, there was no excuse. Thomas just looked at the money he had just lost and blinked at John's prompting that he should continue playing to win it back. Before he could answer he noticed a group of young men coming down the stairs that led to the private parlour. He did not want to even think of what the stakes had been upstairs.
John prompted him some more and Thomas was about to put in another wager when he felt a hand at the back of his neck.

"I don't think Davis wants to play anymore," and that hand hauled him out of his seat. Thomas was unsteady on his feet due to the liquor and blinked at him. He didn't recognize the other boy, except he was one of the ones who passed through the taproom and up to the private rooms. The others at his table had pointed out who they'd been to him -- some scions of noble houses, but Thomas had just lost his first round and had been focused upon that. The stranger was older than he, but not Thomas thought by a great deal, and he was wearing a better style and cut of clothes, but Thomas still could not place him.

Not even the sudden surprise of cold air of the streets jogged his memory.

"So how long has he been in Oxford? Is it a record?" said one of the other boys, laughing.

"Never mind that, who is he?" a haughty voice, and Thomas felt the urge to take a swing at that one. The tone implied that he felt it beneath him to associate with anyone of Thomas's mien or class.

"My cousin," came the response and Thomas blinked.

"And that means you must play ape-leader?" said the haughty voice with distain.

The cousin -- which cousin? -- laughed. "Have you met my mother?" There was a pause, "and why should I let anyone fall for that lot's tricks?"

Thomas allowed himself to be wheeled off in the direction of his room, as the group split apart. The only cousins he did not know were his Aunt Kitty's children. Thomas' brain had allowed him to process that. His Aunt Kitty, who had married some lord, the same aunt his mother did not talk much of, the same aunt his mother did not talk much of, that Aunt Isabella always looked guilty for mentioning, the one his grandmother Bennet often spoke of before she passed, not that Thomas had paid much attention to it all. It was Emily who wondered about everything to do with the family. Thomas was happy not to wonder. The name trickled into his mind.

"Ashbourne."

"My father," said the boy encouragingly. "Maximilien."

"Max."

"Fitzwilliam."

"Max Fitzwilliam," said Thomas and felt something jog his memory that told him that was correct.

"Excellent. By morning you'll even be progressing to proper sentences."

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Thomas groaned; his head felt all muzzy. He knew now why everyone had warned him of the evils of drink.

The evening flew back to him and he groaned even more. How had his insistence on responsibility disappeared so quickly?

He could see his mother's disappointed face when he wrote to her. She would of course send him more money but he could not bear having to do that to her. Neither could he face the Squire. But he
must. He had made a grievous mistake and must own up to it.

It was then he noticed the scrap of paper and recognized the name. His cousin had left him directions to his rooms.

He dragged himself up and cleaned himself off before presenting himself.

An unknown young man answered the door, but when he looked sharply and Thomas and said "Your cousin is here," Thomas blearily recognized the voice. It was the haughty one.

Thomas stepped over the threshold, apologies bubbling on his tongue, but Max waved them off.

"If you thought that was a scrape, I'll tell you about a scrape," said Max, lounging in a chair, showing no signs of having been out late the night before. He waved Thomas into a chair nearby.

Thomas listened to the highly entertaining story involving a trellis, a water bucket, a dare and a chamber maid and wondered at Max's daring.

"So you see, last night was nothing."

"Except the consequences," said Thomas quietly. He did not expect the son of a Viscount to understand the consequences of losing even the small sum of money Thomas had the night before.

"There needn't be consequences," said Max. "Not that I think you shouldn't own your mistakes, but I think perhaps this time you shouldn't have to reveal them."

Thomas' confusion must have shown on his face, for Max handed him something. It was a sum of money. It exceeded what he'd lost, and could not be too much of a loss to the other man, but it was still a sum of money.

"I could not ..."

"You could. It was my own fault for not bringing myself to see you more promptly."

Thomas could tell the other boy in the room, whom his cousin for some reason, be it laziness or forgetfulness, had never introduced, disapproved. Max merely raised an eyebrow at him in a playful way.

"Be it on your own head when you run out of money and it brings your father down on your head. He does not have one."

"Darcy, shut up," said Max, the playfulness gone as Thomas felt that twinge that had lessened over the previous weeks but he thought would never go.

The moment when Thomas felt guilt in taking the money and concealing his folly from his mother and the Squire did not come for some weeks.

It had not been any of their faults. Well it had not been, if one did not count being out of the university walls at night, which was not approved.

Anyone could be set upon like that. Thomas had had nothing to take, but had still received a black eye for his trouble. Darcy had surprised Thomas in his ability and willingness to fight the ruffians off. Max had had the worst of it, being the one first surprised by the group.
They'd dragged Max back to his room, Thomas feeling strange about the ease with which Darcy and he worked together, considering he'd felt the previous weeks that Darcy was just tolerating him for the sake of Maximilien.

It had taken him some time to piece together that Darcy was a cousin of Max's through his father. After realizing they must have grown up together, Max's blithe lack of explanations regarding the other boy made sense. After all, he probably just assumed it was common knowledge; amongst those of the upper class it probably was. Thomas had decided not to take it as a sign that the Squire's maxim was correct, that he was involving himself in a world he did not understand. Lady Ashbourne was his mother's sister. They could not be dissimilar.

Because of their closer relationship, it had been Darcy who had written to his uncle and aunt informing him of the situation (they'd wondered whether they should, whether Max would recover and they would have vexed his parents for nothing, but in the end they saw no other solution). Thomas had assisted by fetching the doctor.

It had only been a bump on the head and the sawbones had pronounced that with a little rest that young master Fitzwilliam would be fine. Thomas had let out a sigh of relief, but he could not help the feeling that it was his fault that Max was carrying quite so much money, or that without him what they had taken would not matter quite so much.

Max had always spoken affectionately of his father, but Thomas had listened carefully, and also to what Darcy had said, and gathered that how affectionate the relationship might be, it would not do to anger or upset the Viscount. Something consolidated by the fact that Darcy made himself scarce the morning they expected Lord Ashbourne. Max had laughed, propped up on a number of pillows, face still pallid.

"That is just because he does not want tales of his own wilful behaviour circulating back to his father!"

If Max was unalarmed by his father's imminent arrival, Thomas resolved to be calm, though it was still with some nervousness that he'd stood when his lordship had been announced. Thomas had expected a slightly younger man, since his Aunt was his mother's youngest sister. But his lordship seemed to him to be the same age as his own father -- as his own father had been, he should say.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" was Lord Ashbourne's first comment, after divesting himself of his riding coat.

The question was clearly directed at Max, but Thomas could not help leap in and try and explain everything away. He faltered slightly under the examining look; he felt as though he was being assessed, but he ploughed onwards until he found he had nothing more to say.

Lord Ashbourne turned his eye reprovingly to his son and Thomas felt a fool until he heard his uncle say "And why could I not have such a son? I am sure he does not worry his mother."

Max tried to sit up straighter, "Papa, I did not -- "

Thomas was alarmed to see Max look paler from the effort, but his father intervened, moving to the bed to make his son lie back. "Don't be a little fool."

After this reassurance Max did make himself more comfortable. "It was very quick; I wish I'd been able to defend myself. Darcy and Davis acquitted themselves, I did not."

"Hardly your fault if you were jumped from behind," said his father, "But we should talk of better
things. I hardly wish to take a tale of your languishing in your bed under such a mood back to your mother."

Thomas found himself standing awkwardly outside of this close relationship between father and son. He was surprised that Max had not introduced him formally, but from their comments it did not seem that Lord Ashbourne had been surprised to find his wife's nephew in attendance. But it was not until his uncle found a pack of cards that he felt as if they'd noticed him again.

"I do not think -- " stuttered Thomas. He knew his lordship's reputation, though from Darcy, not Max. He could not possibly play for those stakes.

"Do you think I would be imprudent and ask you to play for stakes?" said Lord Ashbourne with some surprise.

When Thomas found he could not answer, the Viscount continued, "I may not have an intimate knowledge of your mother, but unless she has changed very much from when my cousin knew her, from what he has told me, I should not dare corrupt her son."

"Your cousin knew my mother?" said Thomas confused. This confusion seemed to confuse Lord Ashbourne.

"Yes, my cousin Darcy. Why he felt the need to name his son exactly after himself I do not know; after all, it merely engenders in me a desire to call him Fitzy or some such nonsense in revenge. But I am talking of the father of your Fitzwilliam Darcy."

Thomas was all at sea. Why had he heard so little of a family that his mother seemed to be intimately connected with from all sides?
The End of a tale long buried

Elizabeth had never been so glad to see her youngest child than as she had at that moment. Thomas had given her a look that clearly said he would not be letting the matter drop, but he would not press her with Emily in the room.

Again she wondered what had happened at Oxford to make her scared, scarred boy come back a man. Henry would have been so proud of him.

If Henry were alive, Thomas might have gone to Henry about what he'd learnt at Oxford. That thought did not alarm Elizabeth because she had had no secrets from Henry.

She had just not expected her nephew to be at Oxford. Her letters to Kitty were infrequent, and maybe Jane or Mary had mentioned it to her but she had to admit many letters in the last months had not been read as scrupulously as they should have been.

Not because she was wallowing in unbreakable grief, but because the village and her daughters seemed to be intent on saving her from such a fate. She'd never been so busy in her life. She did not complain because it was not such a bad thing, being prevented from thinking. But it had let certain parts of her life slide away from her.

Kitty understood, she was sure; Elizabeth had been surprised by the maturity of her sister. In her mind, Kitty was still seventeen with tears running down her face as her life as she knew it ended. But it was just not time that had changed her, life had done so as well.

No, Elizabeth's determination to renew her relationship with her sister had not been dampened but it had slipped away from her; she'd always just thought it was delayed. Foolish thoughts since she should know better than anyone that everything could change in an instant. She'd never thought her husband would get himself killed in a horse riding accident. Neither had years before she thought her mother would truly predecease her father. That time at least she'd made her peace with her mother before the end, but it was no less a shock.

Her hunting through her drawers in her bedroom was successful; she found the last letter Kitty had sent her, and with a sense of finality she moved to pen a letter she should have written years ago.

At least she intended to do so, but not before she realised stuck to that letter was another one. One she'd been handed on the day of Henry's funeral.

She traced the cursive hand with her finger. He'd just written Elizabeth, which had not meant a great deal to her then, but now it made her think.

When Thomas had mentioned a Fitzwilliam Darcy for a moment she'd forgotten that Thomas had said it was her nephew's cousin, and thought that Thomas had met Mr Darcy. Then it had dawned on her that of course it was perfectly feasible for Mr Darcy to have a son Thomas's age or older. That he had married and been happy.

The knowledge didn't upset her. Not from this distance in time.

She opened his letter; she'd not looked at it since that day.

It was a letter of condolence, nothing more, but it was a sincere one. Not one of the ones she'd received from many of her acquaintance which could have been all taken from the same book. This one showed an understanding of the depth of her feeling and an understanding of her.
At the time she was glad her heart was broken and incapable of breaking again, now it just caused her a twinge. The twinge of wishing things could have been different, that somehow she had trusted and waited, even if he had never come.

Then she would not have met Henry and she would not have had her beautiful children. She did not think she could trade that anyway, not for a life she could not, at this point, fathom in reality.

Elizabeth was just putting on her coat when a knock came at the door to her chamber.

"Come in?"

"Mama?" Thomas put his head around the door.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and smiled at her eldest. She wouldn't ask what he wanted because she knew. "I was just going for a walk -- join me?"

Elizabeth had been planning to walk through the village. She had not stopped into see Mrs Jemeston recently and it would not do to be remiss. But with her son by her side, and not wishing to be interrupted, she took the path that would take them through a wood and fields where hopefully nothing but a few cows or sheep would observe their progress.

"My sister Lydia was the youngest," began Elizabeth, not knowing where such a story should start. The beginning was probably the best.

She knew Thomas was restraining from telling her that he had already known that fact from Emily and her bible. But he was just quiet and Elizabeth wondered just how much he'd been told already.

"There was about the same age difference between her and me as there is between you and Emily. But we were very different. All the sisters were. I was much closer to Jane, and Lydia was close to Kitty. And Mary was just Mary. Jane and Lydia were Mama's favourites and I was my father's."

Elizabeth took a moment to survey the little hill they had arrived on top of and wondered when she'd stopped looking at this view; of course she saw it all the time, but when did she stop looking? Like when she'd stopped thinking about how to make things better or fix things. She shook her head and, tucking her arm through Thomas' more securely, they continued on.

"Lydia was very wild. She loved parties and people. She loved flirting and fellows." Thomas gave a little snort at his mother's alliteration.

"Like Henrietta then?" he asked.

"No," said Elizabeth sharply. "Nothing like Henrietta." She could only hope she'd taught Henrietta better than that, taught her at least to share everything with her mother.

"I'm sorry," said Thomas.

"Don't be. I should not have snapped, it is just... I hope there is no similarity. Not that I didn't love my sister...it's just she was hard to like at times."

"So what happened to her?"

"During the war -- the one with Napoleon -- "
"Mama, do you think my teachers taught me nothing?"

Elizabeth didn't try to hide her smirk, "That does not mean you paid attention for all you are at Oxford. But during the War, for a brief time, not even a year I think -- the militia were quartered in Meryton. Every girl loves a red coat!"

"Even you?"

"Even me," said Elizabeth. Her head had been turned by Wickham's uniform as much as by his airs and graces. A uniform was handsome; she was not going to deny that. "The Militia had to decamp to Brighton one summer. I was visiting my friend Charlotte Collins and I came home to find the girls -- Kitty and Lydia, distraught over it. My mother too." Elizabeth smiled at her mother's ability to engage so deeply with her daughters' feelings on that matter. "She wanted your grandfather to take us all to Brighton."

"I cannot see Grandfather liking that idea," said Thomas.

"No he did not. But the wife of the Colonel invited Lydia to go with her -- you can imagine how Kitty, two years older, felt at that invitation."

Thomas nodded. It was not hard for him to imagine, thought Elizabeth. After all, there was a larger age gap between Henrietta and Emily, but still Henrietta would be appalled if Emily was invited somewhere before her.

"I did not think it a wise idea. Lydia was wild and reckless, and I knew something about one of the members of the militia. But your grandfather thought he knew best. He thought that Lydia wanted to expose herself in some public place and this way he would not have to bear the costs -- financial or otherwise. He did not much care what she did as long as he did not have to deal with it."

She sensed that Thomas was shocked that she would speak in such a way about her father, but he said nothing.

"So I went with the Gardiners on a tour of the north. We were supposed to go to the Lake District, but could only go as far as Derbyshire. It was in Lambton that -- "

"Lambton, near Pemberley?" said Thomas.

Elizabeth felt her steps falter slightly. "Yes."

"Darcy has spoken of a fine chestnut tree there that he used to run to when he was a boy."

Elizabeth couldn't contain the laughter that burst from her at that point. "Then it is still there."

"Yes," said Thomas hesitantly, "I did not know that you knew -- "

Elizabeth squeezed his arm, "That is another story, Thomas, one just as long and one I do not ever think I could tell you. Allow me my secrets."

Thomas did not respond and allowed Elizabeth her silence as they continued on the path.

"Where was I? The Inn at Lambton. I had not received any letters from Jane, and two came at once. Of course she directed one of them particularly ill, so I was not surprised. My aunt and uncle proposed to leave me there reading them while they went for a walk. I thought it was likely anything Jane had written to me was meant for my aunt's ears so I said she should stay."
"Aunt Jane had written to say Lydia had eloped hadn't she?" said Thomas. Again Elizabeth wondered how perceptive Thomas was or how much he already knew.

"Yes. With that young man I had known something about. I should have told my father. It had not been my secret to tell and Jane and I had agreed it would not be wise to expose such an amiable man -- to all eyes in the village at least. We might not be believed after all. But I should have told my father. Made him listen. Though I don't know if he would have. So within the half hour we had left! Leaving apologies behind us and goodness knows how much luggage! We were just in such a hurry to leave and find them, but we never did."

"No one could find them?" said Thomas, "If they had eloped, once they were married why would they have not wished to make it known to you?"

"We learned that Wickham -- for that was his name -- never had the intention of marrying her. He never took her to Gretna Green. Lydia was just lost to us somewhere in London. Any other girl abandoned by her lover might have found many means to contact us, but Lydia perhaps did not wish to, or was unable to do so."

"It must have caused," Thomas paused, "great pain."

It did, thought Elizabeth. She sensed he paused because the pain of losing a husband or a father was supposed to be greater. She wondered if she believed that. At least they both knew what happened to Henry; they didn't have to hope that perhaps he would be restored to them.

"I learnt a lot about human forgiveness and understanding. The Bennet sisters were once merely a group of lively, handsome -- if I might be allowed to say so -- girls. Then we were to be pitied. Suffered disappointments. It taught be a lot about what it meant to be a true friend."

"Was grandfather quite angry with the Colonel? After all he must have been remiss in his responsibilities."

"Remiss in his responsibilities," echoed Elizabeth. "No, it was not he who was so. Not that your grandfather saw that."

Elizabeth bit her lip; she had not meant to reveal quite the extent of her feelings to her son. She worked to protect him from the world, not to blind him of course to reality, but what good did it do to talk of the past and show him that the grandfather he had sat on the knee of, who had read books to him and doted on him was fallible? That he had committed the sin of being an uncaring parent? She meant by that not that he did not care for his daughters, although that waxed and waned with those who were not his Lizzy, but that he did not care for what it meant to be a father.

The turmoil she had experienced when she realised just how fallible a man her father was, she had no desire to expose her son to that notion. It was enough that he was seeing for the first time that his mother was not perfect.

"Do you blame your sister?"

"Lydia?" said Elizabeth. Stupid selfish Lydia who did not know any better, was not encouraged to know any better. For some time after her initial shock Elizabeth had looked to the actions of Jane and herself to show that it was truly Lydia herself that was at fault; they had managed to bring themselves up well! But was that mere chance? Had anyone really done anything to guide Lydia? Apart from set an example that must have appeared aloof to her youngest sisters.

The point had been brought home more firmly in Henrietta. Elizabeth had taken her to task over
some behaviour of hers, only to have her teary eyed daughter exclaim that she thought she was doing what she was supposed to do, that she was behaving like her mother. Mirrors were not perfect after all.

Who knew whether Lydia thought Elizabeth's scolding of her flirting was merely because Lydia was copying her actions and doing it better. Elizabeth would never know the answer to that.

"I meant Kitty. If she was close to Lydia -- "

Elizabeth was startled by the question, so her son continued. "You do not mention her very often."

Elizabeth shook her head, "Oh no, I don't blame Kitty. I'd blame myself before I'd blame her. I'd blame Jane before I'd blame her."

"Aunt Jane?" Thomas looked shocked. Elizabeth laughed. Her children adored their Aunt Jane. Who could not? Jane was more serious and saw the world in less of a rose coloured tint than she once had, but she was still Jane. Serene and beautiful.

"I meant that Jane kept my confidence regarding Wickham when she should have told the world. Of course it would never have been her way and she thought the best of him, that he could change. I cannot blame Kitty for keeping Lydia's confidence; if I did that, I would have to blame Jane for keeping mine."

"Kitty knew Lydia was to elope?"

"I do not think so. I think she merely knew of an attachment, a serious one. But I cannot be certain."

Thomas seemed content with her story and her answers, and was happy to walk further along listening to her draw the conversation back to the comings and goings of the village and how of course all the village girls would wish to dance with him at the hop arranged at the Inn.

Thomas's mind seemed elsewhere, though, until he asked her about Henry.

"Do you mean, did your father know of my sister's elopement? Yes, he did Thomas."

"No I meant, you did not -- because no one else would, did you? He was not some second choice?"

Elizabeth frowned and looked away before turning back to him. "No. I would not marry someone unless I loved them. Unless I saw myself having a life with them."

It was a half answer, and her son was always intelligent.

"It is just you said you suffered disappointments."

Elizabeth sighed. She had suffered a disappointment in the way Thomas had meant. But it had not been a rejection. She had not given him a chance to reject her. Her focus had been Lydia and then her family as it tore itself asunder, and it had just slipped away from her. He should have come after her, was her only thought, but he had not. Perhaps that was disappointment in a way.

"I meant more in friends," said Elizabeth, "not everything is about romance. I loved your father."

"More than anything?"

"Do you want me to have loved him more than I love you?"

Thomas snorted, "I thought that was taken for granted with children."
"Not always." Elizabeth flinched, again, not knowing how to handle this relationship with her son. He had always been her baby, he would always be that, but he was an adult. He was not of age, but he was not a child. Henry had always somehow managed to cope with the changes in their children; he would have easily slipped into the way that a father dealt with their adult sons. Elizabeth did not find things so easy. "It is complicated. I would not have you think that love is simple."

"I don't," said Thomas, stung.

Elizabeth saw it as another sign that this conversation was like treading a delicate path and she wasn't sure she wasn't faltering.

"But you think that I should have never felt anything before your father, and that I should never feel anything after?"

That brought Thomas up short. "Mr Martin?"

"I'm sorry?" Why had Thomas just bought up their very studious reverend?

"I thought -- no, nothing."

Then Thomas' thought processes hit her. "You think that I? Mr Martin? Why?"

"No reason," said Thomas too quickly.

"Does the village thing that -- " Elizabeth was baffled. She should not be, though; she had always lived in a small community where everyone's solace was gossip and visiting. She did not assume that the tales whispering about the village, apparently so loudly that it had reached her son, were malicious. No one could have faulted her behaviour over the last year. But people were in love with fantasies. Elizabeth did not think of herself as particularly young, but she realised she was not a doddering old lady, but the idea of their young -- relatively speaking -- widow finding solace in the arms of their bachelor reverend would be too delightful to deny.

She had never thought until that moment of remarriage, but she found it interesting that remarriage was always, unless tinted by the scandal of divorce, about comfort, support and security. It was as if love and passion were the domain of the young only.

Elizabeth had the security of what Henry had left her, and, unlike her mother if she had not predeceased Mr Bennet, the security of her son. That left comfort and support. Did she not find those also in her children and her friends? Shouldn't it be love, passion and an understanding of true minds that drew her back to the altar?

She should not be thinking such things. It felt like a betrayal.

"I'm glad," said Thomas, squeezing her arm.

"For what?"

"That Mr Martin will not be my new father. I think I would disappoint him even if I am at Oxford."

"I promise you," said Elizabeth with a lightness that she did not feel, "if I ever should marry Mr Martin, or any other man lucky enough to receive my good graces, that you shall only ever have one father."
Elizabeth smiled as the younger woman handed her tea. She liked Mrs Albright. The Squire's second wife might not have the strongest intellect but she was fair and kind.

Those more mean-spirited than herself might point to that lack of intellect being the reason that Mrs Albright showed no curiosity in the world around her, but Elizabeth preferred to find it refreshing that Madeline let the gossip of the village and its surrounds wash over her instead of passing it along.

It had taken her awhile to grow into this idea that not everyone had to be her equal on all fronts. She had Henry to challenge her intellect, and now that he was gone, why should she not fulfil that side of herself...herself. It was a radical notion but why should she rely on others for everything? And if she found she did need a gap in her life closed, there could be something to plug it, rather than coming to resent everyone around her for not being able to mould themselves into something they were not.

Elizabeth had not thought she would grow to like this second wife as much as she had liked the Squire's first wife. Emily had been older than herself, and established long before Elizabeth came to visit with friends of the Gardiners, and had met Henry.

In Emily Albright, Elizabeth had found another Charlotte Lucas, though one unable to disappoint her in her choice of husband, and a good substitute for Jane when her beloved sister was no longer available. Elizabeth found she did not give confidences easily; even with Jane she'd edited certain circumstances. It was so easy to keep one's own counsel. But after Lydia it had been difficult.

In those early days she'd had needed someone like Emily to rely upon, to share her disillusionment with her family and with life. It had been painful to see her waste away, and she was not easily replaced, but Elizabeth found by that point she'd learnt again to trust her own counsel, and she'd had Henry.

But she saw no reason to dislike Madeline because she'd loved Emily. The only fault she'd ever found in the eight years since their marriage was that Madeline had a younger sister. Miss Corniston, was unmarried, and that part of Elizabeth's mind that she sometimes thought was controlled by the devil, took delight in bringing to the tip of her tongue all the reasons why that was so.

She did not live with the Albrights, at least she had not before; Elizabeth had merely had the joy of her company on her annual visits to Yorkshire. Each visit Elizabeth had wondered whether she'd be reminded more of Caroline Bingley, or more of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

However Madeline's last confinement had been difficult and Elizabeth did not begrudge her need of her sister, she had supported Jane though several of hers, and Jane had done the same for her. In her grief for Henry she supposed she had just not realised that Miss Corniston had never left.

For she was still with the Albrights, over a year later, insinuating herself into the life of the village; at the present time she was chastising them all for not thinking of a proper schedule for church flowers.

"After all, poor Mr Martin is unmarried. There is no Mrs Martin to think of these things," Miss Corniston concluded.

Elizabeth was glad she had put her teacup and saucer down, she was not sure she would have been able to hold them steady as she attempted to keep her face from showing her mirth.

Miss Corniston seemed to need no response and launched into a new topic of conversation; "We were so glad to hear from dear John."
Elizabeth was surprised John Albright did not choose to spend his break from Oxford with his family, but perhaps he was apprised of Miss Corniston's presence?

"I hope he is well?" asked Mrs Florian.

"John is -- " started Madeline, before her sister interrupted her.

" -- very well indeed. I could not see how it could be anything else. Although we found his letter troubling."

Elizabeth hoped he had not found himself in yet another scrape, although she suspected it was almost impossible for a young man not to take a misstep while navigating new-found freedom in the world.

"I hope Master John has suffered no harm," exclaimed Miss Yellowstone. Miss Yellowstone was Mrs Florian's spinster sister and the prime source of gossip in the village. Elizabeth had to repeat to herself on many occasion that Miss Yellowstone genuinely saw no harm in her behaviour and she genuinely loved the village children, particularly what she termed the handsome young men, as if they were her own.

"Oh it is not John that we quite despair of," said Miss Corniston in a hushed whisper, "but another young man from the village recently gone to Oxford."

Elizabeth bit her lip from exclaiming in stronger language than was proper. There was no doubt at all who Miss Corniston meant. Her first thought was maternal, that her Thomas could be in trouble! She'd spent so much of the last couple of days wondering how much to reveal and how much to conceal, that she had not once thought he might be concealing anything from her! Her second thought was that Thomas was a sensible boy; his very application to her showed his sense in these sort of matters. If something was troubling him, he would seek assistance.

"I cannot imagine what you mean, Miss Corniston," replied Elizabeth coldly.

"Oh, it is nothing serious, Mrs Davis," said Miss Corniston, contradicting herself, "It is just... Well I know how your dear husband left you all."

Elizabeth felt her whole body go rigid, but then she saw Madeline's sudden alarm and it caused her to relax slightly. Madeline's distress made it obvious that the Squire had not made public anything that should remain personal. Clearly Miss Corniston was an adept at prying into and reading things that were not meant for her eyes, or was merely clutching at straws.

"Indeed?" was her only cold response.

"Well, of course, it isn't as though he left you all with nothing. I just did not suppose it would comfort you to know the sort of company he has been keeping."

"Oh he has not fallen in with gamesters!" gasped Miss Yellowstone.

Elizabeth gritted her teeth but before she could defend her son, Miss Corniston continued.

"Oh no, I am sure Thomas is as good a judge of character as the Squire, but it matters not how good a person is, if he is the grandson of an Earl. Poor Thomas is in a world he knows nothing about, nor can he afford. Connections may be everything, but not at such a price."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, "Could it be, Miss Corniston, that you are speaking of my nephew?"

Miss Corniston looked confused, "No, John wrote of your son."
Madeline nodded, clearly not happy with the direction the conversation was taking but making no effort to curb her sister's tongue.

"I meant the grandson of the earl. I believe you are talking of my sister's son, Maximilien. I see no difficulty in friendships between cousins. But even if they were not, I think it all a pack of nonsense. Thomas has a good head upon his shoulder, and he might be friends with anyone he pleases without an adverse effect."

Elizabeth had always disliked social climbing. Money -- she regrettably understood the prudence behind that, everyone had to live upon something. But this deference and blindness due to social station! The assumption that everyone had their place in the world and they must stick to it and any abnormality must cause disruptions and danger!

She noticed the confusion on many of the faces present. She suddenly wished that she had just let Miss Corniston chatter on. Now it was certain that Miss Yellowstone would start to wonder why Elizabeth had never mentioned her sister the Viscountess. They would not stop to think that perhaps Elizabeth had on occasion mentioned her sister Kitty. It was only a small step to the idea that some great rift must have occurred between the sisters. After all did not Mrs Davis only occasionally visit away? Was not her only regular visitor her sister Jane? It was probably only a slightly larger leap to the idea that perhaps the rift was jealousy, perhaps Mrs Davis wished to marry the Viscount.

They would never think that perhaps the cost of travel was too much, and that Elizabeth did not want to be in debt to her sister. Or that letter writing sufficed. No, they would never think that. And the problem was that their suppositions would not be too far from the truth. Elizabeth did not mention her sister because there was a mystery to uncover there.

Except it was nothing to do with Kitty's position, well not really; even if it had been Jane who had married a Viscount, Elizabeth still would have got no joy out of crowing about it to all and sundry! It would be tawdry and pointless.

"I do not see why he would not dance with me as well," complained Henrietta, playing with Thomas' shirts rather than helping her mother pack them.

"Perhaps he did not want to," said Emily, earning her a glare from her sister.

"Is it the end of the world that he did not," asked Elizabeth, examining the shirts for holes. Thomas had claimed nothing needed any darning or fixing, but Elizabeth had long since learnt her son's definition of such things did not match her own.

"Of course not, I just think it was ill mannered."

"I would not like to see your happiness depend on anyone other than yourself Henrietta," said Elizabeth, matching two of her son's stockings together.

"Yes, Mama," sighed Henrietta, "but everyone else has been in love."

"You've been to one assembly in York," pointed out Emily sensibly. "If this was a novel, perhaps you would fall madly in love with your unknown cousin?"

Elizabeth tried to suppress a groan. She had been right about the gossiping. She had just not expected it to come from Thomas. He must have sensed his mother had not revealed all to him and in some innocent way deduced some of the real cause of discontent. Thus his prime topic of conversation had
been his cousin, and his many noble attributes. As if by promoting the son, somehow Elizabeth must be reconciled to the mother. It was either that or he was blinded by young Maximilien Fitzwilliam more than Bingley had ever been by Darcy. It was a sobering thought.

Of course she had written to Kitty. It was just she did not know where to begin. Time and silence had made everything more awkward than it should have been. The only connection they had, though, besides blood, was their children. Kitty would understand her concerns for Thomas, for surely she had had them for her own child?

Elizabeth might have questioned Kitty's motivations and feelings at one point in her life, but she could not believe that her sister was a cold mother. Thomas had confessed to her that both he and his cousin had been robbed in Oxford. Only the fact that Thomas was standing in front of her telling the tale had managed to make the circumstance any more palatable. If she needed proof, it was from what else Thomas related about the incident that made her think that neither Kitty nor her husband could be unfeeling parents.

So that would be their reconnection. She poured her fears out onto the page and hoped that Kitty could see what else she was saying. That she wasn't just talking about how she knew she was underestimating Thomas, and that of course she trusted in him, but it did not stop her worrying. Worrying that the Squire was not taking him back to Oxford, worrying about his talk about wishing to spend time with his friends next time there was a break in his studies.

Elizabeth was pulled out of these thoughts, and away from her daughters' chatting by a horrified exclamation. "Mother!"

Startled, Elizabeth stared at her son.

"What are you doing?"

"Packing?" Elizabeth thought it was self evident what she was doing.

"Am I to have no privacy?"

Ah. Elizabeth thought, another motherly misstep. He had never minded her and his sisters packing for him before he used to go off to school.

"Do you have any secrets from Mama?" asked Emily.

Thomas snatched back one of his books from his sister. "No! That is not the point."

"That is very true, I apologise, Thomas," said Elizabeth.

"Thank you," said Thomas stiffly. "I came up to find you to tell you the Squire is downstairs."

"Thank you," said Elizabeth equally as formally, it was the only way to keep a straight face. She tried to roust her daughters from the room, with limited success, and left Thomas in the room trying, as far as she could see, to salvage some of his manly dignity.

"Sir," Elizabeth greeted the Squire.

"Elizabeth! Why so formal?" he teased her; they had known each other too long to stand on ceremony.
"I find myself committing faux pas today, I thought I should not commit any more."

The Squire looked askance at her.

"I did not realise that a man of the age of eighteen is quite beyond needing of his mother in certain matters."

The Squire gave a shout of laughter, causing Elizabeth to give in to her mirth.

"But, to be serious, my dear. I am sorry that business takes me away, so that I cannot accompany young Thomas to Oxford. For all that he is a man; I understand a mother's worry."

"Thank you, Edward," Elizabeth squeezed his hand.

"I wish that I knew you had male relations capable of protecting you and your family," said the Squire.

"My father still lives," said Elizabeth.

"I did not mean an old man in need of assistance himself."

Elizabeth smiled. She suspected it did not take much of Mary or Jane's time, living as close as they did to Longbourn, looking after their father. He, as ever, was happy with a book, and if his eyesight was failing then someone to read it to him. She'd long since made her peace with her father. What was the saying? Forgiven but not forgotten? Although maybe that was not even quite true either.

Perhaps the best way of putting it was she had long since accepted his limitations as a man and a parent.

"I have my brothers-in-law," said Elizabeth.

"Yes," said the Squire slowly. Elizabeth did not know how much his Emily had told him and how much the Squire had told her of his talks with Henry.

"And I am secure enough to protect my own honour surely?" said Elizabeth, forestalling any more of the Squire's well meaning questionings.

"Of course, except you have not offered me any tea."

"Very remiss of me, I am sure," replied Elizabeth, turning to find the tea things.

The Squire peered out her windows, and gave a surprised clearing of his throat.

"Edward?"

"Are you expecting visitors? An express?" said the Squire, straightening up, but then turning to twitch aside the curtains again, "No, too smartly dressed for an express rider. But I do not recognise him."

Intrigued, Elizabeth joined him at the window. The Squire might not recognise him, but Elizabeth did immediately. She expected some change, it having been at least twenty years since they had met, but there was no mistaking who it was.

Elizabeth hurriedly put down the teapot she was holding and went to the door, her feelings all disordered.
The End of being a Stranger

Elizabeth made it to the end of the path before the rider had even a chance to hand his horse to their stable boy who had been tardy in his duties. It was not a surprise; they had not received many visitors during the period of her deep mourning, and never two in such quick succession.

"My sister?"

The gentleman stopped short at Elizabeth's sudden appearance.

"Kitty? She is quite well."

Elizabeth shakily let go of a breath. "Oh, I had thought..."

It had been the only explanation for the sudden appearance of a brother-in-law she had only ever seen at his wedding. Her head had then been full of buzzing thoughts and she'd only thought of his circumstances, of Kitty's circumstances. Not of him as a person.

He was older now; older than her in fact, but his countenance had not changed, neither had his attire. It was a blessing for men that their fashions had not changed so much. If she looked deeply, perhaps he even had something of Mr Darcy about him.

"I had business in Scotland, one of my father's estates, ma'am" Lord Ashbourne replied.

Elizabeth nodded, aware that the Squire must be staring from the parlour, and even perhaps her children from upstairs. It was a perfectly reasonable answer to her unasked question, but it did not perhaps explain it completely, after all he must have managed his father's estates for quite some time including many trips to Scotland. Never before had he chosen to visit them.

As if he had read her thoughts, Lord Ashbourne answered; "Kitty thought you might be desirous of an escort for Thomas."

Elizabeth blinked, "Yes, I am worried -- overly so, I know - but I would not have you -- I mean Thomas --" she was annoyingly lost for words.

"I was not thinking of informing him that I am here in the guise of a chaperone." She could tell that his lips were twitching in an effort not to smile.

Elizabeth could not help mirroring the action, "I am afraid my son already knows his mother's overactive imagination. I cannot believe he would be convinced by any other explanation. But you should not have troubled yourself ... "

"After twenty years of marriage, you do not think I have learnt to do as I am commanded?" He was sardonic, but Elizabeth did not necessarily think he disliked the notion.

There could be no more conversation as Thomas bowled out of the house, clearly astonished to see his uncle. As Thomas started talking away and inviting the Viscount inside, Elizabeth belatedly realised her rudeness and how peculiar her actions must appear to all. Perhaps not to Lord Ashbourne himself, although she had no idea what, if anything, Kitty had ever told him.

She followed them up the path and thought that perhaps it was like chess; Elizabeth had played her son, and Kitty had responded with her husband.
It had been impossible to have any private conversation with her brother-in-law. Thomas seemed oblivious to his true reason for being there, or perhaps he did know and was just not letting it show; Elizabeth was not sure. Her daughters had asked many questions about their aunt, and their cousins, and, in Henrietta's case, about London. His lordship had suffered them all with equanimity.

Even the squire, before he took his leave, had shown a great deal of interest at Davis Lodge's new guest. Elizabeth was sure that the sudden arrival of the mysterious Viscount connected to her family would be the talk of the village; that and his imminent departure, hastening his nephew off to Oxford. As with all gossip, it would be far more amusing if she was not the subject of conjecture.

"Mrs Davis?" the subject of her reverie made her turn look up from the book she was not reading.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Is it still your habit to take a ramble?"

Elizabeth smiled, "I have not given them up yet."

"May I escort you on one?"

"I would be delighted," said Elizabeth, truly meaning it.

It was easy to talk of the village and any little interesting piece of its history. It was similarly easy to discuss their children.

"You needn't thank me for taking a detour to return Thomas to Oxford. I would be tremendously in the way in London."

"I cannot believe that to be true."

"I am afraid it is my eldest daughter, Clara -- I do not know if you have this problem Mrs Davis, but she cannot quite make up her mind. One moment she is determined that a certain young coxcomb.... He is nothing like I hope you understand, but as far as I am concerned any young man observing my daughter is a coxcomb...one moment she is determined he is the only man for her. Then there is some reason that he is not. Then once again perhaps he is. Your sister ignores it." Lord Ashbourne paused. "I react, which according to Kitty doesn't help anything."

Elizabeth laughed. "I am afraid coxcombs are light on the ground in these parts, but Henrietta is the same. I do not remember being as young as she is now."

"Well I was never a young lady -- " Lord Ashbourne countered.

They walked on for several moments.

"Does it worry you ... "

"My daughter's behaviour? Should it?"

Elizabeth felt agitated. She did not wish to stir up a hornets nest. "No. I was just ... "

"Ah. The spectre of Lydia Bennet."

He did know. Elizabeth felt better to know that, but now that she had opened that Pandora's box she
did not know how to respond.

"Although one cannot assume that she bears the name Bennet, after all none of her sisters do anymore."

"We cannot assume she bears any name," said Elizabeth quietly. "Not, that as my cousin so helpfully informed us at the time, it would be a blessing."

"The righteous Mr Collins."

Elizabeth had forgotten that Lady Catherine de Bourgh was as much his aunt as she was Darcy's. She wondered why it was that he had never been mentioned at Rosings. Lady Catherine had been full of Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam after all.

"One and the same."

"I sometimes think perhaps your father is just holding on long enough to prevent -- " the Viscount paused, but finished his sentence by raising an eyebrow at her.

Elizabeth smiled, if her father could prevent Mr Collins possessing Longbourn, she knew he would. Neither of them would mind Charlotte's son, but Mr Collins? Every fibre revolted. Not after his behaviour. He had been pleased to be their relation when he could only benefit, but when it might damage him? It had not been a great concern to anyone that they lost the good opinion of one William Collins, but it would not be forgotten.

She realised how deftly her brother-in-law had turned the conversation; they were now speaking of her father and Mr Collins. She couldn't help smile at it, but avoiding a wound did little to heal it.

"I did not know if you knew about my sister," she said quietly.

Lord Ashbourne looked down, before stopping walking and leaning on his cane. "I am not surprised. I do not think we exchanged two words at the wedding, if that."

"Oh no, I am sure I would have said Congratulations," said Elizabeth, stopping to turn to face him, trying to keep her tone light. But it was hard to find anything to say that would certainly cause no offence.

Her comment received a laugh before he strode off again, leaving her to catch up to him.

"No I knew about your sister."

"And married Kitty anyway."

"I presume Mr Davis knew."

"Of course."

"Yet he married you."

"With respect, I do not think one can compare," said Elizabeth.

Lord Ashbourne turned to look down at her, "Why not?"

Elizabeth wondered how to pick her words. She knew his cousin, she knew his brother. In many ways both Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam had been proud men. They understood the world. She might disagree with their interpretation, but disagreeing with their fundamental understanding -- she
might as well rail against the existence of the wind. There were classes, money did mean things and with position came responsibilities -- to yourself, to others, to your family.

She'd understood it when she was twenty. But she didn't agree that Colonel Fitzwilliam must have found a wealthy bride, although he certainly should have if he wanted to have the same lifestyle in adulthood as he had in childhood, and have it without relying on his family. She also didn't disagree that Darcy's position as master of Pemberley and guardian of a young sister meant he had certain obligations when it came to choosing a bride. She just did not think it negated her from the realms of possibility. At least not then! And it certainly should not have left her open to the type of proposal she had received! Nor should it have led to the type of blind interference that Darcy had indulged in with his friend.

It could not have been a serene choice for the heir to an earldom to choose for his bride a virtually penniless daughter of a disgraced family. Elizabeth could literally hear Lady Catherine's response to the news.

"Should I make it easier for you?" mused the Viscount, perhaps impatient for her response, but Elizabeth could not tell, his face was too much of a blank canvas.

"Please do," said Elizabeth tired of ducking behind half truths and half thoughts.

"It was very easy. At the head of a very long list of faults that are my pleasure to own are selfishness and stubbornness. And they have always been there. Additionally, I have never believed the sins of the father should visit upon the son, so I do not understand why the sins of a sister should either."

Elizabeth quietly absorbed this. She could easily believe the man next to her to be all those things, his face might not give anything away but his very being did. "So you made up your mind, hang the consequences?"

"It is perhaps reflective of some ill of society, but I have always found that if you are rich and titled enough, and sure of yourself, you can carry anything off."

"It is a pity that more of us are not the former," said Elizabeth with a little bitterness.

"But you can always be the latter, Mrs Davis. You can always be the latter."

That brought forth a wry smile, "You should call me Elizabeth."

"Very well. The simple truth of the matter is that I loved your sister. I still love your sister. There is nothing easier than that. She was desperately unhappy and I had the power to remove that."

_The School_, thought Elizabeth.

Unlike some periods in her life, it required no effort to think back to that day. After an exhausting day of trying to tempt her mother to eat, or to at least think rationally, she'd come downstairs to take tea.

Her father had made some acerbic comment about their mother keeping to her rooms, and how he should follow the example. Jane and Elizabeth had tried to reassure him, but Mr Bennet would have none of it. At that moment Elizabeth's heart had broken for him, as he realised his faults and failings, listening to him reference how he should have heeded her warnings. Then it had all gone wrong in an instant.

Kitty commented that she would behave better if she were ever to go to Brighton. Mr Bennet had shot back he would no sooner let her near Eastbourne. It was a fair response. Mr Bennet had learnt
his lesson about giving freedom to daughters who had not learnt what to do with it.

Elizabeth thought he meant to devote time to teaching his remaining daughters about their errant ways, or allowing his eldest daughters to do so, for of course Mrs Bennet saw nothing but the victim in Lydia. Elizabeth had not seen it then, but she saw it now. Not that anything could remove all culpability from Lydia. Yet despite her foolishness, Kitty at the time, for all her peevish comments, did know what Lydia had done was wrong, and she had never been guided.

All it would have taken was some effort; Elizabeth truly believed that, of course she meant an effort on everyone's part. Their family had been falling apart around them just as they needed each other. Mary might misapply or misunderstand her maxims, but the idea of sisterly balm was not a faulty one.

Apparently that had not been her father's line of thinking. If thought of several years previously, perhaps it would not have been a bad thought. But it seemed a measure too late to take. For that was Mr Bennet's solution. His remaining youngest daughter, since she had taken no opportunity to improve herself like her elder sisters, should be removed to an institution where such learning might be forced upon her.

That he had previously commented on such schools for girls as having screwed women out of health and into vanity seemed to have slipped his mind.

"Elizabeth?"

She shook her head, "I'm sorry. I was miles away."

The Viscount did not respond. Elizabeth was glad for that because it was surely obvious on what her mind dwelled. He could have said something innocuous, like many had after Henry had been killed - - we are so sorry for your loss. But ultimately it meant nothing. Not really.

She realised they had made their way back around to the Lodge. She'd have to clamber over a stile to regain the path, and found Lord Ashbourne's hand a welcome assistance. Thomas, Henrietta and Emily were gathered on the front lawn, ostensibly to play a game of cricket. But she supposed it just gave them an opportunity to gape at her. Elizabeth did not know why, it was not as if she was her mother! She'd never given into nerves or stopped her daily exercise!

"I understand they know little of....?" Lord Ashbourne left the sentence hanging.

"Thomas does, and the girls: bits and pieces. I never could conceive of my parents before I knew them, so I don't imagine it is any different for them."

"Well consistency is the key ..."

"For parenting or successful lying, my lord?"

"Both."

"You should imagine..." said Elizabeth.

"Oh, no, I know, I've had experience in both."

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Thomas gave the cricket bat to Emily; Henrietta suddenly seemed declined to play such a childish
If he had given any thought to his uncle's whereabouts he would have supposed him to be still asleep, or at his toilet. He had not thought he would be having private conversation with his Mother.

Thomas wondered of what they spoke, and part of his stomach clenched. He'd lied to his mother. Not to her face, but by omission. At the time he'd felt no guilt regarding it because he knew she'd omitted as well.

He'd let her think that his cousin, Maximilien, and young Darcy had told him about Lydia. That, that tale was not a secret, not a secret shame, in their branch of the family.

Thomas had never discussed it with Max, so perhaps it was not, but it had not been his cousin who had told him.

It had been his uncle and now Thomas was wondering why he had told him.
The End of Madonna

Some Months Earlier....

Thomas looked around the private parlour. He wasn't fascinated by the fixtures and fittings -- he'd seen a private parlour before, after all. Despite what Darcy occasionally intimated, Thomas was from the country, he wasn't an imbecile. He was however looking at the accoutrements that clearly belonged to the current occupant, not the inn.

Darcy and Max were slumped in chairs. Max was looking exponentially improved on his condition of the day before. Thomas knew he had no lectures that day and Max had been excused from his for the week on the orders of the sawbones. But Thomas didn't know what Darcy's excuse was.

"Why do they never serve us the good stuff?" Said Darcy, idly swirling the port decanter.

"Because they think it a waste; unseasoned palates find pleasure in all substances," Max paused. "That and they know we only want the effects and we don't much care how we come by it."

"Speak for yourself," said Darcy, ‘my palette is seasoned and cultivated.'

Thomas laughed, causing Darcy to shoot him an offended glare at him. "My father appreciates quality in all things. He has passed his maxims onto me."

Thomas muffled a snort and Max did nothing to disguise his. Thomas wondered again what it would have been like if his father had died while he was still in leading strings. Would the lack of memory mean no hole gaping inside him, made by his father's absence? Or would it just be a different hole? Darcy never spoke of his mother, although Max assured him that the other boy did have a slight recollection of his mother.

Darcy poured himself a liberal shot of brandy from one of the decanters on the sideboard. Max declined a proffered glass on the grounds he felt sick enough as it was. Thomas didn't have that excuse, instead cementing once again Darcy's opinion of him as a provincial by making some remark about whether Lord Ashbourne would approve.

"My cousin is attending to business" was Darcy's lofty brushing aside of Thomas' concerns. Speaking strictly, Lord Ashbourne was not Darcy's cousin but his father's, but for brevity's sake it seemed everyone claimed each other as cousins. Thomas wondered if that meant Darcy thought of him as a cousin. He doubted it strongly.

It only took Max a moment to cave in to Darcy's second proffered glass this time of whiskey. Thomas decided Max only did that to create a tighter confederacy where Thomas was on the outside. But it had the consequence, after several more glasses, of both boys slipping into unconsciousness: one through over imbibing, the other through illness and stupidity.

This left Thomas to be confronted by his uncle.

If either of his parents walked in on -- or had walked in on -- such a scene, Thomas would have expected, dependent on the parent, a scolding or a hiding like no other. Lord Ashbourne looked more bemused than anything and waved away Thomas's attempt at explanation.

Thomas blushed when he realised that he had in effect blamed Darcy for the scene in front of him. While that was true, Thomas had not been brought up to be dishonourable in that sense. It shamed him to have appeared so in front of the Viscount. The raised eyebrow told him that his uncle had
heard him, but Thomas did not know whether to be relieved or not when he did not mention it.

Instead Lord Ashbourne divested himself off his riding coat and remarked, "Did you leave me any refreshments at least?"

Thomas remained silent as the obvious answer was 'no'.

"I could not know, and neither could you of course, but that shall not stop us speculating. Do you think this -- " This clearly encompassed the sleeping Darcy, "is the result of two men alone? I know Lady Carling, Georgiana Darcy as was, " he added for Thomas's benefit, and Thomas was grateful, "does what she can, as does Kitty. But they are and have been, on the whole two bachelor men alone at Pemberley for so long."

"Mr Darcy does not have a housekeeper?" Said Thomas in wonderment.

"Oh, he has one of those. But no one since Mrs Reynolds has held any real sway over the Darcys, not in the way a long term servant does."

Thomas knew the truth in that. His old Nursery maid felt herself as much his mother as his mother! Thomas would forever be under her command. Forever her little Thomas whom she could tut over and scold, and praise to everyone she knew.

"Mr Darcy never wished to remarry?" said Thomas, realising he was perhaps over stretching his welcome or politeness in that regard. But Thomas seemed unable to help it. Max seemed such an open book, whereas Darcy? Thomas wondered about him.

"Apparently not. Not for lack of trying on behalf of several very determined young ladies, I must add!"

Thomas smiled; he could only imagine they would be somewhat worse than Henrietta, who for all her chatter had not yet been let loose to practice her charms.

"I have never understood why Darcy did not remarry. Ladies broaden the mind after all."

Thomas felt pink spots rise to his cheeks. He had hardly remained composed when his father talked frankly and the Squire touched upon ladies. Lord Ashbourne seemed to sense the direction of his thoughts.

"Not those sort of ladies, although if Darcy cultivated them I did not hear of it. Those ladies broaden something else entirely."

Thomas choked, causing his uncle to laugh. Thomas felt redder than ever. His knowledge was minimal on the subject of ladies and he had never wished to bring the subject up, but here was the perfect opportunity. He cleared his throat.

"About those young ladies..."

The Viscount seemed to be choosing between toying with him, pretending to know not what of he spoke, or speaking freely.

"What of them?" There was no accusation in his voice which Thomas was certain would have been in his father's or the Squire's. Despite Lord Ashbourne's age, and Thomas's growing respect and awe, he was not a parental figure. Thomas wondered if the Viscount was nonchalant about such subjects because Thomas was not his son, or because that was the Viscount's way.
Thomas wanted to answer his uncle's question with 'everything', but he knew that would bring him in for some teasing. "I don't understand." He belatedly realised this was not much better. "I mean I understand the purpose. But I cannot see why any young lady would wish to be a fallen woman."

"Oh to be Madonna or the whore," said Lord Ashbourne with a smile.

"Excuse me?"

"Women must be one or the other must they not?"

Thomas nodded, although he was unsure.

"Not all women are fallen. At least from their perspective. Some enjoy it. For some, it's a genuine business proposition. Of course, for many it's a necessity or they are forced into it."

"Business?"

"Greed it not just the purvey of men. Thomas, men are not perfect and neither are women, you should not expect perfection in anyone."

Thomas was confused when it seemed his uncle had shot a look at his son when he said that. Thomas did not think Max was perfect! The evidence he was not was staring him in the face!

Lord Ashbourne pulled off his boots and loosened his cravat, remarking mildly that status, respectability, whatever you wished to call it, was all a matter of perspective and names. After all an opera dancer was a different thing to a mistress.

"Did you have one?" said Thomas suddenly, slightly alarmed at what he'd blurted.

"I am glad you presume the past tense." Thomas would not have assumed otherwise. For any decent man it would have to be the case, "but the answer is yes."

Thomas was interested; there were so many parts of society that were alien to him and he felt so stupid to be confronted by situations and conversations he did not understand. It was his curiosity that caused Thomas' father to consider sending him to university. Thomas may not be bookish, but he wanted to know things. Although there were some things he did not want to know that much detail about!

His uncle reached over to slide open a drawer from which he pulled a full decanter. "I require a drink if you are going to be asking any more personal questions."

Lord Ashbourne cut off Thomas' apology. "I have few regrets in my life. That is not one of them, and I should hope that I shall never have cause to regret the fact I was shuttered when I should have been open."

Thomas smiled, "My father always said honesty was the best policy."

"He sounds like he was a wise man."

Thomas tried to keep smiling, "I miss him." This time he did accept a glass when it was proffered and joined the Viscount in a toast to his father.

"Although my mother misses him far more than I," said Thomas.

"That is not unexpected."
"No. She has the village and her sisters -- well, Aunt Jane and Mary -- " Thomas stopped suddenly. "I did not mean..."

"It does not matter." Lord Ashbourne finished his drink, and Thomas found himself gulping his down. "Kitty has me, your aunts have their families, and your mother has you."

Thomas felt his heart sink. His mother did have him, and he felt useless. How did he know what to ask his mother? What questions to ask to discover if she was all right? He did not realise how much of that had been said out loud until he heard his uncle.

"Well you cannot be useful until you know what questions to ask."

"What questions should I ask?" said Thomas ruefully.

"I would start by asking her about the day Lydia Bennet took a little tumble and the world was never the same."

"You mean when she died?" said Thomas, after his brain took a moment to supply him with who Lydia Bennet was.

"I mean the day she fell from grace, and could no longer be Madonna."

________________________________________________________

_The Present..._

Thomas watched as his mother and uncle grew closer, walking more slowly it seemed now that they had seen them. Lord Ashbourne had told him the story of Lydia Bennet. Thomas knew it was only as far as he knew it, as his mother had told him what she had known.

The true story could only come from Lydia herself, and she was not around to defend herself or bury her reputation any further.

Thomas had been surprised about how little he felt about his aunt and her situation; any feeling he should have had had been swamped under the feeling let loose by the idea that his mother had kept such a terrible secret.

Not only that he'd not known about this family history, but how his mother had handled it. Of course his uncle had made no judgements; indeed he had barely mentioned his sister-in-law. But Thomas could put the pieces together.

His childish self clung to the idea of his mother as perfection, but it could not be so. Her family would be far more whole if she had been perfect.

Thomas assumed his uncle had told him because they were sharing confidences and he had been asking about such women. But now he saw him talking so intently with his mother, he wondered.

It wasn't until the next morning when they were both safely in the carriage. After Thomas had gotten over the embarrassment of his mother saying her goodbyes! It seemed impossible without tears from her and his sister and then suddenly remembered pieces of advice.

"I thought you told me about Aunt Lydia so that I could support my mother," said Thomas, knowing he was interrupting his uncle from his book.

"Ever the petulant child," said the Viscount, a remark that stung Thomas.
"I am not."

"Are too."

"Am not -- " Thomas paused in the face of his uncle's raised eyebrows.

"I did not think you believed this was about you," said Lord Ashbourne mildly.

"I do not," said Thomas, "I just do not know why you told me, if you were going to speak to my mother about it anyway!"

"Perhaps because I do not see the wisdom in you not knowing; a lack of communication has caused more than one heartache in this family."

"Why now?" said Thomas. If Lord Ashbourne felt that the Bennet family torn asunder was such a terrible thing, why had he waited over twenty years?

"My lamentable laziness," was the only reply Thomas would get.

Thomas did not believe it. Lazy the other man might be, but that was not his reason.

He could not help but wonder whether it was because they were all sisters. He did not mean that because he thought women were weaker, but because they all went on to other families, to different names. A man would be stuck with the name Bennet and would have tried his utmost to keep every last shred of dignity of that name.

For whatever reason his aunts had drifted off away from each other; even Aunt Jane, who was closest to Mama, was not a confident like Emily and Henrietta were to each other. Of course the difference there might merely be age, but Thomas did not think so.

It seemed that his uncle had said all he was going to say on the subject. Thomas rather thought he perhaps liked being an enigma. Then again, at this present time Thomas understood few adults in his life.

"Shall we make Oxford tonight?" asked Thomas. It would be a long journey, but it would be longer if he'd had to brave the stage.

"No, we are stopping for the night," said the Viscount vaguely.

Thomas frowned, "Mama did not mention it."

"That's because she doesn't know," was the reply.

Where was his uncle taking him?

"Why did you not tell her?" Stopping somewhere for the night, or perhaps even two nights made sense, otherwise Thomas would end up being in his rooms at Oxford all alone for a short while. His mother had urged him to go back early, not because she wanted to be rid of him but because she feared he might be delayed upon the road and it would not do to be late. Thomas wondered if all mothers were as irrational on the subject.

"I think she would have thought I was playing an ugly game."

Did his mother think that Lord Ashbourne, and by extension her sister Kitty, was trying to lure him away? To turn him against his own family? It would explain the need for such a long and in-depth conversation as they had had. But his mother was surely not that irrational. Indeed the opposite was
true; his mother was always sensible. Except perhaps when it came to her children, which made
Thomas think again.

"Game?"

He got no response.

It was not until they were on the drive which wound through a private park that Lord Ashbourne
returned to the topic.

Thomas had opened the sash to poke his head out and admire the view. It was a fair prospect. The
house was grand, even grander than the Squire's. The squire's paled in comparison, and most of the
attractiveness came from how the place was situated. No one had felt the need to take this house
away from Nature.

"It is a fair prospect," said his uncle.

Thomas said nothing, not wishing to be rebuffed again.

"Pemberley, and over that direction is the village of Lambton."

That did make Thomas turn to look. His uncle had brought him to Lambton? Was that why his
mother would have found it unamusing?

Then Thomas remembered whose home was Pemberley. Darcy.

His thoughts must have shown on his face, "It was rather a certainty that you would take an
immediate dislike to my cousin, wasn't it?"

Thomas did not completely understand the comment, nor the reason why it brought a smile to his
uncle's face that did not quite reach his eyes.

"Is Max here?"

"I'm afraid not."

Thomas sighed.

He waited until Lord Ashbourne had left the carriage before climbing from it; he'd half expected a
welcoming party but there was none.

"Very welcoming," muttered the Viscount, causing Thomas to snort.

Several footmen ran to unload the baggage, Lord Ashbourne directing them. Thomas merely stared
at the edifice, until an older man, presumably Mr Darcy senior, made his appearance.

"Ash."

"Darce, your skills as a host astound me."

"You expect after so many visits to be particularly singled out?"

"I may not, but -- "Lord Ashbourne looked in Thomas' direction.

Thomas straightened as Mr Darcy's eye turned on him. "I do apologise."
Thomas did not quite know what to say to that, so merely said there was no need to apologise. Instead it might be more useful if he introduced himself.

"Thomas Davis, sir." Thomas held out his hand. To his eye, it seemed that the older man stiffened and hesitated a moment before taking his hand.

"Yes, Darce. I've brought you my nephew."

In that moment Thomas had cause to wonder just what sort of game Lord Ashbourne was playing.
"Your mother did not trust you to go to Oxford by yourself?"

Thomas had his back to the younger Darcy and concentrated upon unpacking what he would need for the next two days. He had thought that Darcy and he could be civil, but it seemed in his natural habit that the other boy had reverted to form.

Lord Ashbourne had asked Thomas that night when he'd told him about Aunt Lydia whether he thought the behaviour of Darcy was anything to do with the fact Darcy had no mother. Thomas had not answered at the time and even then he would have said 'No, he is just a git'. Now he was not so sure. Darcy's behaviour smacked of jealousy.

He had been jealous that suddenly Thomas had arrived and Max had invited him to join their little circle. He seemed now convinced that Thomas was usurping his uncle as well. Perhaps that was the result of being a motherless only child? The protectiveness of one's circle?

"The maid can do that, since you do not have a valet," said Darcy.

"You don't have a valet."

"Well, it should look ostentatious at Oxford."

Thomas rolled his eyes and returned to digging through his trunk.

"This was my grandmother's room."

Thomas nodded vaguely.

"She died in it." Thomas turned sharply to see the smirk on Darcy's face.

Thomas could see a portrait on the mantelpiece. "Is that your grandmother?"

Darcy looked startled, "No that is my mother. My grandmother liked to look upon her daughter when she stayed here."

Mrs Darcy had been a sharp looking blonde. Thomas would not have called her pretty, striking perhaps. There was, however, only a slight resemblance between her and her son. Perhaps her son had inherited her sharpness?

Darcy took it down from the mantelpiece to give Thomas a better look, one he hadn't asked for.

"She was the toast of her season, for her wit mainly. It surprised many when my father proposed, because she had challenged him; and my father does not like to be challenged, but he liked it in her." Darcy sounded quite dispassionate, which did not surprise Thomas. If he could only vaguely remember his mother, it would be like talking about a character from a book. A well-rounded character perhaps but they would seem no less distant. Or perhaps Mrs Darcy wasn't well-rounded in Darcy's mind. After all Thomas could be witness to the fact that parents did not often tell their children everything.

"Father tells me she was ill for some time, and that it was a blessing she was released when she was. Not being in any more pain."
Thomas nodded, "My grandmother was ill for most of my life. Although my mother says it was difficult to tell what were her infamous nerves, and what was true illness."

"My mother wouldn't have had nerves," Just as quickly as the wall had fallen from around Darcy did it fly back up.

"I never thought she would."

Darcy took his leave, which was a blessing for more than one reason. One of them was Thomas was able to leisurely walk down to the drawing room. The paintings and sculptures, everything here was on such a large scale. He had never been inside a house where one might confuse it for an art gallery. Who knew how many of these paintings were famous, or of Darcys? Or maybe they were the same thing.

"We had thought you were lost, but now I see you are admiring," Thomas looked up to see his uncle leaning against the banister. "What do you think?"

"I know nothing of art."

"But you know what you like?"

"Yes but that is hardly -- "

"Scientific?"

Thomas shrugged.

"Should art be scientific?" questioned his uncle, "or should you just like what you like?"

"I think perhaps Darcy and Mr Darcy..." Thomas grimaced, why could they not be named different things? It was easy to tell apart Henry and Thomas, and Max and Lord Ashbourne. He could refer to the younger Darcy as Fitzwilliam, but he had not been granted that privilege, and indeed even Max just called him Darcy. Fitzwilliam was just too much of a mouthful. ".would not see it that way."

"Would you see it that way?"

Thomas turned to answer his uncle's question but found it was not addressed to him and he blushed when he saw the older Mr Darcy had joined his cousin at the top of the stair.

"My wife appreciated art far more than me. I dedicate myself to my library."

"But this is not an old piece," said Thomas.

Mr Darcy joined him by the painting of a landscape. Thomas could only attest to its newness by the fact the artist had helpfully painted the date next to their signature.

"Yes. I find myself continuing the tradition."

"My father liked music. He used to like listening to my mother play. She still plays now." Thomas did not quite know what possessed him to contribute that little fact to the conversation, but Mr Darcy smiled.

"Taking the trouble to practice."

"Yes, sir." Although Mr Darcy's small chuckle confused him, he did not see the joke.
It was not until dinner that Thomas remembered that his mother had known Mr Darcy. It made Thomas look at the older man more closely.

He had known his mother when she was still Miss Elizabeth Bennet. It was strange to sit with a man who was part of a past that a year ago Thomas could not even conceive of his mother having. It was like he had suddenly realised that his mother had not sprung to life the moment he existed. She had had experiences and *life* before he, and Emily and Henrietta. Even before Papa.

Considering what he had discovered about that life, Thomas could not help be extra curious about everyone who might have played a part in it.

Thomas only assumed that Mr Darcy had played a part. His mother was at Lambton, was it only a mere coincidence that had brought her that close to Pemberley? Indeed his mother had only implied that it was more than an acquaintance brought on by her being near Lambton.

Darcy gave Thomas a frown; Thomas did not entirely blame him, he had after all been staring at his father. He was sure it looked odd.

"What is it, Davis?"

Thomas shook his head, "Nothing." Then Thomas thought some more, "If it would not be considered rude, what was my mother like when she was younger?"

"How should -- " Darcy sounded strangely indignant.

"What was your mother like?" said Mr Darcy senior.

"Yes, sir."

"Impertinent," he replied pointedly. Thomas would have felt reprimanded if not for the strangely amused tone in the man's voice.

His son was now staring at his father as if he had two heads. Amused tones were either not Mr Darcy's way, or Darcy had had no idea that their parents had known each other.

"Apart from impertinent, sir?" Although Thomas did not think mothers could be *impertinent*.

Lord Ashbourne laughed, "I think you would be better served hearing Darce's first impression."

Mr Darcy paused with his wine glass to his lips before taking a sip; he replaced the glass on the table and smiled, "I am afraid it does not reflect well upon myself."

"You do not wish to expose yourself? Not even for the purpose of teaching your son what not to say in the hearing of a young lady?"

"Your son might be accustomed to rolling his eyes at you, but I have no wish to cause mine to do the same."

"Cause the little one to roll his eyes at me!"

Thomas saw the other boy choke, when what was apparently his family nickname was revealed. Thomas could have reassured him that embarrassing names were hardly unique to his family. He shuddered when he thought of his.
"That is not what I meant," said Mr Darcy, "and you know it, Ash."

"But I think you should still tell the boy that he should not say that a woman ‘is tolerable enough but not handsome to tempt me!’"

Thomas did not know whose eyes bugged out further: his or either of the Darcy men.

"I think the subject is closed." Said Mr Darcy senior firmly.

If they disliked each other, and Mr Darcy had only found her tolerable, why would his mother feel the need to be secretive about the matter?

It could not be that she was constrained by the notion that he was friends with the son. His mother did not believe in pretending a person had no faults. It was not that she did not want to prejudice Thomas in case he ever met Mr Darcy. The solution could only be that there was far more to the story.

"I am surprised you took that so well."

Thomas looked up when he heard the sound of his uncle's voice. Thomas was sitting in the library, which his mother would laugh at if she ever knew. He had not heard a door open. The reason for this was because one hadn't. The voices were not from inside the library, but from the room next door, to which there was a slightly open adjoining door that Thomas had not noticed before.

"I think you knew I would have to," said a tired sounding Mr Darcy. "It is history after all. Nothing more, nothing less."

"History?" said Lord Ashbourne, "I would have called it something else."

"What would that be?"

"Regret?"

Thomas could not tell who the soft snort came from.

"Is that not what history is?"

"I never completed my university education," said the Viscount. "But I always thought it was something one never learnt from."

"If no one is going to learn anything, why bring it up?"

"Why bring it up now, do you mean?"

"You know that is what I mean," was Mr Darcy's reply.

"I thought it was time."

Something scraped across the floor, a chair perhaps? Thomas was dismayed to find himself leaning trying to hear as best he could. Had his father not taught him better? Had not told him about the evils of eavesdropping?

"Why? Because a man is dead? You wish me to think that you did not begin your little crusade
before out of some courtesy to me?" Mr Darcy sounded incredulous but there was something else in his voice. Thomas would have promptly answered that it was anger if he had been asked, but he knew he would have then wavered and wondered if it truly was that emotion.

"I would not think so little of your intelligence. You would have coped. No, it just seemed all so childish."

"I do not think anyone meant to be childish."

"I can not imagine you, Darce, meaning to be childish... Time makes fools of us all."

"That and some foolish notion of protection."

"You think she was trying to protect you? I did not think you had such a high opinion of yourself?" Thomas could tell from the lightness in his uncle's voice that this tease over self importance was a long standing one.

"I meant your father-in-law."

"Who was he trying to protect? Himself?"

"I do not expect you to see it that way but I think if I had had a daughter -- "

"Darcy. Do not. Do not attempt to make me see it that way. I have daughters and even if one of them turned out to be a murderess, I would not send the others away. I would not send them to be alone in a place they did not know anyone if they did not want to go. I would not care so little for what became of them --"

"No, I do not expect you would. But let us hope that none of them turn to a life of crime. Although is Bella still enamoured of highway men?"

"Yes, if it were any of them, it would be her."

Mr Darcy seemed to chuckle. "I never did apologise."

"To whom?"

"Anyone. Everyone. Since you are here -- you."

"What do you have to apologise to me about?"

"That night after you announced your engagement."

"You know me: I never pay attention to what is said by drunk men."

"You just never forget....I see you do not contradict me." Mr Darcy, to Thomas' ear, sounded more regretful that he had sounded throughout the rest of the conversation.

"I recently had a conversation about lying."

"Whatever the reason, I apologise. You have made some awful decisions in your life, but that was not one of them."

"I do not need your apology Darcy, but I am glad to have it all the same," was Lord Ashbourne's response.
"You have never sounded more like Bingley than you did just then."

Thomas was thrown, who was Bingley? He was just getting his head straight about how everyone fitted into this long ago past where everything fell apart, he did not need another person.

"Have you heard from Bingley?"

"Not recently. I blame myself. When Mrs Davis told me, or should I say reprimanded me that day at Rosings, I should have rectified my mistake immediately."

It took Thomas a moment to realise Mrs Davis was his mother. The way Mr Darcy pronounced it, it sounded so precise, so foreign.

"You could not have known ...

Mr Darcy cut Lord Ashbourne off, "Oh I did know. I knew what Wickham was." There was a pause, and a chink of glass, "But in the end perhaps I was right about Bingley anyway. He loved another."

"But you will never know how deeply," was the quiet response of the Viscount.

Thomas wished he could see the look on Mr Darcy's face after that comment, he thought just seeing that expression would explain everything to him.

"I would have thought you had grown out of that, Ash."

"I never grow out of anything if I can help it!"

"Then I pity you. You must always wonder -- what if? Try to compare the incomparable -- you cannot know what something that never was would be. Wondering what the road not taken would have brought you."

"You forget, Darcy, I have no such forks in the road."

Thomas heard no more. He had nothing in his head but questions and queries.
Elizabeth folded the letter up and tried not to purse her lips. She wasn't given to flights of fancy; she idly wondered how people's lives progressed without her in them, but it was not something that consumed her thoughts. However Elizabeth could no longer stop thinking about what sort of woman Fitzwilliam Darcy could have married. It must surely be her influence; it was either the wife, or Elizabeth would be forced to accept that she really had never known Mr Darcy. Not truly.

Her son, who had never shown any inclination towards wild behaviour, had been sent down from Oxford. Not permanently, but that made it no less regrettable. Not only had he kicked up a lark, but he'd fled to London instead of coming to face her. Elizabeth could not entirely blame him. Thomas had sent a letter to her asking her series of questions that Elizabeth had hotly dismissed as impertinent. It was a subject she had no desire to discuss with her son.

How did she discuss a relationship that had come to naught because of one sister and the chance, if it could have ever come, to resume it scotched by another?

Elizabeth did not blame Kitty, it was not her fault that she was the centre of an action that made Elizabeth lose all faith in her father and his behaviour. He'd sent Kitty away as punishment for a crime she had not committed; though ostensibly it had been in order for her to learn some sense.

Elizabeth wondered if Kitty knew how she'd argued against her father's plan. No one except him had thought it was a wise plan, no one but him had thought it was a fair plan.

When she'd been able to cling to the idea that her father was truly, for once in his life, attempting to exercise some control over his unruly daughters and wife, she'd been able to limit herself to speech. That while she disagreed with his methods that his goal was sound. Then barely had the trunks been closed on Kitty's packing, as it had seemed, than had come a letter begging permission to go to London with a school friend. A school friend that they had not known anything of. Elizabeth had not blamed Kitty for wishing to go to London; if she had found a friend in the school, Elizabeth was happy not distressed. Indeed the tearful letters from the school had made Elizabeth despair that her sister would ever be happy again.

But she had expected her father to rebuff the suggestion. After all was Kitty not at school to learn sense and be away from temptations?

But her father had shrugged and said she might do as she pleased. It was then that Elizabeth realised his decision had been a momentary one, a balm to his conscience. Now that he had done something, anything, he could wash his mind of Lydia and her disgrace. The disgrace brought to their family. He had sent Kitty away, therefore what else was a father to do?

It was the next bit that always made Elizabeth uneasy, it had been impossible to ever explain to her second youngest sister without causing great offence. Elizabeth realised it might never be inoffensive.

In her mind, letting Kitty go to London had been a disaster. They had thought they had known the Forsters, and now they were to let Kitty go with a family they knew nothing about? The underlying assumption was that Kitty was no better than Lydia, that she would not behave better than Lydia if faced with the same temptations. Elizabeth could not fault her thinking then and she found it hard to fault it even now. How could a girl who had not been taught properly be expected to act properly? One might know right from wrong, but knowing right and doing right were two very different things. Mary had her readings as her armour, Jane had her sweetness and her resolve to think the best
of everyone and Elizabeth had her wit and perspicacity. All of those things meant that they, while
tempted, would know how to extricate themselves from situations, to prevent situations spiralling to
_point non plus_. What defence did Kitty have? None that Elizabeth could see then. She had learned
them, but through pure chance. She could have fallen like Lydia; she could have fallen easily.

Her anger and helplessness at the whole situation, added to the fact she could do nothing to reclaim
their honour if their father was not willing to assist, had made it the work of a moment to accept an
invitation to visit with a friend of her Aunt Gardiner's in the north. There she might have peace and
quiet and she did, almost resolving her mind to certain unassailable facts of her life.

Until she had received a rapturous letter from her mother: her sister was to marry.

How to describe her emotions? Happiness that at least it was to be a marriage and then alarm when
she had seen who Kitty was to marry.

Elizabeth had had a flash of Kitty's future at that point, a desperately unhappy future. What else
could come of an unequal marriage, where one party was fleeing an unhappy situation and running
towards the glittering light of parties, jewels and carriages? Her betrothed was nothing better than a
fool not to see it. He could not know about Lydia either.

If she looked deep inside herself now, Elizabeth could perhaps allow that jealousy had also played a
part. Not perhaps in her thinking, but in her inability not to communicate her thoughts to Kitty
herself.

At that point in her life Elizabeth had seen her future close up around her. She had no expectations at
Pemberley, even less when she had left those beautiful surrounds to go home to a nightmare. But like
all things, how she desperately had wanted it when she had felt it slipping away from her.

There was always a difference between scotching expectations and scotching hope. One was
exceedingly hard to expunge.

If someone had told her that night at the Meryton Assembly that a year later, she'd be thinking how
wonderful it would be to be loved by such a man, Elizabeth thought she would have laughed until
she was sick. But she had thought it, and she knew she could not settle for anything but love, and
there was her sister making a match that could not be based on that emotion.

Again she'd never understood her sister, like she'd never understood her father, and Elizabeth lost
Kitty like that, in the amount of time it took to snap fingers.

Elizabeth shook her head and tried to bring herself out of the past, where she couldn't change
anything, and back to the letter in front of her.

Fitzwilliam Darcy. The Junior this time. From what she could tell it had been his idea to play the
prank on the dean; Thomas placed no blame, but Elizabeth was a mother, she had the motherly
instinct of being unable to blame her own child, and the ability to read between the lines.

Her comfort was that she could not see Mr Darcy taking his son's escapade well. The education of
his son would not be a matter of form; he had taken his own university career seriously, and his
reaction at Wickham's university debauchery told her that.

Elizabeth placed the letter back on her desk and looked at the previous letter Thomas had sent her. It
only contained a line. Thomas obvious felt strongly about the response she had sent him, to spend so
much money on a line. Either that or the squire and the village gossips were right, he was learning to
live beyond his means.
The one line read simply; "He said you were impertinent." Elizabeth had not needed more clarification.

Looking down at the two letters Elizabeth made a decision. If he needed rescuing, she'd rescue her son; it was her job. But she had to do something for herself first. She had to put some ghosts to rest.

Elizabeth pulled the rug up around Emily's shoulders. She did not understand where her daughters got their skill at falling asleep in moving carriages from. Every time Elizabeth attempted it, she was jolted awake. Although even if she did try to sleep on this journey Elizabeth was sure that she would be kept awake by her own thoughts.

She had not expected any resistance from her daughters; in fact Henrietta's eyes lit up at the idea of being able to visit London. Emily, once reassured that their engagements with the Gardiners would not mean she would be unable to visit the museums, also threw herself into the packing with unbounded joy.

It had done Elizabeth good to see her girls happy. Her own problems and that of her son had preoccupied her too much, perhaps. She had forgotten that they had lost their father too. Although as a baby and a child Thomas had been a perfect son. Everyone had smiled upon her when Thomas had been born. They had waited for a child, borne a number of false starts, waited until Elizabeth thought she would never conceive and bear a child. In reality she knew it had not been so very long and now she cherished the fact she had had time with her husband before a child had come along.

So when Thomas had been born, Elizabeth's joy had known no bounds, and he had been an angel. Of course he had gotten into scrapes and scraps like all little boys but she'd never really worried her head over him, not when Henry was alive.

Not like Henrietta and Emily. Fussy Henrietta who was always so difficult to please and sickly Emily; Elizabeth's attentions had so often been on them. It was strange how everything could suddenly balance itself in the opposite way.

If someone had asked her whether she would be fussing over what she was doing on her way to London, or whether she would be thinking of what she was leaving; she would have automatically said the former. But it was the latter that was consuming her mind at the moment.

She was never the impetuous sister. Impertinence didn't quite mean the same thing. When it came to actions Elizabeth always thought twice, it was when it came to making decisions about people that she'd had to learn restraint.

When she'd gone to see the Squire to tell him about her trip, Mrs Albright had not seemed surprised to see her, but she often did not seem surprised by anything.

It had become clear when Mrs Albright had given a vague little smile and said "I think you must have known we needed you; we are discussing the flowers for the church. Mrs Wainwright is here, she must have told you we were meeting."

Isabella had not told Elizabeth any such thing, and Elizabeth knew it was because the women of the village wanted to meet together and discuss her. They could hardly do that, well politely at least, if she was present.

She knew it was not Mr Martin that captured their imagination this time, but the sudden appearance and disappearance of her brother-in-law. Elizabeth could only imagine the conjecture that was
surrounding her. Even Isabella was a party to it, put out that her very own sister could keep
tantalising details from her.

That annoyed Elizabeth more than anything; she'd always been honest with Isabella about the rift
with her family. Not as honest as she'd been with Henry but she'd never lied and she'd certainly
omitted far less than she had with her own children. And yet Isabella was certain there was more to
the story.

She knew the gossip would be upsetting Mrs Albright, but she could not be detained by the ladies. If
she went into the parlour she might end up spending the rest of her life in the village. No bad thing,
except some things would never be resolved.

As much as she'd been unsurprised by the ladies' reaction, she'd been flummoxed by Edward's. The
Squire had looked at her and shook his head "I will not try and talk you out of anything you are not
under my, or anyone else's guidance, but ..."

"But what?"

"Whatever you do in London, this will always be your home, and you will have to return here."

"Edward, do not speak such nonsense. There may be some talk, if there is nothing else to talk of, but
I hardly think ..."

"You take one visit a year away from this village. That visit is always at the same time, barring
illness, and planned."

Elizabeth wanted to say she hadn't and never would care tuppence about what other people thought
about her, but she knew that was incorrect. She knew it now sitting in the carriage. But she hoped
she had never cared for the opinions of people so small-minded in their approach to the world.

Henrietta and Emily had their faces pressed against the window of the carriage. Trundling into the
outskirts of London had suddenly woken her daughters up; only moments before they all had been
complaining of tired limbs and heads. Elizabeth wished she had that spark of youth which would
allow her brighten up as the possibilities of London unfolded in front of her eyes.

None of them had the excuse of being in the carriage for a particularly long time that day; Elizabeth
knew that her daughters would be overwhelmed seeing the Gardiners again and their cousins.
Elizabeth would be overwhelmed seeing her aunt and uncle again. The Gardiners had been frequent
visitors to her in York and the closeness between their families had not been diminished.

Elizabeth had relied upon her Aunt Gardiner's advice for her marriage, for her children, for life...

"It is rather dirty," said Henrietta, wrinkling up her nose.

"We would you rather turn the carriage around?" said Elizabeth teasingly.

"Mama!" was the resounding chorus.

"It's just a little grey, like all cities," said Emily.

"York isn't this grey," said Henrietta.

"But York isn't London." breathed Emily.
Elizabeth wondered whether she should roll her eyes at this sudden change of opinions between the sisters. That Emily should have that round eyed looked of wonder and Henrietta look slightly disappointed.

Of course that look of disappointment faded when Mrs Gardiner was standing on the step of their townhouse watching and waiting for them.

"Aunt, you should not be standing out here catching your death of cold!"

"Lizzy, I was a mother long before you." Mrs Gardiner scolded.

"Then you should know better," was Elizabeth's reply before shepherding her daughters into the house.

Pleasantries and hearing how her cousins did passed the next little while; of course a soothing cup of tea helped. It distracted Elizabeth from deciding how next to proceed.

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_Weeks Earlier..._

Thomas heaved the trunk down from the hackney carriage and only slightly winced when it hit the ground. It was Darcy's after all.

"Mind that!" said Max, struggling with his own trunk. "I put things in that trunk."

"I couldn't fit my Gibbons!" protested Darcy.

"Then I've done you a favour."

Thomas wrenched the door to the lodgings open. They were rooms reserved by a friend of Max's from university. He had finished his degree and just embarked on a grand tour of Europe. It had been pure luck that the moment the three boys had been excluded from Oxford for the time being, Roger had had these rooms to allow them to bunk down in. Thomas did not fancy returning to York and the other boys had their own reasons for avoiding the London Townhouses of their families. He expected it was really the same reason, none of them liked the notion of being given a thoroughly deserved dressing down.

Of course it was a stupid prank to have pulled; they should have known the Dean would not have seen the amusing side of being bailed up by that cow they had corralled into ...

"Give us a hand, Davis," said Max pushing at one of the trunks.

"This is very grand," said Darcy, screwing up his nose.

"I don't think a little trunk pulling is above you, Darcy, might even do you some good," replied Thomas fairly good naturedly as he reached to help his cousin.

Darcy made no response but to stalk into the lodgings.

They were dirty but nothing that could not be scrubbed away.

"I presume Roger told his charwoman that we would be coming?"

"Perhaps he expects us to do our own cleaning?" said Thomas, shooting a grin at Max that Darcy
could not see.

"Well I shall be talking to Mrs Hudson."

Who? mouthed Thomas to Max.

_The housekeeper at Darcy's Townhouse_ was Max's response.

Of course it was, thought Thomas. She would adore being told she had one more place to clean half way across London! They would be better off engaging their own staff, if they could afford it of course.

Then again, if Darcy was the petted child that Thomas often thought he was perhaps this Mrs Hudson's reaction to more work would be overwhelming joy.

"And I shall talk to father -- " Darcy paused, suddenly thinking of the reason he was currently not staying with his father -- "someone, about getting a more secure lock."

This was in response, Thomas thought, to the sound of someone coming in through the front door. Whoever it was, they were across the corridor and into the room in a moment.

"Oh, little one, I think it would take more than a lock to keep me out."

"Father," said Max, scrambling to his feet.

"My lamentable son. Sent down from Oxford! If university is not the life for you, could you not inform one, or more, of your parents?"

"Become a soldier instead," said Max, "like you did?"

Lord Ashbourne had been a soldier? In the militia? It had taken Thomas a while, but he had realised that Mr Darcy Senior had known of Wickham. He had just not figured out how was it through Lord Ashbourne being in the militia? It could not be a coincidence that this Wickham who Darcy had known terrible things about was the same Wickham who seduced Lydia. The same Wickham that his mother had known was rotten, but as it was not her secret she could not tell anyone about it.

"The problem with blindly following in other people's footsteps is that you follow them into the same mistakes."

"I cannot believe you have ever made any mistakes, my lord," said Max, stiffly, a thought echoed by young Darcy.

"Then both of you are even more lamentable than I thought you were."

Max flushed. Thomas could find it extraordinary that this exchange of words, so superficial and cursory, could cause Max to feel more about his behaviour than feelings from any lecture by Henry had ever caused in Thomas.

"No, come now let us think on better things, although I shall say only one more thing upon the matter."

‘And that is?’ said Thomas.

"Could none of you be more original in your ideas?"
Some days earlier....

Thomas took a moment to admire the grand facade that loomed above him as he followed Darcy up the stairs.

Darcy had not been exaggerating when he'd said he would talk to his housekeeper. There had been a cleaning woman, but Darcy complained she smelt of gin. As far as Thomas was concerned, Darcy complained too much and if he didn't like anything about their lodgings, why was he living there?

Thomas did not know why he had not decided to stay at Tattersall's looking at horseflesh with Max. A tiny voice in his head pointed out to him that he was determined to find out as much about the Darcys as possible.

Though what he expected to find here, he did not know! Would he find a locket with his mother's face in it that was constantly cradled by the senior Mr Darcy? Would he find a portrait of his mother with dart holes in it? A draft of some letter detailing the finer points of their history?

Thomas shook his head and entered the house. They were not two steps into the house when Mrs Hudson, he presumed, swooped in on them and inquired whether the young master would like some scones.

Normally Thomas would hold Darcy's imperious answer to bring them to his room, with some annoyance but like all young men his stomach thought for him. Except he did note that Mrs Hudson had a strange expression on her face before her eyes flicked towards him. Perhaps Darcy did not act this way amongst his family? Thomas hoped so, because otherwise why did they all coddle him so?

No, Darcy must just not recommend himself to strangers....or people he was not an intimate of. Or just people in general.

It only took him a second to become bored with watching Darcy attempt to decide how many cravats he might need, now that he was in London not Oxford.

Thomas did not think of it as snooping, rather preserving his sanity. Although he was keeping a look out for any clues, he did not find anything – unless one considered discovering the maids were not as vigilant about dust as either of the Darcy men might like was considered a ‘clue’.

There was a picture that Thomas liked (he had taken on board the point about merely appreciating what he liked when it came to art) on the landing. It had something familiar about it which drew him in. Thomas rather thought it was a landscape by one of the family; it did not have the polish of a master, or even of a respected amateur. Seeing the name Darcy etched into bottom of the painting confirmed this idea; it was here because some much loved member of the family had painted it. Probably Darcy's aunt, although he had heard her praised as a talented artist. Then again that praise was from Darcy, who would be naturally biased. Or perhaps the mother, who liked art so much?

Thomas was distracted by the knocker at the door sounding, he drew back a bit as a footman appeared below to answer the door.

He craned his neck forward a fraction to see the top of a bonnet admitted into the hall. It seemed to be a expensive bonnet, so Thomas abandoned any thought that perhaps his uncle was wrong about Mr Darcy not knowing any of those ladies, although they would not pay visits in such a manner surely?
The door to what Darcy had indicated was the study opened and Mr Darcy himself stepped out to greet his visitor.

"What are you doing, skulking about?" said the younger Darcy imperiously. Thomas hadn't heard him come down from the upper floors.

Before Thomas could answer, the lady's voice rang out. "Is that the dulcet tone of your son I hear? I have been chasing him all over town today, I would have you know!"

Darcy moved to the top of the stairs, as the lady, who Thomas could see now was perhaps a little younger than his mother, started up the stairs.

She paused to throw a look over her shoulder when, quite uncharacteristically it seemed to Thomas, Mr Darcy senior smirked and said, 'That seems quite industrious of you!'

"You wished to see me, my lady?" said Darcy.

"Why ever should I wish to do that, my little one?" she smiled, as she drew level with him. "It is my nephew I have come to see!"

It was then when she was closer, and he could see under the bonnet properly that Thomas did recognise her, her similarity to his mother, and the portrait Max had shown him. It was his aunt.

There was no more time to reflect as he was drawn into a crushing embrace.

Lady Ashbourne was built on smaller lines than his mother; he remembered that was one of his mother's comments about her sister. It was when Emily was sick, once again, and his mother had said that Kitty had always been delicate. Thomas saw no signs of it now; instead he saw his mother's active eyes, examining him. He wondered if she looked most like Lydia, he only saw traces of his Aunt Mary and Aunt Jane in her.

It occurred to Thomas that the roles had reversed and it was now him examining her, and his aunt had noticed.

Thomas felt himself blush, "I'm sorry, my lady." If Darcy called her my lady, it seemed politic to keep that formality.

"Not Aunt Kitty?"

'I should not like to take a liberty, ma'am."

"Such formality. I would like it very much. I've never been Aunt Kitty." That was said with a trace of sadness.

They had repaired to the drawing room and Darcy had, in a rare display of sensitivity, had repaired somewhere else, probably to speak to his father.

"Lord Ashbourne does not have brothers and sisters with children?"

"He does, but I am Aunt Catherine. That will amuse your mother."

Thomas wondered why, but his aunt answered him without him needing to ask, "There was a
Catherine of our acquaintance, an aunt of Darcy's and Ash's. A formidable woman that your mother clashed with on more than one occasion, I believe."

"My mother seems to know a lot of people connected with your family, Aunt."

"I am sure it is rather I who usurped; Lizzy knew them first."

That surprised Thomas and set him to wondering. He had thought there was some mystery regarding Mr Darcy and his mother. But what if it was not that at all? After all, that would hardly explain why the sisters had drifted away from each other. Distance and the fracturing of a family could offer an explanation, along with the fact he knew his mother had not been close to any sister but Jane. Except he could not help but think it was not just Lydia's elopement that had caused a rift.

If it was not something related to the Darcy family, was it related to Lord Ashbourne? He had not noticed any warm feelings between his uncle and his mother when he had visited, but the Squire had made some comment about not seeing his mother move so fast when she had seen him.

"But we should not talking of ancient history. Are you quite comfortable in Brook Street? I know my son's manner, but I beg you would not sink to a situation you find uncomfortable just to appease him!"

"No, the lodgings are acceptable. Unless you speak to Darcy. It is he who would feel the --" Thomas paused unable to complete the sentence without being rude.

"Pinch to his dignity?" said Lady Ashbourne.

Thomas gave a short nod.

"It is a family trait. But little Darcy has been a good friend to my son, although I think it a pity that you did not grow up amongst them, but I do not think that would have ever been possible." His Aunt gave a short smile, "It might be a mother's fancy but I sense you would have been a great grounder. Although this latest tomfoolery might contradict that."

"I assure you, we did not ... "

"I did not mean to scold you!" laughed the Viscountess. "Mistakes are there to be made, making them twice is when you will be scolded."

"I should hope my parents have taught me well enough to avoid making the same mistake twice."

"I should have liked to know your father; it is a pity he missed your birth -- otherwise I would have."

Thomas started, "Papa was not ...?"

"Yes, do you not know? You were born at Longbourn. Your mother was never one to adhere to stern advice not to travel. Your grandmother was so worried Longbourn would curse Lizzy."

Thomas had a million questions whizzing through his head, both general and specific to the current conversation and of course, the first one that popped out was the silliest: "Longbourn is cursed?"

Lady Ashbourne laughed, "According to my mother, it was doomed that Longbourn would never bear sons. So you can imagine, after despairing of Lizzy ever giving her a grandchild, of course she would have her confinement there! Not that your father would have minded if Lizzy had only given him daughters."
"Mama broke the curse," said Thomas.

"There never was a curse." His aunt spoke sharply. "Now, I do not think we should closet ourselves away. I am sure you have many things you would rather do than sit with your aunt."

"No indeed, I would like to know more about my family."

"Pandora's Box! I promise you that. But what do you wish to know? I thought you had been told why your mother and I quarrelled with our family and each other."

"Not why you and my mother quarrelled.' Thomas felt brave, "It was not over a ... "

Lady Ashbourne brightened and gave a giggle; it made her at once seem younger, "Over a gentleman? Oh no, your mother and I never quarrelled over a gentlemen, well never for that reason."

She composed herself, "have you been reading too many gothic novels?"

"If no one will explain it to me, you cannot wonder at my coming to conclusions."

"No, we should not wonder at it. But I beg you not to be offended if your suppositions causes me great amusement."

Thomas did not answer his aunt, because he could not help but be offended. He was not a child any longer; that annoyance he had felt when reading his mother's response to his letter asking her quite reasonably to expand upon the story rose up within him.

"I see that I have offended you."

"Not at all."

"You are not an accomplished liar."

"I do not consider that a fault."

"It is not. Your mother and I spoke harsh words with each other because we did not understand each other as we should. Now, I cannot blame her for not understanding me, and I hope that she does not blame me. But Thomas, nothing good can come of sifting through the past in this manner. I know my husband has probably encouraged you, for his own reasons, but I do not wish to see you hurt."

"You think I will uncover something that will hurt me?"

"Sometimes some fences are best left unmended and trying to fix them -- just doesn't work."

Lady Ashbourne gave his hand a squeeze before rising. Thomas followed her out onto the landing, considering that he had been left even more confused than ever.

Thomas distracted himself from his thoughts by gazing back at the painting that had caught his eye before.

"It is hideous is it not?" hissed his aunt in a low whisper.

Thomas tried not to laugh, "but it reminds me of something..."

"I am not surprised. It is Longbourn. A view of Longbourn at least. Supposedly."

"I did not know any of the Darcys had ever been to Longbourn?"
"Mr Darcy has been. Mrs Darcy was an avid painter and collector. She wanted Darcy to be the same. So he painted this -- I think she was well served for her -- " Lady Ashbourne paused. "I should not speak ill of the dead."

Thomas had a sudden thought, and it was not connected to the fact his aunt apparently had disapproved of Mrs Darcy. No, it was his mother he first thought of, was the disappointment that Mr Darcy had already been married? She had hinted that her disappointment was not related to a love match frustrated by her sisters elopement, and that would be an answer to that riddle. If he had been married, then no amount of sister's not eloping could change that. Thomas had never been in love, but he knew it was possible to fall in love where there was little chance of it being returned. A year ago he might have scoffed at the notion his mother could be so foolish, but he knew she was fallible and human and perhaps she just had not been strong enough to prevent such a thing from occurring.

"Did Mrs Darcy come to Longbourn?"

"Oh no, Darcy wasn't married at that time. It would have been such a disappointment to the neighbourhood if he had been." There was a pause, "At least it would have been a disappointment until his proud disagreeable ways spoiled everything."

Thomas already knew one thing Mr Darcy had said that had been injudicious; he now wondered what else could have happened. He did not think it could have been serious, as his aunt sounded more amused than anything.

They had been caught staring at the paining as Darcy joined them on the landing -- "My father painted that; he is a ... "

"Truly appalling painter?" finished Lady Ashbourne.

Darcy frowned; he appeared about to defend his father.

"Come now, Fitzwilliam, it is always important to own to one's weaknesses." Mr Darcy senior apparently felt he needed no defence.

Lady Ashbourne walked away from the painting, and looked up through the floors, "I do love this house. But I have always felt it was missing something."

A silent conversation then appeared to happen between his aunt and Mr Darcy.

"New curtains perhaps?" was the older man's dry response.

"That must be it!" teased his aunt. "Now, little one, are you going to confess all about leading my darling boy astray?"

The younger boy stiffened, when Lady Ashbourne curled her arm within his. "I do not believe ..."

"Foolish boy. No, I know at whose door to place my son's follies at, and it is a lot closer to home than you."

Thomas watched as his aunt led the younger Darcy down the stairs, telling him he would be much better to mind his father, who would never have played such a prank.

The father in question gave a short snort at that, but Thomas noticed that Mr Darcy had not once looked at the painting of Longbourn.
"And how did you find London as you drove in, Lizzy?"

"Much as it ever was," was Elizabeth's response.

"Oh do not say that in public. London quite prides itself on its ability to revolutionise."

"Oh I think Paris quite puts us to shame, in more ways than one!"

Mrs Gardiner smiled. "But what shall you do?"

"Speak to my son, speak to my sister."

"Enjoy yourself? Does that feature in your plans?"

"Aunt, I think I am a little beyond the age of that being a need that I have the luxury to make a priority. Emily and Henrietta's enjoyment will come first."

"I think it should be possible to enjoy yourself as well."

"Should rather than will,' said Elizabeth pointedly.

"Thomas wrote to you of his address?"

"He has not sunk to being that uncivil to his Mama."

"Do you think he means to be uncivil."

"I think he is distracting himself with attempting to find mysteries where there are none."

All it would take was Elizabeth sitting down and telling Thomas frankly her whole history. He knew patchwork pieces, and was using them to create a tapestry that bore no resemblance to her actual life. She hardly wished to tell him that yes, she had borne a disappointment in love in her life, and that man was Mr Darcy. But there was no great mystery there, sometimes people just did not connect at the right time; fate or God worked against them. Mary and Jane had suffered disappointments. Elizabeth had been surprised to learn just how much hope Mary had held out for Mr Collins, but she was much happier where she was with her clerk. Thomas would see that one moment of unhappiness did not lead to a lifetime of pain. He was a romantic, like all young people.

Then when that nonsense with her son was over, she would visit her sister and -- Elizabeth did not know. She was not a simpleton; one visit would not equal a panacea to their troubled history.

If she made no assumptions about Kitty and her life and her happiness, instead if she just asked, and believed, then that might make up for sharp words of years before. And if her sister understood why she had walked away and shut herself off -- but how could Kitty truly understand when Elizabeth often wondered how she had found herself so far along a certain path that she had no recollection of ever making a conscious decision to take.

Mrs Gardiner kissed her cheek and squeezed her hand, as the Gardiners' carriage pulled up at the front of the townhouse.

"I will take Emily and Henrietta to the modiste ... "

"Aunt!" said Elizabeth, her daughters needed no more finery!
"Let me spoil them, Lizzy. I think they are need of some it has been a difficult year for them -- and for you, of course but ... "

Elizabeth nodded. She was an adult, they were mere children; there had to be a difference. She had to be more self sufficient.

She had thought it might have been advisable to ask the coachman to wait; she did not know in what sort of environs three young gentlemen might find lodgings. But Brook Street appeared nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, it was quite pretty, so she found no difficulty in allowing the coachman to walk the horses. There was a small park nearby where she could walk if she found that her son was not at home.

Indeed she might take Thomas to walk there anyway, one thing she would always miss about the country was the ability to walk.

It had not dawned on Elizabeth that there was every possibility she might meet upon the doorstep of her son's lodgings another parent undertaking the same task as herself, so she when she found herself about to jostle her way up the stairs at the same time as a tall gentleman, she stepped back and apologised.

"There is no need madam, I assure you," was that man's response and Elizabeth recognised the voice immediately, and as she looked up in surprise and he could see her face much clearer, she could see the sense of recognition spread across his face.
"Mrs Davis," Mr Darcy seemed to unfreeze all of a sudden and Elizabeth found her tongue once again.

"Mr Darcy."

"You look well."

"And yourself," nodded Elizabeth.

"Your family -- they are all well?" Mr Darcy paused, as Elizabeth was transported back in time to another such stilted conversation with him. Mr Darcy obviously misconstrued her expression. "I mean, considering."

"They are all well, Mr Darcy." Elizabeth looked to the door they were standing outside of, "Well, I only presume Thomas is well."

"I saw him only yesterday, he appears quite well."

It seemed natural, not by design at all, that they both at that moment turned to walk towards the park. Elizabeth could not imagine calling on her son at this time. To sit in their little crowded drawing room -- if they had such a room -- with Mr Darcy and their sons looking on at them. Not to mention her nephew, who if he was anything like his mother or his father, Elizabeth could not think he would help the situation.

"You came to London to see your son, Mrs Davis?"

"Yes, there are some things we must speak of."

"If you are referring to the reason neither of our sons is currently attending Oxford, I can assure you that while I cannot find their actions laudable, I do not think it constitutes general ill-behaviour. Indeed if I could see that the prank, could have, and perhaps should have been laughed off, then --"

"Mr Darcy paused and Elizabeth saw that he was smiling. It was a rare sight.

"If you can find such behaviour amusing, then I suppose the world should too" countered Elizabeth, "But does Mrs Darcy find her son's wilfulness so entertaining?"

"My wife is no longer with us; she has not been for some time."

Elizabeth started, she had not known that and Mr Darcy's curious wording made her pause -- "I did not know I apologise."

"Do not make yourself upset, Mrs Davis, it was a blessing."

"A blessing?" If Mrs Darcy was indeed dead, Elizabeth did not know what to make of the fact Mr Darcy might be pleased over the matter. She had hoped for his happiness, not that he would be begging for release!

"I meant for her, she was ill for some time and to be no longer in pain...was a release Fitzwilliam does not remember a great deal and I am glad that he does not; it was difficult but it was time."

No wonder Mr Darcy's letter to her on Henry's death had been so sincere. He had experienced it all first hand.
"I still am sorry for your loss," Elizabeth was sincerely sorry for him. If his son barely remembered his mother, then Mr Darcy must have had a lonely life -- unless "you never remarried?"

"At first it seemed disrespectful to Amelia's memory, and then it seemed unfair to Fitzwilliam to disrupt his life when he was still a child -- and then --" Darcy lifted a hand in a shrugging gesture, "Excuses perhaps."

"I do not think you need to make excuses not for something -- not to me at least." Elizabeth shook her head. "It was a great impertinence."

Mr Darcy hid a small upward turning of his mouth, "It is not surprising that such questions should be on your mind, if anything it is I who should be asking how you are coping?"

"As best I can. I know I wrote something to you in response to your letter, but I cannot remember what. That time is a blur to me, but I hope I did your letter justice."

Mr Darcy just nodded, "I did not expect any response. I just wished to offer you my condolences."

"Ah but you forget, yours is a particular talent. And talents should not go unrewarded." Elizabeth ducked her head and bit her tongue; it seemed all too easy, and to remember what she had liked -- loved -- about this man, to fall back into her teasing of him. She had missed that. Not just with him, but with Henry also. She missed her equal. Teasing her children was not the same.

"Are you unwell?"

Elizabeth straightened her head, "No, I just. I do not wish to be ...

"I think we are both old enough to find no comfort in hiding behind society's niceties -- and we are alone."

"It is good to see you. I did come to London to see my son, but I wished to see my sister. I have some notion -- perhaps foolish -- that if I mend that relationship somehow the ..."

"Past twenty years will not have happened?"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes at herself. "I said foolish notion. But Yorkshire is not the wilderness; I should not have drifted away from my family -- I never knew -- I never congratulated you on your marriage!"

Elizabeth did not say that someone could have written to her of it, but was it so unlikely? There was only one person who would have been thoughtless enough in those early days to write to her of Mr Darcy: her mother. But other concerns usurped her mind, more local and domestic matters than the fate of a man who had merely been a proud disagreeable lump in the landscape of Meryton for a short time was not in her mind. Mrs Bennet had spent more time searching out information about Mr Bingley; and that had ceased when she had read the notice in one of the London papers announcing Mr Bingley's engagement.

"It is not surprising ... "

"It is not the wilderness, we receive the London papers."

"Mrs Davis, I only meant to say it is not surprising that you were caught up in your new family."

Trying to begin her new family, thought Elizabeth, frowning as she thought of her anxieties at being unable to conceive in the early days of her marriage. Reading of the Darcys', marriage and then the
prompt delivery of an heir could not have helped matters. Not that it would have been specific to the Darcys' any such situation would have depressed Elizabeth's spirits.

"I hoped for your happiness, when I said God Bless. Although perhaps I am presuming that you remember ... "

"No, you are not presuming. I remember. I wish that time at Pemberley that I had said something to you... It would not have been proper of course, but how mortified I felt at what I had said to you when I read ... "

"I wish you had not felt that way. I could not see it at the time, and not perfectly for a very long time afterwards, your leaving so suddenly from Pemberley where I had thought -- " Mr Darcy broke off and flicked his cane through some leaves before continuing, "Your reproofs benefited me immensely. I had not acted in a gentleman like manner."

"I did not know then ... "

"I do not think any action, past or present, excuses me from what I said to you -- or rather the manner in which I acted towards you. My life would have been very different. You improved me. I could not have been the husband I was without you. I regret that I caused nothing but damage in yours."

Elizabeth let out a deep breath she did not know that she had been holding in, with it came a volley of words that she had been holding onto for years, the unspoken tension between them was to be broken and Elizabeth could only hope the outcome would be positive; "I could not wait. No, it was not even that. I was hurt, blinded by my pride and my prejudice. Isolated by my jealousy. Henry was my salve. I could not continue being unhappy and focusing on my family. I needed to be happy."

"I would not begrudge you that. I would never begrudge you that." Elizabeth wished to believe him, but something about his tone, made her think he had had to convince himself, and perhaps he had not entirely done so. "As I said, I meant my closing of my letter. Although, how bitter I must have appeared to you, I hoped my actions at Pemberley would erase it, but if you still have that letter! I hope you have burned it."

"I have not. It was a lesson to me, and a reminder to myself that I should not be bitter ... "

"That answers my question!"

"No, I merely meant as a lesson in how to be open when it must cause great pain. I do not think I learnt it particularly well with my son at least. Children -- they take all your thoughts and your attention. It must have been doubly hard without your wife."

"I suspect we would have had very different view on what values we should raise our son with."

"Henry and I disagreed many a time. Particularly when Thomas was younger and Henry thought he should be allowed to fall off his own horses in life -- " Elizabeth had barely run that sentence through her brain before it had escaped her mouth. With a gasp she brought her hand to her mouth and tried to blink back her tears. "I beg you will excuse me, I must see my son."

If Mr Darcy was taken aback at her sudden change in demeanour, Elizabeth did not see it, turning away. The footsteps behind her told her that he was following her, she hoped out of a gentlemanly desire to ensure she made it safely to the door, despite her not being an innocent in need of protection, and not out of a desire to engage her in any more conversation.

Elizabeth reached to grasp the knocker, but was forestalled, "Allow me, Mrs Davis."
"Thank you," said Elizabeth, trying to sound gracious.

"I will not intrude on your time with your son."

This time she was sincere in her gratitude, and she watched him as he retreated across the road. He was as tall as ever. That was unlikely to change and he still had a dignified mien, but he was more open now. She wondered if that was what he had learnt from his wife. Or rather, what he had learnt from losing his wife. She wondered whether he had loved her. And which her she meant.

Something churned inside her that she could be thinking about such things, when Henry was barely cold in the ground. Almost eighteen months was nothing compared to the lifetime they had had together. She had thought she was over this. She was over this; it was nothing more than seeing a man she had loved, that she had great hopes for, again. Now they had met, they could go on as indifferent acquaintances. Or even friends. Their experiences, the ones they had had together twenty years ago, the ones they had shared through Wickham, and the ones they had shared separately such as the loss of a spouse, had merely made them able to be honest with each other.

The door opened and an elderly retainer peered at her; it took two rather loud conversations in order for her to be ushered into her son's rooms. The retainer announced her and then shuffled out.

But he had announced her to a rather startled boy who was most definitely not her son. She suddenly froze when she thought this must be Mr Darcy's son. Except she saw nothing of him and that seemed wrong to her.

"Ma'am! Er -- Aunt!"

Elizabeth laughed both at her nephew's confusion and her own. Although his confusion seemed to stem from the fact that the room was in some disorder, Maximilien tried to surreptitiously push some of the mess upon the floor under the armchair he had been lazing in before had jumped to his feet.

"My son?"

"He is not home, ma'am -- Aunt. Do...sit down."

Elizabeth looked at the sofa, which was covered in newspapers, a riding crop and quite possibly an old scone. She then looked back at her nephew who was eying the sofa with some trepidation. Elizabeth bent and swept everything to the floor under the armchair he had been lazing in before had jumped to his feet.

"My son?"

"He is not home, ma'am -- Aunt. Do...sit down."

Elizabeth put up her hand, "I am proud to say my son is his own man."

"Indeed, but I am at least two years older ...

"And age brings wisdom."
"My father says with age comes stupidity." That was said with a smirk.

Elizabeth was not surprised that was one of Lord Ashbourne's flippancies. Except like the man, it was not entirely a joke. One became entrenched, unmoveable, blind, cautious.

Maximilien was a handsome boy, with an open face, he spoke of his parents with irreverence, but not, Elizabeth thought, without respect. She could see why Thomas liked his cousin so. She had worried that he might have been blinded by wealth and consequence; she had a habit of making such assumptions, it was a habit she should really try and break. But her nephew seemed to have no airs and graces. He did not even appear to have the sort of proper pride that Charlotte Collins had often spoken of.

Of course she was basing this on first impressions, and those had been faulty enough in the past, but she hoped that she was not incorrect on this occasion.

"That sounds like the Viscount. I cannot imagine he considers that it applies to him."

Maximilien snorted, "Of course not, ma'am -- Aunt."

"I do not think I like Ma'am Aunt. Aunt Lizzy would do quite as well."

Her nephew did not have long to dwell on his embarrassing gaucheness; he seemed too much his father's son, unused to being socially awkward as they were distracted by her son's entrance.

"Mama!"

If it was possible, her son was even taller than when she had last seen him. She clung to him for only a moment, conscious of an audience and not wishing to embarrass him. "Am I forgiven?" It was a warmer welcome than his letters had given her hope for.

"There is nothing to forgive."

Elizabeth squeezed his hands.

"If you would excuse me -- "

"Oh no, Max, we cannot turn you out! I shall take Mama to a hotel. There is nothing to offer in the way of luncheon here."

"Do not lie, Thomas!"

"Max." Thomas sounded reproving, "I hardly think that is an appropriate luncheon for my mother."

"You will be giving Mrs Davis the impression that I find it suitable."

Elizabeth had assumed they were talking of ale, or some other liquid substitute for food and foolishness. Now she was not so sure.

Her nephew had not finished, "Darcy does not find it ... "

"I think my mother is fully recognisant of the fact none of us approve!" said Thomas.

"I wish I knew what it was you did not approve of!"

"Our cook can only cook one thing," said Thomas. "And that is -- "
"Burnt." Finished Maximilien for him.

Elizabeth blinked, "Burnt what?"

"Just Burnt." Maximilien sounded rueful.

"Thomas I accept your invitation for luncheon, but you must let me -- "

"No, it will be my treat. You have come all this way, because I was so " Thomas lowered his voice, "rude to you. I beg you would forgive me."

Elizabeth curled her arm into her son's and smiled up at him. She was happy to have him restored to her in such good spirits. "Then you will not mind me offering a suggestion to avoid the burnt?"

"The club?" said Maximilien.

She had a thought: had they put Thomas up for London clubs? Thomas was not born to the world of London clubs and gambling! But she pushed down her maternal worries, determined not to let them spoil the moment. "No, home."

"Mama."

"If you came home ... "

"Apart from that time you burnt my birthday cake."

"Thomas, you were ten and that was hardly my fault."

Thomas grinned at her and Elizabeth squeezed his arm in mock annoyance.

Elizabeth knew her son better than to presume his manner and mood meant he had abandoned his searching into her past. She had just needed some fortification, not just for this, but to balance the shock at seeing Mr Darcy and their conversation.

She put her knife and fork down, "You asked me some questions in a letter, which I was not prepared to answer then but I am now."

Thomas looked up at her, fork half way to his mouth.

"Finish eating at least," said Elizabeth exasperatedly. Men and their food. There had been a moment in her marriage that she had thought that perhaps Henry would morph into Mr Hurst. Luckily, however, Henry could put food into a little compartment of his life and enjoyment. Lucky for him, because Henry would have not liked being married to Mrs Hurst.

Thomas hurriedly shoved his plate aside. "I do not wish to intrude ... "

"Thomas," Elizabeth tried not to sound irritated.

"I know I have pried and I cannot say I -- " Thomas shrugged his shoulders, "Perhaps I should not ask questions and you should just tell me what you will."

"It does no credit to me."
"Have you called someone tolerable, I suppose?"

Elizabeth blinked. He knew of that? "I thought you said you would let me speak."

"Sorry, Mama."

"After my sister eloped, or should I say ran away since no marriage was ever announced, my father sent Kitty away. I thought it was because he wanted her to improve herself, so that she would not make the same mistakes as her sister. I thought it was unnecessary that with some care and guidance, that if I was a better sister -- but she was to go away. It became apparent to me that once that was done, my father thought he had absolved himself of his duty, or his failings over Lydia. All his proper feelings passed away, more quickly than they should. I had thought I had known his faults, I thought he spoke only depreciatingly of his lack of ability to be ashamed for long."

Indeed Elizabeth herself had told her father not to be so severe upon himself; her heart had gone out to him on her return to Longbourn, what he must have suffered and to not hear a word of sense spoken about him, what with Jane so consumed with looking after their mother. She had thought she was trying to shoulder his burden, not remove it completely.

"Kitty wished to go to London for the little season; it was only mere months since Lydia's elopement. We had never met the family. But my father saw nothing wrong with his actions or hers."

"But if she was unhappy at school -- " Elizabeth squeezed her son's hand. It had taken Thomas a little while to settle into school himself. He had hated being away from his home.

"She had better come home to us; all I saw was her escaping. Then Lord Ashbourne. I did not think she loved him. I thought the worst and you will let me beg off telling you what I said to her when she returned to Longbourn for the wedding. It was hardly sisterly. You understand now that it was ill-conceived words spoken between sisters that forced a wedge between us? Well a further wedge from childhood, favouritism and the thoughtlessness of Lydia."

Thomas nodded, then he opened his mouth before closing it again.

"You may ask me something if you choose."

"You were jealous?"

"Of Kitty? Yes. She seemed to suffer no ill effects. Lydia -- nothing. I thought it meant she did not feel, did not think, as she should have."

"You were not jealous because of ... "

"Whom she was to marry?" Elizabeth laughed. "No, I did not know your uncle from a sack of potatoes. I foresaw unhappiness for him and her when he discovered his wife had deceived him, but no, I never wished I was marrying him."

"I meant someone else."

Elizabeth gave a wry smile, her son was not stupid. "Let us say I was jealous that my hopes were dashed, when I had been a good dutiful daughter. Not perfect. If I had been perfect I might have been long married before Lydia's foolishness."

"How did you know Mr Darcy, if you did not know Lord Ashbourne?"

"Netherfield. It was let one Michaelmas, to a Mr Bingley, a great friend of Mr Darcy's. He, Darcy,
and Mr Bingley's sisters came to the neighbourhood and caused a great stir. Not as much as the militia, but there were more of the soldiers to go around than there were single London gentlemen."

"So Mr Darcy introduced your sister to my uncle when she was in town?"

That was an idea that had never struck Elizabeth before. She had assumed that it was mere coincidence that Kitty had met and married the cousin of Mr Darcy. In her darkest moments she had thought of course there must only be a finite number of rich handsome men that Kitty and her school friend could have set their caps at, that of course some of them must be related to Mr Darcy. But, of course, Kitty had already known one of them. She had never thought of *that*
The End of Silence

Some Twenty Years Earlier ...

Darcy hoped that holding a glass of particularly weak lemonade would form some sort of invisible barrier around him. He knew that was ridiculous; no glass in hand would ever excuse him from not dancing at a ball.

He wasn’t even sure why he was attending. Societal duty was only one part of it; an adverse reaction to being cooped up in his townhouse was perhaps another part of it.

Darcy had been sure that he would conquer this deep feeling of regret. That his actions, his misapplication of his parents’ maxims, led him to acting in a manner that befitted no one. To insult a woman under the guise of love... that was a move worthy of a Wickham, not a Darcy.

At first Darcy thought that Elizabeth was so misguided and stubborn that she deserved nothing in the way of an explanation, but he could hardly sleep with the knowledge that she was alive in the world and thinking ill of him. So he had written her that letter. He wondered now whether what he had thought of as an objective account of all her accusations, was actually a rather bitter statement of a man disappointed.

A chance to rectify that came at Pemberley. He had not expected her, and he rather thought that surprise showed upon his person when he had literally run into her in the grounds. He had been determined to show her that he was not the ogre she thought him; at Pemberley, at his home, he was comfortable. He knew that was where everyone said he was at his best, apart from Bingley who thought him awful anywhere when he had nothing to do.

He’d gone to the inn, to see her, to speak to her...to declare himself once again -- no, Darcy did not know precisely what it was that had caused him to race to Lambton all a twitter. The maid had bobbed nervously and said that the Gardiners had left that morning.

They had left abruptly, and he had waited for some explanation, more than a single line note left by Mr Gardiner citing not much at all.

His feelings had overwhelmed him, and he disliked himself immensely when he allowed that to happen and perhaps he had let Miss Bingley prey too much upon him. He’d thought immediately that they had some illness in the family that called them away so hastily, but Miss Bingley had said that surely that would be mentioned in the note. After all it was natural that an illness to someone Elizabeth loved dearly would call her away from what he had thought she had been finding a revelatory trip. But it was naturally something that could be revealed in a note.

What could not be revealed in a note? Urgent business? Mr Gardiner was a successful businessman and he had already been told by that man that his business had prevented them from going to the Lakes. No, urgent business in town was a reason needing no secrecy.

No notice in the paper declared mourning, and no letter came for him at Pemberley. He had assumed that once whatever crisis was over within the Gardiner or Bennet family, that a letter of thanks for his hospitality would be swift. Neither Elizabeth nor her surprisingly fashionable London relations would be remiss in that duty. But it never came. Of course it was possible that there was no notice in any paper that Darcy was likely to see, and that Longbourn was shut up in mourning. Grief would put a hold on any happy feeling, and Darcy understood and respected that. If it was Mr Bennet, Elizabeth would be devastated, and Darcy could not intrude upon that.
But these thoughts were precisely the reason he had come back to London. Once his guests had departed and the business that took him back to Pemberley had been exhausted all he had been left with were his thoughts, and Georgiana's queries.

He had not confessed to Bingley his part in separating him from Jane Bennet. It seemed cruel to do so when all it appeared that it to serve was the easing of his own conscience. Elizabeth had given him no hopes, and he could hardly expect Jane to give Bingley any. Jane Bennet might be an angel, but Darcy had never thought her a fool, to be able to give herself to a man who had once abandoned her so cruelly? It was unlikely. Sending Bingley back into Hertfordshire with false hope, merely to satisfy his own curiosity and heartache? Darcy could not do it.

Indeed, Darcy thought, he had no grounds to think that Elizabeth even believed his letter to her at Hunsford. Of course, at the time he had thought her manner towards him as greatly changed as his manner towards her. But he had once been completely in error regarding her feelings; there was nothing to say that he had not once again deluded himself regarding her feelings.

Mrs Reynolds had commented, quite innocently, to him that Miss Bennet and her aunt had seemed quite interested in Mr Wickham's portrait. It was a possibility that their visit to Pemberley was merely to see what had been denied to that poor man by his wicked self. He could not believe that Elizabeth would be so blind, his letter so full of facts and the permission to apply to the Colonel. She would at least have to think -- but he could not know.

Even without Bingley there was nothing, but his pride stopping him from visiting Longbourn, and therein was the rub. Darcy was not sure he could make such a public spectacle of himself. For Mr Darcy to turn up in the neighbourhood, staying in a public inn, only, it seemed, to visit Longbourn? He knew village gossip and he knew what would be suspected: the truth, for once.

Without any encouragement? He found he baulked at it. If only he could discover what had sent them away in such a rush! (If it was not he who had done so). Once again he cursed his inability to perform well to strangers. If he had he might have someone in the neighbourhood that he could, with propriety, write to, to discover if all was well at Longbourn.

Darcy turned his head to watch, dispassionately, the set forming in front of him and frowned when he caught a glimpse of someone.

He found himself moving down the set, as he had once done at Netherfield, to keep her in sight. It took him a little time to be convinced that it was her; she looked different, the dress he supposed. Her presence at a London Ball put paid to the notion that Longbourn was deep in mourning. He might think the youngest Bennet sisters foolish and wanton but not to that extent. Although she was not dancing, merely standing with a group of giggling girls.

"The Miss Muffets?"

Darcy turned to regard his cousin. "I beg your pardon?"

"You have been staring at the Miss Muffets for the past twenty minutes; it will be remarked upon."

Darcy had not thought it was that long, he had been thinking. "I was merely looking in that direction, deep in thought."

Ash looked unconvinced. "Then I beg you, when lost in thought find a blank wall to gaze upon, if
you do not wish to raise expectations."

Darcy could not but think of Sir William Lucas and Meryton's expectations regarding Bingley.

"Unless you wish to be married and find this the easiest way to arrange it?" Lord Upton, one of his cousin's closest companions, joined Darcy's other side. Darcy was used to this sort of pincer movement. They had used it since boyhood to tease him.

"If you do wish to be married, Darcy, please do not go about it in this silly fashion; as my cousin, you do me no credit."

"I was merely lost in reverie. You may disown me if you like, but I was not aware your standing was so tenuous that any action of mine could topple it." Occasionally Darcy was able to get his own back.

Ash laughed. "I think only of you."

"I had not thought that the Miss Muffets would be acceptable to you, Darcy." Lord Upton remarked.

"You have thought upon this, Miles? I had thought no woman was acceptable to Darcy. There is always some fault he finds."

"I had thought they were not gently bred enough for Darcy's taste. Not of his sphere." mimicked Lord Upton.

"You sound like my Aunt,' complained Ash. "But the Bingleys made their fortune in trade; Darcy is hardly a hypocrite."

"Yet Darcy is unlikely to marry Bingley. Or his sister. Therein lies the difference."

It was at that moment that Darcy made his decision. He handed his glass to a surprised Ash and strode across the room to the group of girls that included the Miss Muffets.

Mrs Muffet, and another lady Darcy was sure he should know the name of, were clearly the chaperones of this little party, and those worthy women would hardly be expected to ignore an eligible bachelor making his way towards them. It was not improper pride to think himself an eligible bachelor; it was merely fact.

"Mr Darcy," Mrs Muffet curtseyed and the rest of the group followed. Darcy returned it with a bow.

"Mrs Muffet."

The conversation seemed briefly at an end, after all Darcy only had remembered her and her daughters' names when Ash had mentioned them. He had been introduced, he was introduced to all the young ladies in London it seemed sometimes, but he had not spoken two words to the party after that, or singled them out for any attention.

"It is good to see you back in London, sir. I believe, all young ladies rejoice when any young man comes back to town. After all, there seems to be such a dearth of dance partners."

Darcy had to silently applaud Mrs Muffet; she was far more subtle than Mrs Bennet. Though he was still afraid he would disappoint her. The young ladies were still a little drawn away from them, some whispering and giggling.

"I have come, ma'am, to claim an acquaintance with one of your charges. Miss Bennet." Darcy
bowed again, this time in the direction of Catherine Bennet.

Miss Bennet had been watching him, somewhat apprehensively he thought, since he had accosted their little group, but she curtseyed; "Mr Darcy."

"I had not known -- " Mrs Muffet looked confused. "They really should not be out, sir. I ... "

Darcy was momentarily surprised. Miss Catherine had never appeared to him to be not out. It was a source of amusement for Miss Bingley and a source of contempt for his aunt that all five sisters should be out at once. Why in London was Miss Catherine suddenly not to be out? He decided it had more to do with Mrs Muffet wishing him to pay attention to the eldest Miss Muffet, a shy plain girl of one and twenty celebrating her third, or was it fourth, season.

"If you are not engaged, Miss Bennet, for the next dance?"

Miss Bennet hesitated for a moment, but it seemed an internal hesitation, not one based on the whispering of her friend or the half spoken indicts from her chaperones. He was, for once pleased in those negative traits he had observed in her and her sisters, now that it served his purpose.

"Mr Darcy," she gave him her hand.

He was wondering, as he led her into the set, whether that was all she could say. He had not heard her speak a great deal when he was in Hertfordshire; it was all her youngest sister's chatter, or the middle child's horrific playing of the pianoforte. If she was mute, she could hardly tell him what he wanted to know.

"Your family are all well, I trust?" The dance moved apart for a moment, so Darcy was afraid he would miss her answer, but she answered him when they were joined again.

"Yes, sir."

Darcy was at once relieved and worried. Relieved that no ill had befallen the family but worried that it meant that he had truly been the reason that Elizabeth and her family had left Lambton.

His next question was on the tip of his tongue, but he was interrupted.

"I hope your family is well, Mr Darcy."

"They are very well, thank you."

"Your Aunt?"

Why did Catherine Bennet wish to ask after his Aunt's health? She could only mean Lady Catherine. Perhaps there was some interest in hearing about other Catherines. "She is in health."

The dance separated, but before it did Darcy was almost sure he caught a look of distaste upon Miss Bennet's face. It had disappeared when the dance brought them together. "I am glad to hear it. She seems very liberal with her advice, it would be a pity if she was to cease doing so."

"I beg your pardon?"

"My cousin, Mr Collins, visited Longbourn recently; Lady Catherine was so good to remember us."

She probably managed to offend the entire household, thought Darcy ruefully. If his relations were appalling the ladies of Longbourn, one member of that family might remember his own comments about her relations and think him hypocritical. A charge he could hardly deny. Although any of his
aunt's maxims being filtered through Mr Collins would surely be even further distorted.

What confused him was that Miss Bennet seemed touched by these concerns. Her previous concerns had seemed to revolve around soldiers and bonnets, not what other people thought of them, unless those other people were handsome young men.

"And are all your sisters in town, Miss Bennet?"

"No, sir."

"You are visiting your friends?"

She did not need to answer him verbally for him to see the patent reproof in her eyes.

Darcy was glad that no one here would know that he was about to borrow Bingley's line of questioning, which had all the subtlety of a runaway horse. "All your sisters remain at Longbourn?"

"No, sir."

She was either shyer than he had given her credit for, or she disliked him, or she had no intellect. Based upon previous assumptions, it was most likely the last.

"Which sisters?" he asked.

Once again Darcy reminded himself that making assumptions about Bennet sisters was a perilous activity. Looking at her face, he had a sudden feeling that she knew why he asked.

"My sister Elizabeth is visiting friends in the North."

He was now no longer uncertain.

"So, not a Miss Muffet." Ash joined him at the refreshment table.

Darcy was pouring lemonade. He was not so rude as to abandon Miss Bennet the minute they had left the dance floor. He had no desire to remain in her company although, she had not disgraced him in any way. But he would no longer leave any young lady open to comment because of his treatment of her. If his encounters with her sister had taught him anything, was that his actions -- his pride and selfish distain for the feelings of others -- did him no credit most of the time.

The table was overloaded and Darcy found no space for the glass he had poured for Miss Bennet, so he handed it to his cousin.

"Thank you, such a good cousin that you are."

"That is for Miss Bennet."

'Miss Bennet. Is this the Miss Bennet?"

Darcy shot the Viscount a look; it was pointless to even ask where Ash had heard of the Miss Bennets, or that there was possibly a the Miss Bennet. The Colonel and his brother were close.

"No." Denying anything more to his cousin would only give his cousin more facts to put together, and if there was something the Viscount was good at doing it was puzzles. Darcy merely put his
hand out for the glass, now that he had his own.

"You might spill it, Darce, after you."

This could only lead to disaster.

"Miss Bennet, might I introduce my cousin, Lord Ashbourne."

Miss Bennet nodded and accepted the proffered glass of lemonade from him. When Darcy turned to claim the other from his cousin, Ash looked at him blankly, "Have you forgotten your own lemonade?"

Darcy tried to keep his face equally blank, "It is quite all right I can do without lemonade."

"May I ask how you know my cousin, Miss Bennet?"

"His friend, Mr Bingley, had leased a house near ours."

This new restrained Bennet sister made Darcy wonder how much was new and how much was his own coloured interpretations of the past.

"If you are recovered from your generosity to my cousin (you need not tell me what an appalling dancer he is) would you do me the honour?"

Ash was rarely rejected and it was not one of those occasions. Darcy accepted that it his lot to dispose of the glasses of lemonade.

It gave him once again an excuse not to be dancing.

He had not learnt a great deal, except that no one was unwell, and that it would be pointless going to Meryton if Elizabeth was not there.

"Mr Darcy."

Darcy turned to see Mrs Muffet.

"Mrs Muffet."

"Can I ask you how you know Miss Bennet?"

Darcy stiffened, except he knew no matter how he felt it was not an impertinent question. He explained his recent stay in Hertfordshire.

"Then you will understand my concern," replied Mrs Muffet.

"You have nothing to be concerned over."

"My young charge, fresh from the schoolroom, indeed not even emancipated from there, was allowed to appear here at my dear friend's ball, after I succumbed, I hope not in error, to the begging of my daughter to allow them both to attend. I am not in the habit of allowing schoolgirls to dance. I had thought perhaps you were some family friend. But I have been misled by you it seems; I had not thought you the type."
Darcy could not help but glare at the lady to his right. That she should imply that ...

"And now Miss Bennet is dancing with -- " Mrs Muffet did not have to elaborate on the Viscount's reputation. Mrs Muffet clearly held him responsible for introducing her impressionable young charge to a man who could only break her heart.

But Darcy was not concerned with Miss Bennet's heart. Was the younger Miss Muffet a school friend of Miss Bennet's? Why was Miss Bennet at school?

What had occurred to make the Longbourn household, so free of governesses and masters, suddenly turn to a formalised system of education where the out were no longer out?
As far as neutral grounds went an unfashionable emporium was eminently suitable. It was, however, not private. Of course that was both a positive and a negative for Elizabeth at this present time.

She wished to have private conversation with Kitty; they had many things to talk about, but she was not sure she wanted to launch straight into conversations that had been put off for many years. It also raised less suspicion this way for Emily and Henrietta, who would wonder why they could not meet their aunt. Here Elizabeth could send the girls off to look at trinkets.

Really the only obstacle Elizabeth could think of was that Kitty might not wish to step foot in such an unfashionable place, but Elizabeth could hardly wish her daughters to suffer the indignity of falling in love with something they could not afford to purchase.

Elizabeth need not have worried; it turned out that Elizabeth had inadvertently picked one of Kitty's favourite shopping haunts.

"You do not prefer somewhere where..." Elizabeth looked at the bolts of cloth in front of her. It was some sort of paradox those who could buy expensive cloth would have a dress able to be worn for years, and those who could only afford the cheap would find they had to continually replace, often leading to a higher cost than if they had bought the expensive cloth to start with. Of course the fashionable never wore their dresses for years.

"Oh no!" replied Kitty. "I must have something to source my creations." Kitty wrinkled her nose at a particularly offensive patterned muslin. "It was decided quite early on it was better to buy here ..."

"Unless you have improved over the years?"

Kitty laughed, "Decidedly not."

This led to a happy conversation regarding a gown that a fourteen year old Kitty had fashioned from one of Mrs Bennet's best dresses.

Kitty had brought her youngest daughter Bella, and the three cousins were happily pulling through ribbons. It brought back happy memories for Elizabeth. She'd spent many a day in Meryton with Jane, or with Kitty and Lydia. Although with the latter two, there was less giggling and more attempts to separate the two when they both found they were tugging on the same ribbon.

"Oh this is hideous!"

Elizabeth looked up to find Kitty holding a green and yellow vase. It was ghastly. "Are you in need of a vase?"

"I thought I might send one to Jane."

Elizabeth nodded; she had been looking through combs to see if any appealed to her. It was Jane's birthday and she always liked to buy something special for Jane.

Not only because Jane was quite her favourite sister, but to make up for the time when Jane was not.

"This one?" said Kitty.

"Not that one!" said Elizabeth, although Jane would pretend to like such a vase, and even put it on
"You should not simply nod then," smiled Kitty, replacing the vase.

"These mother of pearl combs are very pretty," said Elizabeth, pointing them out to her sister.

"It would be a very practical present," reproved Kitty.

"Jane would approve," responded Elizabeth.

"You would know," was all Kitty responded.

"Kitty..."

"Yes?"

"I know you are close to Jane." Indeed Jane and Kitty had grown closer as Elizabeth had distanced herself from Jane, and torn up at Kitty. "You would know as well as me."

"Ah but..."

"No buts; the first twenty years of my life I may have had Jane to myself, but we have shared her longer."

"Indeed, it was very hard for her, you know, Lizzy. It was very hard for us all. Lydia, and then you."

"I am sorry."

Kitty looked at Elizabeth, and Elizabeth could sense her calculation -- "I sense there is a but...."

Elizabeth shook her head, "No buts. I was angry. I thought everyone in the world mad but me!"

"You did not have to prolong your visit ... Indeed it was though you never returned to Longbourn after my marriage."

Elizabeth had returned physically to her home, but she knew what Kitty meant. Elizabeth had never been there in spirit.

"I could not trust myself not to speak." Elizabeth would never have exposed Jane to Mrs Bennet's ire, but it was the height of difficulty to sit there and watch and listen to their mother lament over Mr Bingley's continued absence when she knew the truth.

"It was Jane's decision."

"A faulty one," said Elizabeth heatedly before quickly turning her head away and composing herself. She turned back to her sister, "No, I cannot even say that now. She is happy. Perhaps she would have been happier but..."

"You can hardly make that judgement, Lizzy. You judged Darcy harshly for thinking himself capable of judging what would make his friend happy, you cannot judge Jane's for her."

"I thought you had influenced her."

"Jane might be malleable but where she makes a decision she is firm. I tried to persuade her; we were allies, you and I, but we did not know it."
Elizabeth snorted. "I am ashamed to think of how I thought about the world, how I spoke to you. Heartily ashamed."

"You were angry. And then you could not think of the past and what might have been -- otherwise you would have ended up in Bedlam."

"You mean if I had only practiced what I preached and been patient? After all Mr Bingley came back for Jane."

"At his friend's behest," said Kitty, "and I think the stunning blow that Jane dealt Bingley might have caused that friend some concern."

Elizabeth had thought that at the time; why would Mr Darcy come to see her family if Jane, who Elizabeth had assured Mr Darcy was deeply in love with Mr Bingley, had acted so contrary to that advice? He could have easily thought her a liar, a terrible judge of character, or any number of things. If one sister could marry a Viscount perhaps they all thought themselves above mere 'misters'.

That had fuelled her anger towards Jane but it had only been a small spark of it, the spark that she worked hard to remove, because it was selfish and petty. The bulk of her reaction had been based on the frustration that Jane was destroying her future.

Not only was it prudent to marry Mr Bingley, it was (Elizabeth judged) Jane's heart's deepest wish. Elizabeth had seen the way that Jane had mourned Mr Bingley's loss and her pain at Miss Bingley's rejection of her. That did not come from superficial feelings! Yet Elizabeth could still remember standing in the still room, upon her return to Longbourn for Kitty's wedding and hearing her sister tell her the news. Elizabeth had been venting her feelings regarding the wedding and Jane had just serenely sighed at her.

"I think, Lizzy, you are too quick to judge."

"Too quick to judge! I cannot see how I could be! I cannot judge Kitty's desire to flee school and this family, if she feels so abused, but in this manner? A manner that is likely to end in ruin and more scandal?"

"Lizzy, she truly loves him."

"Jane, I know it is your nature to see the best in people but there is a difference between the love of a title, of a house...and of a person. Only think of Mr Collins. He did not love any of us, he loved the Miss Bennets of Longbourn, indeed he did not even love them; he loved the duty he would be fulfilling if he married a Miss Bennet of Longbourn."

"Kitty is hardly Mr Collins."

"She is a foolish silly girl who has captured the fleeting attention of a man of consequence and thinks her life will be balls and parties."

"I cannot think Lord Ashbourne that foolish ...

"All men are foolish. Look at our father. Look at our parents' marriage!" Elizabeth accidentally decapitated a flower in her wild gestures. Jane giggled at her.

"Are you sure you are not jealous, Lizzy?"
'I am not jealous of Kitty. Except, perhaps that she does deserve to be married. I don't think of me -- I think of you, Jane." That had been a lie. Elizabeth had thought just as much of herself as she had of Jane, but she had told herself so often of her selflessness that she had begun to believe it.

"Of me?"

"Mr Bingley. How unfair -- "

"Oh Lizzy. If you have been worrying about me, please do not."

"How can I not? Of course Mama has great plans of other rich men now that Kitty shall be nobility but the scandal of Lydia will out and the taint of fortune hunting -- not that your Mr Bingley would think of that ... "

"Lizzy!" Jane cut in sharply. "I have seen Mr Bingley."

"Mama -- " Elizabeth had thought if Mr Bingley had been in the neighbourhood then she would have heard about it -- ten times daily at least -- from Mrs Bennet.

"She does not know. I met him quite by accident before he reached the door." Jane put down her gardening shears. "I refused him, Lizzy."

"What?" Elizabeth did not think she had heard her sister correctly.

"He told me he loved me, and I told him I could not marry him."

"Because of Lydia?"

"No, Lizzy. A little."

"If he did not care -- " After all Mr Bingley must have known of Lydia at this point, surely he must? "Or you could have told ... "

"Lizzy! When Lydia ran off with Mr Wickham she acted without thought and without reliance on her own guidance. Her note said as much, it was his idea and she thought it a grand adventure! You said yourself that she was weak-willed, craven and fickle."

"No, Lydia was not to be relied upon, unless it was to ruin us all," said Elizabeth. "I do not understand why this affects how you loved Mr Bingley."

"Mr Bingley left Netherfield because Mr Darcy told him that I did not love him. Mr Darcy told Mr Bingley he was mistaken. Mr Bingley comes to me."

Elizabeth frowned, "I do not follow?"

'Where was Mr Bingley's heart in all this? Why was he so easily able to be ordered around by his friend? Did he not trust in himself? How could I trust in that love? "

Elizabeth had had no response. It seemed Mr Bingley had come to be honest to Jane and had been condemned in the process.

"Do you see Lizzy? Our marriage, any of our marriages, would face more obstacles than a mere disapproving friend."

"But love..."
"It is not just about that, Lizzy, and if some friend chose to tell him to no longer love his wife?"

Elizabeth shook her head. Of course now she could wonder at how she, Elizabeth Bennet, had been so blinded by love. If she had blinded by the calf loves of your youth and disregarded any notions of prudence she might have ended up married long before she had even met Mr Darcy. She had always prided herself on being able to understand prudence in marriage.

There was always a limit to practicality. Charlotte Collins' marriage was evidence of that fact. The idea of having to order one's life to minimise the contact one had with ones husband? That was the height of folly.

But that was not what Jane had done. Elizabeth still wondered if Jane was trying to protect herself by sheltering herself from really feeling; really experiencing a true marriage.

"What do you think of this vase? I think it vastly improved on that green one."

The vase Kitty held was blue with yellow flowers and was pretty. It didn't have the willow pattern that was so popular, so there could be some hope that Jane did not have one identical.

"It is very pretty, but would it travel?"

"Oh that is not my problem! That is Ash's!"

Elizabeth laughed.

Kitty smiled, "Did not Henry convince you that his way was the only successful way?"

"Yes, even though his way invariably failed."

"But it provides much amusement to watch! Although a broken vase would do Jane no good. These are very novel, they would not break on the journey!" Kitty appeared to be examining embroidered fabric flowers.

"Useful if your guests are blind!"

"I think if I had blind guests I would just tell them there were flowers, not put fabric ones in their place."

"Very true, but perhaps they would smell the absence of flowers?"

Something struck Elizabeth about the trivial nature of their discussion, and how comfortable it felt. Even when they were discussing a period of great pain in their family and between the sisters it was absent of hurt. It seemed like a burden had been lifted from her shoulders. Of course they would have to discuss it, they could not avoid the matter completely, but it was not the crux of their relationship. They might not have been ‘sisters' in the true meaning of the word before but they felt like ones now. It was under the umbrella of this feeling that Elizabeth felt safe blurting out something.

"I saw Mr Darcy."

"You have seen Mr Darcy?" Kitty looked quite comical, frozen in place, fake flowers in one hand, vase held aloft in the other.
"Yes we had a quite pleasant conversation."

"Pleasant?"

"You are surprised."

"I had not thought pleasant characterised the majority of your previous interactions."

"Kitty, if you had not noticed, there is little point holding onto childish notions! Indeed I think you learnt that lesson before me! We are both grown with children, if we could not meet and be pleasant and open, I would think there was something vastly wrong with both of us!"

"So you found him radically altered?"

"No! Altered perhaps but not radically so. Naturally altered."

"But you said he was open! Is that a natural alteration of a man who lost his wife early, is a confirmed bachelor and has a demanding son?"

Elizabeth paused not knowing what to say before her sister continued.

"Or is he just determined to be open around you?"

"I think, you, with your better acquaintance, would know better."

‘I think it matters not how much time has passed. If a man's pride has been hurt, he will be determined to prove himself. And if a young lady's pride has been hurt, and her ability to judge a good character made a mockery of, then she too will be determined to prove herself.’

"What do you mean, Kitty?"

"I think you were both trying far too hard. You were outdoing each other with your laissez-faire approach to each other."

"I cannot believe you find fault with us being pleasant with each other!"

"I do not find fault, I just wonder what happens when you are both yourselves once more."

Elizabeth opened her mouth to tell her sister that there was far more to her and Mr Darcy's relationship than Kitty could surely know, but that was the point. She did not know how much Kitty had heard, and how true those mutterings were. If they had been filtered through Lord Ashbourne... Elizabeth did not think her brother-in-law would alter the truth, but anything he knew was automatically filtered through his own perceptions.

"Has Mr Darcy spoken to you of our dealings?"

"I know he proposed to you, that you refused him -- on the grounds of Jane and Mr Wickham. I know he explained himself to you. I know hearing of Jane's rejection of Bingley... You know Bingley quite blamed Darcy. Quite rightly I think, although he should, and did, blame himself equally. Anyway Bingley's rejection threw Darcy and then...you hurt him deeply with your marriage."

Elizabeth looked at the ground and then around to make sure none of their daughters were in close proximity.

"I do not think badly of you for marrying a good man, who you knew loved you, who knew about
Lydia and did not care. I know you loved Henry deeply. You and Darcy seemed ships passing in the night -- albeit ships determined to lob cannonballs into each other without realising it!

Elizabeth liked that analogy. So much miscommunication and misunderstanding and mistiming.

"Courtship was not meant to be so difficult. Not after Lydia, I suppose I had little patience and fight in me."

"Not with me living up to my reputation and Jane apparently casting hers aside and Papa!"

"At least we were both happy," said Elizabeth.

"Yes. Although I would have much rather you as Mrs Darcy than...I should not speak ill of the dead.'

"You did not like Mrs Darcy?"

"She was hard to like. She looked down upon me. I was not well-born enough, I was not witty enough. I think Darcy thought he was doing as he ought when he married her, some corrupted notion of duty, but also of your influence since I believe he did care deeply for her."

Mr Darcy had told her that she had improved him, thought Elizabeth had that been what he meant? Marrying a lady he did care for, but one that was suitable? Or not having such a strict requirement?

"You think she reinforced all of his bad qualities?"

"Some of them," Kitty was playing with a fringe, "not all. I think the danger comes from being alone and brooding and trying to raise a son, when you are rudderless." Kitty laughed. "I think Ash would roll his eyes at all my attempts to make you and Darcy ships."

"Boats."

"Are they? Is there a difference?" Kitty furrowed her brow.

"Is what a difference, Mama? Of what do you talk?" Miss Bella approached them, almost invisible behind an array of ribbons.

"Boats," said Kitty with a sly smile, "or is it ships?"
Darcy tied his cravat with the care that came with something one had done for most of one's life. He was unconcerned with fashion, but he still examined himself in the mirror to ensure he looked unremarkable.

He hoped he had looked unremarkable when he had met Elizabeth so unexpectedly on the doorstep of their sons' shared lodgings. He was conscious of no sense of awkwardness between them. But he wondered whether that had been merely the fact that he had been determined that there should be none. Darcy had learnt a great deal through his life, some lessons served to him by his parents, his family, his son, his wife, and a great one from Elizabeth.

Before Elizabeth, if Darcy had thought of marriage his thoughts would have immediately turned to the example of his parents, or of his aunts and uncles. Strong dynastic marriages. Happy unions (on the most part) of people from the same world, with an equal expectation of themselves and each other.

Until Netherfield. There in Meryton he had felt a stirring of a mixture of emotions when he had been bewitched by a woman for the first time. Really bewitched. He had never thought of caring deeply for the young lady. It had never entered his mind. Of course he had never thought of entering a marriage with someone he did not like, but there was a difference between true and lasting friendship and what he had felt for Elizabeth.

The feeling was far similar to what he had felt for certain young ladies in his youth. But then he had not contemplated marriage. Then the idea of combining the feeling with marriage had never even been an option. He was exceedingly glad it had not! No one could ever convince him there was no such thing as ineligibility in a woman! There was a difference between base feelings, and the type of feeling that was for one's partner in life. Elizabeth had opened his eyes to that.

Perhaps he had been too bitter when he married Amelia. Her cutting humour spoke to his (what he now saw as) bitterness. She knew what she wanted and was forthright in seeking what she wanted. That was refreshing to Darcy, who never liked simpering females, nor had he once liked the type of woman who was too direct, but his attitude on that subject had done almost a revolution. Amelia's obvious interest in him attracted Darcy. She had no reason to fake that attraction.

She wasn't wealthy but her dowry was reasonable and her family respectable. Yet it was mainly her other attractions -- her wit, her personality -- that held the attention of other men. It was those attentions that let Darcy know that she had chosen him the man.

The only wish he'd ever made of Amelia was that she had lived to help him raise their son. He knew that their opinions would have differed. They were at variance on so many subjects in life that it was to be expected. But there was no doubt they would have loved their son equally, in all senses of that word.

Darcy assumed that since he'd raised Georgiana from when she was a little girl, he was in a far better situation, with mountains of experience, than any of his cousins, for all Richard was also Georgiana's guardian. He'd found however that when it came to a son, who he was responsible for since the moment he drew his first breath, things were completely new. Darcy did not know if he was making the same mistakes that his parents did. He tried to instil pride without prejudice. Self worth but not at the expense of others.

Some days Darcy wondered whether he was just making different mistakes.
Darcy finished with his cravat and reached for his coat. The action somehow reminded him of a day many years ago at Pemberley, reaching for a coat before almost running to Lambton. He shook his head. It was possible that he would see Elizabeth today, unlike that day. It seemed strange to him that suddenly after years of their closely intertwined family never colliding completely, that they were now crashing together. Their sons had met at Oxford. No, even before that, Darcy had reached out when Mr Davies had tragically been killed. Elizabeth had reached out to her sister, and Kitty to her. Ash had strode in determined to throw people together.

Perhaps he should be wondering at the fact they had never met before this. Although maybe it was not so curious. Henry Davis was not a man of substantial means. Seasons in London would have been out of the question. Even if visiting was possible, three children would focus all of Elizabeth's attentions; their needs would be put above hers. Darcy himself had no reason to visit Longbourn, a natural visiting place for Elizabeth.

For the first years he had always subtly inquired whether Elizabeth, or indeed Jane, would be part of any party formed by Kitty and Ash. He'd learnt to stop asking since the answer was always a curt no. Darcy did not know whether it had been a compliment to him. But Ash's reaction to his questioning to recently at Pemberley made it obvious that Ash had not cared for his sensibility, and Darcy never really thought that was the reason; it was Kitty's feelings that Ash solely cared for.

It only confirmed something Darcy had begun to think over the years: If Kitty's sisters were not invited, or refused invitations, then it was a disagreement subsisting wholly between the sisters, not he who was the reason for the absence. He wished he could say, for the sake of his own character, that it had not taken him years to come to this conclusion.

Darcy did hear of Kitty's family. Neither Kitty nor Ash guarded their conversation around him, and for that he was glad. He was unsure how he would have felt if he had been treated like a blushing girl just released from the schoolroom, unable to hear even the most mild unpleasantness.

He had wondered whether Elizabeth had been told anything of him. Elizabeth's demeanour in the park, and not knowing of Amelia's death, had answered that question so decidedly!

That felt so strange to him: did he want her to be needing, nay, wanting details of his life? When she had chosen to marry another? He had not known Henry Davis but he would not wish an unfaithful wife, even in thought alone, on anyone. He also did not want to think so ill of Elizabeth. If she could marry without love, she would have accepted his proposal. Or Mr Collins'.

Or did it unsettle him more to consider the possibility she did not care to hear of him, that she was now so uninterested in him and his family?

In reality Darcy knew that the rupture in her family was no doubt the real reason that she had heard so little of his life. The communication lines had been broken, and even those that had been resurrected were unlikely to mention him.

Darcy pulled his jacket closed with a hard tug; he disliked thinking in this maudlin manner. It was a pointless exercise. It reminded him of his uncertainty before and after he had seen Kitty across that ballroom floor. It reminded him of anxiously awaiting Bingley's return from unknowingly being the advance guard, and then that empty feeling when Bingley had been unceremoniously turned away.

That was why he had eventually married Amelia -- no uncertainty.

The house felt empty; there was no need to employ a veritable army of servants. In the early days of their marriage they had not needed one either, it was only when Fitzwilliam had been born and Amelia had fallen ill that the house overflowed. Darcy found he did not miss the bustle. He knew
Georgiana thought him lonely, but he strangely was not. He had his family and he had his friends, more of them than he probably deserved.

He wished that he and Bingley could have remained friends, but he knew that was impossible. Bingley blamed him for Jane's rejection, for which Darcy did take responsibility. If he had not interfered Bingley would never have left Jane's side. Where Elizabeth was concerned Darcy was only himself to blame. His hesitation, his damnable pride, his actions -- all seemed to result in destroying something that could have been.

Although if it was so fragile, would it have been worth it? The same argument had only served to anger Bingley beyond belief. Sometimes Darcy thought he still saw the port stain on the wall in his study. It was an argument that Darcy had had with himself in his darkest moments, when all hope of Elizabeth seemed gone and his cousin seemed determined to tie him to a life he was trying to forget.

Darcy knew that that night Ash had announced his engagement he'd spoken intemperately. He'd known it for years, and yet he only apologised for it recently. It had been worse than the ramblings of a drunken man. He'd insulted his cousin and he'd insulted his cousin's wife.

More than anything he'd insulted himself. Gone against his new resolutions!

He'd not meant to, but Darcy had found himself speaking in such a disgusting and vile manner. More than that, he'd found himself breaking the confidence Bingley had entrusted with him. Bingley who had come to him after a chance meeting with Sir William Lucas in town; the catalyst for Darcy to confess to Bingley and to urge him to return to Jane Bennet. He'd stood there and instead of toasting his cousin's happiness, Darcy had found the story of Lydia Bennet spilling out of his lips.

Darcy could still see his cousin's face and he did not think he would ever forget his words.

"You should be damn glad that you are telling me something I already know, because if you ever try with your bitterness or your pride -- do not tell me you meant only kindness, or that you think only of my welfare -- to destroy my happiness, I promise you it will be the last thing you ever do."

He seemed to have a habit of attempting to destroy friendships with his own actions. He just did not understand how his cousin could ignore his birthright, ignore everything society told him was expected of him. Ignore it all! It was not just ignoring it all, he managed to do that and behave admirably and win his chosen bride.

If Darcy had done the latter he would have married Elizabeth long before Lydia had had the chance to disgrace the family. If he had set aside his expectations, lifted his blinkers and seen the world.

He knew that reality was not a fantasy. It could have been.

Darcy found himself on the landing facing his painting; evidence that he was not a perfect person.

He'd always, for instance, written drafts of letters. Those of business he kept as a record of what he'd said: an important detail when organising prices and sales. Personal letters he usually ended up burning when he knew that the letter had been received. There was one draft of a personal nature that was particularly scratched and lined, but he kept it.

Amelia had found it. Darcy did not suppose she was snooping. She was his wife; she could have no jealousy of any other woman and Amelia was not the type of woman to be jealous for no reason.

But she'd questioned him. Wanting to know all.

He should have wanted to share everything with her, and in a way he did, he wanted to see the
sympathy in her eyes, hear her perhaps condemn Elizabeth. He received neither.

Instead Amelia had congratulated him on his escape, understandable as he could have never married her if he'd married Elizabeth. She'd been of the opinion that a family so sullied and full of inconstant sisters and loud mothers would never have done for Darcy.

Her complete certainty that it had been an ill-fated flirtation had angered him. It had, to him, ridiculed and diminished his feelings and his sorrow.

Some of Amelia's reaction had to have come from her shared antipathy with Kitty. His mother-in-law described her daughter once to their son as 'all angles'. Fitzwilliam had only been five; the analogy had been lost on him. It had not been lost on Darcy. Where Amelia had been angles, Kitty was all curves. It was expected they would clash. But over the years, if they had had the time, Darcy was sure they would have become great friends.

Darcy reached out and straightened the frame slightly. He'd still been angry with Amelia when she'd pressed and pressed him to paint something for her.

Another face he'd always remember: Amelia's when she'd praised him, as only a wife could, then the change in her expression when he'd told her what it was of. It had been like a slap to the face. He'd attempted to make some excuse that Kitty had reminded him of something, but Amelia had not been fooled.

The painting he was sure had been destined for burning but Amelia had hung it right where it still stayed to this day.

She'd just looked at him and never spoke of it again. He did not know what she meant by it, and he never had the courage to ask her. Had she wanted it there to forever punish him for what he'd done to her, and what he'd lost? Or had she wanted to show him she understood that Elizabeth had been part of his life, and had meant something to him. That she understood she'd hurt him by belittling how he'd felt.

Darcy shook off those musings and found himself in the breakfast room with no remembrance of leaving the landing and arriving there.

The newspaper was neatly folded by his plate like it always was; he was glad of the distraction.

He opened the paper and perused it. Calm suddenly reigned as it always did when Darcy felt in control. It was as though the dust had settled and left in its wake was clarity, in his household and in his life.

He flicked one of the pages; of course there was never any good news! There never was and the advertisements were all for frivolities. Pointless items that never did what they advertised. Amelia had delighted in them. Darcy had indulged her by never commenting and sharing his opinion.

When Darcy lowered the newspaper to reach for some tea, his vision was filled with the petulant face of his son. Darcy brought the newspaper back up again. He waited some moments before letting the corner of the paper droop. No Fitzwilliam was still there and the look on his son's face did not inspire Darcy with confidence.

"You wished to speak to me?"

Fitzwilliam's mouth opened and then closed again. "No, sir." And with that he was gone.

Strange child, thought Darcy.
A niggling voice, in the back of his head did point out that it was obvious that his son had wanted to speak to him. About something that was clearly troubling him. Or was something difficult to articulate. Darcy tried to dismiss it; if Fitzwilliam wished to speak to him he could, they had no secrets.

Well Fitzwilliam had no secrets from him.

Except he'd not mentioned Max's cousin Thomas Davis to him. Or their escapades that led to their suspension, or indeed the fact Max had been set upon by blaggards.

Darcy put down his newspaper and went in search of his son.

It was not surprising that his son was in his chambers. Darcy wondered why Fitzwilliam did just not stay here; he did not seem to spend a great deal of his time at his own lodgings.

But then he remembered what it was like to be such a young man and desirous of making his own way in the world. He could only hope that Fitzwilliam was not trying on the life that Wickham and so many of his contemporaries had embraced.

Neither of their personalities allowed them to have the free and easy relationship that Darcy observed between his cousins and their sons. Darcy had never had it with his father and it was not a regret he held. Darcy found he did not dislike being held in respect and esteem. More so now that he felt he was perhaps deserving of that respect and esteem. Darcy found himself unable to avoid being a strict parent. He wondered if that was the result of his character, or of the fact there was only one of him. Where there could be two sets of eyes focused upon a child, leniency was more acceptable.

He wondered also that whether where there were two parents there was a greater bond. A closeness. Darcy had perhaps drawn away from his son, from expressing his feelings properly to his son, because of a fear of swamping the boy.

Fitzwilliam was a child to be protected, not to be placed in the position of confidant and of having to bear his father's crosses.

He knew Fitzwilliam looked up to him; Ash had groaned often enough that if he heard one more 'my father' from the little one's lips he would not be accountable for his actions. It made Darcy more determined to act correctly, to lead by example.

"Did you wish to speak to me, Fitzwilliam?"

His son shrugged his shoulders, not turning to look at his father.

"You are not normally this rude, I think," said Darcy.

This usually would have resulted in an apology from his son, but there was no response. Darcy wondered if this was part of his son becoming far more a man than he ever had been before.

Of course, both Ash and Richard had informed him that this day would arrive. Darcy thought they were both waiting for the day so they could decidedly smug, since Darcy had laughed at them both. He'd forgotten that his experience was in losing a father while still relatively young, the transition between son to equal had never occurred with his father.

Yet he could never have imagined his son behaving in any manner except politeness. To himself at
least; he could not know how Fitzwilliam behaved in company where he was not present. More than likely with a degree of social awkwardness which might be mistaken for something else. Darcy would have wished away one of his less admirable traits that his son had inherited if he could, but since he himself had never grown out of it, he did not know how to cure it in his son.

"Fitzwilliam!"

It was then his son did turn towards him. "Father."

'If you have something you wish to say to me, say it."

"You would not like it."

"I am accustomed to hearing things I do not like."

"Not from me."

Darcy inclined his head, "Not from you. But you are accustomed to hearing things you do not like from me."

A twisted smile formed on Fitzwilliam's face. He was no doubt thinking of the punishment Darcy had meted out on hearing of his prank. He had told Elizabeth that it should be laughed at and perhaps it should have been, but laughable or not, it was unbecoming behaviour. Darcy did not know what Elizabeth's response had been, but he knew even Ash had had a reaction, so Darcy did not feel so bad about his, in his opinion at least, trifling restrictions.

"You have made me look a fool."

Darcy could not prevent his eyebrows almost disappearing into his hairline. When he had offered to allow his son to speak to him as an equal he had not meant this!

"Davis asks you questions which I think are impertinent and unable to be answered by you, but you answer. Why did I never know that you knew Lady Ashbourne's family?"

"You never asked," said Darcy. It was an unfair response really.

"I have asked you about my mother, about everything..." Fitzwilliam did not add that Darcy had not been forthcoming. Darcy found himself unable to often open up about his feelings. Or explain himself particularly well.

"There is so little to say." Darcy checked himself, realising that he sounded so dismissive of his late wife. "I mean she was your mother and she loved you." Darcy knew his mother-in-law had told Fitzwilliam about his mother. A romantic view perhaps, but since he himself chose to think about his mother without fault Darcy could not deny his son the same view. After all it was cruelty enough that he had to live without his mother; it seemed vindictive to ensure that his son knew of Amelia's faults as well as her virtues.

"I do not disappoint you?"

"No."

"And Thomas Davis and his mother?"

Darcy smiled, "A young lady I knew long ago, and her son who apparently now seems to form an unholy alliance with you and your cousin."
"That is all?"

"Now I feel I disappoint you."

"Of course not, father. I am glad we have had this conversation."
The End of Sport

Fencing was a sport Thomas had always read about in novels. It was one of the few ways he could be persuaded to read any novel. He'd imagined himself the hero or the villain, whoever had the sword. One of his greatest disappointments at school was finding there was no fencing master. His father had never learnt and did not see the need; it was not an activity that claimed his mind. When Thomas had complained, Henry had merely said, 'You cannot do everything you read about in a novel.'

So when Darcy had asked Thomas to accompany him to Angelo's on St James Street, there could only be one answer.

It did mean that Thomas had to admit that his only experience with fencing had been play-acting with sticks.

"Oh that should not matter, we will hardly be serious," was Darcy's only response. Thomas was surprised at the other boy's affability. He was never consistent in his reactions, and Thomas just grew used to being surprised.

"I should not want to hinder your exercise."

"Well I shall inform you when you do so."

Thomas had clamped his lips around the obvious retort to when not if. After all, it was entirely probable that he would put in a poor showing. Perhaps that was why Darcy invited him. He could only look good against someone who had never held a sword before.

It was an unexpected courtesy that Darcy allowed him to observe some of the movements of the other fencers, and showed him the appropriate stances. Thomas did not think he could do too much harm, except to his pride; after all there were buttons on the end of swords.

The first time they had fenced together it had almost ended in disaster despite those precautions, but Thomas found himself a quick learner. Particularly since several times they had visited Angelo's Max had come with them. If Max was present then Darcy did not want to fence with him, even if he could be ensured a victory with Thomas.

This day he was sure that he would be fencing with some other gentlemen at the establishment as Max had joined them.

"We should introduce Thomas to the pugilistic sport!" said Max as they waited for several young men to spill out of Angelo's before they took the stairs.

For of course boxing and fencing went hand in hand at this establishment. Thomas had little interest in watching or participating in that sport, it was not new to him.

"I know how to box, Max," said Thomas.

"Who taught you?" said Darcy.

"My father." It had involved some considerable embarrassment, for Thomas, the first time he had managed to land a blow on his father. Although Henry seemed proud, Thomas now smiled at the memory
Max laughed. "So did mine."

Darcy only frowned.

"Don't sulk, Darcy. Can you imagine your father boxing?"

"I am sure he knows how," was Darcy's curt response. "He didn't teach me to fence either if that is your next question, Davis."

"I never -- " Thomas broke off, sensing it was pointless to defend himself.

"Oh but that would be encouraging bad habits!" laughed Max, "What if you wished to duel?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Max, nobody duels anymore." Darcy grabbed his sword and swished it through the air several times. Releasing some pent up frustration no doubt. After all Darcy always seemed to have pent up frustration, thought Thomas.

"And if they do, it's not with swords," added Thomas. It was not often that Darcy and he had the same opinion and rarer still that it was the opposite one to Max.

Darcy's lack of charity with his cousin might have been the reason that this day he practically demanded that Thomas fence with him. Thomas did not mind, he would not be so ruthlessly slaughtered today.

It did not take long for Thomas to get the upper hand which surprised him. He could only suppose something was distracting his opponent. Since he was winning, he should have realised that Darcy would use everything in his power to distract him; he just did not guess the source of that distraction.

"You know, of course, that your mother refused my father." Darcy's sword easily struck through to Thomas's shoulder. "A point to me."

Did the other boy mean that Mr Darcy senior had recently proposed to his mother? Thomas dismissed that immediately. He had to have meant before his father, and before Darcy's own mother. It was a possibility that Thomas himself had thought of and his mother had never really denied it, so he was unsure why he was so surprised now.

Of course he never thought that Darcy of all people would be thinking the same thing, and that he would be talking of it in a public forum.

How did he know for sure? It could not be that Mr Darcy spoke of his mother in such a fashion? It would be the height of incivility and Thomas would have to demand satisfaction, wouldn't he? Thomas was the defender of his mother's honour now that his father was gone.

"You have nothing to say, Davis?"

"No, except to say that if you speak of my mother slightingly again I will have to demand real satisfaction." Thomas raised his sword again.

"It is not slightlying. I have not insulted her by revealing the truth." "If it is indeed the truth." Thomas managed to break through Darcy's defence. They disengaged.

"Oh it is. You see, my mother wrote me a letter."

"From the grave?" said Thomas disbelievingly. He knew it was a stupid thing to say the moment it slipped out of his mouth. Of course Mrs Darcy could not write from beyond the grave. Darcy must
have meant a letter written before her death. He could believe that. Thomas knew his own father would have written him something, if he could have.

"Yes, from beyond the grave," Darcy struck his next blow with more force than before.

It seemed to Thomas that if Mrs Darcy was writing to her son about her husband's failed romantic exploits that she might have just had her priorities wrong. Surely a letter to a much beloved son should be filled with the advice and love she would not be around to deliver herself?

"Why should it matter?" said Thomas, finding it difficult to fence and speak at the same time. It was just another piece to a puzzle that Thomas was sure he had the main picture already completed in. It was just a side piece that perhaps explained his mother's reaction to everything. A spurned or disappointed love and her sister marrying the cousin. He could imagine it as a plot of a lurid novel. It was still difficult however to imagine his mother as the heroine.

Thomas found his defence broken and Darcy grasped the hilt of Thomas's sword and forced it to Thomas' chest. The side of Darcy's own sword was pressed to Thomas' neck. Since they were so close, Darcy did not have to raise his voice above a whisper. "Because my father loved my mother and I denounce anyone who tries to deny it."

Darcy stepped back and bowed arrogantly before pushing back through the spectators who had gathered to watch the bout.

"What was that about?" Max looked troubled and concerned.

"I have no idea." It was only a partial lie.

"How do you like London, Thomas?" Mrs Gardiner smiled at him, handing him a cup of tea.

The last time he had seen Mrs Gardiner he must have been ten; she looked much the same as she had then and her kind eyes inviting confidences had not changed.

Although when he was ten those confidences were likely to be about the apple pie he had liberated from the kitchen, not family secrets.

Thomas had almost made up his mind how to respond when Henrietta saved him the effort.

"How could he not? When we are cabin'd, cribbed'd and confined to carriages and walking to prescribed places, and he has the key to the city."

"I know what you have been reading," murmured their mother, not looking up from her embroidery. She'd told him that if Mrs Gardiner was so generous to them, the least she could do was to help recover the chairs, Mrs Gardiner's eyesight not being what it once was.

"Emily recommended it to me," said Henrietta defiantly.

"And Aunt Mary recommended it to me," added Emily.

Thomas, meanwhile was wondering if he had the key to the city could he return it? All it seemed to bring him was information that he could do little with. He could not inform or question his mother on such a subject.

He did not so much as wonder whether it was true; it explained too much. Thomas found himself
wondering what it was that Mr Darcy lacked and his father excelled in. Mr Darcy had position and wealth. Of course his son was possibly proof there was a prickly character underneath the calm exterior and that was the kindest thing that Thomas could find to say about Darcy the Junior.

If his mother had not rejected him due to his character, perhaps she did it to spare him the taint of her sister? Although it did not seem to be an insurmountable object to any of his uncles. And the image of his mother sacrificing her great love had too many unpleasant implications for his parents' relationship so Thomas rejected it wholeheartedly. His parents had loved one another!

The other alternatives were that Darcy had it mixed up, or that his mother had been the one rejected when Mr Darcy had discovered the shameful behaviour of Aunt Lydia.

"Thomas?" Mrs Gardiner looked at Thomas's undrunk tea.

Thomas apologised for his distraction and crinkled his face up when he realised the tea was now cold. Mrs Gardiner looked conspiratorial as she turned herself away from his mother and she leant in towards him.

"How do you find your cousin?"

"Max? I like him very much indeed." Thomas thought if she was trying to keep their conversation private she could hardly have chosen a worse subject; one of the girls would surely hear the name and be immediately interested.

Mrs Gardiner sat back, pleased. "I am glad. I always thought you would make good companions. If...well I should not speak of that."

Thomas smiled, "Probably not, but I know of the disagreement between my mother and my aunt, but better late than never?"

"For more than one thing," added Mrs Gardiner.

Thomas looked at the door and was tempted to knock. But what would he say? He didn't think that anything he could say to the younger Darcy would placate him. Thomas didn't know if he even wanted to placate him. After all, as much as Darcy was convinced his father was blameless, Thomas was almost as convinced his mother was blameless, although perhaps not totally. He'd learnt enough of the world to know that in a disagreement between two people, there was rarely a situation where one was totally innocent and one was the villain.

Thomas was still staring lost in thought when he realised that someone had come to lean against the wall.

"I've always found that coming between two people, intent on some sort of relationship, in this case apparently enemies, is never a good idea." Max paused, "But I was never one for good ideas."

Max wouldn't know how much Thomas suddenly believed in that thought.

"Thomas?"

Thomas turned away and leant on the door, "I don't think this is my argument."

Max looked like he would have responded but Thomas suddenly fell backwards and almost flattened
"Why are you loitering outside my door?" said Darcy, once he'd managed to disentangle and straighten himself.

"If you did not take so long to get ready we would not have to loiter," said Thomas, earning a laugh from Max and a glare from Darcy.

They were attending an engagement at Ashbourne House. Max had complained in the Hackney that it was doubtless to be a tediously formal evening. Thomas didn't know if Max knew or suspected the reasons for the formality: the gathering of people who had a lot to say to one another but not much impetus, as far as Thomas could see, to do so.

It wasn't until after dinner that Thomas thought Max had, for once, got it wrong. Gossip of the political and the familiar nature took up most of dinner. Although Thomas was sure his mother would never have described it as gossip. Since she had often lectured the children, and their father sometimes, on the base nature of gossip and how it ruined lives.

It wasn't so formal that everyone was forced to only make polite conversation with the person next to them. Chatter flew up and down and across the table. But after dinner, everyone broke off into little groups.

Lady Carling took up her position at the piano. A tall and graceful woman, although she had seemed less inclined to partake in the conversation around the table. She seemed more at home behind the piano. Two more different people than Mr Darcy and his sister Thomas could not readily bring to mind. Of course one was fair and one was dark, but Mr Darcy had a commanding presence and somehow you seemed to be able to guess his thoughts, Lady Carling was inscrutable, fading into the background.

At least that was how it seemed to him. Although Thomas was realising he was not perhaps the most observant person, or the best judge of character.

He could see similarities for instance between his Aunt Kitty and his mother, where she apparently saw none. Part of her explanation for the rift had been differing personalities. He could see less in common between his Aunt Jane and his mother. His Aunt Jane had the same introspective character as his Aunt Mary. But Aunt Jane did have the Bennet searching eyes.

His contemplation of Lady Carling meant he did not notice being joined by Max.

"I think perhaps it is time we removed ourselves to the billiards room."

"My father always told me being bored was a weakness of character." Thomas responded cheekily.

"It is not to cure boredom but prevent that..."

Thomas looked where Max was looking. Darcy. Of course.

Darcy was glowering. It seemed to Thomas that this particular brand of glowering was about to accompany an outburst. Thomas turned further to look over his shoulder, this time at what Darcy was glaring at.

He was glaring at his father, and Thomas's mother.
They were sitting on a sofa, intent on conversation. It was nothing extraordinary as far as Thomas could see. But they did not look displeased with each other, which made Thomas' theory that Mr Darcy had rejected his mother for such a superficial reason rather less likely.

His mother would never forgive that sin. Thomas was almost sure of that at least.

Or perhaps at the time she had not thought it superficial? It only seemed that way because of the happy marriages all of the sisters had made.

"Do you not think so?"

Thomas was aware that for the ...well thousandth, perhaps...time in as many days he had been oblivious to a conversation going on about him.

"I beg your pardon?"

Henrietta, who had as far as he was concerned appeared out of nowhere, looked impatiently at him.
"Do you not think we should be dancing?"

Thomas could not think of anything worse. He would after all be surely forced to dance with his sister. He caught up his wineglass to give him an excuse, but his sister apparently had other ideas.

"I think Mr Fitzwilliam would like to dance?" Henrietta sat down and smiled at her cousin.

Thomas tried not to spit up his wine at the look on Max's face.

Henrietta did not need a real answer from either of the boys. Instead she swept Miss Fitzwilliam up in her wake to beg Lady Carling to play something they could dance with.

"Please remember that you refused billiards!" said Max in an anguished whisper.

"Every gentleman should make it his duty to like dancing." Thomas had not seen his uncle approach. Lord Ashbourne leant over and lowered his voice, "particularly my son."

Max muttered something unrepeatable under his breath.

"Ask the lovely lady to dance, Maximilien," was his father's only response.

It appeared that Lady Carling chose an older style dance to begin. The brave couples stood facing each other. Thomas had managed to avoid being bullied into dancing, so too it seemed had Darcy.

His mother and Mr Darcy were still sitting, watching the set forming and the music starting, when Mr Darcy said something to her causing her to smile and laugh. Then they were joining the set.

The look of outrage on Darcy's face would have amused Thomas under any other circumstance. But he could not have the boy create a scene.

Thomas put his wineglass down and tried to nonchalantly cross the room to strongarm Darcy out of the room without anyone else being the wiser.
The End of the Dance

Elizabeth took Darcy’s hand as he led her into the set. She had recognised the music of course. It had taken her a moment to place it with regards to Darcy though. For the first second, like most other times, it had just been a familiar tune. One played at many balls, dances and informal hops in her life. Of course it was by now a quite an old fashioned dance. Perhaps it was the fact she had been ruminating on that period of her life or because Mr Darcy was sitting next to her, but when she had looked at him she had known what he was thinking before he had leant over.

This was what they had danced to that time at Netherfield. When she was determined to hate him, yet found herself in a set with him almost against her will, and he was determined to find fault with her while still falling in love with her against his better nature. Neither of them had known then what the other had been thinking, or the war taking place within.

"Shall we have some conversation?"

Elizabeth smiled, "I think, perhaps, now I am older and wiser that I no longer need conversation during dancing. Dancing is food enough for me."

Darcy nodded. "It is a pity, nevertheless. We may never have the opportunity again to form opinions of one another."

He was, as far as Elizabeth could tell, attempting to be bold and teasing. It was obvious however that he had little practice in the endeavour. It was a rusty attempt but it could not help but make Elizabeth smile. Both because he was trying, and because it reminded her, in a nice way, of their former conversations.

"I think if we did not have an opinion by now then we would be very poor sorts of creatures."

"Yet so much has changed. Should we, in all good conscience, allow these opinions to stagnate? Those opinions that might have been formed unnecessarily and not from all the facts?"

"Opinions I find are rarely reflective of fact, Mr Darcy."

Elizabeth was reminded of Kitty’s conversation with her. The fact that she and Darcy were in essence being false with one another. Trying to out do each other in being civil. More than civil. Even attempting to impress one another. She’d dismissed it as ridiculous but now she wondered if once again she’d underestimated her sister. This interaction with Darcy felt as if both of them were skating on thin ice.

Henry had taken her skating numerous times, and never once had the ice cracked but sometimes she had looked down and fancied she could see right through the ice, like it was not actually there. The same feeling as she was experiencing now had flooded through her. Interestingly, the thought of Henry only brought a slight tremor to her mind, not like the moment in the park when it had overcome her and prevented her continuing her conversation with Mr Darcy any longer.

She was suddenly aware that the face had brought them back together and Darcy was looking at her expectantly yet she had not heard a word of what he had said.

"I find that my mind has wandered, Mr Darcy. Of what were we talking?"

"Nothing of import." But Elizabeth saw a shadow cross his eyes and Elizabeth felt their dance ended as troublingly as their first had done.
"Where has Thomas disappeared to?" said Mrs Gardiner as Elizabeth sat down on the sofa. Elizabeth scanned the room. Max appeared to be still in the clutches of Henrietta, but of the other young man of the party she could see nothing.

"Mr Darcy's son has disappeared too. I suspect they have found something more entertaining to do than sitting discussing pleasantries with us."

"He is a very handsome man, not quite as handsome has his father was; his sullen expression spoils his visage."

"Aunt!" said Elizabeth, only half putting on her scandalised whisper."

"You do not think so?"

"I can hardly be expected to pass judgement of that nature on a child barely a year older than my own son!"

"Lizzy, you have eyes!"

Elizabeth was grateful for the reprieve that her sister's breathless appearance gave. Where she and Darcy had retired, the others had continued with a lively hop. The look that Kitty had thrown her husband and he her, had both warmed and chilled Elizabeth's heart. She was happy for them and sad for herself, and sorry that she could have not seen the success her sister's marriage was.

Her aunt however would not be distracted from her current thinking.

"Kitty, do you not think Young Mr Darcy is only a facsimile of his father? I think he loses something. Lizzy cannot give me an opinion."

"I have not thought often of the Little One in such terms, but no one should stand in the shadow of his father."

"But he cannot help but do so in looks."

"Does this mean, Lizzy, you do not have an opinion on the father either?" Kitty directed the question towards her. Elizabeth saw the glint in her sister's eyes but Kitty did not torment her for very long. "No, he is not as well looking as his father. But Darcy might very well have grown into his looks. And handsome is as handsome does, so perhaps good looks are not the sole recommendation of anyone!"

"He appears to not have his father's temperament either, said Mrs Gardiner."

"Or too much of it," said Kitty lightly.

Elizabeth felt the urge to defend the boy. "Only a moment ago you thought one should not compare! I daresay, Fitzwilliam is his own man. And a good man."

The glint had returned to Kitty's eyes, even though Elizabeth did not understand what the reasoning behind it was. Elizabeth returned the look with a strong look of her own.

"Of course, Lizzy. But you have not seen how cosseted he was by his grandmother. And Lady Catherine de Bourgh took an inordinate amount of interest in him before she passed. I shall not speak ill of the dead. Nor shall I make comment on the arrangement; Mr Darcy needed female influence
and your sister and his wife were not always available. But the effect on an impressionable child?"
Mrs Gardiner did not continue her thought, she did not need to.

Elizabeth had met Anne de Bough, so Elizabeth could imagine the effect Lady Catherine could have
had, but Darcy would be on guard for such things. Although a small voice in the back of her mind
said if he did not see the effect himself he could not do anything about it.

That blindness could be genuine or it could be wilful. In the case of her own father, who refused to
see what Lydia could become, even what she had become. Then refused to see what Kitty would
become if he treated her like a common criminal.

"Let us talk of better things." With that, Kitty deftly cut off the conversation.

"Do you think this bonnet is suitable?" Elizabeth looked up from her embroidery.

"For what, Henrietta?"

"Riding in the park," Henrietta guessed Elizabeth's next question or objection, "with Max. There
cannot be anything improper if my cousin and one of his footmen are with me."

"No, nothing improper," She did trust Max. But if she had not, then she trusted in his parents. "That
bonnet however will make it very difficult to see. I am sure you brought your riding bonnet. In fact I
am sure you brought all your bonnets from home!"

Henrietta frowned, "If I added a veil to it, it would look far more dashing. How clever you are
Mama.' She darted upstairs before Elizabeth could question how a veil on the riding bonnet could
solve her objection to Henrietta's first choice on the grounds of visibility.

"Do not worry, Mama, she is only like this because she had finally got a flirt. She told me herself,"
said Emily from the floor.

"A flirt."

"Yes, a beau. Our cousin, Max." Emily added in case Elizabeth had not quite made that connection.
"It was the comment we made about how things would end in a novel that did it, I suspect."

Elizabeth stared. She could think of nothing worse. Of course if they truly loved one
another....except they couldn't! ‘and Henrietta has told you this herself?"

"Yes. She doesn't let me see what she is writing to Beth. So I think it must be little else, but the
subject of her flirting."

Beth was Jane's eldest daughter. She was by rights in the middle of Emily and Henrietta in age, so
she was alternatively claimed by them both as boon companions. The last time she'd seen Beth,
Elizabeth had thought that it was inevitable that she would become closer to Henrietta as they both
approached that age that age where bonnets trumped trees. Henrietta writing secretly alarmed her, but
she had to remind herself that Beth wasn't Kitty and Henrietta was not Lydia. Neither were Jane or
herself, her parents.

If this was some boy from the village Elizabeth would have had no problem with speaking to him
directly. Expressing her concern that her daughter was too young, that he was too young, that their
temperaments might not suit -- all her concerns that she did not feel she could say to her own
nephew! It reminded her once again what she had missed out on, and what Kitty had missed out upon.

So Elizabeth had merely exchanged commonplace conversation with Max when he had come to collect Henrietta. Max looked impeccable and without being asked reassured Elizabeth that the horse was quite old and staid, that a footman would be with them the whole time, and that he would endeavour to have her home promptly. He was the perfect gentleman and Elizabeth felt badly that she had the feelings that were simmering within her.

Even as it became a daily occurrence these feelings did not subside. Even when she went to take a walk in the park with the girls she would find Henrietta detaching herself from them, in favour of her cousin’s society, this time often Clara's.

"You look troubled, Mrs Davis?"

Elizabeth had not noticed Mr Darcy so she found herself jumping a little.

His arm steadied hers. "I did not mean to startle you."

"No, I was deep in thought."

"Pleasant, I hope."

Elizabeth wondered for a moment if she should make up some pleasantry, some book or dress that she had been mediating on, but the truth seemed easiest. He had acquaintance with Max and as a man might know how best to proceed.

"I fear that a tendre has developed between my daughter and her cousin. Max." She clarified.

Darcy looked up sharply at the little group of young people walking ahead of them. "This displeases you?"

"I am not sure. It disturbs me. I have not spoken to my daughter. I know her, speaking of it might make it real for her, instead of a mere fancy. But I do not know -- if Henry had been alive it would be his role to speak to the young men."

"Indeed. But I do not think Max would take it amiss or be offended if you spoke to him. He does not have that part of his father’s temperament."

Elizabeth smiled. She had thought of speaking to Ash but the idea alarmed her; similarly Kitty might be offended. They had too much history of misunderstandings surrounding ‘love’ between them.

"You know him better than I. Would you -- I would not wish to impose -- " Elizabeth was not even quite sure what she was asking.

"There would be no imposition, I assure you. But am I - do I have the right to interfere?"

Bingley. Elizabeth had wondered when his spectre would be introduced between them.

"I think in this case it is hardly an interference. A request for clarification on behalf of a mother."

Darcy nodded curtly.

"I had not asked you, how does Mr Bingley?"

"Very well, as far as I know. Our friendship is not what it once was."
"I am sorry to hear that. Do believe me that I never meant to be the cause of ..."

"I assure you. You have not the least amount of blame attached to yourself."

"If I had not assured you that Jane..."

"You believed your sister in love because I have no doubt that she was so. But love is...sometimes not enough and sometimes it can die. Your sister's feelings are entirely her own and uncontrollable by you. I always knew that, Elizabeth."

"I hope at least Mr Bingley is happy."

"I believe he is. Bingley was never one to love in half measures and he always found it very easy to hand his heart over. A talent to be admired, I feel."

"And pitied. To be so changeable." Said Elizabeth, keenly aware that perhaps they were not just talking of Bingley and Jane any longer.

"I will speak to Max for you. But I do not think you have anything to fear, no matter what his answers are."

"I am glad to have you reassure me. I notice you don't point out my foolishness."

"I think that it is the foolishness attendant to any parent. I would hardly point out my own follies!"

Thomas looked down upon her, taking a moment out from his pacing. "Why did you not ask me to speak to Max?"

Elizabeth had no answer to that. She had not even thought of her son, which she was now realising was a mistake. She had thought so much on how to avoid offending people, she had not thought she could offend him instead!

"Surely it is what my father should have done. Do I not stand in his place?"

"Of course, Thomas, but you cannot expect to be your father. Especially not to me! You are my little boy."

Thomas left that slide, although Elizabeth could tell he wished to respond to that last sentence with every fibre of his being.

"Not to mention I know Max! I could have told you what was afoot! You did not need to even approach him -- and Darcy made such a scene ..."

Elizabeth blinked. A scene was the last thing she would associate with Mr Darcy. Although if he had spoken to Maximilien formally, requesting an audience and so forth then she could imagine that it would look much like a set piece upon the stage.

"Of course he is just being polite! Flirt with Henrietta! The last thing on his mind! Henrietta knows that! I expect she doesn't mind how she comes by the company of a grandson of an earl! As long as he gives her consequence, it doesn't matter that he would rather be elsewhere!"

Elizabeth felt she was doing a great deal of blinking at her son. He was not often in a passion, but this had apparently broken through his normally calm exterior. In fact he had seemed somewhat
preoccupied since the informal dance Kitty had held. She herself had been distracted with the girls that she was now only retrospectively noticing it. She would address the problem with him directly but it seemed best to first resolve the pressing issue in front of them.

"Then why would he spend so much time with her? No young man is that polite! Should be that polite."

"She does not spend all that time -- She spends time with Clara also!" Thomas looked at her as if she was the most unobservant parent in the world, which Elizabeth was beginning to feel. Of course Henrietta had spent time with Clara, she had seen them herself many times, even when she had asked Darcy to question Max. But until this moment she had only thought of Clara as Max's sister, as a way of Henrietta becoming closer to Max. She had not thought of Clara in her own right, which was silly; of course the older and fashionable Clara would be an object of attraction to Henrietta! Fashion was still apparently just as important as men and Elizabeth was relieved. She had put too much stock in what Henrietta had said to Emily as well. Now she felt foolish, more foolish than any parent should feel!

Not to mention she had asked Mr Darcy to interrogate her nephew! Particularly when in the process she had forgotten her son.

She had always thought she had broken away from her fault of judging too harshly on first impressions. It seemed she was always to be doomed to that blindness.

More than that, to ask Mr Darcy had been forward and presumptuous! He was not part of her family; she should not have felt as at ease as she had done in asking him -- no, it came too close to feelings that she had not truly acknowledged to herself to feel comfortable.

"Very well," said Elizabeth, hoping she sounded duly chastened because she was about to start her interrogation. "But it cannot just be this that has you in a passion."

"A passion?"

"Striding about, hands waving. You look like your father did when something in the newspaper disagreed with him."

Thomas' hands dropped to his side immediately. "I was just upset you did not come to me, Mama." Thomas came to sit beside her and he took her hands. "I am your son. I am supposed to protect you and the girls. I cannot do that if I do not know -- " Thomas broke off. "I cannot protect you if you will not let me."

"And that is all you have flown into this passion over?"

Thomas frowned and looked away and then he looked back at her.

"No, there is nothing."

Elizabeth kissed his forehead, half disbelieving him, but not knowing what else to say to make him confess. "I'm sorry. I will include you more. But you must understand that Mr Darcy ..."

It was Thomas's turn to prevent her from speaking, squeezing her hands. "I just wish for you to be happy, Mama."

Elizabeth was touched. But why had he stopped her talking and why did it feel like a warning?
"So you see, it was all for nothing!"

Darcy smiled as he looked down at the lady walking beside him. She was still a well looking woman. Not classically beautiful, she had never been that, and a certain asymmetry had always clung to her. But her beauty had come from within and a set of expressive eyes.

Thus, her true beauty would never fade unless her mind did.

"I assure you, Mrs Davis, there was no trouble."

Speaking to Maximilien had been no trouble. He had not been offended by his interest. If Max had been offended then he had taken his revenge in pouring his troubles out to Darcy. Darcy had not remembered being quite that dramatic at one and twenty. He would have to tell Ash that if his heir found university too much of a trial then the stage would be the perfect place for him. Although Darcy thought he would wait until Ash had annoyed him to give him this advice.

"Thomas seemed to think -- " Elizabeth's forehead creased.

"If there was anything, it was after my departure. But Max, it seems, is being used as a cisibeo quite against his will. It will do him no harm."

Elizabeth smiled and then quickly schooled her expression to something neutral. Darcy thought she knew what he was thinking.

"I think it might have done me the world of good."

"I was not wondering."

Darcy nodded disbelievingly.

"Perhaps a little. I am sorry, however, to have put you in the position, and to have at the same time convinced my son that I have no regard for him."

"It is difficult to change one's perspective."

"Indeed. He has always been my child. Now he is a man and it is his right now to defend his sister. He has been proving this to me over the last couple of days."

Thomas Davis had thrown himself into the challenges of manhood over the last couple of days. Visiting Ash and expecting a lazy afternoon over port and good conversation, Darcy himself had found himself interrogated about the subject of tenant farming and crop rotations. If only Fitzwilliam would show as much interest!

Indeed, Darcy had been teaching Fitzwilliam about running the estate since he was able to walk. Darcy would sit him on his horse and take him about the grounds, showing him all he was able. Of course, he expected that it would take some time to fully immerse him in his responsibilities. He had time.

But now having seen Elizabeth, and seen her son, he wondered. Perhaps he did not have time on his side. An unfortunate accident, a sudden inflammation -- anything at all could separate him from this world and leave his son with a heavy burden. Why had he not thought this way before? He knew it
himself; his own father had passed away when he was but twenty-three.

The easy answer was that he hadn't wanted to face his own mortality. The easier answer was that he hadn't wanted his son to face his father's mortality. But he had never wanted to shy away from the difficult paths.

Seeing the position that young Thomas Davis was now in, and his own struggles to find his position in the world, spurred Darcy into action. Yet another time in his life that someone with Bennet blood had taught him how to act correctly.

It was unsurprising that Fitzwilliam was at home; he once again wondered why his son bothered to pretend that he was not living under his father's roof.

Fitzwilliam had looked unsettled when Darcy had called him down to his study.

"You wished to see me, father?"

Darcy nodded and gestured for his son to close the door behind him. Darcy had dismissed his steward for the moment. Of course Gavins was the man that his son should speak to, for as much as he could learn from his own father, there was plenty Gavins could teach him.

Old Wickham, not tainted by the faults of his son, had been an excellent steward. Darcy could see that now and he had been wrong to dismiss the man the minute he had taken the reins at Pemberley. He hadn't turned Wickham out of the house, but given him a good retirement. There was nothing fundamentally unethical in his treatment of the older man, but Darcy knew in his mind that his disrespect for the older man's wisdom was beyond abhorrent.

How much he would have learnt if he had just been lenient? Darcy let these thoughts fall away and turned his mind back to his son.

"These are some legal documents pertaining to the sale of some of Pemberley's lands."

Fitzwilliam looked blankly at him.

Darcy knew his son was not stupid. Indeed he knew he had the same degree of intelligence that he had had at that age. Bookish intelligence, Darcy hastened to remind himself. The intelligence in the ways of the world, and self knowledge had taken some time.

No, his son was not looking blankly at him because he did not understand the documents proffered to him. He just did not understand why his father was showing them to him.

"You wish to know why I am showing you these documents?" asked Darcy.

"Yes, father."

"I think it is time that you take more of an interest in your inheritance."

"I did not think I had been disinterested. I apologise for my behaviour if there has been something to complain about, sir."

"You misunderstand me," Darcy wondered if it was a wilful misunderstanding. "I am showing you these documents because I wish for your opinion."

He wanted to test in some way the current understanding of his son. Added to this was the fact that the best way to learn was through some degree of practice. It was not enough to merely lecture upon
subjects. Theory often wildly differed from the practice.

Too many times he had seen sons who just blindly copied the actions of their forefathers without actual thought. It was how many a grand estate fell: mismanagement. Unless you understood the reasons behind a decision, you would never be able to make proper decisions yourself?

This did not just apply to matters of business. When he had proposed to Amelia he had made himself clear. Amelia had been able to understand why he was asking her and made her decision accordingly. His reasoning had been so confused when he had asked Elizabeth, so how could he have expected her to understand and make a proper decision?

He was not so self assured to think that if he had been clear and gentlemanly in that first proposal that the proper decision would have been an acceptance. It might have still been an improper decision for her.

"My opinion, father?"

Darcy blinked at his son, "Yes."

"On the sale of some of our birthright?"

"To a worthy neighbour, who would make far better use of the land than we could."

"How could that be possible?" said Fitzwilliam. Darcy looked up sharply. It sounded as if some of that improper pride had instilled itself in his son without his ever meaning it to.

Instead he saw mere questioning in his son's eyes. Although he wondered what his son saw in his eyes.

It was an understandable question. If the land, which did not add much to the Darcy's revenue, was better used why did they not use it better?

"Mr Cavill has land that, in conjunction with our small parcel of land, can be properly used."

Fitzwilliam nodded, and looked over the document again. "I think it's a high price to pay."

"For the Cavills?"

"For us," said Fitzwilliam.

Darcy was puzzled. The money that would be forthcoming from the sale of land could be moved into industry. Darcy was sure that industry was the way of the future. He mentioned this to his son.

Fitzwilliam shrugged.

"You do not think so?"

"No, with that I agree."

"Then of what are you talking, Fitzwilliam?"

"May I ask why the sudden interest in showing me your plans for Pemberley, sir?"

"It is time, and it is not as if your time is currently being better spent."

"And this very moment is the time?"
Darcy asked for clarification, he did not understand his son's question.

"It has nothing to do with the fact Thomas Davis is currently running all about town attempting to learn which turnip is best for recultivating the earth?"

Darcy smiled, "I admit that Davis' exertions brought my mind around to the matter. But I am sure I would have ... "

"I thought so," said Fitzwilliam. "I beg you will excuse me."

"Fitzwilliam?"

"It is an excellent plan." With that his son nodded and left the room.

"Mr Darcy?"

It was only with Elizabeth's voice that he realised that he was still in the park with her, not still in that room with his son.

"I beg your pardon, my mind was wandering. We were talking of your son?"

Elizabeth laughed, "No, Mr Darcy, we had quite moved on from that subject. I was admiring the herbaceous borders."

"Can anyone admire herbaceous borders?"

"If they are being polite. May I inquire as to where your mind was wandering?"

Darcy had his hands clasped firmly behind his back. "My son. Fitzwilliam has been rather difficult of late."

"I am sure I have said this before, and it has been said many times to you, but I think it takes a great amount of strength to raise him alone."

"I had help. Amelia's mother while she was still able to deal with an active boy. Lady Catherine. Your sister, my sister..."

Darcy was still not sure what the effect of so many influences had been on Fitzwilliam. He himself had tried to be a steady rock. An example. Perhaps that is why it was suddenly so difficult to interact with his son as an equal. He had so long attempted to present a model for his son to follow that he had never appeared as a man to his heir.

"That is not quite the same as a mother, or a father," said Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, he was sure, had thrown herself into her relationship with her children. They would have climbed into bed with her on a frosty morning to tell tales to her. He could imagine it. Both because he knew her, and because she could not be so different from her sister.

Amelia had not been that type of woman, but Darcy wouldn't denigrate her memory. Love was shown in different ways. He was not that type of father either and he did not think of himself as a neglectful or terrible parent.

While perhaps Amelia and he had similar parenting styles, they would have clashed over various teachings for their son. Amelia believed in cutting wit and not undue pride. Whereas Darcy had lived that life and lost.
It was best then to have parents with differing styles? Darcy was not sure.

"I hope that I have done my best, even though I am unsure of my success."

"I think every parent shares your opinion. We both have difficulties with our sons."

"And no one could deny that we are such differing spirits ... "

Elizabeth smiled at that. "No, so perhaps it is just the way of sons, to cause difficulties, no matter what the parents have done."

With that, Darcy's worries seem to clear. There might not be any real problem with Fitzwilliam.

He was sure being sent down from Oxford would have preyed heavily on Fitzwilliam's mind. His son did not like being denied something that was important to him. It was a good lesson then to understand the consequences of one's actions could have personal repercussions of the negative variety.

Better that he learnt it over something so trivial as being kept away from his studies than over something that could really damage his future.

"I discussed a matter of business with him, and it seemed to displease him."

"You should have discussed it with my son, Mr Darcy. My son seems determined to know everything."

"It might have been the comparison I made between our sons that caused the difficulty, ma'am."

Darcy was not sure where that insight came from, but he was suddenly sure that had been the reason his son had been cold. He could not deny being compared to any man was an unpleasant prospect.

He had lived through his father's comparisons of Wickham and himself. He should apologise to Fitzwilliam. Make it clear that he was not comparing the boys. Thomas's sudden interest in his responsibilities did not make him think his own son was irresponsible. Indeed, showing an improper amount of interest in his father's business would have made his son seem forward. Darcy would not have minded a great deal, but he knew that would be how it would have seemed to the world.

He recounted his musings to his companion.

"Comparisons! I thought once that if someone once more made comment about Jane! I was young and hadn't quite learnt how to guard myself against such comments. I thought perhaps I could be taller like Jane. Or suddenly I would become blonde. Strangely I never thought I could be as good as Jane."

Mrs Bennet had been quite clear in her effusions for her eldest daughter. Most of the village of Meryton had been in raptures over her. Jane Bennet was beautiful, Darcy could not deny that. But it had been a cold calm beauty that Darcy had rarely appreciated.

He wondered how the comparisons to her sister affected Elizabeth. When he had first known her, he might have laughed at the idea that anything could affect Elizabeth. But upon knowing her better, upon knowing himself better, he knew that such things had left their mark upon her.

"Do you not think Mrs Williams felt similarly?"

"In any comparison Jane would never be the loser."
"I can think of a number of attributes of yours that Mrs Williams does not possess."

"Flattery, Mr Darcy?"

"Truth, Mrs Davis."

"It has been many years since I have been hurt by an unfair comparison. Your son, and mine, are denied one ability, that neither of us can teach them."

"Experience."

"Indeed. I hope you will speak to young Mr Darcy."

Anyone else that dared to tell him what he might do with his son would have been given a reproof. No, that was incorrect; there were close friends that could speak to Darcy thus. Although they would speak to him, Darcy found himself curiously unwilling to seek advice himself.

A fault. He recognised that, but one he still could not cure.

If his wife had lived he would not have had to seek advice elsewhere, humbling himself. His wife, whoever she was or could have been, he knew now would have been an extension of himself. Of his body, of his mind and of his conscience.

Elizabeth’s steps faltered for a moment, and she looked up at him. He knew she was about to apologise for her words. Again the passage of time had made her more reticent and cautious. Or she had learnt the power of her words.

But she had nothing to apologise for; while he had proposed to her when he had not truly understood what he wished for in a wife, he had wanted her to be his wife. When he had understood what he wanted, and what the words truly meant, he had seen her at Pemberley and his mind had not changed.

The world around them had changed, but not his wishes.

Of course the bitterness set in, the confusion all of that, but it did not change the fact he had once needed her, and if he had once thought of her in that way was it impossible that he could do so again?

He had perhaps not allowed himself to think on the subject as firmly as he suddenly did then, but long dormant feelings had come bubbling to the surface once again.

Elizabeth Davis was not Elizabeth Bennet. But he found himself responding to her despite this.

Darcy knew that her troubled history with her family had changed her. It had changed her sister; it had changed him. It could but not change them. But he found himself open with her, and while it was originally forced through sheer determination, but now it seemed natural.

It seemed natural to talk of their former relationship with ease and humour. Their dance at Netherfield brought amusement in its remembrance, not pain. When she worried about her daughter, Elizabeth turned to him and he felt it natural to turn to her.

Of course he had misunderstood her too many times before. When he had made his presumptions before Hunsford, his disregard for what was in front of his eyes at Hunsford, and afterwards...when he had misunderstood the reasons for Elizabeth and the Gardiners leaving Pemberley.
It was not only her; he had had misunderstood his cousin and his engagement and misunderstood the future Viscountess. In his marriage there had been misunderstandings. Amelia had not trusted in him and he had misunderstood the reasons for her behaviour.

The truth was an important thing, and he would rather be rejected now than labour under a misapprehension.

He stopped his steps, causing her to stop several paces ahead of him. Elizabeth turned to look at him quizzically.

"I find -- " he cleared his throat.

‘What do you find, Mr Darcy?’

There was no teasing in those words and he wondered whether she had any idea of what he was about to say. Although how she could divine his intentions when he could not consider how to articulate those feelings, indeed what precisely those feelings were.

"I find. I find that I must speak to you on a subject of importance. I hope I have learnt the lessons of the past and I must communicate to you -- If I did not communicate this to you then I think we could not consider ourselves equals in understanding of each other. In short -- " Although it was quite obvious to the both of them that his little speech was anything but short." The intensity of my feelings for you, Elizabeth has not diminished."
Elizabeth thought for a moment her heart had stopped. It must have, because if it leapt into her mouth it could hardly be where it was supposed to be, doing what it was supposed to be doing.

She had no idea what she was thinking let alone what she wanted to say.

The moment hung suspended there, until it was broken by Emily running towards them.

"Mama, do you not think these the prettiest flowers?"

Elizabeth caught Emily's hand and squeezed it, "Yes, they are beautiful, but they will wilt if we are not careful." They were in Hyde Park. Kitty's home was not far from here, she told herself. "Aunt Kitty's, we shall go put them in water at Aunt Kitty's. You should like to see Clara and Bella would you not?"

She was well aware she was rambling and Emily was looking at her strangely. Emily's eyes flicked towards Mr Darcy and before comprehension could dawn, Elizabeth found herself hurriedly excusing her daughter and herself and dragging Emily away towards Park Lane.

"Mama, why are we walking so fast?"

"The flowers mustn't wilt!" Elizabeth's voice, she knew, was suddenly much higher pitched than it normally was, and she sounded like her mother.

They reached Ashbourne House, and Elizabeth found herself urging Emily to go find her Aunt and cousins and show them her flowers.

Elizabeth batted away any assistance from the footman who wished to take her bonnet and pelisse.

Up in the sanctuary of what must be the nursery or schoolroom, Elizabeth paced, feeling hot angry tears scalding down her face.

How could he reduce her to this? Once more?

The idea that Mr Darcy had been concealing these feelings. The idea that his wife was living with...Elizabeth could not even think it. How dare he reduce his wife's memory? Elizabeth could never think of doing that to Henry.

The idea that perhaps he had pined for her all this time made her feel somewhat ill. It should have been romantic; it was supposed to be romantic, but what happened in novels and what happened in real life was very different.

Elizabeth paced up and down and released her frustration.

"Emily said you had run mad, I must say I did not believe her."

Elizabeth turned to see Kitty standing in the doorway. Her sister closed the door behind her.

"Elizabeth?"

"Oh do not question me, Kitty."

"Emily said Mr Darcy was with you."
Elizabeth pulled the ribbons of her bonnet and wrenched it off her head, and stripped off her gloves to shove them into it. "Insufferable."

"Darcy is frequently insufferable." Kitty had a smile on her face. "I had thought an argument would have erupted much sooner between you."

"It is hardly funny, Catherine."

"Well if I do not know what it is that you have argued over, I can hardly react properly."

"He told me that he never loved his wife. That he always loved me!"

Kitty frowned. "Darcy announced in the middle of Hyde Park that he never loved Amelia and he always loved you? He used those exact words?" Her sister sounded disbelieving.

"No, not those exact words. He said, 'The intensity of my feelings for you, Elizabeth, have not diminished.'"

"Well and how did you get from -- " Kitty sounded confused.

"He loved me first! That is what it means." It sounded so arrogant and Elizabeth hated the fact she sounded arrogant.

"Were you still in love with Darcy when you agreed to marry Henry?"

"No!" The answer came automatically, but Elizabeth could hear it being a defence. "Perhaps."

There was no perhaps. But it had not meant she did not love Henry. That she was not in love with Henry. Darcy had gradually, faster than she had expected, and surely become her past and Henry her present and future.

"But that does not mean you were not in love with Henry," said Kitty, somehow echoing her thoughts.

Elizabeth sat down on one of the chairs. "But he loved me best, that is what he meant." Elizabeth didn't need to clarify which he she meant.

"And do you love Thomas best because you have loved him first and longest?"

"Do not be ridiculous!"

"I find love is ridiculous." Kitty pulled a chair over to sit next to Elizabeth. "Can I tell you something?"

Elizabeth nodded.

"I was so young when I married Ash. It is not like Jane. Do you think Jane does not love Reginald, because she once loved Bingley? That it died completely?"

"I don't know." And she didn't. Jane was still an enigma to her, as much as she had been to Darcy.

"I was saying, I was so young when I married Ash. You do not think I have not met gentlemen that I could have loved?"

Was her sister confessing what Elizabeth thought she was confessing?
"You misunderstand me," said Kitty, and Elizabeth felt ashamed. "The road not travelled... if only I had met them before I had met Ash, my life might have been very different. Love isn't that simple, Lizzy. There are so many different kinds..."

"You think I have overreacted?"

"No, just reacted to the wrong thing. If you wish for my opinion ..."

"I do," said Elizabeth.

"My opinion is that Darcy did love his wife. There were trials and tribulations. If she had not succumbed to her illness I believe they might have been happy still. But she did succumb and perhaps he has had more time to think. He could not have you, Lizzy." Kitty paused, "Well he could have, but in a very ignominious way. Darcy would never have disrespected Henry in that way, or you. So he moved on. That I promise you. There is no best in love. You can love twice in this lifetime; concurrently or consecutively."

Elizabeth smiled. "And how did my baby sister become so wise?"

"Time. And five children."

"Mama would be so proud."

"Only of the fact three of them are sons!" retorted Kitty. Kitty tilted her head to one side. "Are you sure, Lizzy -- " she broke off and bit her lip.

"Do not worry about offending me," said Elizabeth, thinking that must be why her sister did not continue.

"Are you sure you have not reacted in this way because you might be thinking the same thing?"

Elizabeth did not know. Darcy was her past. But now her present and future had left her, perhaps... She shook her head. "I do not know. I should mourn my husband."

"Henry would have wanted you to be happy."

"Of course he would. But with another man? Should my happiness revolve around another man? My children should be enough."

"Enough to drive you witless," said Kitty, "I heard about Max."

"Oh!" She had not wanted her sister to discover that. "I meant no offence, just ..." 

"They would not suit and they are ..."

"Far too young and ..."

"Henrietta is a little wild and Max is ..."

"A little too like his father."

The sisters laughed. Kitty squeezed her hand, "See we are in complete agreement and charity."

"Emily must think me mad."
"I think all children think their parents a little mad."

Elizabeth had certainly thought that about her parents. Still thought it of her father. Then the thought struck her. She had not answered Mr Darcy. She had left him alone standing stupidly in the middle of the park. A more hideous rejection than Hunsford. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Mr Darcy. I left Mr Darcy in the middle of Hyde Park! What must he think of me!"

"He is probably thinking 'my dearest Elizabeth, you have not changed.'" Kitty laughed.

"This is no laughing matter." Although Elizabeth could not help a small giggle escape her lips. "He has certainly not changed. Once again, suddenly and without warning he -- I lie, it is not entirely without warning."

"I said that you were both trying so earnestly to be open with each other, to prove you were both all right with this reunion. It is just an extension of that honesty. I do not always think honesty is the best policy but in this situation, it is."

Elizabeth did agree, except how was she supposed to meet him now, in company? She must tell him her response, except she did not know what that was. What could have been a friendship was suddenly more than that and she had to change.

Kitty had not noticed her sister's distraction and was babbling on "...of course it is so much better now. If you had been twenty, something would have had to be said, but now? It is just a statement, nothing else."

"What are you talking of?"

"I mean there is nothing improper in your interactions; having been married is a glorious thing. There might be some talk of course, but imagine if you were twenty!"

"I am hardly concerned with the opinions of society."

"But Darcy would have to be let down or accepted if you were twenty. Now you might merely regard it as a compliment."

A compliment. It was a compliment, thought Elizabeth. It meant she had not changed. She was still the woman she was at twenty. The woman he had loved. She thought on that some more; well actually, that was not in fact a compliment. It meant she had not changed.

"A very Darcy compliment. Does this mean I have not changed an iota in all these years?"

"Do I look like Darcy?"

"Well I can hardly ask him!"

"You can, and you will," said Kitty sounding certain. "Or I will."

Elizabeth quickly forbade her sister from doing any such thing.

"Careful!"
It seemed to Thomas an incredibly late instruction. By his reckoning he and Max had already sent the ancient wooden trunk flying into one possibly priceless vase, knocked the banister too many times to count and gouged out part of the Darcy's hallway.

"Clearly if you were in my position," said Max, blowing blond hair out of his face, his hands being otherwise occupied, "then we would not be having these problems."

"If you were in my position, we should have had more accidents. It is my house, after all, I know the best way to take this trunk downstairs."

Thomas tried not to laugh when he heard his cousin mutter 'What is this 'we' you speak of.' He already had sweaty palms.

"Perhaps you should put it down and have a rest," said Darcy finally.

"Where? Where should you like me to put it?!!" Max sounded frustrated. Thomas had a fair idea where Max might choose to put the trunk.

Thomas was sometimes uncomfortable with the notion of servants. They had had, he thought, the perfect number so that they might be part of the family almost. Here they became quite faceless, and Thomas did not like the idea of faceless unknown people knowing his life; the most personal details of that life no less.

However, in this circumstance, he was quite happy at the idea of footmen. He did not know why he and Max were lugging more of Darcy's furniture around. He'd returned to his rooms after visiting his uncle and found himself ordered to assist and bundled into a hackney cab.

He was surprised that he was asked, since he had not thought Darcy was precisely speaking to him. Although he could not, Thomas thought, still be thinking of the ridiculous notion that his own mother threatened the memory of the marriage of Mr and Mrs Darcy! Surely not.

"Darcy," said Thomas, having lowered the trunk to rest precariously down the stairs.

"Yes, Davis," said Darcy.

"Is there a reason that you have not asked the footmen to do this?"

Darcy was usually a very upright person, but somehow he seemed to stiffen even more.

Even Max seemed to be eyeing him warily.

"I will not lower myself to ask."

That seemed a contradiction in terms. Did he not think lugging items around London demeaning? Thomas could have sworn Darcy would have thought so. Before Thomas could, perhaps unwisely, probe into this new thinking from the other boy the front door opened.

Looking over his shoulder, Thomas saw Mr Darcy Senior enter his home with a face that looked like thunder.

He stopped short when he saw the trio of young men grouped on his main staircase.

"Gentlemen."

Thomas thought that the older man tried to force his face into a smile for the occasion. But it was obvious something was perturbing him. Thomas tried to put it out of his mind that he was sure Emily
had told him yesterday how she was to go walking in the park with Mama and Mr Darcy.

"What have we here?" It might have just been the fact he was listening intently, but the joviality sounded false.

"Darcy cannot live without this trunk, sir," said Max.

Mr Darcy looked at the trunk and smiled, "You cannot live without your childhood mementos, Fitzwilliam?"

"I think they would be preserved better with me," said Darcy stiffly.

Thomas felt like his head was yo-yoing between the two Darcys except what was being lobbed between the two players was almost flying over his head and Thomas had no idea how much Max was even inferring from the conversation.

For whatever it was that Darcy meant by his statement, his father clearly understood it, turning slightly red.

Thomas thought he was breaking the tension, by commenting that some sort of assistance to continue the trunk on its way would be very welcome.

"Of course. I do not understand why Gregory and Raymonds are not assisting."

"I did not ask them to," said Darcy. "They offered, of course."

"I am glad they did..." Mr Darcy looked suddenly tired. "I have had a trying afternoon. I would be glad of it if you just spoke as you found, Fitzwilliam. I do not need another moment of second guessing what is going on in someone's mind..."

"Very well, Father, I do not wish for any assistance from you, or the house that you keep." Darcy took a breath, "I do not, naturally, mean to devalue the time and effort in raising me, it must have been difficult for you - " He seemed to wish to say more but Thomas thought it was a look at him that made the other boy stop.

It was possibly the most awkward situation Thomas had been in his entire life. Mr Darcy Senior's hand slipped from the banister and he turned on his heel to enter what Thomas was sure was the study. Mr Darcy Junior turned on his heel and stalked up the stairs.

"You know I feel that if this trunk does not hold all of the Darcys' rare and valuable treasures, I am going to be quite disappointed," said Max.

Thomas gave a wry smile at Max's attempt to lighten the mood, but Thomas thought perhaps he should have given his mother a more explicit warning.
Darcy poured himself a generous glass out of the decanter. On the wall of his study hung a portrait of his late wife; he silently raised the glass to her. He had a habit of raising his glass to her, today he just had a particular reason.

A knock at the door, and Darcy wasn’t sure he could cope with the earnest look of Thomas Davis. But it was not Thomas, it was Maximilien.

He did not blame Elizabeth per se for her reaction to his declaration. She was in shock. He was in shock. Darcy was not sure what he expected. She could hardly have fallen into his arms, even if that was what she wanted to do. She was not out of mourning for her husband. She was certainly not out of the society dictated period, but Darcy did not think internally she had finished her mourning.

Why had he said anything? What could she do with this information? All it had done was transfer the burden from himself to her.

Darcy had seated himself at his desk, his elbows leant upon it and with the glass suspended between his hands he regarded the portrait more deeply than he had in a while.

She had sat for it just before their marriage. Whatever she was thinking when she sat, it wasn’t about him. Or if the painter had captured the eyes and the expression in the later sittings, perhaps she had thought of him.

Amelia had caught his attention across a room; a laugh, which had annoyed him because he had been determined not to enjoy himself. It had been his Aunt’s party, the only reason he had attended. She'd looked up, seen his regard, his negative regard and continued listening to the tale being told to her by some long forgotten lord.

Annabelle, his cousin, had pulled his sleeve later on in the night and told him that Miss Watson had asked her 'who is that man who had clearly lost his fortune -- or his dog?'

Darcy smiled at the memory. He had asked her, almost seriously, whether she equated dogs with money. Amelia had responded with a smile that she'd known men to be just as upset over a dog as they were over losing a thousand pounds in a sitting. Her tone had implied what she thought of such men, and he had agreed with her.

It had been the beginning. It had also been the end.

When she was on her death bed she had put her hand on his face and told him he looked like he'd lost his dog.

Darcy could still not believe how flippantly he had answered ‘Not my fortune?’. Amelia had said she never believed that of him, and if he suddenly became that man she would haunt him for depriving their son.

They'd spoken of other things that night. Things only barely touched on before. Amelia had given her consent and her support to his remarriage. He was young. There was Fitzwilliam to consider. She wanted him to be happy. She wanted to leave this world with no regrets.

Darcy knew she'd written a letter, or more than one letter, to her mother and to their son. Those last letters had been entrusted to him to hand over when specified but he'd never read them. What Amelia had to say was between her and Fitzwilliam.
With his solicitor was another letter, waiting for him to read if he remarried. That was her instruction. Perhaps it was a desire not to read that letter that had kept him from succumbing. That may have been her intention, but he'd not seen insincerity in her eyes. She did want him to be happy, and if that involved a second marriage, so be it.

He could have not even considered her feelings, or anyone else's; no one would have blinked an eye if he had remarried. It was expected. Perhaps not if their had been a great romance but it had not been. They loved each other, there was no doubt, but not like star crossed loves. They weren't Romeo and Juliet. Although Darcy had always found that parallel distasteful and strange. What was so destined and romantic about such a fantastical love? The courtly stories were not much better.

Either way, Darcy had been set free by Amelia. He doubted Elizabeth had been similarly set free by Henry and even if she had been, she hadn't yet liberated herself.

"Sir?"

Darcy realised he'd been staring at the painting while Maximilien had looked on curiously. A sense of embarrassment washed over him, caught out in such a private moment.

"Max."

"I wished to tell you that..." the younger man fidgeted slightly, "I was not old to be so with Oliver... but how upset I was when Alex and then Bella entered our lives. I did not understand why my parents would wish to replace me. I thought they should send them back where they came from."

It was a very clumsy analogy, Darcy told the boy so, "and might I add, Maximilien, that you were six when Alexander was born?"

Max shrugged, "I think the point stands. If it is a little weak, this one is not. If I am a disappointment, my father might disown me and still have two sons to replace me. You do not have that luxury. Neither does Fitzwilliam."

Darcy followed the point through, "You have two fathers to replace Ash? Not that I blame you ...

"Sir, I mean that I am not the sole focus of anybody's attention and I do not feel that I have to focus solely on anyone either."

Darcy acknowledged the point, it seemed easier than arguing further.

Thomas reassured the cabdriver that his cousin would not be long, and sure enough Max emerged from the townhouse and nimbly leapt into the hackney.

"What did you have to go back for?" asked Thomas, who could see nothing in the older boy's hands.

"Nothing," said Max. "I just had to speak to Darcy."

Thomas didn't press his cousin, indeed he did not know which Darcy Max even meant, and focused his attention on making sure the trunk did not fall from its precarious position.

Just as he did not expect Max to reveal his conversation, he did not expect the younger Darcy to give either of them any thanks when he returned.
It was his day to be surprised. Thomas was lying on his bed trying to decipher some of his father's notes. He had written to ask the Squire to send some of his father's effects to him. The best way of coming to grips with everything would be to return to York, but Thomas found he did not wish to leave London.

Not because he felt that York was beneath him now that he had experienced London. Nor was it because his friends in York were so far below his friends in London, Thomas found that thinking abhorrent. He found he could not leave his mother. She was an adult, certainly, but Thomas thought she needed him. She might not realise it, but she did.

He had put aside the papers to read a little more of Tom Jones. Max had suggested it; there might be minimal or no duelling, but it was bawdy. Thomas wasn't sure that should be an indicator of good reading material, but he understood where Max was coming from.

So it was with surprise that he looked up to see Darcy standing in the doorway.

"Darcy."

"I see my trunk arrived with minimal damage."

Thomas supposed that was Darcy speak for thank you and told the other boy he was welcome. Thomas thought that Darcy wanted to say something else but was waiting for him to ask. He should indulge him; after all he had spent the last year almost drowning in questions that no one would answer, someone who wanted to tell him things was a rarity. It was, however, a combination of the fact it was Darcy and the fact Thomas was sick of Questions and Answers that made Thomas obstinate and he said nothing.

The next time Thomas looked up, Darcy was gone.

His trunk however wasn't. Darcy might have been thankful that they brought it in for him; he wasn't so thankful that he brought it in from where Max and he had dumped it.

There was no way that either of their two elderly servants would be able to drag it anywhere. If Darcy just left it there, he clearly expected either Thomas or Max to move it.

"Darcy!" yelled Thomas up the stairs, when there was no response Thomas ran up them and barged into Darcy's room.

Darcy was in his shirtsleeves and was on the verge of saying something cutting, when Thomas cut him off. "Did anyone teach you good manners?"

"Of course," said Darcy defensively.

"Then move your trunk!"

Thomas practically pushed Darcy down the stairs. Why did he have to become involved with the Darcy family, who seemed to exist to torment his family?

Before he'd even heard of this family, he'd thought his mother had always been his mother, that before he could remember she had just been his mother with no life and purpose bar that which brought him life. Now he knew more than he wanted to know about how complicated the world was and could be. He knew what could happen if assumptions were made and if one did not think before one spoke.

Of course Darcy could never lift it on his own, Thomas knew that, but as long as Darcy did some of
the work, he did not mind helping.

It turned out to be heavier than both of them could manage, and they ended up dropping it just as
they manoeuvred it into Darcy's chamber. The old hinge shattered on impact, spilling some of the
contents onto the floor. Thomas only bruised his shin but Darcy cut himself and, swearing, went to
find his liniment that Max had borrowed.

Thomas pulled the lid back into its rightful place and reached to put back the contents that had
slipped out. These had been placed on the top, and were letters. Old letters. Some addressed to Darcy
and some addressed to Mama.

Letters. Like the one Darcy had mentioned when he'd tried to impale him at the fencing masters.

"You want to read them."

Thomas turned to see Darcy had returned, wrapping a bandage around his hand.

"I was just returning them," said Thomas. "I would not read another person's correspondence."
Thomes turned the one addressed to Mama over in his hands.

"My grandmother left them to me."

Thomas was not surprised. Darcy's morality and sense of duty might be skewed as far as he was
concerned, but he felt they would share the idea of reading other people's correspondence without
permission.

"Read them." Darcy just looked resigned and left the room, leaving Thomas with the writings of a
dead woman.

"Mr Darcy."

Darcy looked up from the desk; he had not moved since Maximilien had left him. He had attempted
to continue with some of his business affairs but his mind wandered. One of the footmen had entered
the room; Darcy signalled him to continue.

"A lady is here to see you."

Darcy tried to smile, but inwardly he groaned. It was either Georgiana or Kitty. If it was Georgiana
then it was likely just to be a general concern into his well being. Georgiana would wish to make
sure that he was not too greatly upset by the fact that Elizabeth was in London. She would distract
him by talking of her own children, of her paintings, of anything in order to distract him.

If it was Kitty, then it was likely to me a much more painful interview. He knew that they were near
Ashbourne House when he made his disastrous proclamation. Elizabeth would have gone directly
there and it could not be hoped that Kitty would not know about what had happened.

Elizabeth might have told her sister, if she had not then Darcy had every faith that Kitty would have
winkled it out of her.

No, it was his luck, or his just desserts that it would be Kitty and he would have to explain himself.
He should show her into the drawing room as was proper; in fact he was sure that his servants had
already done so. But she could pace better in here.

It would be best if he led off discussion, so as soon as the door opened Darcy stated very firmly, "I know what you are here to say and ..."

Except it wasn't Kitty.

It was Elizabeth.

"Do you?" said Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth..." said Darcy, suddenly realising she had visited him -- for all purposes she was a single woman -- and he had invited her into his study! Darcy ran his hand through his hair. "We should ..."

"Talk?" He could not see any trace of amusement or teasing in Elizabeth's face or voice.

"I was going to say perhaps we should retire to the drawing room, it would be more proper."

"You were expecting somebody else?"

"I was expecting your sister or mine."

Elizabeth nodded, "I see no reason to retire anywhere. What I have to say can be said here as well as anywhere."

Darcy invited her to sit, and noted that she chose the seat where she could not view Amelia's portrait.

"Mr Darcy, I ..." It seemed that for once Elizabeth was out of words.

"I should apologise to you once again for my behaviour. My actions were ungentlemanly."

"They were surprising, but I would not judge them so harshly, Mr Darcy."

"Selfish at the very least. I should not burden you with my feelings."

Elizabeth stiffened; he could see that her hands that lay in her lap had tightened around her reticule. "Perhaps I should judge what I am capable of receiving."

Darcy thought perhaps he should apologise once again, but her actions belied her words. She had run off! She had come here clearly without much thought to what implications her actions might have to him or to society. It was perhaps not wise but he told her as much.

Elizabeth reddened.

"I do not mean to offend you, Mrs Davis, but I feel we should speak the truth. That is why I confessed to you this morning. That is what I meant to do, now I have time to reflect ...

"Now that you have reflected, you regret telling me that you never loved your wife?"

Darcy started. He had never said that. He would never say that. It would be a rejection of everything. He could not compare his love of Amelia and his love of Elizabeth. That was not because his feelings for one were inferior to the other; they were merely different. Of course if Elizabeth had accepted him at Hunsford, or he had arrived at Lambton before the Gardiners and she had left then he would have never married Amelia.

His relationship with Amelia had been strained at times due to disagreements and misunderstandings,
not to mention her health. But he could hardly imagine his life with Elizabeth would have been idyllic. He could not pretend that perhaps in the middle of some small argument he would not have thrown Wickham at her head; that she had not seen through Wickham. He had told Elizabeth he did not think he could have been the husband he was without her, and it was she who had taught him not to expect perfection. That a relationship could have storms and tempests without being a failure; that he could love and respect someone with whom he disagreed. He could have never been a successful husband to anyone without that knowledge, unless he had married a milksop. He would not have been happy then either.

If nothing else, if there was no other reason to hold affection for Amelia, then there was his son. His frustrating son. His son with whom Darcy could only assume he was making mistakes.

But Darcy had remembering looking at him for the first time and being amazed. He had continued to be amazed. Appalled as well occasionally. There could be no doubt as to how he felt about Fitzwilliam, even if he could not show it as well as he would like.

Amelia had given him a son, and if she had been a cipher, that would be a reason to love her. She had not been so, so Darcy was glad that there were other reasons to hold her in esteem.

He could only imagine that his current thoughts showed across his face as Elizabeth looked distressed.

"Darcy, I ..."

"Elizabeth. I never would say that to you. That is not what I said. My feelings for you are separate ..."

"I know," Elizabeth broke in, "I just... It was unexpected and I was foolish; I should not have said such a thing. You have had quite some time to come to terms with everything, I have not had that luxury."

"Of course," said Darcy. "That is why I should have..."

"Suffered in silence as you did before?"

Darcy smiled, "It was hardly suffering."

"I thought you were suffering."

"Because you mistook my expressions."

"I cannot help but do so where you are concerned." Elizabeth paused, "I do want to continue our discussion."

Darcy held his breath. Was she about to speak to him about her feelings? She had cleverly avoided any hint. He knew from their first meeting that it had not been a rejection of him that had led to her marriage to Henry Davis. Timing, miscommunication -- everything but not being in love with him in fact.

Except that was twenty years ago. A lifetime ago.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and Darcy was half hope and half in agony of what she was about to say, "I think you should tell me about your wife."

It was not so unexpected. She wanted to know about his life, about his reasoning, his feelings, and
she wanted to make up for her assumption. At some point she must talk to him about how she felt, but this was not the time.
So Darcy began talking of Amelia.
The End of Reading

Thomas shut the trunk carefully.

He'd been given permission to read the letters, but he still felt uncomfortable. Those who had written the letters had not given him permission and it felt intrusive reading the letters of two women who were not around to explain their words more fully. So he had only looked at them cursorily. He was not sure what Darcy wanted him to learn from them.

Darcy had lied. He had learnt that much. Mrs Darcy's letters did not mention his mother. Mrs Darcy's letters were as he expected: the letters of a woman who knew she would not be around to impart wisdom. The letters of a woman who did not want to leave her infant son.

The letters to her mother (Mrs Wilson) were not so focussed and Thomas wondered at a woman who would leave her grandson the letters she'd received from her daughter without first censoring them. Thomas told his own mother things he assumed that she would take to the grave. For instance, many grievances with his sisters that he never wanted his sisters to know about: he just had needed to say it to someone.

Clearly Mrs Darcy had spoken similarly to her mother. There were mentions of his mother and Mr Darcy in those letters. Thomas could only laud Mr Darcy for his honesty to his wife.

He also could not entirely blame Darcy for his behaviour if these letters were all he knew of his parents' relationship and of Mr Darcy's feelings for 'Elizabeth'. It was strange for his mother to be an Elizabeth, but the woman Mrs Darcy wrote about was more 'Elizabeth' than his mother 'Mrs Davis'.

Letters were a one-sided sketchy representation of real events, worse than that they were someone's perception of a real event.

So Thomas could not take Mrs Darcy's version of events as gospel. Neither could he take them as gospel of Mrs Darcy's feelings. They might capture a moment in time but he could not be surprised that anyone would be upset to find that their husband or wife had once loved another, particularly if that was after the marriage.

He wondered how his father reacted. If there were similar letters, to the one's Thomas had just read but with the name Henry Davis scrawled across the bottom. If there were, Thomas had no desire to read them.

Elizabeth set the teacup back on its saucer. She was alone in the drawing room. A household matter had called Darcy away for a moment. A flustered maid had mentioned the word 'smoke' and Darcy had shot away immediately. The fact he had not returned to hurry her out of the house, and she heard no shouting, meant she was fairly secure in the fact the house was not burning down around her ears.

She was glad she asked him to speak of his wife to her. Perhaps it shouldn't reassure her, but it did. He hadn't pined for her per se. But he had been unhappy. Unhappy in his loneliness and in his past decisions; unlike her, he had had the luxury of time.
Three children, a husband, the village; all allowed Elizabeth no time to think of the past. She only thought of the past as it gave her pleasure, she had had no energy to do anything else. Gradually those memories brought her back to Jane; no that was far more to do with Jane's good nature than herself. Of all her sisters, it was natural that it was Jane she reclaimed the most; they had had the strongest bond for so long.

With Mary, she had always had a difficult relationship, and Mary seeing her thoughts and her portents of the future (so often proved correct) so dismissed by her family was quite happy to disconnect from Longbourn and her old life when she married. Elizabeth thought now perhaps she had more in common with Mary than she had previously suspected.

She had been too proud to try and mend fences with Kitty. In turn her sister was equally as stubborn -- or perhaps fearful. Kitty's weakness had always been to attach herself to a stronger body and be swayed by them. Perhaps she had no longer wanted to surround herself with such things. It had been both their faults, but the primary fault was her own, Elizabeth knew that; she had caused the rift, she should have been the one to make the move.

But she had been busy.

If Henry had never happened, if the children had never happened, if it had all been ripped away from under her feet earlier, she would have had the leisure to reflect and repent earlier than she did now.

She would have been lonely. No, she and Darcy were not so different, it was merely their circumstances. Reversed, it would have been Darcy happy and content with his Amelia.

Reflecting on the past, or what might have been, did not help in the present. It left them both exactly where they had started. His realisation that he might be happy again with her and Elizabeth wondering whether she was ready for such a thing.

Darcy had said that Amelia had left him a letter in case he ever remarried, he had avoided looking at her particularly when he had mentioned that but she knew he was thinking of her.

Had Amelia meant for her husband to open that letter when he planned on remarrying, when he had picked a potential bride, or after the event? What would she have written to Darcy?

Elizabeth wondered what she would have written to Henry. It was only the work of a brief moment: she knew what she would have written. She would have wanted him to be happy. If that happiness meant that he never married another then that is what she would have wanted. If it had meant remarriage, that is what she would have wanted.

Of course it was expected when a man lost his wife, and had small children, that he would find a new mother for them. Darcy, it seemed, would never follow convention.

Elizabeth knew what the village gossips would have made of it: a romance unable to be broken, a man callously refusing to do his duty or a man waiting for the ‘right’ woman. It might be that all were the case in Darcy's situation.

"Elizabeth?" Darcy sounded concerned.

"I was just lost in my thoughts," said Elizabeth, trying to smile reassuringly.

"You must forgive me."

"I thought we had discussed that."
Darcy hung his head for a moment, but Elizabeth did not think he was chastened by her comment, rather he was trying to hide a smile, "I meant for my having to leave you just then."

"Households must come first. I would not want it to burn down around my ears."

"I do not think there was any danger of that; my chef dislikes the new range. Anything modern he dislikes. He was hoping that a small plume of smoke would decide the range's fate in his favour -- no doubt he dreams of it adorning a scrap heap somewhere. Perhaps if I gave him more to do he would not be quite as unhappy."

"You do not host many dinners?"

"I can count the number of times I have had guests -- of the non-family kind -- over to dinner since Amelia died on one hand."

"And your chef has stayed with you?"

"I did not say that. This would be my fourteenth chef. They stay their year and that is all. Pemberley servants are more loyal to me."

"Or they have nowhere else to go," teased Elizabeth. "Not that I think you a harsh master. After all, I still remember Mrs Reynolds' sincere appreciation of you."

A look of fond remembrance passed across Darcy's face, "Mrs Reynolds was the very best of women."

If this was twenty years ago, Elizabeth thought, Darcy would have at least by now asked her if he dared to hope. He would have brought up the reason Elizabeth had broken with propriety, for all she was a widow, and come to his house alone.

Her third marriage proposal, her Henry, after she had told him she had no answer, had asked her to give him at least hope.

"I will not speak of this to you again, unless you choose to open the conversation, Elizabeth, but please tell me now if I am a fool to hope."

Of course she had given him hope. Ultimately she'd given him a positive answer to his question.

The difference between a twenty-six year old Henry or even a twenty-eight year old Darcy and the Darcy that sat opposite her? He knew, like she now did, that hope was the one thing that no one could gift. He would wait.

Thomas glared at the man sitting next to him, who had just elbowed him in the chest for the fourth time in half an hour. He had never been in charity with Darcy more.

That young man sat on the other side of Max asking, yet again, why they could not have sat in the box kept by their parents. Instead the three were seated in the pits with everyone else. Thomas had to
admit it was entertainment enough where they were sitting but he had not heard one iota of singing. He could just about see those on the stage, but that was all.

"This is an experience," said Max, brushing an unknown food -- well Thomas hoped it was food -- substance off his coat.

"I would think the opera was enough of an experience," said Darcy frostily.

"For my first time, I would have liked to have watched the opera...." added Thomas. He needn't bother adding 'instead of for low flying objects' to the end of the sentence.

Max sounded annoyed, "Well, if I knew both of you were going to be so difficult about a genuine London buck experience I would not have suggested it."

"Then it is settled: we shall repair to my father's box." Darcy stood with some difficulty; even though those on the benches did not seem to be paying any attention themselves to what was on stage, they loudly protested their view being blocked. Darcy however did not seem to notice, nor did he either sit down or push his way out. His attention had been grabbed by something or someone above him.

Thomas craned his neck around to see what had done so; it was his mother. Sitting in what Thomas could only presume was Mr Darcy's box. Or perhaps the box Mr Darcy shared with Lord Ashbourne. Either way the choice now seemed to be: sit in the cramped stalls or sit with his mother. Darcy had made his choice and hurriedly sat back down.

"Decided to continue to grace us with your presence?" said Max dryly.

"I was never going anywhere."

Max turned to look over his shoulder and did not even need to seem to search out what had upset the other boy. He looked back at Thomas and shrugged.

"I have not seen this production before, is it a good rendition?" asked Elizabeth.

"Tolerable," was Darcy's response.

"Well I know what tolerable really means in the dictionary of Darcy..."

Darcy flushed; "I beg that you would -- " Elizabeth was about to assure him that she was really only teasing, when Darcy recovered himself. "I am glad that you are so ready with your translations. I wonder what you would have thought if I had said that it was 'fine'."

Elizabeth was bemused. "I must not have come to that entry."

"Reading backwards? Most peculiar."

"I prefer to think of it as forward thinking."

"To know the end first?"

"It is a talent I have sometimes wished for outside of books."
"It does not spoil your enjoyment?"

"Not in the least," said Elizabeth blithely, knowing they were not really talking about books.

Darcy paused before speaking, "You do not really read the end of books first?"

Elizabeth laughed, "No! That would really spoil the enjoyment."

"But you wish for such a peek at life?"

"Sometimes. But I am glad it is just a fantasy. If I really had the choice to see how my actions would fare, I am not sure I would take it. If I had seen what would happen to end my marriage, before I answered Henry? I would have seen the pain of losing him -- but not ..."

"I understand perfectly."

Elizabeth did not doubt for a moment that he did. In fact she could not think of a time when they were in such perfect charity with each other. Something could only spoil it.

"I am glad that you invited me. It is a pity though that my aunt could not accompany us."

Elizabeth wondered if Darcy realised that Mrs Gardiner had constructed an elaborate plot in order to extricate herself from the invitation. Her aunt thought that Elizabeth had not realised what she was doing, and perhaps before Darcy's declaration she might have been blind. But now she was exceedingly sensitive and able to see what her friends and family might have been hoping for.

"It is a great pity that this was ..." Darcy seemed to be trying to place the words "...inaugural dinner of the ladies of ..."

Elizabeth relieved his suffering, since while he could not remember the particular excuse, the look on his face showed he knew it was an excuse. "Please do not try to remember my aunt's nonsense."

"I never have thought of your aunt as nonsensical."

"You were surprised that I had such respectable relations," replied Elizabeth tartly.

"Pleased might be a better word, and I always found myself surprised around you." Darcy looked down over the stage, it was clear that the interval was soon to end, "Do not hold my folly against me. I promise you that I was trying ..."

"I do not believe you needed to try, not there, not at Pemberley."

"Regardless, do not hold such against me."

It seemed that she was always being applied to for forgiveness.

"I am endeavouring to think of the past only as it gives me pleasure. I will do so in this case, as long as you promise me that you will do the same."

Darcy smiled. "I do not think I need to promise that." But he took her hand and kissed it.

It did not seem to Elizabeth that she needed to make a decision. Her mouth and her body were doing it for her.
Darcy pulled his cravat from around his neck and carelessly let it fall to the floor. Looking at himself in the mirror, he wondered what Elizabeth saw when she looked at him.

He would never have been so unsure of himself before. But now what did he have to recommend himself? A home: Elizabeth had one of those. A heart: Her children gave her theirs unconditionally. Conversation: he was not so arrogant to think he alone could give her that. The list could go on, and he could not find one single thing that was not fulfilled.

On his side there were plenty of blank spaces to fill. Twenty years had reversed his thinking. Then he thought only of what he could give her. What she would be a fool to refuse. Now he could only think of what she could give him.

Darcy swiftly removed his cufflinks and put them in a dish on the dresser. The letter wedged between that dish and the wall caught his attention.

After his confession to Elizabeth and their conversation in his study and drawing room, he had instructed his solicitor to recover the letter. It had been sitting there now for a couple of days.

Darcy had not opened it. Not because he was unsure of the meaning of Amelia's requirements to open. She had asked him to read it on his remarriage, but it could have meant when he decided to do so, when he had announced it, or when he had done so. Although, it would be an understanding new wife who would allow her husband to read a letter from another woman on their wedding night.

No, he had not opened it because he did not wish to open it until he was safe from the contents.

He would be physically safe from them if he opened it after the service; no words could unbind a holy union. But his mind might still be swayed.

Darcy had thought of burning it. Then it could pose no threat to him, or his future happiness whatsoever. Maybe he should burn it to prove that his life was beginning again that the past was locked away. But Darcy found he did not want to miss Amelia's last ever conversation with him. Whatever it may be.

He fingered the aging paper, and thought of that evening, of the Opera, of Elizabeth. Most of all he thought about himself, and he made a decision.

Carefully he slid his finger under the seal.
Dear Fitzwilliam,

My dear husband, I wonder how long it has been between this letter being delivered and your opening it. I hope it has not been so long that the ink has faded. I do not want my effort to be in vain, and neither do I wish for you to be alone forever.

Perhaps you are opening this on your wedding night, but I hope your curiosity has been aroused much earlier than that. I know nothing I can say will ever change your mind if you are already sure of yourself. You once told me of your disgust of those that are ever changeable, listening to everyone but themselves. I know you think you straddle the line of too changeable and immovable, but you fall a little short.

If there is time, Fitzwilliam, do not make your wife miserable. You have, at the time of writing, a home and an heir. Your duty is fulfilled in this respect. If you should marry again, marry for yourself and no other.

I can see your expression, as if you really were standing before me. I do not mean to imply that you made me miserable. Of course there were miserable moments for both of us, but I have not been a wretched wife.

We are similar creatures of duty and family, but our union has fulfilled that, Fitzwilliam. I have such a deep and great affection for you.

Darcy could see here there had been some time before she took up her pen once more. Perhaps it denoted a time of illness or that some thought was required.

I love you, Fitzwilliam. It is not a blinding love, and it did not strike me as I looked across a ballroom, but it is there none the less. And I think, nay I know, you love me too. It crept on much more slowly for you maybe, but I know from my experience, whomever and for whatever reason you choose to marry again, that you will love her.

Except I cannot in good conscience support you in growing a love that is not already there; there is of course an understanding that love does not underpin marriages in our
sphere, but this does not stop hope. A first marriage is for growing love, a second is for the support of an existence. I will leave it to you to understand me, as I understand you.

I even understood you when I married you. It is a gamble that might not pay off twice.

I thought perhaps such a handsome husband, with such a dry outlook on life, would do me well. I did not think that I would come to feel affection for everything about you. That I would notice the smallest of expressions when you saw me reading once again the advertisements for Gowlands lotion. I expect you did not notice how much that was to tease such an expression out of you.

Darcy could not help but feel a sense of rising annoyance. He faithfully read those advertisements! He faithfully listened and she had been laughing at him!

Then he could not help but laugh himself.

My thoughts will mean little to you, not because you mean to belittle me, but as I have said before, you come down too strongly on the side of immovable mind. I can only ask that you think of our son....

The rest of the letter contains Amelia's thoughts about their son. This was the fault of the letter. A child barely three years of age had little personality that was recognisable with the adult. Although Darcy thought of his son at that age and his son now and had to admit perhaps there was more correlation than he had thought.

Nevertheless, he felt a sense of sorrow and pain that this child Amelia was writing about was not their son. She had never known their son. But she had his best interests at heart and Darcy knew what she meant in this section of her letter. She wanted him to put himself and their son first. Not duty or society or anything else.

He had not shed a tear at Amelia's funeral. Nor at any other time in those dark months. He had felt desolate and bleak but, apart from an increase in consumption of the finest alcohol Scotland and the Continent could offer, there had been no outward leaking of that emotion. But now Darcy found himself folding the letter roughly and finding himself forced to shield his eyes.

"Are you sure you do not wish to come to the emporium with us, Mama?" Emily looked concerned.

"But if your mother does not accompany us, I can spoil you more than I could if she was there," added Mrs Gardiner with a smile.

Her aunt was also amusing and exasperating. Her Aunt and Emily were the reason that Elizabeth felt that visiting Thomas would be like taking sanctuary.
"Shall I buy you some new ribbons?" said Henrietta.

Elizabeth cupped Henrietta's chin. "You do not think I am a little old for such fripperies?"

"Giselle... " Giselle was another newly debuted member of the ton that Elizabeth was almost sick of hearing about. At least her niece, Clara, had sense. Giselle seemed to only think of ribbons and lace. Henrietta did not need help turning her thoughts in that direction... "said that tricking oneself out was the only way to get a husband and ...

"Look at that pretty church spire, I have never noticed it before." Interjected Mrs Gardiner. "But here we are at Thomas' lodgings. Shall we call for you, Lizzy?"

"No, I am well able to find my way home," said Elizabeth dryly, barely allowing the carriage to stop before she had reached to open the door. She was not fooled by her aunt's sudden interest in church architecture. It seemed that she was going to have to have a conversation she did not want to have with her daughters before too long.

Mrs Gardiner was a sensible woman, though perhaps one that had grown rather more fond of romance than Elizabeth remembered; if she had said anything to her daughters, it would have been a generalisation. Something to prepare their minds for the idea that their mother might remarry; only Emily might then make the connection to Mr Darcy. Mrs Gardiner left the specific conversations to direct to her niece!

Elizabeth raised her hand to the departing carriage and could not help returning Mrs Gardiner's wide smile, before she turned to the stairs that led to her son's lodgings.

No, if Elizabeth thought about it, her Aunt had always been a practical romantic. Elizabeth had admired it in her younger years; after all things such as money, station and situation were practical matters that ensured or destroyed one's happiness. But love, respect, affection, passion, romance -- they also had an impact.

Elizabeth now felt rather differently about her aunt's notions. It seemed more and more that her Aunt would, when they were in private, drop notions such as Phaetons and fours being just the thing for Pemberley into conversations.

That had been a particularly pointed hint and had required some response.

A response that had been a momentary challenge: "Leaving aside more pertinent issues, Aunt," Elizabeth had hoped her response did not require the addition of 'such as there has been no understanding, no proposal, and perhaps no hope of one.' The response did however need a conclusion: "It would not be seemly."

"If it happened tomorrow perhaps, but that is unlikely. These things require some preparation, surely you remember."

Elizabeth did remember, and her marriage had been a simple affair. It would have been simpler if not for her mother. She'd resented having to pander to her mother, but now she was glad she had done so. Elizabeth could visualise her own contentment and pride at seeing Henrietta or Emily married to a man they loved and respected. She knew how hurt she would be if either of her daughters cut her from their wedding preparations.

"Aunt, you speak too prematurely."

"I notice you do not say I speak wrongly," said Mrs Gardiner pointedly. "I told Mr Gardiner, before we had that awful letter from Jane, that I thought Mr Darcy had a preference for you. Was I wrong
"No." It was the simple truth. Elizabeth felt no embroidery might help ease this conversation to an end.

"I was not quite so certain about your partiality. You had spoken so strongly against him. I have had more experience now, but even then I knew young ladies who abused those they secretly admired."

Elizabeth had gaped at her Aunt. That her Aunt could think like Mr Collins! Sputtering, she told her aunt so.

"This is why I was uncertain. My Lizzy could never be so stupid."

Elizabeth was relieved. "I have been stupid where Mr Darcy is concerned."

"I am sure you have," responded her aunt warmly, "but knowing Mr Darcy's character, I think you would have been well matched. I think you are well matched in a lot of ways."

"We were then perhaps."

"I think now also."

"Perhaps," conceded Elizabeth, "But, Aunt, I cannot have you putting the cart before the horses, so to speak."

Mrs Gardiner had nodded and, to show her understanding, had turned the subject.

Her aunt was a woman of character; anything she had said to Emily or Henrietta must have been before their conversation. Or she had merely wanted to plant the seed in their minds, not realising that both Emily and Henrietta were completely capable of turning a small seed into a rambling forest in moments.

The elderly retainer at last shuffled behind the door and opened it, allowing Elizabeth admittance.

The front room was as disordered as her first and so far only visit. But instead of holding her nephew, it held the younger Mr Darcy.

"Mr Darcy," said Elizabeth with a smile.

"Mrs Davis," replied the young man. "Davis is, I believe, taking a bath. I could fetch him for you."

That would embarrass her son, thought Elizabeth; for she could not suppose that the younger Darcy would do it with finesse. It would be too good of an opportunity to pass up. Elizabeth knew boys.

"There is no need. I did not give him any warning. But we might have some conversation while I wait."

Elizabeth noticed that Darcy stiffened at that. No, Darcy's son was not oblivious. Slowly, as if pieces were falling into place, Elizabeth saw maybe what her son was so worried about. What he had been trying to warn her about.

She had expected a confrontation ever since Darcy had made his declaration of intent. But this was a quarter from which she had never considered it might come. Her children being upset she could visualise. She and Darcy having yet another fiery clash was almost a certainty even if it had failed to materialise so far. But she had never thought what the younger man in front of her might think.
He could have never known his mother. Elizabeth would be no replacement surely. Nor would he be affected to any great degree. He was at university, no longer living under his father's roof. The reaction of the Squire's children to their father remarrying had been one that did not even rate a mention. In fact, the lack of reaction had been the talking point in the village.

If she had been a younger woman, than perhaps the younger Darcy may have felt threatened at being replaced in the heart and mind of his father by younger half siblings. Elizabeth knew stepmothers who intrigued desperately in order to have their children considered the favourites.

Nowhere in these vague thoughts bouncing around in her head, where she refused to focus on them as they became real that way, had she thought of nothing but pure irrational emotion driving the younger Darcy's reactions. She could say it was because she had been so caught up in her own feelings, and the reactions of those closer to home, but her heart had gone out to this awkward child on multiple occasions, why had she not thought of him?

Now she braced herself for a reaction. Would he be impolite? If he was his father's son and Elizabeth rather thought he was, he could be more than impolite.

"Was there a subject you wished to discuss in particular?"

It was not impolite but it was leading. Did everyone think that she had an understanding with Darcy? Had none of them thought that perhaps she had no desire to remarry? That she was happy with a renewed friendship? That the past should remain the past?

She thought her mouth and body had been making the decisions for her; what she had failed to connect before now was that unlike thoughts, actions and words could be interpreted by others.

"Your father liked to discuss the state of roads, is this an interest of yours?"

It had the element of surprise. It worked.

"Roads?" He sounded like he had never thought of his father and his preferred trivial conversation topics.

"Yes, and the relative distances over good ones." Elizabeth was going to be careful not to mention they had been discussing roads in relation to marriage.

"My father is, of course, an excellent conversationalist." If this statement had come from Maximilien, Elizabeth would have known that it was being said facetiously. However, Elizabeth had noted before a sense of hero worship from the younger Darcy towards his father. So he really believed in his father.

Except Elizabeth could sense that his rational mind was trying to point out to him that the evidence, as far as provided, was to the contrary. No one had ever taught Darcy to be laughed at, although Elizabeth thought now time had mellowed him in that respect, but it was definite that no one had taught the son to see that the fathercould be teased.

"Indeed, memorable."

"Do you remember all of your conversations with my father?"

Elizabeth could have answered anything she liked; after all no one would no the truth of it besides herself, but she took the time to think. Apart from perhaps some moments (after all could anyone really remember everything) she was startled to realise that perhaps she did remember all their
conversations.

At least she remembered the gist of their talks. What did that mean? It could mean what no doubt her Aunt would say it meant. But how could she know Darcy if she could remember every conversation they had?

A small voice reminded her that she would have been happy to commit her life to him, twenty years ago, on the basis of those few conversations. But that was then.

She found her voice, "Yes. I believe I do." She had to be honest.

Darcy junior, looked as if he wanted to reply to that, but the entrance of Thomas prevented him.

Thomas' hair was plastered to his head and Elizabeth could not suppress the maternal urge to move it aside. Thus, Thomas' greeting of "Mama!" was half surprise and half barely disguised embarrassment.

Mr Cavill's letter lay open before Darcy. Business letters were always trying, but this one particularly so. Fitzwilliam had laid the seed of doubt in his mind, and now he was wondering if selling the parcel of land to their neighbour was the right decision.

To do anything with the land would require an outlay of a not inconsiderable sum. Darcy could not allow himself to keep the land sentimentally. If he did not sell he would have to cultivate it. Yet the idea of his birthright was still sitting at the back of his mind. His son's birthright. Could he short change his son in such a way? Would his son miss this parcel of land in the future?

Darcy turned the letter over in some annoyance at himself.

As if reading Amelia's letter had not given him enough food for thought!

Part of him wanted to show Elizabeth the letter and ask her opinion, particularly with regards to Fitzwilliam. The other part of him thought that would be a betrayal of Amelia. Except if he was to do as Amelia asked, he would have to share all of his life with his future wife, whomever she might be, and the fact he wanted to share with Amelia ...

Darcy let his head fall to the desk and groaned.

He did not want to think anymore. He did not want to have to decide whether he should speak to his son or not.

Everything was in Elizabeth's hands. He would not press her. But in all good conscience he could not speak to his son, at least about Elizabeth, unless he was certain. He found it easier to speak when he had a definite reason to do so.

"Sir?"

Of course, the footman would enter the room, right when Darcy was acting uncharacteristically. He did not want to think about the rumours that would be spread around the servant's hall about him. *He had his head on the desk.....*

"Yes?"
"A lady," his footman coughed politely, "Mrs Davis, is here to see you. I have asked her to wait in the drawing room."

"Thank you," was all Darcy could reply.

He looked at himself in the mirror in the hall before taking the stairs two at a time. He did not even think what sort of gossip that would provoke below stairs. However, he did manage to prevent himself from bursting through the door like an overgrown pup. Straightening his jacket, he opened the door.

"Mrs Davis," he bowed.

"Not Elizabeth?"

"Would that be proper?" said Darcy. He had violated that rule several times already, but he had not heard his name from her lips. He would have remembered that surely?

"At our age and in our situation? We are almost family, after all," said Elizabeth.

"Very well, I will attempt to endeavour to remember it."

Elizabeth smiled at him, "I wished to speak to you." She looked nervous for a moment and then it seemed to drop away from her. "But I must know something first."

Darcy froze. What sin of his had been uncovered that she must know about? What was about to sway her opinion of him?

She walked towards him, and before he could quite realise it, she had, standing herself on the tips of her toes, pressed her lips to his.
The End of Trust

Thomas adjusted his cravat once more; it was ridiculous to do so, he was only accompanying his cousins in the park. The squire, and others he looked up to, would certainly see it as a preening, peacocking thing to do. Lord Ashbourne would not. But for that man it was practically a duty to look good. Thomas wondered which side Mr Darcy would fall on?

He was growing more and more sure that his mother would have a talk with him very soon. He hoped she would at least. If she was to tell him, and his sisters, that growing attachments should not be kept hidden, she should have the courage not to be hypocritical. Of course any attachment would be of long duration; after all, there was no rush.

His mother's reaction to the near elopement of a young lady when he had been fifteen had astounded him at the time. To listen to a decree on a subject that he had never ever thought of (and he was sure his sisters had not either)! Now, of course, the reaction was completely understandable.

Truthfulness and honour had been bywords of the Davis household and Thomas assumed it was a two way street.

"You are going with Max?" Darcy lounged in the doorway.

"Yes, you?" Thomas was determined to be polite.

"No. Listening to a gaggle of girls chatter away about ribbons? I do not know why Max, or you, put up with it. Unless you wish to throw your life away so soon?"

Thomas smiled, "I am not sure I agree that marriage is such a waste of a life."

Darcy scowled, "I did not mean that. I meant at such a young age you are doubtless to make a poor choice. Particularly since you have no guidance."

"I have my mother, and my own judgement."

"Faulty."

For the sake of civility, Thomas did not press the matter as to whether Darcy meant his judgement or his mother was faulty. "My uncles and my father's friends will stand me in good stead when it comes to advice." Thomas paused, wondering if he should bring the subject up. Darcy had not asked him about the letters, probably rightly assuming that no outraged outburst meant they did not read the letters in the same light. "Your father as well."

There was little reaction. "I should not rely on advice from that quarter."

Thomas found he needed clarification. "You do not think he would offer it?"

"I am sure he would do so."

Thomas shrugged himself into his olive green jacket. He was unsure whether it went with the tight yellow pantaloons but both items were new, and even if he hated to admit it to himself he did want to present himself as a man of some means. He found people, other men mainly, gave him some credit when he looked the part. "You did not ask me what I thought of those letters."

"I thought you might not have read them..."
Thomas wondered if the implication was that he could not read, since he was not as bookish as the other boy and Darcy tended to scorn anyone who did not have identical tastes to his own. Max was the exception to that rule. "I did read them. I should read them again if I were you." Thomas could not escape the impression that Darcy had only read them all through maybe once. He would return to certain passages, but to read the whole canon might be too painful. But perhaps he was ascribing his own feelings when he thought of reading anything of his father's to the other boy.

If it was the case, then Thomas could understand the false impression Darcy might have received from the letters, particularly from those written to his grandmother. He could also understand the misplaced anger. It would be easy to hate this unknown woman who caused his mother pain rather than his father who was more culpable.

"I have."

Thomas looked over at this admission. Darcy was not the type to admit fault, he proved it in his next sentence. "My impressions have not materially changed."

Of course they had not. Thomas sensed difficulties all round. Problems that his mother was oblivious to, and, if Thomas was able to judge a man he barely knew, Mr Darcy did not understand his son as well as he should.

"You look appalling." Thomas blinked, then looked back to the glass. He was about to strongly challenge Darcy's fashion sense when his uncle appeared behind him.

"I do not think I have ever agreed with you more, Little One. What are you wearing, Thomas? I do hope you are not thinking of squiring my daughter anywhere looking like that!"

Thomas realised there was little point in arguing with Lord Ashbourne; the result would be the same. He would be made to change. He might as well speed the process up and just give in. He started stripping off.

"Come, Little One! Let us have some port while Thomas stops giving us headaches!"

___________________________________________________________

Elizabeth's mind was racing. She had told herself that this moment would give her the answer she sought. In a way it had, but it had not clarified anything. To be so intimate with another man, who was not her husband, felt strange. Yet she wished to cling to it, but was this because she missed this feeling? Or because of the man?

The kiss did not answer this question. She could only presume that kissing another man would answer her question and she could not do that. That would go against every fibre of her being; she did not even know why she was doing this!

The idea that she did not know Darcy, that they had no depth of relationship had scared her. She could not remember the outline of every conversation she had with Henry. Nor the outline of every conversation she had had with her children, her sisters, her parents...Emily Albright, Charlotte Lucas...

Her head told her that this was surely because those people had lived in her everyday life. She had had conversations about chickens, dust, shelving and whether there were any potatoes left with them. They were not memorable conversations.
It was ridiculous to compare Darcy to them. Darcy had been part of a strict societal dance whereby men and women were supposed to choose the partner of their fate without really being allowed to see each other in anything but the most formal of situations. Nor being allowed to speak to each other in private, although Darcy and she had defied that convention on several occasions.

She had made a good choice in Henry; he had been less formal in his dealings, and the village was a much more unrestricted place to learn about fellow inhabitants. Yet, she had to think perhaps Charlotte had it right when she said happiness in marriage was purely by chance. She could have been deceived in Henry. She had thought Lord Ashbourne deceived in Kitty.

Not that she doubted her feelings and affections for Darcy, but would they be long lasting? The fact they still existed after all this time made her think positively. But this could be just the first flush of excitement.

Somehow she thought some sort of physical contact would convince her that she was over-thinking things, and that it was a sort of very unpractical romance that had her remembering all their dealings. That and many of them had revolved around moments in her life she could never forget: Jane and Mr Bingley, Lydia's elopement, her being utterly blind in her impressions of people...

Elizabeth drew back, and as her feet landed on the floor, so did all her resolve and level headedness crash to earth.

"Elizabeth..." Darcy seemed equally as perplexed.

Before Elizabeth could try to speak, to explain herself, to defend herself; whatever was necessary. A cough made them break apart.

"I am sorry, sir, but your attention is needed in the kitchens." The Butler looked aggrieved at having to interrupt his master, and Darcy's sharp response made both Elizabeth and the servant flinch. At least, Elizabeth knew she was not the only one who found that reaction uncharacteristic of Darcy.

She could not entirely blame him though for it; Darcy had always been tightly wound when it came to showing his emotions. She had been completely surprised by his proposal at Hunsford, she had seen no evidence of his ‘ardent love’. Looking back on his behaviour later, she thought she could see the signs, but one had to know Darcy very well to see them, or have hindsight in one's favour like she had done.

Being a private man, he would shy away from emotional responses in front of others, particularly his household, and she felt for him because at that moment he must want to speak, or to act. To do something, and he was being prevented. Once again she had put him in an untenable position.

"I apologise, but I do not think this is a matter for the housekeeper. Monsieur is quite enraged." As if designed to punctuate his words something crashed from below them.

Darcy swore under his breath; Elizabeth only heard because they were still standing so close together. His eyes held apology as he left the room.

Elizabeth sank into a chair and wondered what she had done. They had been acting so perfectly with each other. As Kitty had said, neither of them had to resolve anything until the other was ready. They were not twenty. They were a respectable widow and widower. Of course she had to be impetuous, a trait she had thought she had lost in her girlhood, and push the matter before she was ready!
Some time later, when the door to the drawing room opened, Elizabeth let go of a breath she did not even know she was holding. It was not Darcy. For that she was glad, because she had not ordered her thoughts; not even one of them was it its proper place.

However the fact it was the younger Darcy did nothing for her composure. She knew she looked as disordered as she felt. That she had been clearly expecting someone else. Indeed even the fact she was sitting in the drawing room unattended spoke volumes.

Rising awkwardly, Elizabeth offered the young man a seat, he looked equally confused. Her offer made a series of emotions flash across his face and Elizabeth cursed herself. In her confusion, she had just offered him a seat in his own house. The house he would one day be master of; it was utterly absurd.

"We seem to be crossing paths more frequently," she noted.

Mr Darcy the younger had no response. Elizabeth's mind did contortions as it always did when she thought of the son. Perhaps that was why she did not think so often of him; it was difficult to separate him from his father when referring to him. She could not not think of the father when he shared his name.

"I do not mean to imply that this is unpleasant," said Elizabeth when no response came.

"Of course not, ma'am. Did you find the road pleasant?"

He sounded so serious, but it had to be a joke and Elizabeth could not help but laugh. "Indeed, what is less than a mile of road between friends?"

The unchanging expression made Elizabeth pause.

"How do you find the house?"

That comment made her start "I think it a very fine house."

"It is nothing to Pemberley."

"I think very little compares to Pemberley."

"You have seen my father's estate?" Elizabeth was surprised that he had not known that by now at least. Or perhaps he was feigning for some purpose of his own.

"A very long time ago," said Elizabeth. Indeed it felt as if it was a different lifetime, one that had happened to a different person.

"A house party? My father rarely has those any more. Unless it is family."

"No, I was quite an interloping guest. I thought your father was from home. Mrs Reynolds, I am not sure if you would remember her, showed us through the house."

Any response was cut short by Darcy returning. He crossed the room, not noticing that in his absence his son had returned home.

"Elizabeth, I cannot apologise enough ..." He held out his hands to her and in every expression, if not in every word, his feelings radiated from him.
Elizabeth could not help but respond with her own hands, even as she shot a look at the younger man. "Fitzwilliam..."

Darcy smiled, thinking at first she meant him, and perhaps she did, but he turned in the direction of her gaze to see his son.

He did not, as she thought he would, drop her hands. But Elizabeth was not sure if this was simply because he was in a position of some discomfort, to be surprised in what he thought was a private moment.

"Sir, I believe you forget yourself."

Perhaps that should have been Elizabeth's line; after all she was being 'accosted' by a man who was not her husband, or any other near relation of hers.

"Fitzwilliam?" Darcy seemed puzzled. Elizabeth knew she had been right, Darcy had not seen what was under his nose either.

"Do you need reminding of the fact that Mrs Davis is so recently a widow?"

If that had been the extent of the younger Darcy's stricture Elizabeth could not have faulted him, even Darcy could not have done so; after all it was a valid concern. To romance a woman so recently a widow would raise some eyebrows. Perhaps not as many if she had been younger but raised they would be. Except, of course, that was not the end. "To be so disrespectful to my mother; to forget her in some tawdry dalliance with so inferior a woman?"

Darcy dropped her hands at this and turned in no inconsiderable anger towards his son.

"Fitzwilliam! You forget yourself." Darcy's hands clenched and unclenched before he continued, "I will not have Elizabeth spoken of in that manner. I will not be spoken to in that manner."

"I do not much care for what you wish! I am sure there has been no thought to what anyone else wishes as far as you are concerned. You have been making a fool of yourself! If that had been all, then perhaps I could have remained silent, but you have been making a fool of my mother, and of our name."

"I will try to understand your protection of our name, but what does Amelia have to do with this?"

"If you had to ask that question then you are a much lesser man than I ever thought! My mother had to live in the shadow of your affection for..." he gestured towards Elizabeth. "You had to make her life miserable, and now her memory?"

"I beg your pardon?" Darcy's anger seemed to have been replaced with bewilderment. "Where have you received these ideas from?"

"Not from you. Indeed, I rank so lowly in your concerns, it seems, that perhaps you felt I should be the last to know?"

"Who has been spreading lies?"

Elizabeth could not fault Darcy for focusing on the fact someone had been spreading lies. Elizabeth saw everything abhorrent in those who twisted facts, or outright made things up, for their own purposes. The problems with such things were that although the originator would be malevolent, it would spread through those who were merely slaves to gossip. Those like Mrs Long and Aunt Phillips, who just could not contain the stories, could not think of their likelihood or who they would
hurt. So the tale became more twisted.

But the younger Darcy was not stupid; proud and stubborn naturally, but not dim-witted. His pride alone would make it hard for him to believe anything said against those he respected and admired, which made his current actions out of character. Except Elizabeth suddenly saw who could instill such utter confidence in the younger Darcy. Only the real, not imagined, defence of a mother could inspire such anger. But she saw it too late, and her sudden clutch of Darcy's elbow was for naught.

"You call my mother, your wife, a liar? I wish for you to know I will never accept this. Whatever this is. You will have to break with your son. It will be your choice and I know how much you dislike gossip. Indeed appearances are everything, did you not teach me that?"

Darcy seemed to have nothing to say to this, it was not because he had no response, but because he physically seemed unable to put voice to whatever was flowing through his mind.

"Already you have laid yourself open to gossip. Receiving a woman alone? Making no excuses to the servants? To fall so low, it is abominable." That was his parting shot.

If Elizabeth felt torn, then she could only imagine what Darcy himself must be feeling. Elizabeth thought she could smite Amelia for whatever she had written to her son. Except that Amelia seemed to have no resemblance to the Amelia that Darcy had described to her; Darcy's Amelia even if she had hated her husband would not have inflicted such hatred upon her son. Not knowing that her little boy would only have his father in life.

Knowing the thought was particularly hypocritical she could not help but curse Darcy. Did he never speak to his son? She could not imagine him such an unfeeling parent or such an unobservant one. Why did he even have to have a son? If his son did not exist Elizabeth thought they would not be here, in this room, so close together yet still so isolated.

"This is my fault," whispered Darcy.

He gave voice to what she was thinking and in that moment Elizabeth ceased to think of it. She could not bear to see Darcy in this much pain. No man should be in this much pain. The contrast between his expression when he walked into the room to the one now etched on his face was considerable.

"No, it is not." Elizabeth moved to reassure him in words and in actions.
The End of Childish Talk

Thomas had tuned out Henrietta's conversation. He had become adept at doing so, particularly when she talked about ribbons and such like. At the moment she was talking about ribbons and their apparently magnetic quality when it came to Mr Jefferson.

In previous conversations, he had listened intently to discover who Mr Jefferson was; after all he did not want to be surprised by a suitor. Mr Jefferson was indeed, according to Henrietta, a paragon of virtue. Thomas however would not take Henrietta's word; he could be a tattooed sailor with a mouth belonging in the gutter and have a dream to become a mercenary and a penchant for strong drink and gambling, but if Henrietta liked him, she would only see his virtues. Like his face.

Max had reassured him, telling him that 'Jeffy' was a shy bookish sort who would never dream of speaking out of a turn to a young lady. Indeed he would never even dream of speaking to a young lady. He was quite frightened of them.

"It is his curse that he is quite an Adonis so young ladies always wish to speak to him!"

Thomas had laughed at that, and resolved to only feel pity for Mr Jefferson and his plight. When Max had introduced him to Jeffy, Thomas' pity had deepened, for Jeffy was far more comfortable amongst his books than in society. Henrietta was in no danger. Indeed, unless a man was a hardened cad, he thought Henrietta quite able to handle herself.

"Of course, I wonder if he will apply to Mr Darcy?"

It was this wondering that caused Thomas to suddenly turn back to his sister. "What would Jeffy apply to Mr Darcy for?"

"I wish you would not use that silly name. If you must be so vulgarly familiar, Tom, Mr Jefferson has a Christian Name. A fine Christian name, Hildebrand."

It was at this point that Thomas though he had perhaps underestimated the extent of Henrietta's calf love.

"Very well, what would Hildy apply to Mr Darcy for?"

His sister gave him a look of not inconsiderable annoyance but answered him anyway. "My hand, of course."

"Your hand? Jeffy doesn't want to marry you!" Thomas was shocked. "He has not said he wishes to marry you, has he? I should draw his cork for speaking to my sister!"

"Tom! Of course Mr Jefferson has not spoken in such a way to me, but I am sure he will in time."

Thomas was relieved that there had been no making up to his sister behind his back. Then he paused. "What do you mean he'd speak to Mr Darcy?"

"Well, by then of course Mr Darcy would be in place of Papa."

Thomas stopped dead in his path. "What are you talking about, Hetty?!"

Henrietta sighed, and Thomas was sure he saw her eyes roll. "I know Aunt Gardiner never said as much, but Emily and I are not simpletons. Of course, when she gave us that little hint that we should
not suppose our mother to end her days alone, she meant Mr Darcy. Emily said Mama was quite overset by him in the park that day. I mean he is not so very handsome, but he is old, and perhaps Mama finds him so since she too is no longer young."

A sudden fear gripped Thomas. "Who else have you told this theory to?"

"It's not a theory, Tom. You cannot be so blind! You are not sheltered from society as Emily and I are. And we know they have been walking, they have been to the theatre together, they are always putting their heads together about something. I am sure he means to propose. I think it is quite romantic. Tragically lonely all these years; and no one would do for him. Then he sets eyes on the girl he once knew, Clara said that she was surprised that her mother had known him long before she met Uncle Ash ..."

Henrietta continued to ramble, but Thomas did not hear her. Common knowledge! He had not thought it would be common knowledge so soon.

Once he had managed to attach Henrietta back to the gaggle of young people walking, Thomas made his escape. He thought he saw Max's frown at being left behind, but Thomas could not think of anything else but that his mother was being gossiped about in the basest of ways.

Not everyone would assume that the sudden enjoyment his mother and Mr Darcy found in each other's company was entirely virtuous and leading to a proposal.

Mr Albridge and his cronies at Oxford had made it quite clear to Thomas the attractive qualities of widows to some men.

Thomas let himself into their rooms, but before he could work out his plan -- did he speak to his mother or Mr Darcy? -- he heard a crash from upstairs. It sounded like someone was throwing things against a wall.

Barring intruders, there was only one person likely to do that.

"Darcy, what are you playing at?" Thomas hoped he sounded as aghast as he felt. "Those are Rogers' things!"

"I will reimburse Rogers!" said Darcy, but he put down the vase he was holding.

"They might be mementos! Priceless memories!"

"Rogers isn't so sentimental," scoffed Darcy. "He hates his mother and he detests his father." Darcy muttered something more under his breath which Thomas could not distinguish.

Darcy picked up a picture; Thomas recognized it as one of the prized possessions from the trunk. It was, he thought, a picture of Pemberley.

"You should have this," said Darcy.

"Why?"

"Well, it is going to be yours someday, I am sure."

"Excuse me?" Thomas was baffled.

"My father cannot stop extolling your virtues; when you are his son ..."

Thomas bristled. "I will never be his son, and inheritance does not work that way!"
"My father is not titled and Pemberley is not entailed. It is within his power to leave it to whomever he so chooses."

"Which will be you!"

Darcy laughed. "Really? When he is ensconced with his new wife, and she works away at him promoting the cause of her son, whom he already loves like his own?"

"You of all people should know how dangerous it is to belittle a mother to her son!" retorted Thomas.

"I mentioned no names, how curious it is you presume I am speaking of your mother."

The time to be coy and circumspect had passed. "I do not think either of us are stupid, Darcy."

"At least you do not underestimate my intelligence."

"I rather thought you saw this coming a lot earlier that most; what has put you into such a passion?"

"I found them together."

Thomas thought he might be ill. The idea that ...

"Not like that. I should hope my father had some dignity and honour left," said Darcy sharply. "But who can tell? After all, she was alone in the drawing room and it was clear something intimate had passed between them. She treated my -- his -- house like it was her own. I may assume that nothing more than an understanding had occurred. The servants will not be so magnanimous. They will be more base thinking."

"They were alone together?" said Thomas.

"Not for the first time." Thomas was going to challenge Darcy's assertion but the other boy spoke first, "I said servants talk. And they tend not to give the benefit of the doubt."

The idea that his mother was the subject of base gossip angered Thomas. It was ridiculous; she was a grown woman, a widow! More than that, Thomas knew his mother; she would not give up her reputation!

"I am sure it has made its way to the clubs. Every eye was on them at the Opera," said Darcy.

Thomas knew that was true, he had not been able to apply himself to the opera once he had seen them there. He had watched as Darcy had watched others watch their parents.

"You, I am sure, will wish to protect your mother from such baseness. I am sure that now only a marriage will suffice to stop her from being exposed to other attentions." Darcy put the picture of Pemberley down. "Any marriage, however amicable it is between the parties, will always be gossiped about. Particularly when I am excluded from the family circle."

Thomas restrained himself from rolling his eyes at Darcy's dramatics. His mother would never conspire to exclude the son; she could never promote his own interests to the detriment of others! Even if she could be so heartless and cruel, Mr Darcy would not stand for it; Thomas was sure of that. But he could not argue against the picture Darcy was painting about the gossip.

Darcy would never be thinking so selflessly about his mother's reputation. Underneath all his talk, he was really thinking about his own reputation, his own name and his own insecurities.
This did not mean, however, that Thomas could ignore what he was saying.

Darcy looked at him speculatively before stalking forward, "You know I am speaking the truth. Women who start to manage, or are even seen to manage, men for their own gain, are universally laughed at. What sort of life is that? Alone? Friendless...not in her own circle. I expect Mrs Davis is universally admired in your village. Turned to for every occasion. Why would she want to leave that life for a life amongst the ton, a group that apart from her sister will despise her for entrapping one of the most eligible bachelors?"

Thomas could not but help scoff at the idea of Mr Darcy being an eligible bachelor.

"He is hardly in his dotage, and there are many women who would have been happy to marry my father, and even happier to marry their daughters to him. I make no judgments on their characters, but they will judge."

"You would prefer that to his marrying my mother? An eventuality which has not been confirmed?"

"I would prefer nothing. I am just stating the facts."

The facts as quoted by the venerable Fitzwilliam Darcy Junior, thought Thomas with some sarcasm. But the problem was that his version of events was all too probable.

A cold fury overcame Darcy. How dare his son speak to him in that fashion? He would have never spoken to his father in that way!

He had thought his son awkward and inept socially; he had never thought him full of spite and hate!

Now he could only think of Mrs Wilson and Lady Catherine. Their influence had poisoned his son. He should not have let them anywhere near his son. He would never have done so if Amelia was alive. Well, they would have of course seen the boy, but their influence would have been minimal, and Amelia had a way of dealing with her mother's over-zealousness. Lady Catherine had hated Amelia simply because she spoiled her plans for him and Anne. Darcy had given about four minutes of thought to marrying Anne when Elizabeth had been lost to him. But he had dismissed it. He could not have a wife who was ruled over by her mother, and how foolish it would be to marry Anne, who was surely not strong enough to bear children and live a long life. That last thought had been ironic in the circumstances.

Darcy had thought it was entirely his fault, but as soon as those words had left him, even before Elizabeth had offered her reassurances and her embraces, he had known it not to be true. Fitzwilliam had been warped by some power and Darcy could not have stopped that. It could not be his fault. It could not be.

"I am sure that he will revise his opinions in time, Fitzwilliam."

Darcy turned away from the window to look at Elizabeth. Of course it was now she used his name.
"You think? I think he has too much of me in him."

Elizabeth smiled, "I can think of several situations where your opinions have come to mirror those you would have once scoffed at." She came to take his hand by the window, squeezing it to punctuate her words.
"I am not sure I could forgive him." Darcy hated feeling that, but he could not lie. Not to himself and not to her.

"Your good opinion once lost is lost forever?" said Elizabeth, looking at him with a piercing gaze.

"Something like that," said Darcy. If he was honest, it was the fact that he felt so angry with himself that made him feel that way. He was angry that he had not seen this coming. Both his feelings towards Elizabeth, and the quagmire in which his son seemed determined to pitch himself.

"But he is your son."

"He is a man foremost," said Darcy. "And I cannot forgive a man who speaks disrespectfully about the woman I love." Elizabeth dropped his hand and Darcy could see he had upset her. "I am sorry but it is the way I feel. He has disappointed me immensely."

"I think you have disappointed him just as much."

"Only because he wilfully misunderstands me and wilfully comes to incorrect conclusions."

"You do not think you are doing the same thing?"

"No. You did not think he made himself perfectly clear?"

"I have enough experience to know that people in a temper rarely speak the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Particularly when they are out of charity with people they love."

"You are not furious that he thinks we are behaving improperly?"

"I think he is not the only one thinking in that manner. He is protecting his mother's memory. He feels neglected, Fitzwilliam."

"No one has neglected him. He has had every comfort."

Darcy knew his son had been spoiled. Materially he had every comfort and opportunity. With regards to memories, he had been protected. Darcy had preserved Amelia for him.

"And when had you last spoken to him, properly? You do not think he has a right to be hurt, if he is the last to know?"

"Last to know what, Elizabeth?" Darcy cursed himself when he realised how he had snapped at her. "Elizabeth, I am sorry. I should not speak to you in this manner. I should not be entertaining you here. In that respect, my son is correct. I have compromised you most dishonourably."

"I accept your apology for your tone just now, but as for the rest, you have nothing to apologise for. If I remember rightly, and you will find I never forget, the two times I have visited you here I have surprised you."

A wry smile twisted Darcy's face before Elizabeth continued.

"As for the last to know -- I think, while we have not put voice to anything, that there is some understanding between us. My aunt is already planning a phaeton and four for Pemberley."

Darcy knew she was trying to make him smile, but he felt a twisting inside, the same twisting he felt years ago when Sir William Lucas had been all expectation of a marriage between Jane Bennet and Bingley. The weight of expectation. The weight of raising expectations. But he plastered a smile upon her face and brought Elizabeth's hand to his lips.
"Fitzwilliam, you would not pick me over your son, would you?"

Darcy was not sure how to answer that, at least not in his current frame of mind when he could cheerfully strangle his errant child. He never thought it would be a choice. Elizabeth would never insist she was more important to him than his family. He could not love her if she was that type of woman. It was one of the reasons she had refused him that time at Hunsford. She might have been ashamed of her family, but no one else could speak badly about them. She could not envision a life where she was banned from seeing them, which is what she had more than likely assumed would be a codicil of marrying Darcy.

Of course not a year later she had shut herself off from her family, but Darcy could see the punishment she'd inflicted on herself for that on her face.

He hesitated, and he saw her face fall and she stepped back from him.

"Elizabeth, it is not a question I can answer." At least it was not one he could answer honestly.

"My children are the most important thing in my life." Elizabeth had conviction. "Of course I do not think they are perfect and I will not regard everything they say as the truth. If they speak disrespectfully of others I love, then I will not let them believe that is what I want for them. What I want for them is for them to be the best people that they can possibly be. But I would never abandon them."

"Elizabeth..."

But it was too late; Elizabeth had slipped out of his grasp and out of the room.

Darcy slammed his hand into the wall beside the window, watching as Elizabeth walked down the stairs into the street. She turned her head, looking directly up to him, before she turned to walk down the street.

Part of him raged at him for letting Elizabeth go, the other part of him raged at him for his inexcusable behaviour as a parent. His mind was so full of 'should haves'. Not only did he have those still circling his mind from his behaviour twenty years ago, they joined the regrets he had over Amelia; he did not need any more, yet they kept arriving.

He had encouraged his son's feelings towards his mother, thinking perhaps some perceived closeness would make up for her not being there. He had exposed him to influences he knew were bad. He had not been an open and available parent. Darcy told himself that was because neither personality allowed it, but he wondered how much of Fitzwilliam's behaviour was his own reflected back to him. If Darcy had given him the impression he did not wish to be the type of parent to have a child's constant questions, then would his son have moulded himself in that way to spare his parent? And then sought answers to his own questions elsewhere? In that way, perhaps his son and Thomas Davis were two sides of the same coin.

The decanter was calling to him from the other side of the room, and Darcy poured himself a generous glass. He deserved it. He had alienated the two most important people in the world to him.

Elizabeth he could speak rationally to as an adult. They would discover a way through his obstacle to their reunion. Of that Darcy was sure. Their love had survived much more than this. Of course it meant that marriage, a home, the rest of his dream for his new life might be delayed. But he had expected that. Henry was still occupying the greater space in Elizabeth's heart and head. She was still torn and not yet come to terms with the fact that there could be enough space in there for two men in their different ways. She seemed to be able to love her children unconditionally, growing her heart
for them, something Darcy seemed to have never learnt, to his detriment. She would grow it for him.

As for Fitzwilliam, Darcy still felt a surge of anger. It should be solely directed at himself, but it was not. Part of that anger was fuelled by the fact he was sure that he could not have any rational conversation with his son. Perhaps someone else should speak to him. For Darcy did not know what to say.
The silver platter was empty and Elizabeth felt a keen sense of disappointment. She had hoped after such an eventful day that she would have returned home to, as Mary would term it, ‘sisterly balm’. She had not heard from Jane since she had written of the shock she had felt in Hyde Park. Elizabeth knew it was highly probable that if she committed another missive to paper it would cross Jane’s reply to her first letter en route.

The schoolroom at the top of the house was most likely where Mrs Gardiner and the girls were. Elizabeth knew Henrietta spent the morning walking, but by now she should have returned to the house. Mrs Gardiner had taken it upon herself to make sure neither Emily nor Henrietta fell behind in expanding their knowledge of the world. Elizabeth had worried this was too much of an imposition, although her aunt had taken to it with glee. However Darcy had, when she had confided in him, told her how fruitful new wisdom was; after all, Mrs Gardiner had talents that Elizabeth lacked and vice versa. Mrs Gardiner had long been obliged to assist Mr Gardiner in his business dealings, an obligation that she now fulfilled for her son where necessary, and thus was far more au fait with numbers than Elizabeth had ever been. But her aunt was not the only one of her family offering her assistance with her daughters’ education. Kitty had offered the services of the masters already retained to teach Clara and Bella; it made particular sense for more students in the case of the dancing master. Elizabeth had really hesitated at this offer because it really was an imposition. Elizabeth could have afforded her own dancing master out of her jointure but it seemed an extravagance and Elizabeth was not sure she wanted to encourage solely those arts that were designed to make a young lady think only of men and marriage.... although Elizabeth thought she was fighting a losing battle on that front with Henrietta.

But she could not ignore her daughter's education in this aspect either, so Elizabeth had agreed with her aunt, her sister and Mr Darcy; thus her daughters had Mrs Gardiner and her numbers and atlases, and the dancing master. A governess had been discussed by her and Henry, but Henry had felt that governesses were often no better educated than the mother of the household, if she would only apply herself to the task. Elizabeth had agreed, thinking on the whole the approach taken by her father, along with a great deal more parental encouragement and advisement, would be beneficial.

Elizabeth did find her daughters in the school room; Emily left her work and ran over. "Mama, these letters have come for you."

Emily handed over three letters addressed to her, one from Jane, one from Mary and the last from her father.

"I was feeling very unloved," remarked Elizabeth, "But now I see how wrong I was." She wanted nothing more than to rip Jane's letter open and devour it. But she was too aware of her Aunt's keen eye and that her daughters would wish to share in the contents. This was one letter that would require careful editing before it was fit for family recitation.

"Are you not going to open them?" asked Henrietta.

"Blessings should be savoured," answered Elizabeth. She stayed to hear the girls' progress in their lessons before she went to put off her outerwear. She had barely closed the door to her chamber when she almost ripped the paper in her haste.
Dearest Lizzy,

How tantalizing I found Kitty's letter till I opened yours! I was being scrupulously fair, opening the first letter on the pile, yet her letter was all hints and teases. Despite this preparation, I was still shocked to hear that Mr Darcy still has feelings for you. Not that anyone admiring you should be so very shocking, at least not to me. But after such a period of time and separation? Indeed, I have not heard much of Mr Darcy, though he must be an intimate of Kitty's circle. I find her very well able to keep her tongue when needs must.

Reservations, I will come to those later, aside, My Lizzy! to be offered a chance to wonder no longer! I find it amazing that of our sisters, it is you and I that have paths not taken and suffered disappointments. Maybe if I were in your position those old feelings would too rise to the surface. I do not include Lydia in my thoughts, though she must suffer daily. Thoughts of extreme shame and disappointment must plague her. But Mary and Kitty..."

Elizabeth smiled at Jane obviously implanting her own feelings upon their errant sister. Jane would have felt shame, Elizabeth mortification, Mary would have been shocked at herself, Kitty horrified, but Lydia? Elizabeth strongly thought Lydia could feel none of those emotions. Although if Elizabeth had thought of Lydia as she must be now, she had pictured a wretched creature with too many children, subsisting on the charity of others, most likely in a stinking poor house. Her stubbornness meaning she was too proud to apply to her family for assistance.

She'd painted this picture to Kitty when once again the conversation had turned to that period in their lives. Kitty had laughed and confessed she had seen Lydia in quite a different light. A far more successful one, as an abbess. Terrifying the clients who visited her establishment. Elizabeth thought she should have been shocked, but she found she wished Lydia happy and healthy before she wished her punished for what she had inflicted on her family. Elizabeth understood that the death of her husband as well as reconnecting with her sister and Darcy had made her resentment towards Lydia disappear. She could now feel charity towards her sister. Elizabeth could only agree that Lydia's temperament probably made Kitty's vision a far more likely one than her own had been.

Jane's letter went on to describe Mary and Kitty's paths to happiness and then returned to its chief subject.

As for your entreaties, Lizzy, I cannot answer you. You and Mr Darcy may be content together, for the rest of your lives. Or it may end in disaster; end like our parents in loneliness, or, worse, like Mrs Mason who took herself off to Italy rather than live with her husband. I cannot know. I know you are both good people but as to your understanding of each other -- that only you can answer. You never understood my decision to reject Mr Bingley, but I could no longer rely on my understanding of him and my trust in myself was shattered. Perhaps we would have been happy. But I am happy now and Reginald has never given me a moment's discomfort with regards to his feelings for me.

That was something Elizabeth now never doubted from Darcy either.

But I feel I must caution you, Lizzy. My reservations are thus: Unlike the Lizzy of not yet one and twenty, there is not only your heart to consider. Mr Darcy has a son. You have Tom and Hetty and Emily. I understand if you not wish to consult them directly but their feelings must be taken into account. Do not let your children subsume your
desires and needs but remember that they should be placed above all else. I know this
sounds contradictory and perhaps this is so, but I cannot be sorry for it.

Jane might always see the best in people, but where she felt herself right she was firm. Elizabeth
wished she had read this letter before she had so impulsively thrown herself at Darcy.

As a widow, you enjoy considerable freedom in your thoughts and your property. This
may not be the case in a marriage. I do not think you would be so foolish as to marry a
tyrant who would campaign to have you turned out of the house, unlike a wretched
creature of this neighbourhood. Your understanding of each other must be perfect.
While your reputation as a widow may be untouchable by the types of scandal that
would be attached to an unmarried lady, any talk will affect others. I would not even
think you required such a warning, not with our sad history, but I can sense your
overwhelming emotions and I would not have you allow yourself to commit to
something that you would not do in your right mind, if I could help the avoidance of it
by a word or two to you.

Now Elizabeth felt shame. She had not put her children first. She had berated Darcy for not doing so,
but she had been equally guilty. Elizabeth folded Jane's letter, determined to read it twice over after
she looked at her other correspondence.

Mary's letter was filled with sharp anecdotes about her neighbours, and updates about her children's
health and prosperity, but nestled towards the end was a line that Elizabeth did not know whether to
laugh or cry at. Mary begged Elizabeth to think twice about rejoining the shackles of marriage that
had too long held woman from her rightful place in the world. Clearly the family grape vine moved
too quickly for Elizabeth.

She chose laughter when she read the first paragraph of her father's missive, written ostensibly by
Mrs Hill. Mrs Hill was an honorific title that for some time Elizabeth had thought might be made
official, but with the new name of Bennet. Her father had come to rely on Mrs Hill so completely.
She had written for him, "My dearest daughter, reports of a most alarming nature have reached me
here in my library, the fact that you might be once again resigning your name! And that the chosen
partner of your fate is one of the most illustrious men in the land!"

He teased her because he did not think it was true. Elizabeth wondered if a marriage, still only a
possibility, that once seemed to be met with disbelief or caution had more or less of a chance at
success.

Darcy stood in Fitzwilliam's chamber. He was an unnatural parent so he had come to stand here to
see if he could capture that feeling that he clearly, according to Elizabeth, should be feeling. But he
felt nothing but sadness. Elizabeth wasn't asking him to choose, his son was. In his mind the contest
was no contest at all. But that did not mean he did not intent to fight for Fitzwilliam, instead of just
fight him. Once again, he had not explained himself well enough to anyone.

Books were left lying around the place and Darcy frowned at one of them. *Family Shakespeare* He
opened to look inside, it was lovingly inscribed on the frontispiece 'To Fitzwilliam from your adoring
Grandmamma'. Fitzwilliam had bought this book, not this copy, home from Eton as a small boy. It
had been a phenomenon then, Shakespeare suitable for families, but Darcy thought it disgraceful.
He'd read the unexpurgated plays to his son those holidays. Darcy had only answered any questions Fitzwilliam had, instead of explaining everything to his young son. Fitzwilliam had not had many questions and Darcy wondered whether that was merely because he was bored, and not because, as Darcy thought, children were far more resilient than given credit for.

Darcy was sure Mrs Wilson had known of his feelings towards these types of works, yet she had given him this book. Darcy knew how his son felt about his grandmother. She was his last true link to his mother. Amelia had had no brothers and sisters. He had worried about Fitzwilliam being an only child after seeing the intense focus Mrs Wilson placed on Amelia. Lady Catherine was another mother cast in the same mould. Darcy was now thinking that in consciously trying not to place too much pressure upon his son, and not inquire minutely into every little thing he did, he might have done more harm than good. In exposing his son to more people than just himself, he'd just set himself upon a pedestal in his son's eyes, and made Fitzwilliam the sole focus of multiple people. Not only did Fitzwilliam have to live up to his parents, but his grandmother, his great aunt and everyone else who had an interest in him.

He flipped through the book and wondered if he would have felt the same if he had daughters. He was sure he would want to protect them from every single thing in the universe. So perhaps he would have been happy to see Thomas Bowdler's tireless work in removing indelicacies from Shakespeare. But then Darcy thought of Elizabeth. He knew from his Aunt and from Kitty that education in the Bennet household had been a ramshackle affair. Open to those who chose it. Elizabeth would not have been protected from the shocking, for he could not see Mr Bennet putting inappropriate work on a higher shelf. The dangers of the world had still affected Elizabeth, whether she was informed of them or not. Indeed perhaps being more aware of the world made one more resilient.

It was strange how Mr Bennet's careless approach to raising his daughters had affected them each differently. Or perhaps it was the loss of Lydia which had really been their education. The eldest, Jane, saw the best in people and was tireless in opening her household to care for those less fortunate than herself. Mary's proselyting, a quality Darcy found least attractive, had shifted into a different sort of fervour. Darcy knew Jane came into London pamphlets in hand, visiting Mrs Jameson and those of that ilk. Kitty had confided to him that she was sure she would have left her husband for the cause, if not for the fact she adored him and he was a far better speller than she. As for Kitty, Darcy could only remember a comment related to him by Amelia. She had indelicately said (Amelia's thought, Darcy had thought it sounded teasing) upon the advent of her second confinement, when Amelia was in a similar state, that such a state was good for only one thing: broadening one's mind. Kitty, it seemed, had spent her days lying in bed reading, most likely finally being bullied into reading her sister's political tracts. To Amelia, this lack of care of the life she was caring was mortifying. Amelia gave thanks every day for her blessings and thought of nothing else, yet was inflicted with a terrible pregnancy, whereas Kitty sailed through hers with barely a backwards glance and seemed able to speak and think of other subjects. Darcy knew he could never empathise with why this would gall Amelia quite so badly but he could sympathise. But it was neither of their faults.

Darcy threw the offending book down on the bed, but then thought better of it and placed the book on Fitzwilliam's overflowing book case. He had never intruded upon his son's chamber before, so he had never seen what books Fitzwilliam kept at arm's reach. Byron, Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Keats, Leigh-Hunt. The Examiner.

Darcy supposed he should be thankful that he no longer needed to be worried that his son was caught up with the views of Lady Catherine or Mrs Wilson. Now he only worried that his son's views might be so opposite to his own. It seemed inconceivable that his son who seemed to him to be far more conservative than himself would surround himself with the radical. Had it not been only
weeks ago that Fitzwilliam had argued against Darcy even giving away one tithe of his birthright? That land was the bastion of consequence? Did he merely want to 'know thy enemy'?

He had never inquired too much on his son's pursuits, assuming that like most children, he would need to relate the most pressing of his desires. Fitzwilliam had, so it seemed, fit this model. Darcy had found out when he wished to be Robin Hood and duly set up an archery range at Pemberley. A tree house. A small pony. Although perhaps these wishes had fallen away as Fitzwilliam had grown. Darcy had just thought that his son had put away childish dreams. Or maybe he had just kept them to himself.

"Darcy! Enemy Territory! Beware!"

Darcy must have jumped a foot into the air. He had not been expecting anyone at least not his cousin.

"Ash," Darcy turned reprovingly to his cousin.

"Is it wise to be rifling through the Little One's possessions? I should be personally affronted if you rifled through my belongings."

"I would not dare do so; I should not know what I might find."

"I think that thought would apply here, too."

"I am beginning to realise," Darcy sighed before having a thought. "You have not been expanding my son's reading, have you?"

"Would I dare?"

"That is a moot question, we both know the answer."

Ash considered it for a moment, "I think perhaps your son has enough people telling him what to do. I only recommend horrifying books to my sons. I find nightmares should be passed on. If I have recommended anything to the Little One, it would be designed to terrify him into sleeping only when a full moon exists."

Darcy snorted. That would explain Frankenstein. Darcy himself had read it when Fitzwilliam had been suffering from some malaise he could no longer remember. He had not wanted to sleep while his baby son was suffering. Mary Shelley's tale had certainly kept him up for the remainder of the night. Lurching unnatural beasts tended to invoke that reaction in Darcy.

"You have not explained your sudden interest in your son's reading habits," said Ash, deciding to take his seat in the armchair by the fire. The fact the servants still lit a fire in his son's hearth made Darcy smile.

"Have you ever had the feeling that you did not know someone as well as you should?"

"Frequently. Is this about Elizabeth or the Little One?"

"Fitzwilliam."

"Ah." It was an enigmatic answer.

"Why 'Ah', Ash?"
"Has he made his objections known?"

Darcy turned to fully face his cousin. "You knew?"

"I always know," Ash sounded so serious, but then he shrugged. "I think perhaps you have been warned from many a quarter. It is only your fault if you had eyes for nothing else but ..."

Darcy waved a hand at Ash to show he understood. Ash was right. Ash had attempted to warn him, Kitty had attempted to warn him, Max had attempted to warn him, Thomas Davis had attempted to warn him if certain veiled comments during crop discussions were anything to go by, and just then Elizabeth had tried to open his eyes.

Darcy cleared his throat, "I think it best if..."

"No."

"You do not even know what I am about to say!" protested Darcy.

"I do and the answer is no."

"Very well, what are you saying 'no' to?"

"I am not going to speak to your son on the grounds that he is more likely to listen to me than you. I shall also not attempt to soothe him into understanding that your love for Elizabeth knows no bounds and that if you, his illustrious and perfect father, are not allowed to sacrifice yourself on the altar of matrimony you will go quite mad and start giving away all your money to undeserving people."

"I would have not put it so dramatically," muttered Darcy. "And that is not what I wished for you to speak to him about."

"Really?" Ash sounded surprised. Darcy found his cousin was always so surprised when he was found to be in error.

"I wish for someone to speak to him about Amelia! He will not believe it from me."

"Perhaps that is something I may talk to him about. May, Darcy, May. I have no desire to drive a further wedge between the two of you."

"Are you claiming to be so untactful?"

"No, I am claiming that the truth is never tactful. Now surely you have some Dutch courage?"

Darcy was about to follow his cousin when he noticed, where he was sure his son's trunk had once stood, a folded letter wedged between the dresser and the wall. Darcy could curse that trunk.

When Mrs Wilson had been on her deathbed Darcy had dutifully taken his son to pay his last respects to his grandmother. He remembered now the conversation they had before they had entered the bedchamber. Warning Fitzwilliam of the difficulty of seeing someone in such pain, and how important it was not to let them see how affected you were. Fitzwilliam had been meticulous in that regard except for the small flinch that Darcy thought only he saw when Mrs Wilson hand, with the paper thin skin, had grasped his son's. She had rasped that she had left him something special in her will.

Of course, that something had been Amelia's letters to her. Mrs Wilson had filed them away on receipt and had always intended to pass them to her grandson. Darcy had never read them; they had
passed directly from grandmother to grandson. There had been a slim window of time when he could have read them before they disappeared into Fitzwilliam's possession and into this trunk. But Darcy had missed it trying to discover whether he wanted to read them or whether he did not wish to.

If he had read them and known the contents, it would have known what it was that so poisoned his son? Once in his son's possession, if that son did not offer them to him, Darcy had no desire to demand them, Amelia's memory the way Mrs Wilson would have wished it preserved was between mother and son, Darcy would have felt like an intruder coming between that.

The letter he held in his hand, however, was not even from Amelia. It was in Mrs Wilson's hand. It was not addressed to Amelia, so Darcy could only presume it had become mixed up in the letters she had left to her grandson. With servants rushing about the house trying to fulfil bequests, such an error could easily be made.

Normally he would not trespass on the thoughts of others but he could not help but wonder whether Fitzwilliam had read it.

It was short and to the point. Darcy thought first he could exactly date the letter, written in the overwhelming grief felt for the loss of her daughter, but the date was some years later, which made Darcy suddenly less forgiving.

In hindsight, both his and Amelia's desire for Fitzwilliam not to be an only child had been a forlorn hope. It had also been disastrous for Amelia with regards to both her health which had never been strong after Fitzwilliam and her state of mind. But in this hindsight, the only blame Darcy had ever apportioned was to himself. Amelia's own wishes had hurt her, but he could not blame her and he certainly had never looked at his son as his mother's killer.

If Fitzwilliam had read this letter, which Darcy now hoped with all his might Mrs Wilson had never intended her grandson to read then Darcy did not blame him one bit for his behaviour. Particularly if read as an impressionable child; after all, Fitzwilliam had only been fourteen when his grandmother had passed and left him her effects. No, Darcy did not blame him, not one bit.
The End of Avoidance

Thomas peered around the doorway; seeing Mrs Gardiner, he stepped back. He wanted to speak to his mother alone, did not relish the idea of having to make up some excuse to speak to her alone. Mrs Gardiner was too perceptive. Not to mention if his sisters were in the vicinity then Henrietta would surely know what he wished to speak to their mother about.

After some skulking he finally located his mother in her chambers. He'd of course knocked first before entering, it was only polite. And safe.

His mother was sitting by her desk, responding to correspondence.

"Mama, I wish to speak to you."

His mother did not look very surprised, almost as if she was expecting it. "Thomas, it is almost time for dinner, could we not postpone this conversation?"

"We could of course," said Thomas, willing to defer to her wishes, but he made it clear in his expression that he was unhappy with the idea.

"Have you by some chance recently spoken to young Mr Darcy?"

"I have. But without him I would have wished to speak to you. Mama, you must know how universally, at least within the respectable thinking of our acquaintance, expected a marriage is between you and Mr Darcy. "Senior." He thought he saw his mother's lips twitch at that, so he ploughed onwards. "But it is not of that I wish to speak to you. It is the thoughts of the less respectable minds that I wish to speak of."

There, Thomas had laid his cards on the table.

"Universal knowledge?" His mother seemed to reject this notion. But Thomas felt she could hardly be surprised, they had not been so oblivious surely. He told his mother as much.

"I believe I have been expressing more than I ought," she replied ruefully. "I would not have you, or the girls, think that I have no feelings for you in this regard. I did not know how advanced everything was until it was, so I had determined to speak to you all together when there was something to speak of. Indeed there may still be nothing to say."

"Nothing?" To go to the opera quite alone, to walk together so particularly, to visit -- although that was not yet public knowledge, Thomas thought -- how could this be nothing?

"I realised that neither of us had thought beyond ourselves. I had not thought of you, or the girls."

"Why should you? I mean, yes, of course it would be welcomed but it is your happiness of which you speak. I think none of us would expect you to choose a man who could not like us, or could not treat us well. But we do not expect to be the sole determinant. At least, I do not." Thomas had to be honest. He did not know what Emily thought. Henrietta he was fairly certain of.

"Precisely. You may know Mr Darcy a little, but the girls do not know him."

"Henrietta is already overjoyed that I shall not be receiving what she expects will be the numerous men clamouring for her hand."
His mother laughed. "See, I said she did not know him! If she thinks it preferable that suitors go to Darcy before you."

Thomas tried not to be put out. "I am quite capable of terrifying suitors."

"I expected when they are those of your own daughters you will be," said his mother with equanimity, "But you cannot expect your sisters...

"To take me seriously? No, I guess I should not."

Thomas wondered what the polite way of asking his mother whether she would take him seriously was. But he found he did not have to as his mother looked at the clock sitting upon the mantelpiece. "I suppose we do have a short while until dinner. You wished to speak to me about your concerns?"

The conversation paused for a moment or two as Thomas thought of the best way to phrase those concerns.

Thomas left the Gardiners unsure if he had managed it. At least he had voiced them. Not as forcefully as perhaps Darcy had done though. Thomas tried to suppress his anger at Darcy for speaking to his mother in the way he had apparently had done. His mother was too good to use Darcy's precise words as she had attempted to explain the scene at the Darcy's townhouse, but Thomas could guess them. He knew Darcy too well.

Mrs Gardiner had of course insisted he stay for dinner and Thomas was happy to find it a jolly little family meal, like the ones he remembered from home; the only thing missing was his father.

Laughter and silliness. His mother, who had been wearing an air of seriousness, perhaps even dejection, from even before she had seen Thomas in her chamber, had found new animation and spirit.

Thomas decided against the hackney, and spent the walk back to his rooms wondering how Mr Darcy would fit in with the party he had just been engaged in? Would Mr Darcy tease? Or would their little family dinners become more formal?

For all that his aunt and uncle Ashbourne ran an atypical household for the aristocracy, their family dinners had a sense of formality about them. Thomas could only suppose it was difficult to be intimate in a room, or a house, designed for cold outward presentation. So much space was not conducive to cosiness or homeliness.

At least, however the amount of people created the noise and hubbub at the Ashbournes, Thomas did not relish the idea of dinner a la famille in the Darcy household. The house had a coldness about it, and the two inhabitants had been so used to sharing meals over a large table. Another explanation for Darcy's behaviour perhaps.

Max was loitering outside their rooms with a cigarillo in his fingers.

"I would not go in there if I were you," said Max, coming to lean on the railings, blowing smoke into the night sky.

Thomas would have hoped that there was no more destruction of property going on inside; if
anything there could be nothing less, but Thomas found he was disappointed in the fact he had underestimated the child in Darcy.

"My father," added Max, as if this solved everything ... which in many cases it did, but in this case while it absolved Darcy of blame, it just left Thomas confused.

"You are hiding?"

"Of course. Wherever there is need of a 'Talk' from the Viscount," Max capitalised the words even in his speech, "I make myself scarce. Particularly if I am the required other participant! It never ends well. Darcy, however, was not quite quick enough tonight."

Thomas found himself disappointed in quite another Darcy. That Mr Darcy senior would pawn off his duty to his cousin! The very least Darcy deserved was his father.

So Thomas ignored Max's warning and made his way into their lodgings.

He could hear the voices the moment he had stepped over the threshold.

"I do not believe that in pointing out gross breaches of decorum I have done anything that requires a lecture. Are you, of all people, going to tell me that of course with age comes perfection?"

"Leaving aside that so pointed barb, I will only say I find fault in your manner of presentation."

"Of course." Darcy's voice was dripping with sarcasm. "Superficiality is your watch word."

Thomas found it difficult to believe Darcy, who Thomas had often thought was very much in awe and thrall of those older than he, particularly his male relations, would speak like that to Lord Ashbourne of all people.

"I find with the trouble of only adding a veneer to oneself that a great many more doors are open, despite what lies beneath."

"Mrs Davis certainly has acquired one."

"Indeed."

Lord Ashbourne's one word response made Thomas pause from his intention to burst into the room to defend his mother.

Darcy sounded almost eager, "You do not mean to tell me you agree with me as to her unsuitability?"

"I mean that Mrs Davis' depths are not displayed. I make no comment positively or negatively."

"She has no fortune, she has no respectability, she..." Darcy broke off.

"You mean, I presume, to ask why is she more important? Otherwise you forget to whom you speak."

"Oh. But you married Lady Ashbourne."

"For all her faults?" drawled Lord Ashbourne, in what sounded like amusement.

"For all yours," retorted Darcy and Lord Ashbourne laughed.
"Annoyance becomes you."

"I am more than annoyed. I am not a petulant child to be reasoned with."

"Really?" But Thomas could see his uncle shaking his head as if to get him back on the pertinent point. "Of course. You think your mother's memory is belittled, you think your father weak, but you will do everything to deny that. You think he wishes that young Thomas Davis was his son and if he was stronger you would not exist."

Thomas could hear the eyebrow raise that accompanied Lord Ashbourne's little speech. "You cannot do anything about any of that. You can accept that your father has behaved inappropriately, that Davis will be a permanent bane of your existence and that your mother is merely a veneer to you. Or you cannot."

Thomas thought that was harsh; it appeared so did Darcy.

"My mother is not a veneer."

"She is to you. Letters to other people, other people's perspectives, apart from what she wrote directly to you perhaps, it is all reflections. And even that letter to you is a woman presenting herself in her best light."

Thomas was determined to listen to this conversation to its, as he rather supposed, bitter end. But he was standing next to the precariously laden stand by the door. It was used by all three of the boys to sling coats, umbrellas and any other number of things. It fell over almost once a week, and Thomas found that in shifting his weight trying to hear better he brushed against it. The stand shed half its load, including Max's opera glasses -- well, Aunt Kitty's -- which fell clattering to the floor.

There was nothing for it but to reveal himself. It had the effect of ceasing all conversation within the room and Darcy even quit it, but not before thanking Lord Ashbourne for his 'enlightening conversation'.

"Whenever anyone thanks one for 'enlightening' them, they invariably mean they disagree, perhaps violently, with everything you have just said, or... " Lord Ashbourne brought himself further forward in his seat, "they really wish to strike you for unpleasant truths."

"Which do you think it is in this case?" asked Thomas.

"Do you not have an opinion?"

Thomas could deny that he had heard the conversation, but he knew that look in his uncle's eye. He thought perhaps Lord Ashbourne had known the moment Thomas was at the door, which would cast an interesting light on what he had just said to Darcy. Or maybe it was just a rather easy guess on his uncle's part. Either way, Thomas would only be denying what they both knew was the truth.

"I think it is difficult to tell."

"Fence sitting becomes uncomfortable after a while."

Thomas flushed. "I do not think not presuming to judge another man's opinion indicative of the fact I have no opinion of my own. I have them."

"And you keep them. Wise."
Thomas saw neither hide nor hair of Darcy after his uncle had made his departure. Although through the window Thomas had witnessed Lord Ashbourne attempting to terrify his older son. It was only an attempt because Max had merely laughed and offered his sire the rest of his cigarillo.

Thomas needed fresh air the next morning and perhaps it was only because he was now sensitive to the fact, but it seemed that from the moment his foot had placed itself outside of his rooms that he met nothing but covert glances and heard nothing but whispers.

Of course, he had told his mother such things were being spoken of universally but that had been an exaggeration. Thomas had not really believed it to be true. He had meant universally amongst those likely to be most affected by any relationship between his mother and Mr Darcy and most affected by not being considered. He had not supposed that either his mother or Mr Darcy, such as they were in their present state, could be so interesting to society in general.

Thomas had meant to warn before they had become interesting. But it seemed now his eyes and ears had been opened that perhaps he was too late.

Of course nothing spoken around him, not even in hushed tones, unless the speaker was lost to all propriety, could be anything against his mother's honour. But the fact she was spoken of at all meant there was that space Thomas knew was being filled elsewhere. In the clubs perhaps his mother's name was surely sullied.

Worse, it seemed everyone knew that there had been an acquaintance many years ago. That was the one thing calculated to practically guarantee that Darcy would cause problems.

If Thomas was true to himself, it was the one thing that held back his support. He was not a romantic; he knew some of why there had been no reconciliation then. Just because he saw no disrespect intended to his own father lurking in the corners where none existed did not mean he was entirely happy.

To remove the rumours either an outward and permanent declaration was needed, or a complete break. Both had their consequences and he sensed from their conversation his mother was unwilling to do either. She rejected one option because her heart told her to and the other because her head told her to.

The walk back to their lodgings was unpleasant, too many thoughts rattling around in his head. His distraction was the reason that he did not see the trunk on the floor and almost fell over it.

"Going somewhere?" said Thomas.

Darcy looked up from the floor and gave him a withering look.

Closer inspection proved that the trunk was The Trunk, its contents spread all over the floor.

Darcy was sitting too close to the fire, thought Thomas as he lowered himself into a nearby armchair. The reason for sitting close to the fire became apparent when Darcy folded up the letter in his hand and tossed it into the fire.

Thomas sat up. "What are you doing?"

He got no response. So Thomas caught the next letter that went flying at the fire. "These are your mother's letters, why are you burning them?"
Darcy looked up, "It has become patently obvious that they mean nothing."

"Not to you, surely?" Thomas could not imagine wanting to part with anything that held so much of a beloved parent in it.

Darcy shrugged. "According to your uncle, they should mean nothing."

"I do not think that is what Lord Ashbourne meant."

"So you were listening." Darcy didn't sound accusatory.

"Of course."

"Of course" mimicked Darcy. "Did no one tell you it was impolite to eavesdrop?"

"Constantly. I never listened."

That did raise a smile out of Darcy. "Well, our betters are not always correct." That was said as if to challenge Thomas to object.

"I will never disagree with that statement."

"Thomas Davis not bowing down to the assessment of his elders? You have spent the better part of the last month at least attempting to ingratiate yourself with my father." Darcy just sounded resigned.

"No. I have spent my time attempting to learn about estate managing."

"With the added benefit of grooming yourself in the best light. Why cannot you be more like Davis, Fitzwilliam?" Darcy had never sounded more sardonic. Thomas had to strain to hear the next part of Darcy's speech, "Not that my copying you would have done me any good."

"Do you really need to present yourself in the best light to your father?" Thomas could understand wanting to; that was a given, he wanted to show his father that he was the best man he could be. But it was never a necessity.

"I think with that statement you show you do not understand either my father, or the society we live in."

Darcy seemed to have given up on burning his letters, instead placing them into piles. He flicked through them, randomly it seemed to Thomas, and lines furrowed into his brow.

"Perhaps." It was true. Thomas felt he did not know Mr Darcy senior at all, and he was constantly out of his depth in relation to everything else. "Why do you not tell me?"

"So that you can talk me out of my opinions?"

"Yes," said Thomas.

"At least you are honest."

Thomas shifted in his seat, "I try to be." And that statement was true. Thomas had been taught well by his father. He knew what it meant to be a gentleman and those traits were not defined by income.

"I might be convinced to acquiesce to your request if you answer me but one question."

Thomas thought rolling his eyes at Darcy's studying too much for complicated words when he could
have just said 'agree' probably would stop the conversation dead in its tracks so he managed to keep his expression schooled in what he hoped was relatively benign interest. "What question?"

"Your father..." Darcy paused and Thomas had a feeling he was not going to like the question. His father, like Darcy's mother, was a sensitive topic since apparently they both were 'second choice' although Thomas did not expect Darcy to recognise that fact. Darcy was too wrapped up in his own world view to imagine someone else might be struggling with similar problems. "...I imagine he played with you and your sisters. My uncle once pretended he was a bear. I assume it was only the once," Darcy paused again, allowing Thomas the time to pore over the idea of Lord Ashbourne as a bear. "Well, I never asked Max if it was a game that he and Oliver played with their father. It was the holidays and Alexander and Isabella were very young." It sounded as though Darcy was trying to excuse his uncle's strange behaviour.

"I do not think my father ever impersonated an animal," replied Thomas slowly. "We used to play games, card games and such like, and he would always lose horribly. I remember thinking he had suddenly improved so dramatically when I was about fifteen because suddenly he could remember the difference between an ace and a jack." Thomas leant back in the armchair. "He used to take me riding over the estate. Lecture me in his study. I do not know, no different from any other father." But of course Thomas could not compare. He had no other father; he could only have the experience of the one.

"I cannot imagine you ever did anything to require a lecture," said Darcy, "or that anyone would tell your Father when you were in a scrape."

Thomas smiled, "Oh, I'd tell him myself. Of course I would be suitably punished and chastened but he would always pull me out of a scrape." Thomas' heart clenched at that feeling when his father had died that he was suddenly on his own. He would have to be the person pulling people out of scrapes. That feeling subsided, only marginally, when he had fallen into the clutches of Max. Max would always pull him out of difficulties with no lecture, and if that failed, his uncle was there to take up the reins.

Darcy turned his face away at Thomas' comment and Thomas did not understand, until he remembered when Max had become ill and Max had thrown off that line that Darcy had not wanted tales taken back to his father as an excuse for Darcy's absence at Lord Ashbourne's arrival. Darcy had had no problem, well no real problem, reporting their problems to Lord Ashbourne. It was expected that Lord Ashbourne would come to his rescue. Thomas had expected it even then, maybe because of his father; Max and Darcy had expected it because of past experience, Thomas assumed. But Darcy had not wanted his father to know. Thomas assumed it was because there was no point inviting a scolding. But perhaps, looking back on it, Darcy had just not though his father would pull him out of a scrape, for all his posturing about 'his father this' and 'his father that'. He hadn't wanted his fear confirmed.

Thomas thought he'd had an epiphany.
The End of Twenty Years

Darcy twisted his signet ring as he waited to be admitted to see the lady of the house. He wasn't nervous to see her; he was just agitated.

It wasn't a complete surprise to be admitted to her bedchamber. The butler had murmured something about her ladyship attending a soiree that evening.

Kitty threw him a look over her shoulder and seemed to sense this wasn't a social call. She dismissed her maid and put down the earrings she seemed to be choosing between. "Darcy, what has happened?"

Darcy pulled the letter out of his coat and handed it to her.

Kitty looked perplexed as she unfolded the letter. The expression on her face turned from puzzlement to shock and then to anger. "That witch! How could she write such a thing?"

Darcy leant against the bedpost. "I cannot conceive of ever writing such a thing down, so I cannot help you."

"How did you get this?" Kitty looked up at him.

"It was in Fitzwilliam's possession."

Kitty's jaw dropped for a moment before she recovered herself. "She cannot have meant him to read it. I did not like Mrs Wilson but she did adore her grandson." She looked back to the letter. "At least she did once he could walk, talk and think. When he was a real little person she could shape into her mould."

"Indeed. That was written when he was still in leading strings."

Kitty folded the letter roughly. "Then it was written when she was still grieving."

"I thought so too but the date is too late," said Darcy, prompting Kitty to reopen the letter.

"I do not think there is a time limit on grief, Darcy."

"Nevertheless, I think it explains a great deal about my son."

"What does Lizzy say?"

Darcy smiled at the idea that Kitty was so sure that Darcy would have spoken to Elizabeth. At least one member of their family was unconditionally accepting.

'I have not spoken to her. She did not know Mrs Wilson and does not know my son as well as you."

"Lizzy is a great student of human nature."

"I have no doubts that her insights would be beneficial, but at the moment I feel she would wish me to resolve this problem without her."

Kitty raised her eyebrows at him. "A disagreement?"

"Yes."
"Are you going to indulge me and tell me what about?"

"No."

Kitty smiled at him. "Lizzy will tell me."

"I am sure she will."

"I wished for you to read the letter because I hoped that you could explain."

"Explain why a woman would write that a defenceless baby should be blamed for the death of her daughter? I cannot understand that. No, perhaps I can. In grief one thinks very strange things, I am sure. Also it is understandable that someone should be to blame for a tragedy. I think I have to believe that Mrs Wilson wrote that in grief and did not wish for her grandson ever to read it."

"She left him other letters, I think perhaps it got mixed up in those."

"Ah yes, Amelia's letters. Did you ever read them, Darcy?"

"No." Darcy regretted that more than anything.

"You trust Mrs Wilson edited them correctly?"

"I did not think there would be anything to edit," said Darcy.

"Foolish."

It was, on reflection, incredibly foolish. He had known Mrs Wilson, after all. But he had also known Amelia. He had not thought that she would write to her mother about everything. He had not thought they had that sort of mother and daughter bond.

She had had other friends to whom to write about marital woes. He would have preferred she revealed their private lives to no one but he supposed he could not begrudge her needing advice. Just who she had begged that advice from.

"I did not think Amelia would write about our lives."

"What else would she write about?" said Kitty with false innocence.

"I meant our private concerns."

Kitty shrugged. "She wished for her mother to take her side."

Darcy knew Kitty's thoughts on Amelia and that her judgements would not be gracious towards that lady.

"Mrs Wilson cannot have meant for any of those letters to go to Fitzwilliam."

Kitty laughed, "Your understanding of women has always been limited, has it not? Of course she wished for those letters to go to the Little One! Her daughter was the wronged woman. If anything, she blamed you for everything that happened to Amelia."

"She could not have meant to hurt my son."

"Casualty of war," said Kitty dismissively. Kitty stood to hand the letter back to him.
"I will never understand it."

Kitty snorted. "You would have made a very bad General."

Darcy couldn't help but give a little smile at that but it didn't help his current situation, "It is not the only thing it seems I would be, or am, very bad at."

"Well if you attacked the problem with the same finesse as you usually do then in this situation I would say it might actually work."

"Finesse?" Darcy was only slightly offended. He knew he often spoke and leapt before thinking.

"Talk to him, Darcy. Do not just ask others to do so on your behalf."

"But I have nothing to say." Darcy winced at how that sounded, and was glad it was Kitty he was speaking to and not Elizabeth. She already had too much evidence of his abysmal skills with his son, she did not need any more.

If he hoped that Kitty would tell him what he should say, and Darcy was not even sure that was what he wanted from his cousin, he was sadly disappointed. She merely rolled her eyes and told him to write a letter.

"I think there have been too many letters, do you not?"

"Perhaps, but I do know it is one skill you excel at."

Darcy cursed himself, but he felt his blood rising into his cheeks. He should have learnt better from being embroiled in a large family -- not directly his own, but his extended one at least -- for the past twenty years, that nothing was private. He understood that Elizabeth would speak to her sisters, but he still felt like he did on realising that Amelia had spoken so openly to her mother. He found, however, he did not feel annoyance towards Elizabeth; her chosen confidants were trustworthy. Her sisters would not use the information to wound or embarrass (or at least not publicly).

Darcy wished his cousin a good night and left her to the rest of her toilette. Closing the door behind him, he heard a clearing of a throat further down the corridor. He turned to see Ash in full evening dress, cocking an eyebrow at him.

"Are you not supposed to climb down the trellis?"

"At my age? It was considered unwise."

"I would challenge you to pistols at dawn, but I find I need my rest..." retorted Ash.

"Best-dressed at noon?" responded Darcy.

It was a relief to descend once more into normalcy, or at least whatever plane it was his cousin existed upon.

"If you insist on choosing a contest in which you can only lose..."

"Did you speak to Fitzwilliam?"

"Yes. I cannot tell how well it went. Thomas Davis could probably give you a better idea."

"You spoke to him in front of Elizabeth's son?" Darcy was surprised. Witnesses did not sound like Ash's modus operandi.
"If lurking in the hallway is in front of, then yes."

Darcy frowned at the underhanded way that seemed uncharacteristic of someone raised by Elizabeth.

"What would you say to him, if Fitzwilliam was your son and you were his father?"

"I am not sure I would have to," was Ash's unhelpful reply.

Thomas waited for Darcy to say something else. Some opening so that Thomas could explain that no father was like another father, that perhaps Mr Darcy senior was distant, but this did not mean he would not fly to his son's rescue. Or perhaps Darcy did not want to be rescued, it did seem rather to fly in the face of Darcy's determined nature. Determined to be an arse, but determined nonetheless. When no opening was forthcoming, Thomas tried to think of ways to phrase it in a tactful manner, but before he could think of one, Darcy suddenly spoke.

"Where is my grandmother's letter?"

Thomas thought this question was more rhetorical than anything else, but Thomas couldn't help but respond, "Which one? There must be at least a hundred there."

Another of the reasons that Thomas had not read every single one of Darcy's letters. It would have taken him at least a week!

"No, these are my mother's letters. My grandmother merely left them to me. I meant the one written by my grandmother."

"I never saw one from your grandmother."

"I don't believe you even read them."

"I said I did." Thomas retorted.

"I know you said you attempt to be honest, but even you are not incapable of lying."

Thomas wanted to respond that he was above such arts, but he wasn't incapable of lying. He knew that. There was a distinct difference between attempting to be honourable and being honourable all the time. One was achievable, the other merely an illusion. Instead he drew the conversation back to the letter. "Why is your grandmother's letter so important?"

"Because it explains everything."

"Enlightening." Thomas knew he sounded a little like Lord Ashbourne, but he could not help it. Why must everyone squirrel their thoughts and meanings away when being open could only lead to rewards and answers? "Perhaps you burnt it."

"I would not have burnt that one," replied Darcy.

"You would burn your mother's letters but not your grandmother's?" Thomas did not understand that. Or perhaps he did if it was the only letter of his grandmother's that he had.

"I would not expect you to understand."
"I would not expect you to make sense!" retorted Thomas.

"And people say you are not brothers. All this witty banter." Max always knew how to make an entrance, thought Thomas, and was then horrified to realise that Darcy thought the same.

"You always know how to make an entrance."

"Thank you, Darcy. I could claim it as my own trait, but I think it is an inherited one. Why does it smell like burnt paper in here?"

Thomas was surprised that Darcy did not disclaim immediately the idea that they were, or could be, brothers. Perhaps he took it for a joke, and knew railing against it would only bring even more scrutiny from his cousin.

Max then took in the scene before him. "Are you burning your letters?"

"He is contemplating it," answered Thomas for him. "and he was just about to explain why."

"No, I wasn't. I was about to explain all your faults in minute detail." What would have had a great amount of feeling behind it if said several months ago now just felt flat to Thomas. As if Darcy had merely given up.

"Is it an open roasting? Can I list your faults, oh little one?" asked Max.

Thomas tried to shake his head at Max that such a joke would not be taken well, but Darcy smiled.

"You might as well before my father attempts it and chooses his new -- or should I say old -- love."

"I reiterate the fact that I have placed before you multiple times: I do not think there is a choice."

Thomas realised the construction that could be placed upon that statement and hurried to add to it, "by that, I mean that there is no choice. No one is making him choose."

"I am," said Darcy.

Thomas expected Max to raise his eyebrow at Darcy's statement, but Max did not appear phased and it seemed to Thomas that this was more to do with Max's understanding of the other boy rather than his mimicking his father's famous blank face.

"And your aim is?" Max asked the question but Thomas wanted to know the answer equally.

"Of little import; I think he already made his choice."

"Over twenty years ago," said Thomas involuntarily. Except that thought brought to mind his mother younger and Mr Darcy younger whispering sweet nothings at each other. His father had often said that Henrietta resembled their mother, or was fair bidding to, when she was younger, when he had first seen her and loved her. Henrietta had always complained loudly at this story and Thomas had never blamed her. The problem was now that when he imagined his mother younger he imagined Henrietta, and if anyone was to look like Mr Darcy when he was younger, it would be his son. The mental image of Henrietta and Darcy whispering sweet nothings to each other was almost as repulsive as the actual article.

"Precisely," replied Darcy, looking curiously at Thomas. Thomas expected this was because his face probably reflected his current repulsion at the mental images invading his mind. "Now if you will excuse me."
When Darcy had left the room, Thomas looked over at Max, who seemed to be contemplating the letters strewn over the floor. Darcy would say that he had left them in perfect order, but like many things in Darcy's life this would be a false vision.

"I do not think joking about any relationship soon to be existing between Darcy and myself is a good idea," said Thomas suddenly.

"You do not expect that your mother and ..."

Thomas interrupted his cousin, "No, I believe quite certainly that my mother and Mr Darcy will be married."

"Good, I did not wish to have to enlighten another unenlightened soul," said Max flippantly.

"I do not think there have been many of them, certainly not Darcy." Thomas had not thought his cousin was blind; he had thought that they thought along the same lines when it came to the younger Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Max shrugged, "Well it was certainly bucking a family trend." At Thomas' blank look, Max continued "Darcys are not known for their realisation. They tend to wade in and find themselves in a quagmire for lack of thought. It seems strange that it should be so since they are all so reserved. But my uncle, the Colonel, said he should not let a Darcy become an officer. They could never stand back and survey the landscape."

"I think Mr Darcy is a great observer of the world," defended Thomas.

"Watching the world and understanding it are two very different things," replied Max. "Otherwise I think Mr Darcy," and Thomas knew he was only using the honorific prefix to differentiate, although now that Thomas thought of it he had not seen Max interact with his father's cousin a great deal, "would have seen this all a great deal earlier."

"He seemed to recognise his feelings for my mother quite quickly." The too quickly merely hung in the air.

"As you said, that had been a thought in the back of his mind for well over twenty years. Considering this current problem has been there almost as long, you would have thought he would have seen it by now."

Thomas thought of some of the details he knew of his mother and her previous relationship with Mr Darcy. It seemed Mr Darcy was the type that needed to be told things directly. Otherwise he just assumed what he was doing was just and right. His previous worry about the idea of his family suddenly becoming reserved flooded back.

Of course there were more of them than there were Darcys, but were Darcys capable of learning? Would Mr Darcy ever lose his dignity for those he loved, like Lord Ashbourne had crawling round the floor with no doubt children clinging to him, or when his father had listened to Thomas telling the village that his father was unable to understand even the simplest game?

Would a family life be able to rub off those sharp corners? Even if Mr Darcy, and Darcy for Thomas included him in his thoughts, wanted those difficulties of character rectified, was it too late?
The End of the Affair

The waiter hovered and Darcy felt obliged to order. It was clear that he was waiting for someone, but it was still more obvious that the private sheltered areas were much sought after and could not be left to the vagaries of a loiterer, particularly an untitled one. Fitzwilliam was fashionably late. Darcy had a moment’s hesitation before ordering for two. It was foolish to be nervous, and even more foolish to be second guessing the venue for such a meeting. It had seemed safe. Public. A place that conferred respect. But on reflection the potential for a scene was drastically heightened in a public area and the choice of Whites could also be seen as disrespectful for the gravity of the situation.

Darcy mentally slapped himself for caring quite this much about his son’s opinion. Then he delivered himself a second slap for *that* thought. It was thoughts like that had brought him into this quagmire. In an attempt to stop thinking, Darcy opened a newspaper and scanned its contents, so he missed the moment Fitzwilliam dropped into the chair opposite him.

“Father.”

Darcy nodded at his son and pushed the port across the table. He waited until Fitzwilliam had taken a sip and used the brief moment to note his son’s countenance. He looked tired but not displeased by his surroundings. Fitzwilliam looked up and noticed Darcy’s attention and a expression of defiance replaced the otherwise inscrutable look upon his son’s face.

It made Darcy decide to confront the situation head on.

“Fitzwilliam, I intend to marry Elizabeth. I love Elizabeth. This is not a negotiable outcome.”

Fitzwilliam put his glass down. “Then you will not let her go a second time.”

“No I will not,” Darcy knew there was a stubbornness to his voice, but he could not bring himself to be ashamed of it.

“It must be your great regret.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to agree; after all, he had thought many times that he should have immediately sought out Elizabeth. That he should not have made assumptions, that he should have proposed better at Hunsford. Surrounding every interaction with Elizabeth was a sense of regret, except the regret that he had ever thought of her. Even now he regretted being quite so open with her in the park, not because what he said wasn’t the truth, but because he could have found a better way to confess.

But he had a sense that his son was trying to trap him into a corner with his regrets and for once in his life Darcy thought maybe he understood why.

“Fitzwilliam, I wonder what my life would have been like if I had not lost Elizabeth. This is natural; surely you can understand that. But it is not the same as the regret you speak of. Amelia brought fulfilment. She brought you.”

“I am glad that you *fulfilled* your duty.”

“You mention duty, not me. Duty is one way to fulfil your life. Love is another. This hatred you bear for everything, for me, is not fulfilling.”

Fitzwilliam gave him a look that clearly asked him where he had read such a homily. Darcy couldn’t
fault him for that, he wasn’t an orator. A writer perhaps, but not an orator. Parental speeches in the past had not been particularly poetic. Or perhaps Fitzwilliam was looking at him such as he was because it was precisely the kind of speech he had come to expect. One that said nothing, but repeated the same word twelve times because Darcy could not think of another one with four syllables in time.

“What I mean is that nothing has to change,” Darcy caught himself in time, of course things would change but it would not change the essentials. “Fundamentally nothing will change. If you are worried about …whatever you are worried about, it will not come to pass.”

“You mean that you will marry Mrs Davis and you and she will not live together?” asked Fitzwilliam.

“I do not think that worries you.”

“I do not believe you have asked me what worries me.”

“No, I have not. But your thoughts were made very clear when you spoke to Elizabeth and me that day. And I found your grandmother’s letter.”

Fitzwilliam shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and Darcy knew he had hit a bullseye. “You found her letter.”

“I did,” confirmed Darcy. “You must know that nothing your grandmother wrote was true.”

Fitzwilliam raised an eyebrow at him.

“Your grandmother may have thought it was true at one point in her life. I cannot pretend to understand her. But no rational thinking creature could think like that.”

“Grandmamma rational? A novel concept.”

“Indeed. What I mean to say and I should say it explicitly… I never thought that you were responsible for your mother’s death. No one whose opinion matters, not me, not your mother, not Georgiana, not Kitty, not Ash, no one else of my family, no one of Amelia’s family thought like that. Even your grandmother who wrote such scurrilous nonsense, you cannot deny she loved you.”

Fitzwilliam shifted uncomfortably opposite Darcy and that was how Darcy knew he was really listening.

“I understand now that perhaps my actions have not reflected my feelings. I think perhaps this is a lesson that for me is the hardest learnt. I began learning it when I was a young man, and I still have not memorised and applied it. I find it very difficult to express… I would not have you think that…” Darcy rather thought he was proving his point.

He knew that he had appeared loving to Elizabeth, Amelia (he hoped at least) and to Georgiana. So why not his son? All he could think of was the fact Fitzwilliam was a son. He was trying to be a gentleman. The protective love shown to a wife or a sister or even, Darcy theorised, a daughter, would be unsuitable for a son. At least that is what Darcy had always believed. His own father had been strict and passed on his strictures in his study where Darcy was required to stand and nod. It was important to create a Darcy man.

Except he had left his son to follow his strictures in pride and conceit, he just had not recognised it as such until this moment.
“I have taken you to see the tenants at the Far Acre, have I not?”

Fitzwilliam looked surprised at the change of subject. “Of course you have.”

“You understand the duty of a gentleman towards his tenants. I have taught you that.”

“Yes,” Fitzwilliam nodded cautiously, now he suspected a trap.

“What is the difference between us? We are in a position of privilege, but that does not mean that the same concerns do not envelop us all. Petty arguments, worry about our loved ones, love. Human emotion is the same.”

“And it is not human nature to prize one thing above another,” was his son’s riposte.

“Perhaps, but comparisons between two very different things is not a comparison at all. I am capable of being discerning.”

“Mrs Davis, I am sure, is a very good sort of woman.”

Darcy attempted not to snort; that was not the opinion Fitzwilliam had previously expressed.

“She may very well be the soul of discretion and respectability. But that does not mean that she will make you a good wife. Or a happy one.”

“I think you should not hide behind such statements.”

“I am not hiding.”

“I know what your true concern is.”

“Strange since you have not asked me what it is.”

“What is stranger is that you have not expressed it. Your behaviour has been nothing more than disgraceful. But all could have been solved by merely discussing the subject with me.” Darcy knew he was treading on thin ice, but the ice needed to break. “I understand that you did not want to appear, “Darcy sought for the word and did not find the perfect one, and so went for the least clumsy, “cowardly in front of me.”

“You misunderstand me then. Did you not teach me the importance of conservation? Of prudence, economy and sense? I merely thought the effort would be wasted.”

If Darcy thought he was chipping away slowly and surely, his son had apparently gone straight for the axe. Darcy found it impossible to look directly at his son. It was as he feared. He had created himself too apart. He was still that man standing aloof and unapproachable, snubbing any approach by those he considered beneath him, at the side of a country assembly. Then he had Bingley and his sisters prompting him, in their very different ways – one attracting, the others repelling – to act more graciously.

But the very behaviour Bingley often saved him from, not that Darcy viewed it as such at the time, was what drove Bingley away and had left Darcy without such a guiding force. The very same behaviour which had meant that his cousin, who might have fulfilled the same role, had been disgusted with him and it was only through the good graces of his wife that that relationship had been rebuilt. Then he had thought Kitty merely silly and uncomprehending of the world around her, that the natural liveliness of a seventeen year old girl becoming a Viscountess had meant she had extended overtures of friendship to anyone in her path. Now he had no doubts that Ash had told her
everything and it had only been Kitty’s natural goodness and desire not to see another family fall apart that had caused her to extend the olive branch time and time again.

No one had really taught him to laugh at his own stupidity, or to even recognise that he was capable of such folly. While Amelia had the intimacy to do so, her character and time had robbed her of the chance to do so. So he had remained uncomprehending of how his actions must appear to others.

He had thought that his attempt to be a model of virtue and expose his son to many influences had merely set himself apart from his son and caused him to split himself, trying to live up to the expectations of many. But it had run deeper than that. Fitzwilliam, Darcy could almost see now, had only ever attempted to live up to the expectation of one person, a person he did not think much cared. If he had not read that letter, it might have merely been a reserve that Darcy knew he shared with many of his circle; with that letter Darcy’s behaviour had taken a more sinister hold.

“At least I have the capacity to injure,” said Fitzwilliam mildly. That did make Darcy look up and he thought he saw a glimmer of triumph in his son’s eyes. It pained Darcy, but it proved that his theory was correct. At this point, any reaction from his father would be a battle won for his son.

“For what it is worth, I apologise. It seems I have hidden my feelings even deeper than I thought.”

It was a worthless statement but at this point in time no words to express his feelings came to mind. Anything else he said was likely to cause more problems. The spectre of Hunsford came to mind. There he had spewed forth some of his most hurtful accusations and it was not until he had meditated upon his thoughts and committed them to paper that his true meaning had been able to be conveyed.

“No, what is worse is the fact I do not think I ever believed in some of the things I said. Particularly to Davis. I said to him that I was sure you would leave Pemberley to him since he was the perfect son.” Darcy opened his mouth to protest, but Fitzwilliam cut him off. “No, I do not think you would ever do that. But because of your idea of duty and name, not because – “ Fitzwilliam couldn’t finish that sentence.

Darcy wanted to pounce on that half finished sentence and demand his son finish it to put into words what they were both thinking, but Fitzwilliam seemed to swiftly turn into another avenue of thought.

“I was surprised to hear at Pemberley you admit that you had once insulted a woman in public. That was not very gentlemanly.”

He wanted to respond that he never claimed to be a model all of the time, but the truth was that he had. When Fitzwilliam had played cricket on the south lawn and hit a ball through one of the windows, terrifying a maid, he had stood before his young son and said ‘I wish you would look to me as a guide for your behaviour’. It had implied that Darcy himself had never had such an accident.

But that was how a father should act, he had thought. His father had acted in such a manner. Even when Fitzwilliam had been sent down for the rest of the term, Darcy had said it was not such a great matter, but he had lectured his son heavily on how he himself had never been sent down. The fact that he almost had never left his lips, that he had relied on the expert manoeuvring of his eldest cousin to manage to hush the whole thing up had never been revealed.

Darcy had always deplored Ash’s fathering techniques but he could not argue that they were unsuccessful. Maximilien, Oliver and Alexander were all gentlemen. They behaved rather too rakishly and wildly for Darcy’s liking, but he was not their father, so it was not his concern and it was unsurprising considering their sire.

He had been horrified when his first year up at Oxford Maximilien had become entangled with a
lady of some dubious virtue. He had been touring estates with Ash at the time and had been with him when the inevitable father-son confrontation had happened in Max’s rooms.

It had seemed at the time that Ash was more concerned with not finding out directly from his son, and his laissez faire approach which seemed to consist of saying *If you must behaviour in this fashion why could you not at least do as I did and…’*

Darcy had thought it lamentable at the time; the idea that his cousin could admit such weakness and set such an example. He did not hold with the idea that mistakes would always be made in one’s youth.

But surely, if anything, it had taught Maximilien that if he truly was in difficulties his father would pull him off point non plus, and be able to understand how he got into difficulties in the first place. Of course Darcy had not seen that; he had seen excusatory behaviour not empathetic.

“No, it was not.” Darcy leant forwards. “I do not claim, I never meant to claim, that I have never… Elizabeth.” Darcy stopped. “I insulted her, her family, made assumptions about her life; I insulted possibly a whole county. I have tried to be the sort of gentleman that I would wish my son to be. I am just not sure I have succeeded.”

“I am sorry that I am not a facsimile. Thank you for the drink.”

Darcy put his head in his hands.

Elizabeth smiled at the retainer as he shuffled away. He had seemed reluctant to allow her to wait in the room for her son to return from wherever he had gone. Elizabeth could have gone to wait in the park, but it was far too cold for that, and the park made her think of a subject upon which she did not wish to think.

Of course, she had thought she might meet the young man who had caused the subject of Darcy to be so painful to her. But she had prayed that she might escape such a meeting.

She was not to be so lucky.

“Mrs Davis.” It was the sort of false politeness that if Elizabeth had not known better, she might have sworn was learnt from Miss Bingley.

“Mr Darcy,” said Elizabeth, equally as politely.

“I am sure you will be relieved to know my father has every intention of marrying you. Your honour will be intact. He told me so just now at Whites just before he told me how disappointed he was that I was not the son he wished to mould.”

Elizabeth blinked. “I beg your pardon.” She felt she must have heard the young man incorrectly.

He opened his mouth to repeat himself but Elizabeth hastily reassured him that this was not necessary. “I did hear what you said, I just needed a moment.”

Sitting down upon the sofa, she almost muttered to herself. “Of course he would think it appropriate for such a conversation to continue at Whites. He feels the middle of Hyde Park is appropriate for
declarations when everyone must have seen me run away! Insufferable man!” But she said it affectionately.

Now it was the younger Mr Darcy’s turn to say, “I beg your pardon.”

Elizabeth did not feel equal to repeating herself but she had a feeling that his statement was equally as rhetorical as hers had been. Indeed it was because he continued speaking.

“It might explain why we are unwelcome in the county of Hertfordshire.”

Elizabeth’s lips twitched. It was certainly true that Darcy had managed to make himself most unwelcome there. It was a true proficient that made her mother detest the sight of a single gentleman with ten thousand pounds a year.

“You do not deny it?”

“I fear your father would be quite run out of town!”

Now Fitzwilliam looked interested, he almost looked eager. “What, pray, did he do?”

If the son was looking to hear that the father had enacted the most grievous crimes he was to be disappointed. Elizabeth smiled, “The worst. He would not dance with any ladies. He insulted them. He would hardly speak unless spoken to. Spent a great deal of his time staring out of windows.”

Elizabeth almost laughed at the thought, “And yet he swears he was in love with me during that time! I cannot understand how I was supposed to know. I do not think anyone has broken that particular code.”

“Oh,” said Fitzwilliam.

Elizabeth had an idea that it was because suddenly the conversation was not about his father, but about her and his father. “I do love him. Your father. I do not agree with him all the time. I shall not agree with him all the time. But he is indeed the best of men. I have been fortunate enough to know, love and respect many of those rare men.”

Fitzwilliam’s hands clenched and Elizabeth reached out to him. She had felt a great deal of pity for him when Mrs Gardiner and others had been comparing him to his father. She had always stressed upon Henry the importance of not making any of their children feel as if they had to live up to being either one of them. Living up to standards was one thing but no two people were identical. Of course it had not stopped Henry teasing Henrietta specifically about looking so much like her mother. “If your idea of your mother has been changed by learning more about your father’s history, it does not follow that the change should be an unwelcome one.”

When he did not take her hand Elizabeth drew back. “I do not intend to be anything but… my presence cannot erase the past.”

“For you perhaps.”

“You think your father…?” Elizabeth was confused.

“We might as well be plain with each other. It becomes more patently clear to me as the days wear on that some recapturing of youth is at the forefront of my father’s mind. I do not doubt that he would prefer it if the last twenty years had not happened. I thought, when my grandmother so helpfully informed me that my mother would not have died if I had not existed, that this was no doubt the reason for the considerable reserve and his need for me to strive for perfection. Except of course if my mother was not the reason for his existence, it can only be that I have merely
disappointed him in every way imaginable. My mother’s letters asked me to love him, to respect him and to look after him. I cannot imagine why she bothered to request the last of me.”

Elizabeth could only think of saying what was on the tip of her tongue. “Because she, like me, could see the truth: he can be completely blind to his own actions and how they affect the world.” Elizabeth paused to allow her voice to have the vehemence that her next sentence deserved, “and no mother would ever think that about her child. No mother. And I cannot believe it of Darcy. Your grandmother, Darcy’s mother I mean… he has never blamed Georgiana, has he?”

Now she would not let him draw away. “I know your father has considerable reserve … “

“He seems to have none with you.”

Elizabeth felt frustrated; would nothing get through to this child? “But I cannot doubt that he loves you.”

Elizabeth meant that his relationship with Georgiana had proved to her that he was a caring man who would make an excellent father. He may have failed fantastically along the way, but like she knew now that her mother loved her and had shown it in her strange ways, she knew Darcy loved his son.

Their relationship had been one of equals; when he had expressed his ardent love for her while at the same time insulting her so irrevocably, she had been able to seize onto his words and bring them down around his own head. A child could not do the same thing. Thomas was loved unconditionally and she had seen him disagree with his father and have it be on the tip of his tongue to say something and be unable to do so. Indeed she had been shocked, but never so proud, of her son when he had explained to her his difficulties in accepting her actions.

This selfish, blind, enraged child in front of her in no way reminded her of his father. Where Darcy controlled his emotions, his son seemed to radiate them. It was even more clear that her decision did not just include Darcy. It was not like when she was twenty and accepting Darcy would mean that she and he would live at Pemberley together and her father would visit more often than he expected.

But it was not an off-putting thought. Elizabeth had always liked a challenge, and she had made so many mistakes with her own family that maybe she could atone. More importantly, she wanted it.
The End of Dinners Alone

Twenty years may have had their effect on Mrs Gardiner, but she was still as elegant as Darcy remembered. The feeling he had felt on seeing Elizabeth’s relatives for the first time at Pemberley had stayed with him. It had been another kick in the stomach to realise once again how wrong he had been.

He knew it had been some years since Mr Gardiner’s death, but he still offered her his sympathies. Indeed, he regretted not knowing Mr Gardiner more than the several days’ acquaintance at Pemberley. Mr Gardiner had not been ashamed of who he was, of what he was; he carried himself with dignity, humility and good humour. By his very being he had challenged Darcy’s ideas about trade and society; he had been someone Darcy could have looked up to.

“Thank you, Mr Darcy,” replied Mrs Gardiner sincerely. Darcy thought she might have continued the conversation by asking if he was there to see Elizabeth. Mrs Gardiner, however, seemed disinclined to be so familiar. Darcy could not tell whether that was because she thought it improper or whether, like her niece, she delighted in the follies of men and wished to hear him confess his reason for visiting her.

Darcy decided to play the game properly and after taking the seat that Mrs Gardiner offered to him inquired after her family and her health, she responded in kind but he thought he could see a smile in her eyes.

“You must enjoy having your niece and her children staying with you.”

“I do!” Mrs Gardiner lit up. “It has been some time since I had children around me, although neither of the girls would like to be known as children, they think themselves quite grown up. Elizabeth is at home, Mr Darcy, I think she would like to see you should I call for her.”

“I would be delighted to see Mrs Davis,” replied Darcy, thankful Mrs Gardiner had in the end decided to be kind.

Elizabeth was dressed in a simple morning dress, one that had seen better days, but Darcy did not think he had seen a woman look so well as Elizabeth did at that moment.

After their greetings, it came as no surprise to anyone in the room that Mrs Gardiner suddenly recollected something that called her away.

“My aunt is not subtle, is she?” teased Elizabeth after the door had closed.

“I thought her subtlety itself,” responded Darcy truthfully.

“Then I shudder to think what you have been exposed to all these years,” laughed Elizabeth. “Fitzwilliam,” she came to clasp his hand, “I am sorry we parted on bad terms.”

“I am not sorry for it,” Darcy replied, “I could not have gone on as I did blind to everything around me.”

“Not blind to everything.”

“Perhaps not everything,” Darcy gave her that. “But in many things I have been, to cause you to doubt me …”
“I should not have been so cruel to you; your pain was real and I can only have added to it…”

Darcy squeezed her hand, “I shall stop this quarrel over our actions and who caused the other the most pain.”

“Very well, but allow me at least to say that neither of us, over our long history, has conducted ourselves irreproachably.”

“I will grant you that, and hope that at least with each other we have learnt civility.”

“More than that, I believe we have openness.”

“But you will allow me to tell you that your reaction to my behaviour towards my son made such an impression on me. I know scarcely what I think of myself in that regard. Your look of reproof, your inability to even look at me, it spoke more than a thousand words could ever do. In that instant, I knew my failings.”

“I hope you have also seen how to resolve them?”

“I confess I have not that power at this present time.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to speak but Darcy held up his hand. He must speak. He must say what followed, for all she might despise him afterwards.

“As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Unfortunately an only son (for many years an only child), I was spoilt by my parents, who, though good themselves (my father, particularly, all that was benevolent and amiable), allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing; to care for none beyond my own family circle; to think meanly of all the rest of the world; to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. When I met you, I found myself questioning myself. You taught me to be humbled. I could not conceive of a refusal, at least not by you as I saw you then. You know how I saw you Elizabeth. I could hope that in the past twenty years you might have forgotten the words I spoke to you. But as I have not forgotten your words to me – that I could not have addressed you in any possible way that would induce you to accept me – I cannot hope you have forgotten mine.”

“I will forget them if that is what you wish.”

“It does not matter, Elizabeth, for I cannot forget them, because if I do I might lose that lesson so ably taught to me.”

“I can, nay I have, forgiven those words.”

“Then that is all I wish, except I must say that your lesson did not stick as it ought. I sought Amelia out and recommended myself to her in the most proper of ways. I made no assumptions about her or myself, and I believe I chose, under the circumstances, quite well. But then it all ceased.”

“You, yourself, had an only son.”

“Indeed and I raised him in an even more ill-conceived fashion. I thought by not spoiling my son that I could avoid the greatest of injuries to his character. But it seems that spoiling, or not spoiling was not the cause of my selfishness or his. My selfishness sprung from too much love badly directed. His has sprung from not enough. That I did not mean to do, please tell me that you do not believe I could be…”
Darcy found he could not finish his sentence. But Elizabeth, it seemed, did not need him to.

“No, I do not believe that for a moment, Fitzwilliam. I have heard you speak of your son and in such loving tones. Although somewhat exasperatedly. I think you guilty of nothing else but not knowing how to express that love. I think perhaps that you over judge Fitzwilliam. I do not think him to care for none but his family circle. I think he cares too much for everyone’s opinion but he hides it; I feel he thinks too little of his own sense and worth.”

“In other words he is far more redeemable than his own father?”

“The young are much more adept at learning new tricks,” responded Elizabeth.

Darcy felt cold all of a sudden, like Elizabeth was trying to tell him that as much as she loved and respected him, that it was not enough.

“Elizabeth… I know that I have so little to recommend myself. An alliance between ourselves would be so unequal, it would have given my former self so much pain! I have my untutored self. I have my disastrous relationship with my son. You would give me change, love, a home, a family – in essence you would give me life.”

Darcy tried to look into Elizabeth’s eyes to see her reaction, but she had her head ducked down and once she had looked up she had composed herself. Except she could not hide the blush that had spread across her face.

“Sir! I am too old for blushes. You cannot see me in such a perfect light. You changed yourself. You realized your faults and attempted to rid yourself of them. You may not have perfected that attempt, but I added to my faults!”

Darcy tried to disagree with her, but Elizabeth would not have it.

“I, who was so harsh on your reaction to the world and your implacable pride in your place in it! I turned my back on my family, on my life, on everything. I decided that I must be the only person hurting after my sister’s disgrace, that I was the only person who saw the truth. I thought Jane made herself into a martyr, that Kitty was grasping for anything and everything, and that Mary buried herself in pronouncements and judgments. Did I once think that the reason I saw such things in my sisters was not because they were behaving that way, but because I was? I exiled myself and rallied in knowing I suffered greatly. I looked for an escape and friends that did not know of my family and its disgrace. I judged everyone around me!”

She took a deep breath and held his hand tighter. “Do you not see, Fitzwilliam, that we are both equally flawed, and that we cannot change the past?”

“All we can do is look to the future,” added Darcy with a smile.

“You see we are in perfect charity with each other.”

“Except you must guide me through these first steps, for I still find myself lost.”

“I think we should think of others; my son reminded me that I have not been thinking of my children as I ought. Indeed as I scolded you for your behaviour I had not been behaving much better. My daughters hardly know you, sir…”

“I cannot think an extended acquaintance would improve me …”

“It has improved you greatly in mine,” Elizabeth teased him.
“Very well, I bow to your greater knowledge.”

“I think a quiet family dinner, here, would be a good first step.”

“I am yours to command.”

“That is grossly unfair, Mr Darcy, for now to be equal I must place myself at your command and I am uncommonly fond of commanding myself.”

Darcy laughed and kissed her hand.

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He had expected an official invitation; a summons the next day was surprising. So surprising that he had not realised that this was the family dinner that Elizabeth spoke of until he stood in the hallway. Darcy reached out to catch her by the elbow, and stopped her from following her aunt up the stairs.

“Elizabeth, I had not realised that ... “

“It is a family dinner, Fitzwilliam, it is nothing formal.” She laughed at what Darcy supposed must be the hunted expression on his face. “They will not eat you alive; well, Emily will not at least.”

“I meant that if this is a family dinner, for all its informality, then we – no I – should have thought to invite Fitzwilliam. I cannot conceive of him accepting such an invitation but he is part of,” Darcy knew what he was about to say was the truth but it could not be unsaid, “our family.”

Elizabeth reached up to cup his chin. “Indeed he is, and you should not worry. I have already planned an assault on that front.”

It was not a blinding epiphany, he had known for some time, but this is why he loved her. Moments like this when she thought as he did but had done so before he had.

“I cannot believe he accepted.” That was the real surprise, not that Elizabeth had thought of him.

Elizabeth ducked her head, “I may have engaged in some subterfuge.”

Darcy did not like the sound of that. Elizabeth, for all her love and affection for him, and by extension all that surrounded him, did not know Fitzwilliam. Darcy knew his stubbornness had been carried on tenfold in his son.

Except Fitzwilliam did come, although it was apparent he had not realised that dinner or his father would be involved in his evening plans. Davis and Fitzwilliam appeared to have come directly from Jacksons. It was evident that they had been boxing, not fencing, and Fitzwilliam seemed deeply embarrassed to be seen in such deshabille.

“Oh, Thomas, Fitzwilliam, you must stay for dinner,” If he hadn’t known better Darcy would have sworn Elizabeth was utterly surprised to see them.

Davis rapidly agreed, and Darcy thought he was rather the weak link in this charade, but his son was distracted and did not notice his friend’s rather poor acting.

“I would be delighted …ma’am…but I could not sit down in ... “
“Nonsense! It is just an informal dinner,” Elizabeth shepherded both boys into the room and with one hand waved Davis away from the decanter and with the other handed Fitzwilliam a glass.

“Mother!” Davis seemed to take this favouring of Fitzwilliam amiss.

“Well can you blame me, Thomas? I still remember that time your father had to fish you out of the pond. I thought you might drown.”

“I was fifteen!” retorted Davis.

“Indeed! Far too young to be carousing, and I have little proof that you can now handle your port.”

Davis flushed and ignored his sisters’ giggling.

“Well can you blame me, Thomas? I still remember that time your father had to fish you out of the pond. I thought you might drown.”

“I was fifteen!” retorted Davis.

“Indeed! Far too young to be carousing, and I have little proof that you can now handle your port.”

Davis flushed and ignored his sisters’ giggling.

“Indeed ma’am, when I first met your son…”

Darcy stiffened because he caught the look on Davis’s face; this would not be a tale that should be told to a mother.

“…it was much the same. Except there was no pond, just the gutter.”

As Davis relaxed so did Darcy. It was most unlike Fitzwilliam, particularly in his current frame of mind, to not use every weapon in his arsenal.

“See, Thomas, and you ask me why I cannot bear to see you imbibe. You might not have your father or such good friends to rescue you next time.”

As Davis tried to defend himself, Darcy saw Fitzwilliam being drawn into conversation with the eldest Miss Davis.

“Aunt Gardiner, well really my Great-Aunt Gardiner but that is a mouthful, could play, and we have enough couples to dance. Your father and my mother, you and I, and then Thomas could have Emily.”

Darcy expected a reaction at Miss Davis’ easily coupling of himself and Elizabeth but Fitzwilliam seemed more shocked at the idea that he would be expected to dance.

“What about Jeffy? I am sure he would be most jealous,” interjected Davis, who had extricated himself from his mother’s strictures about public drunkenness.

“Do not speak to me of Mr Jefferson.”

“I thought he was ever your close friend?”

“Don’t be so vulgar, Tom!”

“Has he done something?” Suddenly Davis was all brotherly concern.

“If you call insulting me something,” sniffed Miss Davis.

“He insulted you? I cannot imagine Jeffy insulting anyone,” Davis looked bemused. Fitzwilliam looked lost. Although he had the experiences of his cousins and of Ash’s children, Fitzwilliam had no direct experience of sibling relationships.

However, it appeared he had misjudged his son’s confusion. “Who is Jeffy?”
“Mr Jefferson,” sighed Miss Davis.

“Mr Hildebrand Jefferson,” added Miss Emily, as though the first name said it all.

“He insulted my book,” revealed Miss Davis and she produced the offending item. “Mr Darcy, do you not think it is an excellent read?”

It amused him to hear his son being called Mr Darcy. Fitzwilliam looked as if the last place he wanted to be in the world was sitting on a sofa in Mrs Gardiner’s drawing room surrounded by Davises but he had made no move to escape as yet.

“Paul Clifford,” read Fitzwilliam. “I do not believe I have ever read it.” This was said tightly.

“Oh you must. The highwayman is the hero, and it is ever so adventurous!”

“Paul Clifford,” read Fitzwilliam. “I do not believe I have ever read it.” This was said tightly.

“No wonder you are on the outs with dear Jeffy,” said Davis, “He is not at all exciting; I do not think he even knows what a blunderbuss is!”

Fitzwilliam laughed at that, which made Darcy aware of the fact that while this ‘Jeffy’ was a complete unknown to him, he was not to the younger set, although his son apparently did not know him in such familiar terms. That did not surprise him; his son’s manners rarely allowed him to use the affectionate if perplexing terms oft given to young men by their bosom pals.

“But I would think Mr Jefferson particularly interested in the vulgar vice and fashionable vice,” said Miss Emily, who then blushed when she realised what she might have implied. “I mean in the sense that all vice is vice. Is it not, Mama?”

Elizabeth smiled, “Indeed it is, but now I am intrigued as to what my daughters are reading. Is it at all acceptable? Have you read this book, Mr Darcy?”

Darcy cleared his throat, not at all expecting to be called upon. “No, I find I do not recognise it.”

“I thought a well stocked library and the improvement of the mind by extensive reading a particular passion of yours?”

Darcy still found himself the focus of the attention of every person in the room but his son answered Elizabeth’s question.

“But this is a novel, ma’am. I do not believe my father ever thought great notions to be found between the pages of a novel.”

“Then your father is much to be pitied and I find I cannot laugh at such a fault, for true imagination and wit lie between the pages of a novel. But since so many of us are without knowledge of this particular novel, maybe you will consent to read some out loud to us while we wait for dinner? Aunt, did you not say it may be a little while?”

Mrs Gardiner supported Elizabeth’s statement, and it seemed that unless Fitzwilliam wished to be utterly rude that he had no escape. Of course, Darcy had seen that his son was capable of the rudeness required but something, perhaps the attention being sent his way and the ease and deftness in the way Elizabeth handled him, or maybe it was even their conversation at Whites, restrained Fitzwilliam.

“It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the house-tops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled
against the darkness.”

“Can flames struggle?”

“Shush, Thomas. Mr Darcy is speaking!”

Although it seemed to Darcy’s eye that Fitzwilliam agreed with Davis’ assessment of the opening of the text, the reading continued punctuated with Davis’ comments, Miss Davis and Miss Emily’s consternation at such interruptions and Elizabeth’s strong desire that her children should let her hear what Fitzwilliam was saying. Darcy felt a sense of warmth spread over him which had nothing to do with the fact that Mrs Gardiner kept a good fire.
Darcy had certainly tasted better meals, but he could not think of one he had consumed in more convivial settings. He found himself unable to contribute much to the conversation, but he hardly had to.

Miss Davis and her sister amply filled any silence into which the table descended with their views on books, London, and childhood tales. Davis equally contributed and Elizabeth was content merely to comment, but she earned Darcy’s smiles when she made the effort to draw Fitzwilliam into the conversation.

His son had never been loquacious, and it was not to be supposed that one evening surrounded by garrulous companions would change that, but he answered Elizabeth’s questions and Darcy was satisfied.

Once or twice Darcy thought he saw Davis examining him, but he could not think why the younger boy would do so. Of course he might be protective of his mother but Darcy thought that Thomas Davis was, if not precisely happy, approving of his relationship with Elizabeth.

The informality of the dinner meant that when the ladies stood up to retire to the drawing room, Elizabeth invited the gentlemen to join them immediately. Thomas took up his mother’s offer, and it seemed that Fitzwilliam would be steered in that direction since Miss Davis was talking to him about a morning ball that needed more male partners. Darcy shook his head at Elizabeth; he would join them in a moment, but he needed a short time to recover from the jocularity. He needed to think. It was not often that Darcy found himself in a situation where he was so cut off from his own thoughts, particularly not situations where the reason was a cacophony of young persons.

The drawing room had a small enclave where Darcy could open the window to enjoy a cigarillo. He rarely did indulge, though he found it far less messy than snuff, but he found he needed its calming presence. It seemed polite to waft the smoke out of the room; after all, the home was no longer a masculine home and Mrs Gardiner would be unused to the smells left behind by a man.

Thus he rather felt like a guilty schoolboy when his son cleared his throat behind him and Darcy tried not to look as though he was hiding behind the curtains blowing smoke out the window.

“I am sure my departure will cause no comment, but I felt it polite to inform you of it.”

“It would be politer still to inform Elizabeth of it,” remarked Darcy. Fitzwilliam’s lips narrowed to the point of disappearing. “And I am sure the ladies are expecting you to continue with your reading.”

“We would not wish to disappoint the ladies,” Fitzwilliam was sarcasm itself. “Though I think you would be an acceptable substitution.”

“Fitzwilliam…” Darcy stubbed out the cigarillo. “Cannot you admit that your evening has not been an unwelcome one?”

“Being dragged to a dinner against my will, set upon by young ladies who are so variable as to be offensive, and forced to read drivel. Yes, it as certainly been an extraordinary evening.”

Darcy did not know how to answer that; and he felt extremely awkward when, looking past Fitzwilliam’s shoulder, he realised Elizabeth had entered the room, no doubt to call them both to the drawing room.
“But it has highwaymen, Mr Darcy. Surely you can’t conceive of anything more exciting?”

Now it was Fitzwilliam’s turn to be flustered but Elizabeth laughed. “Have a safe journey home.”

Fitzwilliam bowed stiffly and left the room.

“You could not have made him stay, Fitzwilliam,” said Elizabeth lightly. “Do you know what I would have said to someone who asked me about my feelings for you after I had left Lambton? That it had come on so gradually that I could hardly point to where it had begun. Small steps, Fitzwilliam, small steps.”

“I have spoken to him, Elizabeth, but I do not think he heard a word I said. Your sister has suggested a letter; she seems to think it a skill of mine. I do not know where she came by such an idea.”

Elizabeth smiled, “Perhaps because it is the truth? I think that an excellent idea, if you can find the words.”

“That might be the problem.”

Being in a rare passion and the night stretching out before him might have been the crucial ingredients in writing the letter that so changed Elizabeth’s opinion of him, but they did not seem to be working in this case.

He had also taken an early leave from Mrs Gardiner’s and for the past three hours had been staring at a blank piece of paper. His quill had been mended several times and he had made sure his ink was acceptable, but nothing would come.

It was ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous.

How did he even start such a letter? ‘Son’, ‘Fitzwilliam’…

Darcy sat in his chair in his shirttails, having stripped off his jacket in an attempt to revitalise his thoughts, and listened to his silent house.

Except he heard footsteps; Darcy had sent the servants to bed. Well they had hardly needed sending; there was little for them to do with their master fed elsewhere and readying himself for bed. His valet had offered to stay up, but Darcy had dismissed him; he hardly needed help undressing and if he did he did not know when that might be.

If the current state of the letter was anything to go by then Darcy might never sleep again.

Darcy opened his bedroom door and found his son.

“I would have thought you not yet returned from Gracechurch street, if you intended to return,” Fitzwilliam spoke mildly but Darcy felt the sting.

“Come in, Fitzwilliam.” It was not a request.

His son stood stiffly by the fire that still burnt in the hearth.

“I am making an attempt to write a letter.” It was an inane a beginning as anyone could hope for but
it was the beginning. “But since my recipient is standing in front of me, perhaps I do not have to commit it to paper.”

“I go back to Oxford shortly; you do not have to banish me on paper.”

“That is not what I wished to write to you about. If you could remain silent for one moment and listen.”

“Very well.”

“I think you should read the letter that your mother left for me before her death. It may mean very little to you, if you consider it to have been a planned and staged final communication, unlike the letters your grandmother left you. But I think that she would have liked you to have read it. It was supposed to be a letter to me, but it seems on reflection so wholly devoted to your happiness, and mine.

“I cannot expect you to understand, but I loved your mother. It is true that if Elizabeth had accepted me when I proposed, or later if we had been thrown back into each other’s company properly, that I should not have married Amelia. But if I had not met Elizabeth I would not have loved and respected your mother. I was utterly convinced of my own worth, and that anyone connected to me must be valued only by their connection to myself. I could not have offered anything to any woman if I had come to them with those as my accepted wisdoms. A woman – indeed, a man as well – is entitled to respect and appreciation based on their own merits. A marriage is about the meeting of minds and feelings. Any marriage I contracted before I met Elizabeth would have fundamentally been unequal because I would have only seen the benefits granted to the young lady by her connexion to me; I would not have seen what blessings she could have brought me.

“I was humbled by the fact that Elizabeth did not care for my behaviour or my person. That to her I was not a gentleman. My selfish distain for the feelings of others repulsed her.”

Darcy took a breath and leant back against his desk, his hands flexing against the wood.

“But Elizabeth was not my wife. Amelia was. She did not much care for my position when I met her. I know now that some of her letters from a difficult period in our lives have been read by you, but I would have you understand. Amelia was hurt by my having a previous interest, and I was hurt by her dismissal of that interest. But we understood each other. We loved each other. I think perhaps we were too similar to do much good with rounding each other’s sharp corners, but that does not hold that our marriage would not have lasted with more affection than others. She wished for you, more than anything… if anything, perhaps I would have grown jealous of your relationship with her. She would have spoiled you, and been far freer with her emotions. I have not that ability. I knew I could not recommend myself to strangers, but I was unaware that I could not even do so to my own son. But I realise that while the symptoms are different the cause is the same.”

It was true. Darcy was unwilling to perform to strangers because he had no wish to let down his guard and invite people into his private sanctums. If he admitted it to himself it was because he always thought that they would disappoint him, or that he would disappoint them. It was the same with his son; although he had never thought Fitzwilliam would disappoint him, just that if his guard was dropped his son would stop his hero worship.

“I find myself guilty of the sin of pride. I once said that where there is real superiority of mind, pride would be always under good regulation. I hope that you can see the flaw in my logic.”

Darcy paused to see if his son would answer his question.
“I am sure my professors would be most disappointed if I could not,” was his son’s response.

“I am sure that they would be, but can you see it?”

“I was not aware this was an examination. What is the consequence of failing?”

“Reassuring your father that he is not the only man in existence who lives a flawed life?”

Fitzwilliam snorted, “Then I am sorry to disappoint you. I expect your logical fallacy is in your premise: circulus in probando. or perhaps petitio principii. Either way there is an element of circular reasoning, and evidence of the proposition being in your proof. Your statement relies on one being able to identify a real superiority of mind and not just any mind, but one’s own. Except to assume that you have a real superiority of mind must be evident of pride because there is no higher opinion of oneself than to see one’s mind as better than the majority. Thus if superiority of mind is the regulator of pride then it is no regulator at all.”

“Oxford has had some uses then,” replied Darcy with a snort. If someone had said that to him when he had been at Cambridge then his life would have been very different. “So we have identified my cardinal sin. Do you begin to understand?”

“Not at all.”

“I was afraid of that. My pride was what stopped me behaving as I ought to, in all respects of my life. I thought I had beaten it, but I fear I have not. I did not wish for you to see me as anything but the best gentleman, the best master, the best fencer … and so forth. What I forgot to put on that list, because I thought the summation of those parts equalled the whole, was the best father. I could not let you see my weaknesses. The end result is that I have appeared unloving and uncharitable.”

“I always wished for you to see me in my best light,” was Fitzwilliam’s quiet response, “Even if it was not as you wished, I could not be … “

“This is my error not yours, Fitzwilliam. I never wished to imply that I wished for a facsimile as a son. That would be the height of hubris, and I am not quite at that lofty place. I know I have faults and that you could be a far better man than I.”

Darcy let that hang in the air for a moment before continuing. “Indeed I am proud of you. You certainly have the courage of your convictions.”

“I do not think it was courage; it was motivated by fear.”

“Nevertheless, while I cannot commend your sentiments, you will not stand idly by.”

Fitzwilliam had his shoulders hunched and he kicked at the embers in the hearth pushing them back into the fire.

“I cannot help but think that I have managed to shackle not only myself but you as well, Fitzwilliam. I know it is easy to rectify, at least for those in our station: L'homme est libre au moment qu'il veut l'être but I find it more difficult than that.”

“Man is free the moment he wishes to be?” Fitzwilliam was surprised.

“You think I should have forgotten my school boy French?” It was true if Darcy was asked to carry on a conversation in the language he might be quite stilted but he could still remember how to quote.

“I am not surprised by that: I did not think Voltaire would be acceptable to you.”
“I did not think my son should enjoy such writers as Keats and Byron. I thought you a traditionalist.”

“Even a conservative being can see beauty where it exists… even when it is penned by a revolutionary.”

“Indeed, and what beauty has to say is not unimportant.” Darcy paused. “We have never spoken of poetry before, I believe.”

“I did not think you had much to say. I did not think that you appreciated novels either.”

That of course was Darcy’s fault. The idea of overtly swaying his son’s opinions (except of course to correct faults of impression, such as in reading an edited version of an original) by displaying his own feelings towards poets and books had repulsed Darcy. He knew the joy in opening a book, be it poetry, a work of prose fiction or a history and having one’s own opinions. Georgiana’s opinions had grown too close to his own as she only read those books that Darcy enjoyed and it had made him uncomfortable, particularly after Elizabeth. He had sworn not to influence his son in the same way, but he had not had the foresight to see that discussion after the reading could be beneficial.

It would have allowed a bond to grow between father and son and allowed Darcy intelligent conversation, of which he had felt so deprived within his household after the death of Amelia.

His cousins were not unintelligent and he had had many a conversation, nay argument, with them over the years but it was impossible to have too few sparring partners in that regard.

“I may be staid in my taste,” warned Darcy.

“I cannot see that your tastes would be any different than what we are taught at Oxford.”

“Should you like to discover it?”

There was a shrug, but Darcy saw the interest that lay beneath it.

“You know that I am to go back up to Oxford soon.”

Elizabeth looked fondly at her son; she did not wish him to go, but she must part with him she knew. She was glad he had been here with her during this time.

“Is this a request for an advance on your allowance so you may kick up a proper dust?”

“Mama! Be serious.”

Elizabeth schooled her expression into one she hoped disguised her amusement.

“I do not like the idea of leaving you unprotected in London.” Thomas clearly expected her to argue this point, so he paused dramatically, and when she made no comment, he looked at her so confusedly that Elizabeth had some difficulty in not laughing. “But I think we both know that you are not unprotected.”

“Indeed.”

“And I must thank you for understanding my reservations.”
“Of course, my darling boy,” said Elizabeth stretching out her hand, “I should always hope that you could express your reservations to me. That anyone could.”

“I still wonder if…”

“Yes?”

“Well, Mr Darcy did not seem particularly lively at dinner.”

“I do not think it is his way,” replied Elizabeth. She had noted that and wondered at it. He could be all openness with her, and even occasionally tease her, but he pokered up in the company of others. It could have been his son’s presence that constrained him at dinner, or the presence of her children. An informal meal which was commonplace to her and her children could be only foreign to him. “But he will learn, and liveliness is not the only virtue, Thomas.”

“But as I would feel uncomfortable at a table, or in a household, surrounded by those who were reserved, so must he feel uncomfortable in a household where the reverse is true.”

Elizabeth could only own to the truth of her son’s statement. But she did not hold that this would be the case. The more she knew of Darcy, the more she saw his carefully constructed walls of defence. The drawbridge was lowered, in very different ways, for some and it could only be a matter of time before it was lowered in the presence of her children.

Henry had never been as lively as either herself or her children and they had loved and respected him. Darcy was not the same as Henry but she thought that they could learn to understand his character and appreciate it as much as she did, even if he was not one to tell jokes.

“I do not mean that I think this should prevent any…” Thomas seemed to find it difficult to continue, out of embarrassment Elizabeth suspected, but her son conquered it. “alliance.”

“You make me sound like a state. What you mean is marriage, Thomas.”

Thomas smiled. “A marriage then.”

“You know I love you and your sisters so very deeply, and that I loved your father.”

Now he really was embarrassed. “Yes, Mama.”

“Good, I should not wish for you to forget that.”

“I shall not. I have had no reason to doubt you.”

“Really? I should have thought I could think of many.”

“I have forgotten them.”

Elizabeth kissed her son and hugged him to her, ignoring his muffled “Mother!”

This motherly scene was broken up by the announcement of Mr Darcy.

Elizabeth released Thomas, and watched as her son turned red when he realised it was the son, not the father who had walked in upon this touching scene. His fleeing not long after was thus unsurprising.

“Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth curtseyed to him.
He looked as if he had spent the whole night awake.

“I have come to tell you that I do not agree, but I shall not cause any more trouble.”

“That is very welcome indeed, but you do not look as though you are untroubled.”

He looked confused for a moment until Elizabeth pointed out his unkempt state.

“I spent most of the night speaking with my father and I do not believe I slept, indeed I cannot do so now.”

“I am glad that you have spoken to Fitzwilliam. At least I would be glad if I could be assured that the proper subjects were brokered.” It was an imposition but Elizabeth could not assume that they had spent the night discussing the rift that lay between them.

“Shelley was certainly discussed,” he paused, “Percy Bysshe Shelley, not Frankenstein.”

“I had thought as much, although discussing Frankenstein would explain the lack of sleep. Did your father tell you the story about his reading that book when you were an infant and quite unwell?”

A shake of the head was his mute answer.

“Oh, well, he did not wish to sleep while you were so unwell, and of course picked up a novel to while away the time and he said he could not have picked a book more designed to keep him awake.”

“He wished to stay awake while I was ill?”

“Of course. He is a father.” Elizabeth held out her hand to him, “And I am a mother. I am not your mother of course, but that does not mean that we cannot be friends?”

Elizabeth waited for his response.
The End of Fitzwilliam

Although the girls heartily complained, Elizabeth drew down the sash of the window and let the air swirl into the carriage. Proper fresh air was perfection itself after their time in London.

She could barely contain her excitement at the idea of visiting the Lake District. It was perhaps undignified for a woman of her advanced years (Henrietta’s sniffs certainly showed that she thought so) but Elizabeth could not bring herself to care. All those years ago she had been disappointed by the fact her uncle could not be spared from his business for that length of time. Of course if he had been she would have very likely never visited Pemberley, never fully changed her opinion of Darcy, and well… Elizabeth turned her mind from such thoughts.

Then when she had married, Henry could barely be spared at all from his estate and the village, and when he could Elizabeth preferred to visit with family (his family mainly, and Jane). So the Lake District had remained unknown to Elizabeth except through poetry.

The boys had returned to Oxford, and Elizabeth had been sad to see them go. Thomas had been affectionate in his parting and young Darcy had been gruff. Elizabeth may have overstepped the terms of their truce by not only examining her son’s trunk for proper warm clothing but also his; that was perhaps stepping into the bounds of motherhood.

Young Darcy had not entirely accepted Elizabeth’s overtures of friendship but he had been uncommonly polite and civil after she had offered her hand of friendship to him. As far as Elizabeth was concerned, he had accepted her offer, just not in words.

What she was embarking on at the present time was perhaps a little daring, but she was a widow, and not a young widow at that, and visiting the Lake District with her children with a male escort …there was nothing inherently scandalous about that. Except that the male escort was only tangentially family, although Elizabeth knew that those circles that cared were expecting an engagement notice any day now.

Darcy was riding along side the carriage. Only particularly inclement weather drove him into the carriage. She did not blame him, he was not one to be cribbed cabined and confined, and entertaining Henrietta and Emily would be beyond him. It was certainly beyond Elizabeth at times.

“Mama, are we not there yet?” Emily had tossed aside her book, a sure sign that she was growing fatigued of the journey.

Elizabeth had not been paying attention to the milestones as much as she had been admiring the view, so she had no idea where they might be. After she waved to attract Darcy’s attention, he drew his horse closer to the carriage.

“Emily would like to know when we shall arrive.”

“It cannot be more than an hour, Elizabeth. Unless the road deteriorates.”

“An hour!” complained, Henrietta giving Darcy a look that seemed to blame him entirely for the fact they still had such a way to go.

A week ago, Elizabeth might have intervened, sheltering Darcy from having to respond, but he would have to learn, and she would have to trust that he was capable of doing so. Not only would Darcy have to adjust but Henrietta and Emily also.
She had heeded Thomas’s advice and worries about whether Darcy could really ever be comfortable around the girls, and them around him. But Thomas had forgotten one crucial thing: Darcy was not to be their father; he could never replace Henry.

“I apologise, Miss Davis, for the slowness of my carriage.” It was hard to tell whether he was teasing or serious. Elizabeth rather thought the several days journey on horseback was tiring him. He would not admit it, men rarely did, but Elizabeth thought she could see it in his eyes.

Henrietta rolled her eyes, throwing herself back into the cushions dramatically, and Elizabeth sighed. The holiday she so longed for and the girls had been excited for until of course the reality of the journey, may not be the success she had wanted. Taking her little family away from London to see rocks and mountains, for which she had a love that was unbounded, seemed to be an ideal way of slowly inching their way forward to being a family.

Darcy had employed agents to find them a charming cottage, and when they had finally arrived Elizabeth’s breath had been taken away upon seeing it. The housekeeper was entirely capable, laying out baths and a good spread of food and their luggage had arrived before them and was already unpacked. Elizabeth felt her spirits soar.

They plummeted to earth after dinner, for Henrietta and Emily clung to her most uncharacteristically. She felt their foreheads and they were flushed. It did not seem to Elizabeth that they were particularly unwell, just in the first throws of illness that could descend into a proper illness or with judicious treatment be easily remedied.

She had just settled them into their bed, and listened to them moan about their aches and pains, which seemed to have devolved into a competition, another sure sign that it was not particularly serious, just an unwelcome intrusion into the holiday, when Darcy’s manservant stopped her in the hall.

“I am sorry to intrude, ma’am, but Mr Darcy would like to see you.”

“Yes, is he in the parlour?”

“No, ma’am, he is in his chamber.”

Elizabeth had a feeling she was not going to like what she found in his chamber. There was no possible way that Darcy would send his servant to arrange an assignation. Indeed he had been somewhat horrified at her teasing that they were widow and widower, and society would not talk a great deal if they did not get married.

They had spoken of marriage and it seemed the hurdles to their marriage were external. Darcy did not wish to marry until he was sure that his son was accepting, and Elizabeth did not wish to marry until she was sure they could all be a family. So of course Elizabeth had lightened the mood with the idea that these should be no bar to their union. It had taken Darcy a few moments to realise what she was suggesting, and begged her to relieve his suffering and tell him that she was in jest. Of course she was; Elizabeth had self control and would much rather be married. But she was practical, their coming to the Lake District was daring even with the girls.

Kitty had raised her eyebrows when the plan had been put forward, and had echoed the number of bedrooms in the various options offered to Elizabeth by Darcy’s agents. Darcy had not noticed the tone in Kitty’s voice but Elizabeth and her husband had. Elizabeth had scolded her sister later.

“But you cannot blame me, Elizabeth. You are a handsome woman; he is a handsome man.”

“Propriety, Kitty!”
“Hang propriety!” Kitty had then smiled. “But what I should like above all things is for you to have news of the best kind when you return. I should not be surprised if Darcy was planning something.”

“It may not be romantic; this is not the best time to visit the Lake District.”

“It will be far more romantic than being in an old morning dress, which the youngest Master Muffet had just thrown up on, in a nursery,” Kitty pouted.

“I thought you said Ash proposed in Hyde Park amongst the backdrop of flowers?” She may not have paid a great deal of attention at the time, but she was quite sure that was what Kitty had said at Longbourn.

“I lied, Lizzy. I lied.”

Elizabeth had not been able to contain her laughter at that point.

Pushing the door open to Darcy’s chamber, it was as she feared. He looked unwell. All that riding in the rain at his age was likely to do that to a man.

“Elizabeth, I fear that I find myself …“

He was trying to sound dignified. The ultimate sign of a male in distress.

“Shall I make up a mustard plaster?”

Now he looked resigned. “Since we have reformed our acquaintance, I have felt twenty years younger; now I feel as though I have aged overnight.”

“One is only as old as one feels certainly, but …” Elizabeth let her sentence trail discreetly off.

“I am well served for my foolishness.”

“You are not foolish, Fitzwilliam, merely headstrong.”

“If you would be so kind as to arrange some poultices, I am sure that I shall be well enough to accompany you and the girls on your proposed tour tomorrow.”

It was naturally the case that as three of the party had succumbed to aches and pains that the weather had started to look as if it was turning.

Elizabeth smiled at Darcy’s hope for feeling better in the morning, but she knew it was a forlorn hope. The girls were feeling far better in the morning, but not well enough to accompany her on her tour and Darcy was still confined to his bed.

Darcy was not a patient patient. He was not Jane with her calm serenity. He reminded her somewhat of her children. It was not that he complained or moaned. Elizabeth would have found herself incredibly disconcerted if Darcy had moaned and complained. It was that he was convinced he was well enough to get out of bed when he so clearly was not.

It became patently obvious that one effect of having no wife (or indeed of only having a son) was that nothing Elizabeth could say would convince Darcy that he could not sit up in the parlour. It had only been her quick thinking in asking the maid who was serving them how arduous a tour around the countryside that day would be, that prevented Darcy from entering the carriage he had impetuously called around.

He and the girls were happily playing cards as breakfast plates piled up around them, and Elizabeth
was happy to watch, but her eyes kept being drawn to the window and the beautiful weather outside.

It was the sunshine that drew her outside. The carriage had not yet been sent back to the stable, and she wondered why, but she noticed the sound of rumbling carriage wheels and realised they must be waiting until this particular vehicle passed by.

Except it did not pass by; it slowed itself, and Elizabeth smiled. She had not pressed Thomas (or the younger Darcy) to visit them from Oxford, indeed she had focused very hard on how important it was for her son to catch up on his studies and to stay out of any more scrapes. But she knew that her desire to have her entire family with her had bled through onto the page.

Except Thomas did not step forth out of the carriage, the younger Darcy did; it was a slight shock that her son did not follow him and it caused Elizabeth some confusion.

She had still not formed a distinct idea of what to call her future step-son. Fitzwilliam was out of the question if she was to call her husband that; so was Darcy in a sense because Darcy would always be Darcy. Mr Darcy was slightly ridiculous and far too formal for their relationship, however strained. Elizabeth realised her confusion must have shown on her face, because he grimaced. “I am sorry that I have disappointed you. But Davis has not come, he had lectures. He has formed some notion of continuing up in a couple of days but I should not pin my hopes on his abilities.”

If one had asked her Elizabeth would have to say out of her son and Darcy’s she would have picked hers to be better able to navigate the pitfalls of travelling across the country, but that she would keep to herself. Instead she sidestepped the name issue entirely and reached out her hands.

“Oh course I am not disappointed. I did not think you should wish to travel to see us.” Elizabeth was a fan of plain speaking, and she saw by his reaction that she was correct, but something else was lurking underneath. “Unless it is not us you have come to see, but rather you are avoiding someone in Oxford.”

The change in expression answered her question.

“Baliffs?”

“I beg your pardon!” He sounded annoyed that his honour might be so impugned. “If you must inquire, since if I leave you with that impression you will just tell my father, I find myself being cast in the role of bear leader for this – “ he broke off, apparently his views on this young man who had taken it into his head to follow him around wishing for him to introduce him to Oxford society were not for a woman to hear.

“You are not speaking of my son, I hope,” smiled Elizabeth.

“That is Max’s undertaking, not mine, although it is all their fault.” He sounded his age then.

“Well you have escaped, unless he has the means to travel to the Lake District.”

“I hope not,” muttered the boy under his breath.

“I hope not too, because I do not think your father would like a stranger amongst us at the moment,” at his querying look Elizabeth added, “I am afraid too much riding outside in the rain has resulted in a cold.”

The younger Darcy looked slightly horrified though Elizabeth did not know whether that was because he did not wish to catch the cold or he knew his father’s temperament when ill.
But looking at him she had an idea; entwining a hand around his arm she led him towards the carriage that Darcy had called around for their tour that day. “We were to go touring today but as your father feels unwell and the girls are not much better, they are sitting sedately inside playing cards. Of course I could not go alone, but now that you are here…” she looked up at him.

It was in some respects pure manipulation, he might not wish to spend the day with her, but she could tell he was the sort of boy to be driven mad by a pack of invalids playing cards.

So he did not complain; he even helped her into the carriage.

“Thank you, Mr Darcy. See that sounds so ridiculous, but what can I call you?”

“My family appear to delight in calling me ‘little one’.” Now that Elizabeth knew was a magnanimous offer, and one that was surely a test.

She looked down at him from the carriage. Usually she looked up at him. “Now that would be ridiculous! Well, I’m sure you were shorter than your father at some point…”

Elizabeth wished that she could sketch, and then sketch well, in order to capture the views that they were taking in. The housekeeper as well as putting a packed basket of food in the bottom of the carriage, had placed a sketch books and some pencils. Clearly young ladies demonstrating their talents was part of most tours of the district.

The open carriage lumbered around, and at a great many hills they had to disembark as the horses could not pull their weight as well as the carriage’s up the hills.

Elizabeth thought she should not have thought badly of Darcy for not behaving appropriately for his age as now she was clambering up mountains and fording streams as if she was twenty once more. Indeed even her companion had difficulty keeping up.

“Ma’am…Mrs Davis…”

“Elizabeth!” she replied, cresting the top of a hill to look down upon the most pristine view of her life. The lake surface lay still and unchanging, the mountains above so completely etched in its surface. She had once said to her aunt, what were men to rocks and mountains but she had not meant it. Now she thought if she were to say it again she might mean it. “Is this not perfection?.”

She expected him to disagree with him, after all the peaks of Derbyshire were not to be denigrated, and he did not seem to be a country boy. Though looks could be deceiving; she had not thought Thomas would settle into such a widened society so well. Perhaps she was turning into Lady Catherine, always thinking of ‘spheres’ that people were bubbled up in and unable to quit.

But he remained silent, just looking. Perhaps he was sick of lakes. It was entirely possible, although their driver had told them that only one lake was in fact named ‘lake’ something or other. He was holding the sketchbook in his hand, and Elizabeth felt sorry that she had not told him that she would not be using it before he went to all the trouble to bring it up here with them.

She left him staring at the lake as she moved to climb higher still. Part of her wished she was sharing this with her children, or with Darcy, but another part of her relished the solitude that enveloped her. Looking down back towards the lake, she realised that she was fulfilling both desires, she was
sharing this with family, but one whose nature, if not his understanding, allowed her to experience the views in serenity. Her daughters would be filled with questionings and babblings and Darcy and Thomas would, like her aunt before them, concerned about her taking a fall.

She did not know how long she stood there basking in the sunshine just soaking in the view, but she finally stirred herself to walk back towards the carriage.

Her companion had taken a seat and Elizabeth realised that he had not acted selflessly; the sketchbook had never been for her. Peering over his shoulder she did not think that this was an endeavour he had ever explored; perhaps the views had seized something in him, but that did not mean there was not some talent there.

Realising her approach he covered it up and tensed. “I was bored.”

Elizabeth smiled and took a seat next to him although she might need a helping hand to rise and she hoped he would help rather than leave her to the mercy of the driver. She pulled the pad out of his hands.

“Well I think boredom becomes you. I never acquired the skill.”

“I do not think it takes a great deal of skill.”

Elizabeth did not take the bait. “Not here perhaps.” She noticed that at the bottom of the incomplete sketch he had written ‘Will’ and the date.

“I could hardly add my own name.”

Elizabeth smiled. Of course he would think such a hobby beneath him.

“So you are not going to neglect your duties and run off to become an artist, or a poet?”

“Well I am sure Davis could amply fill my place if I chose to act so rashly.”

“My son has many good qualities,” was all Elizabeth would say to that. “You do wish to be master of Pemberley, do you not?”

She worried for a moment that he might misunderstand her, wilfully or not, that she was angling to supplant him with her son.

“I do not know. Do I have a choice?”

“I think if you should wish for one you do. I am a great believer in choice. Although that right can be squandered in the worst way…” she drew in a breathe before continuing. “My youngest sister, Lydia, is the best example. Circumstances perhaps had not allowed her to see her way clearly and it could have been prevented, but she made a choice that at the very least she knew was daring, even if she did not know the consequences. She eloped, well meant to elope but I cannot say if the marriage was ever concluded or not.”

Elizabeth wasn’t sure why she told him that; perhaps he already knew, perhaps he didn’t. It was certainly ammunition against her.

“I should not say circumstances, as though I did not mean the way my sister was allowed to behave by my parents, and her elder sisters. ‘Circumstances’ sounds so much less like the failures of man.”

“And woman.”
“Indeed.”

Her companion it seemed had nothing else to say on the matter, instead he changed the subject “My cousin, Max, says that it the family’s expectation that a notice will be sent to the papers upon your return to London. Or Pemberley.”

“I have heard that expectation, although if your father was looking for the perfect moment and spot I think he must fail. A snuffly nose is not perfect.”

“But will not stop your positive response.” There was no accusation.

Elizabeth smiled, “If he proposes with a mustard patch attached to his chest, I will lie, and say that he proposed here. You will keep my secret?”

“I do not think I should support a lie.” He was so like his father. But then he tore the sketch off the book and handed it to her. “You may tell them he sketched that for you.”

“The cornerstone of a good lie to society is that it sounds plausible. I shall tell them that it was a gift from my stepson.”

Elizabeth did not press him any further and they just enjoyed looking out over the lake.
Darcy could not but help raise his eyes frequently to the window. Elizabeth had vanished. Part of him was disappointed in her, that she could leave him and her children invalided as they were, although he knew in his heart that Elizabeth was many things but uncaring to those in need had never been her fault to own. Knowing that, he could only suppose that she was not avoiding them for a selfish reason, but perhaps the desire to tramp through the fields surrounding their cottage was keeping her away longer than she thought.

Of course, she could be injured, and it was that thought that kept him looking out the windows.

"Hi! You there!" Darcy spotted a boy walking outside the window.

The youth obligingly opened the window, "Yes, sir?"

"You have not seen Mrs Davis?"

"Yes, sir."

Darcy waited for the boy to continue, but he just looked expectantly at Darcy.

"Where is she?" he prompted.

"She went on the tour of the district," was the slowly enunciated response and Darcy got the impression that it was not because the boy was slow but rather the fact the boy thought that of him.

"Without us?" Henrietta looked up from her game on the floor.

"It would appear that way," said Darcy shortly. It was highly irresponsible for Elizabeth to tramp about the county on her own. But he knew what her feelings would be on the subject; the same that had brought her six inches deep in mud to Netherfield to see her sister.

"Well she had a man with her," said the servant helpfully.

"Thomas!" said Emily. "I knew he would come, did I not tell you, Hetty?"

"Well it was nice of him to greet us before going to see the countryside. What if we had wished to go?"

Henrietta had complained bitterly all the way to the Lake District about not wishing to be dragged about the countryside looking at identical trees. Darcy thought she had rather a selective memory.

"You wished to see dirt?" said Emily in a rather good impression of her elder sister.

"Well I should rather see that than watch you trim that bonnet badly."

"That is because you are feeling better. This morning you felt differently and you know it," rejoined Emily.

"Mr Darcy," said Henrietta turning regally to him, "Did I not say this morning that I would accompany Mama?"

He knew Elizabeth wished for him to befriend her daughters. They would become, in the eyes of society, his daughters very shortly. He would be responsible for their well-being and their futures. It
would be very easy to gain Henrietta's friendship but Darcy could see a cost involved with her capricious nature.

Darcy had never, obviously, had a daughter but he had raised Georgiana. Georgiana's sweet nature was rather the exception than the rule, like Bingley's character had been amongst men, but even she had cost him many a sleepless night. Indeed daughters like Henrietta and Emily might be better than a daughter like Georgiana who folded in upon herself and did not intrude upon your notice until the moment she almost fell into the abyss.

Although it did not follow that the nature of a child must be the nature of the adult, neither did it follow that the nature of the child must change. He of all people knew that last fact. There was no reason Henrietta, or indeed his own son, would become a productive member of society, one who their parents could be proud of.

Nonetheless he could not lie. "I believe it was I who this morning wished to accompany your mother on her sojourn despite my illness." In the interest of fairness he added, "I believe that makes you the more sensible of the two."

He was favoured with a smile, and in her face Darcy recognised the Elizabeth of her youth and impulsively he returned her expression. Darcy turned to the window, and took in the sunshine and knew Elizabeth would take some time to return, particularly if she was with her son.

"Since it looks as though your mother may be some time, I suspect we should find some way to amuse ourselves."

Henrietta and Emily looked up from their game. Emily seemed to be about to respond but closed her mouth, deciding clearly discretion was the better part of valour.

Darcy felt himself stiffening, caught in that moment where he either withdrew or engaged.

"I concede. I should find some way to amuse myself."

On request one of the servants of the house pointed Darcy in the direction of the library. The library ended up being behind the chair he was already reclining in.

A small shoddy affair, thought Darcy as he looked at the books. He didn't understand why people neglected reading and despite what his son thought Darcy did not reject novels. He just preferred other forms of reading. One of the paltry selection caught his eye; a book he'd remembered swooping on as a younger man when it was finally reprinted and no longer merely confined to the eminent collectables of his library. He withdrew it from the shelf.

He was not four pages into the book when Emily distracted him. That he was not used to either. Fitzwilliam had rarely interrupted him even as a child. It was perhaps contradictory to his nature since Darcy owned his son possessed his temper. But he managed to contain his bursting into rooms to times when Darcy was not that occupied.

"Mr Darcy, what are you reading?" She looked interested and Darcy wished he had picked one of the lighter books upon the shelf, the one he was reading was inappropriate.

"A very serious tome," he replied.

Emily craned her head. "Le Morte D'Arthur?" He could see her translating in her head. "That is not a very happy subject."

Darcy smiled. "Well, it has its moments."
"Who is Arthur?"

Darcy flicked his attention to Henrietta, "A king."

"Is he handsome?"

Darcy had never wondered whether King Arthur and his knights had been attractive. Of course they had had every other attractive quality, some of them in abundance to the point they became faults.

"I expect he is, Hetty; Kings have to be handsome, it's a rule."

Darcy was glad Emily had answered his question for him although he rather thought that was princes and he took it for granted from Emily's assertion she had never seen any of their royal family.

"Then will you not read some of it to us?"

"Well I am not sure Arthur and his knights would interest you..."

"Oh, that King Arthur," said Emily, she turned her attention back to the game on the floor, but seemed to have a sudden thought. "Mama used to tell us the story of Tom Thumb, is that one of the tales?"

"Do tell us a story."

Darcy was not entirely sure any of Mallory's stories were suitable for young ladies...or well young men, either now that he thought about it. Of course he was never one to subscribe to the idea of literature rotting the mind, but these were not his daughters.

But they looked quite interested and Darcy felt something stirring in his chest. He'd always wanted more children which was somewhat ironic since had not known what to do with the child he had, but he had always wanted a sea of small faces looking back at him as he read by the fire. One rather intense face had rather unnerved him. Although looking down at his current audience, two intense faces did not seem to improve the situation. It was clearly one of those situations that was better in fantasy than in reality.

He cleared his throat, "Well I warn you both I am out of practice." He'd managed to avoid being made to continue reading after Fitzwilliam's precipitous exit from Elizabeth's dinner party.

"Your son reads beautifully, sir," said Henrietta, suddenly looking quite coy, "I am quite sure you do as well."

Bolstered by her confidence in him Darcy began to read, although looking at the paragraph before him perhaps it would be best to skip certain bits. He had confidence in that talent – at least the ability to summarise detail allowing certain ways of the world to be passed over with the lightest of touches.

Elizabeth was surprised that no one was anxiously awaiting their arrival. There was no Fitzwilliam standing in the doorway or the front gate like she expected; there was not even a twitch of the curtains to betray a watcher.

Something inside of Elizabeth froze, was the stillness because an alarm had been raised for her? Her joy at being able to explore the district abated. She could not enjoy what she had done if she had
caused untold worry and alarm in others. It had not been so long since she had been widowed, she should remember what it was like to have someone – her other half – who would worry about her safety. Even if Fitzwilliam did not exist then her children would always fret about her, and that was not their job, that was hers.

It took her a moment to realise that her companion was holding out a helping hand. She knew a sign of reconciliation if it was presented to her, so she took it and bestowed a smile on him. He was a good man, like his father, riddled with faults but perfection was overrated.

"I think we must have worried them." She said 'we' but Fitzwilliam would not have known of his sons arrival.

"Or perhaps, if they are unwell, they have gone to bed."

Elizabeth stripped off her gloves and bonnet as she strode towards the cottage, letting Will – that name turned over in her mind and she found it as acceptable now as she did on the hillside – deal with the carriage.

She abandoned her pelisse, gloves and bonnet in the hall and pushed open the door to the sitting room. No candles had been lit and the fire was down to glowing embers, but the room was comfortably warm. It took her a moment for her eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness and what she saw made her feel relieved.

Fitzwilliam was sprawled in a chair near the fire, a book forgotten on his lap and another lying near the chair as if it had dropped from his outflung hand as sleep overtook him. Emily was curled up in a nearby chair, her head propped up on her hands, if her eyes were closed Elizabeth would presume she was waiting to hang upon Fitzwilliam's words. Henrietta was in the space between the two chairs, her head resting against Fitzwilliam's chair.

The scene was a domestic tableau in perfection. Painfully domestic thought Elizabeth almost wildly. She had thought that such moments were past her. She had realised her own moments of contentment were not past her, almost the moment she had met Fitzwilliam Darcy again, but she had not thought that everything could be whole again. Of course there were pieces missing, some permanently.

She moved across the room, and picked up the book from the floor, a volume of poetry that she had meant to read some years before when it had been published but had never quite found the time. It was strange how life interceded and prevented what you had thought you would never be able to live without. She replaced that volume and the other to their rightful place and then wondered how to rouse the girls.

As contented as they looked, they would not feel so in the morning after sleeping in such uncomfortable poses.

Will appeared in the doorway; he took in the scene himself, and Elizabeth standing amongst the sleeping figures with her hands on her hips. If ever there was a time that Elizabeth wished she could read minds it was now. Will turned to leave, and Elizabeth quietly called after him.

"I shall put the girls to bed, if you shall endeavour to deal with your father." The look on his face made Elizabeth laugh. "It surely is not an insurmountable task?"

"You have never woken my father. I shall ask you again later."

Elizabeth flushed at the implication. He had surely meant to make her colour but she did not think he
had meant it maliciously.

Emily barely opened her eyes as Elizabeth steered her to bed but Henrietta yawned and stretched as her head hit the pillow.

"Mama, why cannot we have knights and jousting? It is ever so romantic."

Elizabeth wondered whether Fitzwilliam realised he had more than likely opened Pandora's box where Henrietta was concerned. Perhaps he would be relieved it would distract her mind from contemporary gentlemen, that might have been his plan all along, but Elizabeth couldn't credit him with such a complex strategy.

"Things long past often seem romantic," replied Elizabeth as she tucked the covers around her daughter.

"Like you and Mr Darcy…" Henrietta might have been going to say more but her eyes closed and she was asleep once more.

Her romance with Mr Darcy could hardly compare to the stuff of legends thought Elizabeth as she closed the door to her daughters' bedroom. Now looking back, it was true that their relationship had elements of romantic fiction, but at the time it had seemed anything but romantic. Confusing. Painful. That seemed more real.

Fitzwilliam was already at the table when Elizabeth descended for breakfast the following morning.

"Elizabeth," he said, standing holding out a hand.

She moved to grasp it. "You are looking much better."

"Although I should have felt better sooner if I had known what you were planning for yesterday."

Even though his voice held no recrimination, she felt some guilt. "I believe I have not grown out of my impetuousness of my youth, sir."

The pertness of her reply made him smile. "I should not have it any other way, Elizabeth, but if you could be so kind as to spare a moment to write a short note next time. I had thought you with Davis; I was surprised to see Fitzwilliam."

"Were you really?" Elizabeth turned away to pour herself a cup of tea.

"Elizabeth, this is not a matter of not being trusting, or not believing in my son."

"Then what is it a matter of?" Elizabeth took her seat and reached for the bread.

"There are not that many situations that would lead my son to suffer the indignity of a hurried scramble across the countryside."

Elizabeth smiled, she did not think Will had spared any expense in his journey, which Fitzwilliam would doubtless learn soon enough if it turned out to have dug too much into his allowance and she knew he had had his own reasons.
"Well he suffered the indignity of being dragged around the countryside by a woman mad for vistas and panoramas, mountains and valleys, rocks and lakes … "

"I trust your appetite for such was fulfilled?" Fitzwilliam looked wistful, "I should have been …"

Elizabeth cut off what looked as though it would descend into some mis-placed self-pity. "You have not told me how your day was, with the girls, I could see with my own eyes that it quite wore you all out, but that does not tell me if it was from over-exhaustion or frustration."

Fitzwilliam's mouth curled into a smile. "It was interesting. I may have allowed too much freedom."

"I hope you are not implying that you could corrupt their minds with anything out of books."

"Books are not incorruptible, Elizabeth. Minds are not unmalleable."

"I know the truth of that more than most, Fitzwilliam, but let us not fight about the past, or about the present."

"I think our disagreeing is unavoidable; I would not have you base our relationship on a lie."

"That is not what I am asking, Fitzwilliam. I am asking to save our disagreements for when it matters. I have seen petty things ruin more than one – " Elizabeth had been about to say marriage, but she swallowed that word hard, "relationship. Let us not disagree over the expansion of my daughters' minds to include courtly love. If anything, Henrietta was far more taken with the idea of men jousting than anything else."

"And thus is why I shall never understand women."

"I believe we understand each other quite well, Fitzwilliam."

"But you are not any woman, Elizabeth."

"Your flattery does you credit, sir."

"It is not flattery," he replied swiftly and Elizabeth felt her cheeks colour.

"I must call it flattery, otherwise I might become overwhelmed."

"I should like you overwhelmed Elizabeth. I am by my feelings for you, I can only hope that it is equally felt by you."

If Elizabeth had thought a declaration would come over the bread and butter she might have worn a nicer morning gown. But she had thought Darcy would be able to control himself better, at least until the sitting room. Although perhaps he thought that too close to his last failed proposal. That they would be both thinking of the past. Elizabeth might not have, after all she held by the edict to think only of the past as if gives pleasure, but perhaps he would have. So here over the bread and butter might just be the perfect place.

She opened her mouth to reply, but the door bursting open put paid to that.

Thomas stood flustered in the doorway. "Did you know that the stage would not make detours?"

Will was clearly not far behind because a muttered phrase insulting her son's intelligence was heard.

Elizabeth laughed. At least their family was here, all together, acting as they would.
Darcy straightened his cravat and looked straight in the mirror. Though he would not admit to sickness, he knew he looked better than he had done in the previous days, and that he had felt only the smallest degree of embarrassment in his condition around Elizabeth and her children.

If nothing else, this told him that Elizabeth was right; that their families joining would bring him happiness and he was certain that happiness would extend to more than himself.

Of course, if not for the interruption of Davis, a date for their marriage might have been set already. But perhaps it was for the best, a proposal over the butter? It was hardly romantic, or an auspicious beginning.

He would take Elizabeth aside and propose amongst her beloved rocks and mountains.

This seemed simple, or so he had thought when it had entered his mind after Davis' interruption and it had become his goal over the last few days. However, whenever he suggested a walk one of the children leapt at the chance to join them.

He had once managed to walk with Elizabeth a little way from the house alone, and he had seized his opportunity, only to have the accursed stable boy pop up and ask him what he thought should be done with one of the horses that had developed a limp. He had then an opportunity to continue, but Elizabeth had shooed him away to the stables, seemingly oblivious to what he had intended, or perhaps she thought the moment broken beyond repair.

Darcy had a feeling if he could but stifle his sense of pride and explicitly tell each of the young people in the household that he wished to take Elizabeth aside and ask her to become his wife that they would have eagerly helped him with his task, in the case of the girls, or stayed out of their way, in the case of the boys.

To ask for such consideration, however, felt awkward. It would be another thing to ask Kitty or Ash or the Colonel to help him arrange a private moment, but to invite his son or Elizabeth's children into their most private concerns felt too invasive. It was a failing of pride, he knew, but he found he could not overcome it.

Although he wasn't sure that hinting was any better for his self-esteem. He found that he was completely inept at hinting. He was perhaps too subtle, it was now that he needed the abilities of a woman like Mrs Bennet had been, or perhaps even his own Aunt, Lady Catherine. Women for whom language was wielded like a wooden club.

If it had been anyone but himself this morning, he would have found the attempt amusing; as it was, it was just embarrassing.

He had been in the sitting room with Emily reading and Elizabeth embroidering for company. He would have preferred not to repeat his proposal in a similar setting to the last one, even though he was almost certain this time he would not be refused, but he was becoming impatient.

He had caught Emily's eye, and tilted his head at the door. She had frowned at him, as if uncertain as to whether Darcy really meant to communicate something to her. So he had tilted his head at the door and winked at her. It could now only be obvious he was trying to silently speak to her. But she just gaped at him.

More winking and head tilting between Elizabeth and the door brought only more confusion and
then amusement to her face.

"Why are you winking at me, Mr Darcy?"

Elizabeth looked up from her work at that point; Darcy almost choked at Emily's innocent question.

"Wink at you! Why would I wink at you, pray?" Darcy realised he sounded quite ridiculous. "I mean, I have something in my eye. If you would excuse me, I should see to that." Darcy strode out of the room and if the ladies laughed at him he did not hear it.

He had steeled himself for a further attempt in the afternoon when he found himself standing in a field with Davis and Elizabeth. Davis was talking of crop rotations and Elizabeth was watching him fondly.

"I think perhaps I saw some books on crop rotation in the sitting room."

"Really? They all seemed to be romantic novels," Davis poked the earth.

"I am sure it might have been some of Young's theory, maybe outdated but useful nonetheless."

Davis nodded and asked a question about Pemberley's crops.

"I believe you might find that answer in the book I saw. Perhaps we should go peruse it?" He intended to let Davis walk back to the house and take advantage of the moment alone. Except somehow they had ended up walking back to the house, and Elizabeth was left enjoying the view. Not only that, but by chance there was a book on agriculture and Darcy had spent the next hour talking turnips with Davis.

He'd escaped under the pretext of dressing for dinner and could only think it was another day wasted.

"I'd always thought it was your creed to speak to the point."

Darcy turned to see his son leaning against the doorframe, looking more relaxed than Darcy had ever seen him, and that made some undefinable emotion uncurl in his breast. But he could not change the past; one could only hope for the future.

"You certainly told me to come to the point more times than I would like to be responsible for counting."

"You will have to add to that tally, because I am dangerously close to urging you to be more direct." Although Darcy could not remember the last time he'd asked his son such a thing. Clearly the extortions as a child worked, because Fitzwilliam as an adult was direct, cuttingly direct. Except in everything but his emotions.

Fitzwilliam did not answer, so Darcy turned to him in some annoyance. "Is everyone wilfully putting obstacles in my place?"

"I wasn't aware that you had a chosen course."

"Fitzwilliam, do not play the fool."

He regretted saying it the moment he did. Fitzwilliam should not bear the brunt of his annoyance and frustration. He had suffered enough of his father's stifling emotions as a child; they had begun to forge a path anew, mending fences along the way and he wanted nothing more than to preserve that
"Forgive me," Darcy clasped his son's shoulder. "My temper should not be your concern."

"It affords me amusement."

Darcy couldn't contain his snort. "I am glad to see I engender such respect in you." His tone was light because in truth his cup did runneth over, if only he could manage to propose.

Elizabeth folded her sheets down. It wasn't a task she was required to do, but she enjoyed it, straightening the beds. Another thing that if someone had told her at twenty about she would laughed herself sick at.

"Mama!"

Elizabeth turned just as Emily burst through the door.

"Are you acquainted with the notion of knocking?"

Emily rolled her eyes and knocked on the door.

"Not quite what I meant, but I shall accept it. What can I do for you, Miss Emily?"

"Mr Darcy - not your Mr Darcy - said it was such a nice morning, we should go for a walk."

Elizabeth could only think that was very thoughtful, perhaps even brave of him.

"Shall you come, Mama?"

"I rarely say no to a walk," particularly not one organised by a boy who was so opposed to everything not weeks ago.

Emily gave a radiant smile and ran down the cottages stairs, shouting to (presumably) Will and her brother that Elizabeth would be coming with them.

She took only a moment to make sure nothing was out of place in her room before descending the stairs herself.

If she expected a happy little party at the bottom of the stairs, she did not betray her surprise. Will looked more sullen than she had seen him in some time, Thomas was looking thoughtfully at the other boy, Emily looked confused and betrayed, only Henrietta looked eager.

"Shall we not make a start?"

"I am afraid, madam, there has been an error: you are not invited."

At this insult to their mother, Emily decided to stalk out of the cottage. It was not unexpected; she had reached an age where she preferred not to have her upsets publicly displayed. Henrietta swept after her after glaring at Will. That boy also took himself off with Thomas trailing at his heels.

Before Elizabeth could comprehend quite what had just happened, Darcy, her Fitzwilliam, having
just completed his breakfast, strode out into the hallway.

"Elizabeth!"

"Fitzwilliam," she greeted him as enthusiastically as he had greeted her; she wondered whether she should mention his son's behaviour.

"Are we alone?"

Elizabeth tucked her head out of his embrace and looked up at him. "I believe we are, sir. I cannot say for how long this may last, and I should not like to expose my children to such immoral behaviour in the hallway."

Last time she had made such a comment, Fitzwilliam had reacted quite differently, now he just smiled. "It perhaps would not be so immoral, if I managed to ask you a question I have been trying to ask you for some days."

Elizabeth smiled; she had noticed his distraction she had just not realised it was distraction in active pursuit of a goal. She had thought he was studying for his words of four syllables or more.

"I am immensely grateful for whoever conspired to leave us to ourselves, even for just this moment."

"I believe your thanks should be directed towards your son," and she wondered about that. It would so like a Darcy, so like that particular Darcy, when faced with his plan unfolding not as expected to react in such a curt manner.

"Remind me to offer him my thanks."

"But what," she teased, "do you have to be thankful for?"

"Hopefully, a positive answer to my question?"

"But what is that question?"

"I phrased it so badly the last time I attempted it with you; I am quite terrified to attempt it again."

"It was phrased well enough, sir, it was the surrounding conversation that quite sunk you."

"Then I shall attempt it once more. My dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth …"

"I do not believe that is how you started."

"Then I should have. I must tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

"You have not struggled? Your feelings have not been repressed?"

"I cannot believe you remember my word. How I wish you did not!"

"But they were very pretty words; we only did not know each other well enough to understand their import."

"Well my affections, wishes and hopes are unchanged…"

"I hope you shall not ask me whether my feelings have changed."

"Indeed, I should not dare. But I will ask if you will relieve my suffering and consent to be my wife."
"Yes, Fitzwilliam, I shall, and …" she was about to add, 'we shall be happy'. But she could not promise that. She knew too well how easily it was to have happiness snatched away from one. But they would try and that would be enough. "I love you."

Their mutual happiness was only short-lived, although it would be more proper to say that the happiness that could only be expressed between themselves was short-lived.

They might have divested themselves of their children, but they had forgotten the servants.

Elizabeth laughed at the flustered expression that overtook the maid's and Fitzwilliam's faces.

Sally mumbled her apologies and ducked her head as she hurried past them to the kitchen stairs.

"Now, I am very glad that I am an engaged woman, Fitzwilliam."

Thomas pushed the tree branch out of his way as he attempted to follow Darcy.

He thought he understood the other boy, but then he did not. Although he could not expect that any effort on Darcy's part would last, it would come in drips. Thomas knew this because that is how he felt, although he was far better – although that was not difficult – at hiding his apathy. Mostly because he had said his piece to his mother, several times, and it was now no longer his concern.

Not that Thomas had stopped caring, but that he could not influence his mother any more than he had; she had to decide what best made her happy and her happiness was all that Thomas really wanted.

Darcy thought only of his own happiness, which made Thomas think well of himself until he wondered if his contented and life filled with love and security meant he was not able to judge. It was easy to be concerned with others' happiness if one had only ever felt happiness. Thomas disregarded those moments of extreme pain, such as his father's death; they were natural moments of melancholy.

"Wait up!"

"Did it occur to you that I do not wish for company?" There was a pause. "Particularly not your company."

"You wanted it before." Darcy did not respond but at least he stopped striding. Thomas felt a glimmer of triumph. "I knew that it was your attempt at being magnanimous."

"It was hardly magnanimous."

"It would have been if you …"

"I meant I was not intending to be selfless. It was becoming tedious."

Thomas did not ask to what Darcy referred; Thomas agreed with him. Although if Darcy had pointed out that Thomas had been one of the obstacles he sought to remove, Thomas would have laughed. He had not interfered in any way. Mr Darcy was merely slow in coming to the point.

Not that Thomas thought this was because of a lack of affection and respect for his mother; rather it
sprung from the Darcy need for perfection.

Thomas took a welcome seat on a tree stump. "I would have never thought, stepping into the grounds of Oxford, that in the future I'd be sitting in the middle of the Lake District talking to my future brother."

Darcy flinched at that. "You will wish to spend more of your time on your own estate." It was more of a command than a statement.

That was at least partially true. While he could trust the Squire and his watchful eye, there was a patch of earth, a farm with tenants, and a house that belonged to him. But Thomas would not be swayed from his thoughts. "I gained a whole family. I asked my mother a question and gained a whole family."

Darcy shot him a look that communicated his thoughts about Thomas' intelligence.

But Thomas did not care. He thought he knew how changeable life was when one afternoon he had been lounging on the window seat and he'd seen a riderless horse bolt into their stables. Not just any horse, but his father's horse. He remembered stiffening and having a sense of unease, but it had not been fear or worry, not then. Many a time had a riderless horse returned to the stables. But usually it had been his; his father had been a bruising rider who would never part with the reins. He expected to see his father limping into the yard grimacing and in pain. That was the normal course of events. The male servants had gone looking, probably more to do something different than their normal duties than actual worry and Thomas had thought no more about it until something once again caught his eye.

They had carried his father into the yard, and even from the house Thomas knew he was dead. He had frozen, part of himself willing the other part to race to ensure his mother did not see, but he had been too late, a heart rendering scream as his mother stumbled down the steps.

The life he knew had disappeared that day, but equally he could not have imagined the one that sprung up in its place. The unravelling of a family's secrets and a daughter's grief had brought the pieces of a puzzle, long abandoned, back together.

Without warning, Darcy had stalked back to the house and Thomas had dutifully followed.

"Thomas! You must come inside!" Emily was half out the sitting room window and was in danger of falling into the bushes.

"Yes! They will not speak to us unless we are all here!" Henrietta elbowed her way into view.

Thomas headed straight for the cottage and in the hallway managed to grab Darcy's arm to make sure he didn't wander off. It would be like him to presume that 'all' did not mean him. But it did, and it always would from now on, Thomas suspected.

"They are here!"

"I could not have foreseen such excitement!" said their mother, clearly amused.

Thomas thought it was obvious what was about to be announced and that the girls' eagerness was
unnecessary but he supposed they wished to talk about his mother's dress or such like. Things that interested Thomas little, and the Darcy men none.

"I am pleased to say," said Mr Darcy clearing his throat, "that I have asked …" there was a pause before an encouraging nod from his mother spurred him onwards, "Elizabeth to …"

"Elope to Spain."

The girls' crestfallen face was quite possibly worth the wait thought Thomas, but Mr Darcy coughed. "I have asked Elizabeth to marry me, and she had accepted."

Thomas was not sure what sort of reaction was necessary but the girls' reaction should be enough for the four of them. Thomas settled for shaking Mr Darcy's hand and giving his mother a swift hug.

"Where shall you marry? At our home? At Pemberley? In London?" asked Emily.

"What shall you wear? You must have Madame Fancot make you a dress and wear ostrich feathers. Or maybe you should have jewels in your hair, I am sure the Darcy family has a tiara. It would be very matronly," gushed Henrietta.

"Shall you travel, sir?" asked Thomas, thinking that he should at least try to draw Mr Darcy into the conversation. "Now that my mother has seen the Lake District, I know not where else she would like to go."

"Wherever shall you start," added Darcy sardonically.

Thomas watched his mother smile widely, and Thomas was reminded of his childhood when his mother was perfect and when, as far as he was concerned, all was right in the world if she smiled. "Why, Will, we shall start where everyone should start. The beginning."
Elizabeth married her Darcy in a small ceremony with close friends and family. It was not the happiest day of her life, but with three children and the happiness of her former life, it had understandable competition. But it felt like completion. The first time in a very long time that Elizabeth had stood with her whole family … almost her whole family but Elizabeth tried not to think about that. Jane, Mary and Kitty sat behind her, watching her pledge her love to Fitzwilliam and her father sat in his bath chair trying not to doze off during the service.

Pemberley was as beautiful and as well situated as Elizabeth could remember and being mistress of it and its surrounds was not as frightening as she once imagined. The household welcomed her, and the surrounding gentry seemed happy that a mistress of Pemberley had come to resurrect some of the old ways and to breathe life back into the house and the neighbourhood. Elizabeth privately laughed at some of the young ladies' enthusiasm. Despite being warned by Kitty that those same young ladies had had hopes of being Mrs Darcy it seemed they would be placated with balls and parties.

Though it was not surprising as Pemberley had not had a mistress since Amelia, and before her all too brief tenure, there had been another long period where Pemberley was desolate of female stewardship. Of course Georgiana and Mrs Reynolds filled the role, but neither could do so completely due to age and station.

Embracing her role, Elizabeth did not forget her old home; marrying Darcy did not stop her, and him, visiting Davis Lodge and all her old friends. Before the wedding, Isabella had, of course, interrogated Fitzwilliam minutely. She had been worried for a moment that Fitzwilliam would not pass Isabella's barely concealed test. Not for Fitzwilliam's sake but for the sake of peace and comfort. Isabella might frustrate Elizabeth, but she was Henry's sister and had been a source of support for many years, particularly that hard year after Henry's death.

Fitzwilliam had sensed Isabella's importance and made an effort with her, not that he had to try particularly hard; Isabella had a good heart and wanted her sister-in-law to be happy. The fact Fitzwilliam wanted nothing but Elizabeth's happiness added to his good looks and wealth made it almost impossible for Isabella not to approve.

The rest of the village had been more interested in gossip. It was then that Elizabeth had understood Kitty when she had said that being happy and love removed the sting of whisperings but it didn't make you deaf, blind and dumb. But Elizabeth knew she had not spent her life pining for Fitzwilliam Darcy, and he knew that. Everyone who was important to her knew that, so Elizabeth was happy to make sport for her neighbours.

The knowing glances were more prevalent in Longbourn, but that was to be expected. Elizabeth's father had teased her about her dislike of Darcy but then had kissed her and said he only wanted her to be happy, which she was.

Georgiana Darcy, as was, sent her a brother an eight page letter crossed densely, expressing her perfect happiness with her brother's choice, and her hopes for their future as sisters. It was hardly the Georgiana Elizabeth remembered, the quiet reserved young woman. She wondered if it was time, or better knowledge that had brought this side of her to Elizabeth's view. Either way, she was a source of knowledge for Elizabeth about Pemberley, about Fitzwilliam's family and even about Fitzwilliam himself.

Elizabeth's own sisters were no less enthusiastic. Kitty had beamed and immediately wanted to throw a ball; Jane had saved her enthusiasm for when she could hug her sister close. Mary contained herself
to a densely written letter that seemed to approve of Elizabeth's choice if she had to give up her newly found freedom as a single woman – the only kind of single woman that society supported and even then only minutely – Elizabeth felt the pamphlets were only a wedding trip away.

In all Elizabeth was content. She was loved by a good and honourable man and she loved him in return. In that regard she had been blessed twice in her life. She had three beautiful children whom she loved more than anything else in the world, and a step-son who could be relied upon not to spare her feelings when it was necessary (and sometimes when it wasn't) for whom her love was important, not expected. Her father spent the last years of his life at Pemberley, lured their by the library and captive grandchildren to read to him (although Elizabeth was amused to note, when Will was at home it was he who would argue with her father in the library about books and poetry, and she had never seen her father quite so happy. He had not been blessed with cynical grandchildren; the addition of Fitzwilliam Darcy junior to his life at such an advanced age brought him nothing but joy.)

Her sisters visited with their children and husbands and sometimes without, and her heart would overflow when Elizabeth had to figure out whether she could accommodate all of her guests without, for instance, banishing her son from his own room.

Of course there were those empty spaces; Henry was not with them, although his presence would have meant the domestic and familiar happiness would not have looked the same. Her mother was an absent figure, but Elizabeth found herself scolding her children and stopping in shock when she realised who she sounded like, and she supposed her mother was not truly gone when it only took a moment and closed eyes for Elizabeth to envision her reaction to her marriage to Mr Darcy of Derbyshire. Lydia too was a gap that no one could erase. But burdens and sorrow made joy more profound.

In a village in Scotland, a lady past her youth was passed a copy of a London paper. She did not often read the paper; her husband would read from it excerpts he thought might interest her, or her mother-in-law would hand wave about the dubious morality of townsfolk as she told her daughter-in-law about the latest scandals in Edinburgh.

But this day one of the ladies of the village had brought the newspaper and she'd opened it. The news was gloomy, as news often was, and she skimmed past it. The announcements page was always of more interest, even when it was about people she had no knowledge of. She liked to speculate about the lives behind the print. A notice caught her eye:

FITZWILLIAM - DAVIS: Lately, by licence, at Mertyon, Hertfordshire by the Rev. H.P Morgan, Fitzwilliam Darcy, Esq. of Pemberley, Derbyshire to Elizabeth Davis, daughter of Thomas Bennet Esq of Longbourn, Hertfordshire.

Some other lady might sigh at the announcement and feel regret that even with such an announcement she still had to speculate. But this lady felt no such regret, merely happiness at the announcement. She put aside the paper and smiled. Perhaps she was merely glad that her choices had not spoiled her sisters'.
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