A Marital Education

by Yahtzee

Summary

Darcy's impotent.

Notes

This is the latest Help Haiti story of them all, and I duly apologize to Kangeiko for that. But, at long last, here it is.
Chapter 1

Certainly there is no time in a young woman’s life when she is more in need of wise counsel than upon her marriage, and no one so well-placed to offer that counsel than her mother.

Unfortunately for Miss Elizabeth Bennett, her mother’s advice was rarely rich in wisdom. So it was with no great hopes that she, along with her sister Jane, submitted to a specific conversation on the eve of their double wedding.

“No, girls, you are to be wives soon. I trust you have seen enough of the animals in spring-time to know which is male and which is female, and how they do pair. You have, have you not?” They could scarce reply save for nodding. Elizabeth suspected Jane’s blushing was the equal of her own, and neither could meet the other’s eye – as much from fear of laughing as from modesty, though the latter was thoroughly outraged.

Mrs. Bennett went blithely on: “Good, good, I knew you were sensible girls. Tomorrow night, it will all seem quite rude to you, and the postures are indeed strange at first! But put on a sweet smile and make the best of it, for that is what men like. You shall see, in time all pursuits become better for practice, and I dare say you shall be quite happy with your husbands in due course, and prefer your marriage bed to all other places. Why, I still do, and we wed these three and twenty years! So patience, practice, and smiles, do not forget the smiles.”

With this and a motherly pat, no more, they were set to sea on the unpredictable waters of matrimony.

Yet Elizabeth harbored no great fears in this matter. Whispers, gossip, and oblique allusions in certain novels had suggested to her that the martial relation could be embarrassing and painful, particularly for a maid. Yet the construction of all human society told her that, loath though anyone was to admit it, most women came to enjoy the practice, some of them quite beyond the bounds of decorum.

And sometimes, when she looked at Mr. Darcy – her Mr. Darcy! Such joy it was still to think it – Elizabeth wondered whether she might not fall into that latter category. Thus far they had shared no more than a handful of chaste kisses, the holding of hands, and on one thrilling evening not a week before, an embrace that lasted many moments. The very scent of his skin lingered in her memory all the night, so that she could scarce sleep.

Thus she felt only a great anticipation and tenderness when nightfall came. Her new ladies’ maid, Fletcher, helped her into a white nightgown trimmed with soft lace, and brushed out her hair until it curled and tumbled loose around her shoulders.

Fletcher also had brought up some wine on a tray, which must have been meant to ease her new lady from fretfulness. Despite suffering no such apprehensions, Elizabeth took several sips as she waited for her husband, partaking enough to feel easy, but not enough to inebriate.

When finally the door of her bedchamber opened again, Elizabeth smiled to see her dear Darcy – Fitzwilliam, she could call him now, though she had not yet presumed to do so. He wore a nightshirt of the same white material as she, thin and soft, and through it she could discern the strong lines of his body. Elizabeth was not unfamiliar with his frame, as the fashions of the day dictated that every observer should know the dimensions of a man, but it was newly thrilling to behold this and realize that she should soon touch and be touched by him.
Yet Darcy did not smile as easily as she. He seemed distinctly ill at ease. Elizabeth took this as a
kind regard for her situation.

“Come, Mr. Darcy,” she murmured. “Do not fret. Anyone observing us would think me the man of
the world and you the blushing bride.

This flash of wit only increased his unease. “We are not observed, I should hope. The servants are of
a better ilk than that.”

“I am sure we are not.” If her husband were nervous on her account, then she should soothe him.
Elizabeth rose and gestured to the small carafe of wine that waited on the nearby dressing table.
“Have a glass to drink, my love.”

“My love,” he repeated softly, and this seemed to gentle his temper more than wine could ever do.
“My dearest, my only. Forgive me my hesitation. In this above almost any other thing I would wish
for all to be well between us.”

“All is well, and all shall be well.” She dared to caress the side of his face, and when he smiled, her
happiness became all the greater. “Now I shall be most impertinent and kiss my husband.”

“There will be no chance for impertinence. It is I who shall kiss you.”

In the end to her it seemed that no one had begun the kiss, that it had come into being of its own
accord and claimed them both.

Darcy bore her down onto the bed, and then they were lost in kisses and embraces and endearments
that became more ardent and less sensible with every passing minute. His hands caressed her, at first
chastely, but then seeking greater knowledge of her form. Elizabeth was gladly sought. Her heartbeat
quickened until she eagerly awaited what would come next, whatever that might be.

And yet the kisses went on and on – without ever hastening, if never slowing – until quite suddenly
Darcy released her.

“It is of no use,” he said. Where he had been joyful, he was now disconsolate, and he did not meet
her eyes. “Pardon me, Elizabeth, if you can.”

“I – I do not understand.” Elizabeth’s words came haltingly; her breaths remained quickened from
their embraces. “Have I done something I ought not?”

“Indeed not. You are lovely and obliging in every way. It is I who have failed you.” Darcy rose from
the bed to take a glass of the wine.

For a few moments, Elizabeth did not know how to answer. Why should Darcy fail to consummate
their marriage? “Please. We might yet continue. Return to my side.”

“That would not avail us, and only remind me of my humiliation, and my cruelty in marrying you.”
He drank deeply. His face was like the stony mask she had first beheld at the dance where they met:
correct, proper, revealing no hint of the generous man within. “You see, Elizabeth, I have known for
some time that I could not – that I cannot lie with you as a man should lie with his wife.”

“But how can this be?”

“In my youth I was as other men. But last year – not long ere we came to know each other – this
affliction overtook me. My love for you has burned so strongly that I believed I could overcome it.
Foolish, reckless pride! All I have done is ensure that the woman I love must have a share in my
suffering.”

Such news was too shocking to be borne. Yet Elizabeth refused to think of her own dismay. Her husband’s evident pain and shame must be greater even than her own grief. “My love – it is but the first night. We shall have many nights together, a lifetime’s worth –”

“And if I cannot answer now, when I have dreamt of you these many months, then truly I am beyond hope.” Darcy placed the empty wineglass on the dressing table, and she noted that his hand shook. “I would beg your forgiveness, were it possible to be forgiven for so egregious a mistake as I have made. I can in courtesy only leave you.”

Elizabeth could find no words to stop him, no words whatsoever, as Darcy left her chamber for his own. And so it was that her only companion in her wedding bed was sorrow.

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The next day was desolation. Elizabeth did not see Darcy until the breakfast table, and there his evident discomfiture silenced whatever halting attempts she could have made at conversation.

Wretched though this solitude was, she later felt certain that it was the best part of their day, and that Darcy would have agreed with this sentiment, had they had one moment’s privacy to speak. However, they instead found themselves in the position of all new-married couples – accepting callers, welcoming family members and making such arrangements as were necessary for their impending journey to Pemberley. There, of course, Elizabeth would immediately assume the role of mistress. This meant that she was much in conversation with Mr. Darcy’s – with their servants, many of whom were already in attendance upon them at Netherfield. Though they all behaved with courtesy, she wondered what whispers might be taking place on the back stairs. Those who washed the linen, those who helped dress her in the morning and saw her distress, those who assisted Mr. Darcy, very much in his own room, to prepare for the day: Did they all know of this? They could not comprehend the real truth. But surely they suspected the wedding night had not been a success. Elizabeth’s chagrin was increased by the realization that she would surely be the one blamed. Perhaps they thought her cold, or, worse, no maid upon her marriage and thus the cause of Mr. Darcy’s disgust.

Such feelings of pique, though natural and strong, did not govern her temper. Her foremost concern was the wellbeing of her husband

When night came, she had Fletcher prepare her for bed as thoroughly as before. Fletcher had brought wine again, but this time Elizabeth took none; though she knew not what calamity had befallen them, she determined to do all differently upon this second assay. After an hour of waiting that drove her to distraction, she summoned her courage and went to his chamber instead.

Mr. Darcy startled upon her entrance. Then, however, his countenance became distant and forbidding. “You should not have come.”

“So it very shocking, that a wife might come to her husband’s bed? Not in the ordinary way of things, I am given to understand, but surely within the realm of propriety. Assuming, of course, that this wife chooses the correct door and does not instead wander into the private chamber of the butler.”

He almost smiled then, and she felt the pleasure of knowing her wit well-placed. “Your good humor
is more than I expected, or deserve.”

“My humor may yet improve, sir.” She raised an eyebrow and hoped he would take her meaning.

Whether he did or did not could not be determined. Already Darcy’s countenance had assumed that forbidding coolness she disliked so heartily. “I suppose it is best that we discuss what you are to do, in light of my inadequacy. Though I beg of you that we speak of it this once and no more, quickly and directly for my sake at least, as I find the subject even more objectionable than you must.”

This had not the tone for which Elizabeth had wished, nor had Darcy made any motion to suggest she come closer. But as he had suggested they talk intimately, it was therefore a beginning, and she sat on the foot of his bed.

He began a speech which she realized must have been oft-rehearsed in the past day, and yet repetition had stripped away none of the emotion. “As you must know, my condition is one of the very few deficiencies that allow a wife to divorce her husband. Such a public action would no doubt prove – scandalous, shocking, distressing to all involved. However, if you wish to assert these grounds, I shall admit their veracity, and I would settle upon you a sum as should provide for a more than comfortable living.”

Elizabeth could only gape, until she found the voice to retort, “Divorce! I will not countenance it.”

“Then I must suggest the more common alternative in such situations.” Darcy’s jaw clenched; this was somehow more odious to him than even the thought of divorce. “I grant you your freedom. If you wish henceforth to – to spend your time in London without me, in company of your choosing, then that is your right, not to be begrudged.” She did not understand him until he added, very quietly, “I shall be blind to evidence and deaf to rumor.”

Slowly she rose from the bed. The anger that coursed through her – she had not known such indignation since --

--since he had proposed to her the first time.

“Sir, when first you applied for my hand, I believed that you had insulted me as thoroughly as man ever could insult woman. I see now that I was mistaken. Not even then, at the height of my temper and the depth of my misapprehension of your character, could I ever have dreamt you held me in such low esteem as to believe me capable of – of – the false, shameful arrangement you have proposed. I trust you will excuse me.”

With that she departed. Once again Elizabeth spent a night in her bridal bed with no groom beside her. She found fury a warmer companion than sorrow, if not an easier one.

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Yet sleep is a sure gentler of mood. The next day, Elizabeth reflected more fully upon what had been said, most particularly by her husband, and why.

Again the morning provided little chance for private conversation between husband and wife. Instead of frivolities, their attention was taken by more immediate concerns – foremost among them closing Netherfield Park so that Bingley and Jane might find all in order upon their return from their wedding trip to London.
How kind it had been, Elizabeth thought, for the Bingleys to open their home to them … for the alternative would have been for them to spend their wedding night at Longbourn, a possibility that had seemed odious before and now made her shudder. How much greater would have been their mortification! But there at least Darcy could not have made himself separate from her.

They two had planned to make their wedding trip in the spring. Darcy wanted her to see Italy, and the prospect had filled her with such delight – though mostly because he would be with her there – and now what would that journey be? Elizabeth did not know and could not guess.

In the afternoon, she sat in a parlor with windows that faced southwest, the better to have light for her novel. As Darcy was far more occupied with the business of their travel than she, Elizabeth expected him not. However, a knock upon the door quickened her heart even before she lifted her head and saw him standing there – quiet and abashed.

Her heart full, she said, “You need not knock, sir. This is no more my house than yours – and wherever I am, you are most welcome.”

No sooner had Elizabeth said the words than Darcy was by her side, his hands clasping hers fervently. “I most grievously offended you. To have addressed you in so unfeeling a manner upon such a tender subject is beyond rudeness. Please allow me most sincerely to beg your pardon.”

“It shall not be allowed, for mine was the greater fault. All day I have thought of what you offered to me. While I reject those possibilities as strenuously now as I did then and ever shall, I realize now what … greatness of spirit was required for you to speak so.” To have offered his public humiliation or private degradation as a means of easing her situation had been selflessness embodied. “You were in error, sir, but you erred only in the application of your kindness. And surely that I can forgive, if you can but excuse my harsh responses.”

“I deserved no less. For my speech last night was hardly my most deplorable mistake.”

Though such self-castigation was a sign of his sincere repentance and regard, Elizabeth could not but think that it did not aid their situation. “Tell me, my husband, how did this affliction come upon you? Were you injured, perhaps? Or was there some lamentable illness?”

“It was lamentable, to be sure, but otherwise you have come not near the point.” He hesitated, then took his seat beside her. “You should have the truth of this, for I owe you no less. But to speak of such matters – please trust that I do so solely that you may understand, and with no disrespect for your delicacy.”

Elizabeth nodded. She had thoughts about men’s concern for the “delicacy” of women, and how often the result was merely feminine ignorance of matters that for the comfort of both parties would better be understood. But this subject could be raised at another time, when he was not seeking her tender confidence.

Still clasping her hands, Darcy began, “Whilst in London the season before Bingley took Netherfield, I did as many young men before me have done, thinking to fill the idle months and years before entering into matrimony. I … took a mistress.”

This information was not as startling as its teller perhaps believed. The habits of young men were not wholly mysterious to Elizabeth. She only squeezed his hands that he might know he could continue.

“Always I had held this practice in contempt,” Darcy said. “Yet I too fell prey to it, and worsened my situation through my own pride. Many of my fellows took up with actresses and other creatures of the demimonde who were nonetheless intelligent, likeable persons. Though these women would
ever lack virtue and refinement, they nonetheless possessed their own sort of honor. Several might have made respectable gentlewomen had their positions in life been but slightly altered. However, I considered myself above the company I kept, and so chose a woman whom I might justly despise. Her beauty was matched only by her vulgarity. By loathing her I found it easier to pretend that I did not loathe myself for my weakness.”

Elizabeth wondered what sort of conversation was to be had among such women. Though all her education told her their discussions were likely to be uncouth, she could not but think that they would also be highly interesting.

“One night, before I went to her, I had taken much to drink. Thus the – malady first befell me.” Hastily he added, “That is of no moment, however. It is not an unfamiliar consequence of drinking more wine than is good for one.”

“That much I knew,” she dared to add. “It is in Shakespeare.”

“Is it?” Darcy must not have paid nearly enough attention to Shakespeare to find that surprising, but it did not long distract him. “If that women knew it, she cared not. For her it was but a reason to ridicule me, which she did most cruelly. She said I was no man, that I had ever displeased her but now had disappointed her beyond all endurance. I crept away with the sound of her laughter in my ears.”

“That was unkindness.”

“Had she but been patient – spoken gently once in her entire vicious life – I believe I should have thought no more of the matter. Yet the next night, though entirely sober, I found myself equally unable to answer. The mockery of her gaze! The cruelty of her words!” He no longer met Elizabeth’s eyes. “Would you believe that I went to her yet again the night after? I wished to redeem myself. Instead in her chamber I found her with another, who was vigorously providing that which I could not – to her evident delight. Upon discovery she only laughed the harder.”

“She sounds wholly unworthy of any decent man’s attention.”

“So she was, and yet that provided no consolation. I attempted again, with others, all to no avail. Eventually I realized that a few nights’ cruelty had forever unmanned me. It was in such temper that I left London and joined Bingley here. No doubt you have wondered at my coldness when first we met, how unwilling I was to please or be pleased. Now at last you know the source of it.”

Long-ago words echoed in her thoughts: *She is tolerable, I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt me.* How little had she ever dreamt what emotions might underlie such a statement!

More gently, Darcy added, “Then I came to know you. Your wit, your liveliness, your forthright nature, your beauty – all of these convinced me first that I could desire you, then that I could love you. In the privacy of my own home …” His voice trailed off, only now embarrassed. “Let me say only that I felt certain I could do you honor as your husband. I told myself that my earlier failings had been but a reflection of the company I kept, and that with another, worthier woman, one who held my sincere esteem and affection, all would be well. On this assumption I proceeded, and thus I led us both to an unhappy pass. This indiscretion – I have not offended you?”

“You have not, sir. You do me great honor by showing such faith in my understanding.”

Darcy’s eyes met hers, seeking comfort as openly as any trusting child, and she knew such tenderness as brought a lump to her throat. “I ought never to have proposed to you, Elizabeth, knowing what I knew. Though I hoped to overcome my weakness, I had no right to take such a
chance with your happiness.”

“My happiness is not solely situated in our marriage bed. We are friends, are we not? Can we not – converse, and dine, and carry on our daily activities while enjoying one another’s company as we did during our engagement? You are my life’s companion. Do not let us be parted by recrimination and pain. Let us enjoy what is given to us.”

Mr. Darcy was but little comforted. “You say this now, but in one month, or one year, you will judge differently.”

Indeed there were other, greater concerns regarding their situation. Yet Elizabeth refused to consider such matters at the moment. What was most important was restoring their confidence and trust in one another. “Then give me one month, or one year. Give me whatever we may have.”

He lifted her hand and kissed the palm, and they were friends once more.

Friendship, of course, was not enough for a lifetime – as Elizabeth mused that night in her solitary bed. Darcy’s problem was no physical ailment; to her it sounded no more than a failure of confidence, and confidence could be restored in time.

Surely there must be ways for a husband and wife to overcome such a grievous difficulty. Just as surely, polite society would never allow discussion of such matters, nor would she find information in any book.

Therefore she would have to take such counsel as she could trust. Thank goodness that what society and literature would not acknowledge was still the province of confidences among women.
Chapter 2

To ask her mother was, Elizabeth decided, beyond all consideration. Even were Mrs. Bennett to know of any good remedy, her discretion could not be trusted, and Elizabeth would not subject her husband to even the possibility of further humiliation. Besides, the prodigious speed and quantity of her parents’ childbearing suggested to Elizabeth that her present calamity was not one they had ever endured.

Jane was now a married woman the same as she, though of as short a duration. As yet she must have little advice to offer. Still, she had ever been Elizabeth’s main confidante and friend, and readily would Jane’s counsel have been sought were she and Bingley not in London.

They planned to visit the Bingleys upon that family’s return to Netherfield some weeks hence, but that could not yet avail Elizabeth.

She had one other married sister, but so unthinkable was the idea of speaking to Lydia on such an intimate topic that it did not occur to Elizabeth save as a private joke.

At least she and Darcy were well installed at Pemberley. The house’s grandeur and scale quite intimidated Elizabeth; she had sufficient housekeeping to manage a staff of four or five maids, a cook and perhaps a man of all work, and yet now she was to govern dozens. But the housekeeper was a sensible woman who wisely contrived to ask Elizabeth questions in a way that instructed her as to what appropriate answers would be. Fletcher had proved herself trustworthy and amiable. If Elizabeth were not yet fully a wife, she could at least answer as Pemberley’s mistress.

Georgiana was delighted to have her brother back, “and my sister, too, for I may call you my sister now, can I not? I have always wanted a sister.”

“And indeed you have one now.” Elizabeth smiled as she smoothed Georgiana’s hair. “I myself have never been in want of sisters, but I am most heartily glad of another, especially one so dear as you.”

As for Darcy – still he kept to his room, as she did to hers, and he did not seem to admit of any greater hopes for their situation. Yet he now kissed her good morning, conversed with her easily and intelligently throughout the day, took her out riding and in all other ways proved himself a fine companion. Each being an avid reader, they would share choice passages in the books they had selected, and began to take pleasure in performing the voices of such characters as would provide amusement. They were becoming friends in the manner every husband and wife should wish … save for this one deficiency, the one that damaged all the rest.

Never did he kiss her goodnight. Their evening parting remained, always a moment of sorrow.

Elizabeth had resigned herself to this situation enduring at least until their visit to the Bingleys – but then a letter came announcing visitors.

My most esteemed Mr. Darcy –

You will pardon my addressing you in so familiar a manner, though I feel certain you well
remember our acquaintance formed at the home of your worthy aunt and my infinitely gracious patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Although I am given to understand that relations between you and your aunt are at present somewhat short of complete felicity –

“She told me I had polluted our bloodlines for all time,” Darcy interjected as he read this missive. “She declared that I should never more be welcome at Rosings, and had she her way, Pemberley would be pulled down stone by stone ere I should bring you here to live!”

Elizabeth’s lips twitched with a smile she could not entirely repress. “You must admit, sir, that is ‘somewhat short of complete felicity.’”

Darcy continued reading, his voice shifting into tones that, while not outright mocking the patterns of Mr. Collins’ speech, were like enough to increase Elizabeth’s mirth.

--I feel that this need not preclude amiable relations between your household and mine, particularly as we would of course conceal all knowledge of it from Lady Catherine, the better to preserve her steadiness of mind. Given the long friendship between our wives, it is only natural that Mrs. Collins and I should call to pay our respects upon your marriage, and we shall arrive on Thursday next. I trust my dear cousin Elizabeth will rejoice to think of our coming.

Sincerely, your most humble servant,

William Collins

“A very trusting soul indeed,” Elizabeth noted, “if he trusts that I rejoice to see him. But Charlotte is most welcome, if you can long endure her husband.”

“I would deny you no pleasure within my power to grant.” Mr. Darcy looked grave for a moment, perhaps considering the ramifications of his last remark. “I shall undertake to teach Mr. Collins how to shoot. That should keep him out of house the entire week, and make him at least as much my groundskeeper’s burden as my own.”

“Unfortunate groundskeeper.”

“He has been after me to buy new dogs – more for his enjoyment than my own, I think. After this, he shall certainly have earned them.”

“You had better hope Mr. Collins proves a better huntsman than a dancer, or a player of cards. Otherwise you are like to need a new groundskeeper to go with the new dogs.”

Charlotte was not Elizabeth’s first choice of confidante in this matter, not least because the subject of Mr. Collins’ involvement in amorous exertions was one to be avoided if at all possible. However, Charlotte was by now some time married, and though her friendship with Elizabeth had been more distant since, still there existed between them a spirit of cordiality and good feeling.
And now that she had been married a month and still remained a maid, Elizabeth’s anxiety had grown most acute. Advice must be had, and Charlotte was the likeliest provider.

The Collinses arrived in due course. For the first long while, when all four of them visited together, Elizabeth amused herself by observing Mr. Collins’ attempts to praise Pemberley and yet somehow find it wanting in comparison to Rosings Park. Mr. Darcy forbore with great patience.

Only on the third night of the Collins’ stay did the married women of the party find any privacy in which to talk. Georgiana had a headache, which seemed to portend no serious illness but obliged her to retire early, and Mr. Collins evidenced an interest in the stables, which despite the late hour Mr. Darcy agreed to satisfy. However, as Elizabeth and Charlotte at last regarded one another in the sitting room, Elizabeth found herself at a loss as to how she might proceed. Such a delicate topic – how could it be raised?

Fortunately, Charlotte herself steered the conversation in useful directions. “You seem not well, Lizzie. Forgive me for mentioning it, but I believe you are much – worn down by care.”

“Indeed, Charlotte, I am. To have quitted my sphere as a daughter and become a wife – I find myself still very unsure.”

“That will pass in time, and you will accustom yourself to the patterns of your husband’s life. Certainly you have secured an ideal situation here, and can want for nothing.”

Always Charlotte looked at matrimony as first an arrangement of property. Elizabeth had oft challenged her on this question, but knew now she was forever silenced. She had married wealth, and in the eyes of those who are always on the lookout for hypocrisy, so much so that they will invent it where it is not to be found, her earlier proclamations had been shown to be false. She believed in marrying for love more than ever, and felt she would have taken Fitzwilliam Darcy had he not even one hundred pounds per annum, but ah, who would believe her?

Charlotte continued, “Still your countenance is grave. I trust Mr. Darcy is not unkind to you?”

“Indeed not! He is very kind. Very generous, and more considerate of my feelings than I would ever have dreamt when we first met.”

“You would not have thought him capable of any consideration then!”

“Do not remind me! I believed him cold, beyond the reach of any proper feeling. How little I knew him.”

Charlotte raised one eyebrow. “He does not … importune you overmuch?”

After all her worries, and now Charlotte had spoken of matrimonial matters herself! Elizabeth ought to have expected it, now that they were both wives. “No. In fact, I feel he does not importune me enough.”

“That is a singular complaint.”

Was it? If only Elizabeth knew.

“Most wives would be glad to be little inconvenienced in that manner,” Charlotte said. “I claim women’s troubles for many days before and after their true course, and Mr. Collins respects this entirely. He would never lower himself to question the housemaids. Thus half the month I enjoy untroubled sleep. Should Mr. Darcy eventually fall into the more usual pattern of male overindulgence, you might consider a similar stratagem.”
Elizabeth could not wonder at Charlotte’s reluctance to share her bed with Mr. Collins. Yet Charlotte had married him, and to so blithely disregard her matrimonial duty, not to mention a source of great comfort between husband and wife, seemed unworthy of her. However, Elizabeth held her tongue. Her initial contempt for Charlotte’s choice had forever injured their friendship, and to opine further on her marriage might drive them asunder. “You do not understand, Charlotte. Mr. Darcy does not—we do not—” How could she say this, without betraying his confidence? “I fear we might not have children.”

“That is truly cause for distress,” Charlotte said. At last real sympathy flowed between them. They held hands a moment, and Elizabeth felt somewhat comforted. But then her friend said, “But the Gardiners, your uncle and aunt, they have many children, more than they can well keep up with. Might not one be fostered with you? And with so many sisters, you are bound to have so many nieces and nephews that in time one or more might be made a member of your household, with no undue deprivation to their parents and a very material increase in their fortunes. It is a shame that there should be no direct heir to Pemberley, but my husband has it from Lady Catherine de Bourgh that the estate is such as can be inherited by heirs female. Thus Georgiana or her children may succeed Darcy.”

These true statements did not assuage Elizabeth’s sorrow. They only deepened it by showing her the gulf of feeling that lay between her and her onetime dear friend.

Charlotte smiled. “Really, Lizzie, you should count yourself lucky. You have all the benefits of matrimony with none of the trouble, and you may in time have the joys of motherhood without its attendant pain and peril. And you are the mistress of so great a house! Take heart, and think upon that.”

Elizabeth patted Charlotte’s hand, but could speak of matters close to her heart no longer. She dared to ask what Anne de Bourgh’s reaction to the wedding had been, and the resulting gossip (Anne and Colonel Fitzwilliam? Behind Lady Catherine’s back? Shocking!) kept them occupied until Mr. Collins returned to report that Mr. Darcy’s white stallion was a fine steed, but no match for Lady Catherine’s chestnut mare.

Any further hope of good counsel would have to wait for her visit to her sister.

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“Darcy! Good man! I feel as though we have not seen one another in years! And Mrs. Darcy — my new sister.” Bingley clasped her hand with warmth, and Elizabeth could but smile.

“My dear brother,” she said. “And Jane!”

Jane came rushing toward her, and then there were hugs, laughter and happy tears, and Darcy and Bingley watching them in amusement.

Elizabeth had known herself to be the second-most beautiful bride at her wedding, and she had begrudged it not one whit, because surely no woman’s loveliness and joy could have eclipsed Jane’s on that day. Yet Jane seemed to glow all the brighter now. Her every glance at Bingley spoke of affection and trust.

Only one problem muddled their matrimonial bliss.
“We are rather close to Mamma,” Jane said. “Though naturally I wish to see her, and Kitty and Mary, and of course Papa, very often! But – perhaps – not quite so often as the trip is made, or requested of me.”

“Your family is my family,” Bingley said reassuringly, though in the tone of one who is taking up a burden to be shared. “As mine is yours, though I cannot get Caroline to come and stay. She will not next visit us until well after you two have gone.”

Had she postponed her trip specifically to avoid them? Probably Caroline Bingley as yet found it too mortifying to address Elizabeth as Mrs. Darcy. Elizabeth did not regret her absence. How easy it would be to read knowledge into her contemptuous looks, to imagine Caroline thinking, Mr. Darcy would have no difficulties with me as wife!

This was of course a ridiculous fancy, and yet Elizabeth was not in a state of mind to easily disregard such.

Propriety allowed greater familiarity between sisters, even after marriage, than friends could ever claim. Even as Elizabeth removed her day dress to begin preparing for dinner, Jane burst in wearing only her shift and curl-papers, the better to embrace yet again. “How I have missed you, Lizzie. So much have I had to tell, and so few to whom I could tell it!”

“You seem to have all the happiness you deserve, sweet Jane.”

“Indeed I do.” Jane’s face seemed to glow with delight. “Is not marriage bliss? I know now why we do not speak of such things to young girls. It would make them too impatient.”

“Is it as pleasant for you as all that?”

“Of course! But – is it not for you and Mr. Darcy?”

Elizabeth clasped Jane’s hands, grateful for an understanding auditor. “We have got off to a bad start, I fear. Mr. Darcy is consideration itself, as loving and kind a husband as could be wished, but our intimacies are … fraught with uncertainty.”

“There is nothing to be afraid of! The first night, I admit, I was unsure of myself – Mamma was right about the postures seeming rude. But Bingley was so kind, so ardent in his attentions, that soon I delighted to him. Within a week, I took as much pleasure as he did, and how happy he was to know it.” Jane sat on Elizabeth’s bed, hugging her knees to her chest.

“Were that it were always so simple,” Elizabeth sighed.

“You must enjoy yourselves,” Jane insisted. “You must be as open with each other as children, as free with your imagination, and as willing to play.”

“Play?”

“Of course!” Though Jane’s cheeks had begun to pink, she continued, “One night, very early, Bingley asked me how I knew what I knew about, well, about everything. I told him quite honestly that I had once watched the horses.”

“Jane!” Elizabeth began to laugh despite herself.

Laughing also, Jane said, “And I made as to imitate the mare, and then Bingley imitated the stallion, and what was at first a source of mirth then became a most thrilling diversion.”
Elizabeth, who had never dreamed of such, could hardly summon the strength to say, “You pretended to be horses? As you – lay abed?”

Jane nodded. She knew well the impropriety of her speech, and yet she clearly had chosen to battle her natural modesty, so as to better help her sister. “Bingley and I contrive all sorts of games. I tied a scarf around his eyes once, for blind man’s bluff … of a sort. We tickle each other, or spank each other as though we were naughty children, or wrestle in the bed as earnestly as any athletes. Then, only last week, he took livery from the servants’ closets and surprised me at night pretending to be a footman overcome with amour. And I was shocked, very shocked indeed! – until I was equally overcome. Oh, how we laughed afterward.”

To think of something so intimate as a source of laughter – it astonished Elizabeth, and yet she was less shocked than she was envious of the evident felicity between Jane and her husband.

Could matters ever be so easy between Darcy and herself?

“There, I have said too much, Lizzie, and asked not nearly enough. Are you still uneasy with Mr. Darcy in such matters? There is no need for fear, you know. Surely my silly stories have proved that much, at least.”

“I do not fear him, Jane. I could never fear a man so good. Yet –” Once again, Elizabeth found she could not describe their exact predicament. Darcy deserved some small measure of privacy, and she would not betray the great trust he had shown. “—it is he who is uneasy with me. In his youth he had unfortunate experiences, and the prospect of marital togetherness fills him with more distress than I ever knew myself.”

“Poor Mr. Darcy!”

“Indeed. I feel that in time he will be soothed and come to me as a husband ought, but how much time, Jane? I would wish for the harmony you and Bingley share. Our affection would support it, of this I am certain. Only it is so very hard to wait.”

Jane came to her sister and hugged her again. “There, there. You can only love him, and show him the tenderest regard. In time he will be more at ease with you. Perhaps it was only to be expected that a man of such circumspection would find the intimacies of marriage strange, at first.”

Elizabeth’s initial reaction was surprise – for Jane had glimpsed a truth in Mr. Darcy’s character that she herself had not. Had not Darcy said that he chose a mistress whom he could disdain? Surely this could only spring from a reluctance to be fully exposed, in body and spirit, before one whose regard meant much to him. But as he came to trust and know her more, this reluctance would be defeated. How, though, might Elizabeth be able to make him understand as much? “That is the question. I must make him at ease with me, particularly in that way, yet it is difficult to begin when the situation is already so fraught.”

“Is it as bad as all that?” Jane hesitated, obviously struggling for words. “Has he – does he at least – when you are together in that fashion – Lizzie, does Mr. Darcy make ready to fence?”

“What do you mean, Jane?”

“You do not even know? Oh, this is most distressing indeed!” Jane put her hand to her cheek.

“There is far too much I do not know, given that I am a woman wed.” Elizabeth could no longer conceal her distress. “I realize that only time and affection can improve our circumstances, but it is so very difficult to endure the waiting.”
“Take heart. You love him, and he you. So long as that is true, the rest can all be mended. Someday this time of privation will be only a memory.”

This said, Jane embraced her once more, and Elizabeth took consolation in such ready sympathy. But dinner-time neared, and they each had to prepare. Before long their ladies’ maids would be with them and all privacy would be at an end.

As Jane went to the door, though, she hesitated. “Lizzie – if you think it would help – I am quite sure that Pemberley would also have footman’s livery enough for Darcy to borrow.”

“… I do not think that would yet avail us.”

**

Springtime came to Pemberley, as it did to all England, early in the year. Warm sunlight banished the snows, and most rejoiced in the temperate climes. To Elizabeth, however, the very lushness of the foliage seemed to taunt her, as did the new lambs and calves. All around her, the world was bursting into extravagant, exuberant life, while she slept alone between sheets cold and white as winter.

They held a ball for Georgiana and her friends, a grander affair than Elizabeth had ever before attended, much less hosted, but thanks to the wise counsel of the housekeeper, Elizabeth prepared for every detail. A handful of the more powdered and primped guests, the set who had longed to see Caroline Bingley as mistress of the house, said afterward that the decorations and refreshments were not quite the thing – not nearly so elaborate as one would expect at Pemberley. Those with better taste and temper instead praised Elizabeth’s elegance, and it was widely felt that what the ball lacked in frippery it more than made up for in good humor and conviviality.

“Do you believe you shall dance, sir?” Elizabeth said to Darcy as the couples took their place for the first number. She could scarcely contain her smile. “Or will you again leave young women in want of partners? I know how disagreeable you find such affairs …”

“Allow me to do what I should have done the first night we met,” he replied, holding out his hand to hers.

Elizabeth had a lively disposition that delighted in dancing. Not only was it an opportunity for amusing conversation, but also it was fine exercise that brought a glow to her cheeks and quickened her heartbeat.

And yet now that flush of exhilaration reminded her of the one night she had her husband in her bed, for the brief half-hour in which she had thought herself a wife in full …

Darcy’s gloved hand around her gloved hand could not compensate for the lack of his ardent touch. The admiration of gathered friends could not console for never having seen her husband’s smile upon waking in their bed one morning. The pounding of her heart, the heat in her cheeks, reminded her of the tiny sliver of marital happiness she had known and of the great emptiness within her where so much more ought to have been.

She begged her husband’s pardon when he asked for later dances, and would go about the floor with no other man. No one else thought much of this – a hostess throwing her first grand ball might well be expected to tire early, perhaps in truth before the party had even begun. But Elizabeth could feel Darcy’s gaze following her, more and more saturnine as the night wore on.
The last guest’s departure saw the smile fall from Elizabeth’s face. As they repaired upstairs to the sound of servants’ clatter and cleaning, Darcy said, “You do not delight in your triumph.”

“Triumph.” In her mouth the word was hollow. “It went well. Yes.”

“It is unlike you to seek refuge in such commonplace phrases. What troubles you, my dearest?”

Elizabeth could not answer truthfully; to do so would be to wound him. Yet she would not lie to her husband. Instead she stared straight ahead, up the stairs, no more focused upon Darcy to her left hand than she was the flame of the candle to her right.

Only the briefest of hesitations had been necessary to confirm Darcy’s suspicions. “I told you it would be thus. That even your depthless patience and charity would come to an end, when confronted with the reality of spending your earthly life with a man less than a husband.”

“Mr. Darcy, please – ” But Elizabeth knew not what to plead for, that he could give. They shared one anguished glance before abruptly he turned and hastened to his own chamber.

In her distress Elizabeth did not wish to return to the bed she found so lonely. Instead she went to the second-floor landing. On fine days, Darcy had told her, they might take tea there together. When summer came. But summer seemed to stretch out before her as one more desert she must cross without water. All she wanted was silence and a chance to behold the stars.

Her eyes were so blurred with tears as she stepped outside that it took her some moments to blink them away and see the constellations overhead. Only then did she hear the soft rustle of cloth and movement that alerted her to the presence of another on the landing.

“Oh! Georgiana!” Elizabeth dabbed hastily at her eyes. “You have quite startled me.”

“I did not mean to be clandestine,” Georgiana said. “The dancing has left me overheated, I fear. The cool air is bracing – is it not?”

At once Elizabeth understood this was Georgiana’s gentle way of asking whether she might inquire into her sister-in-law’s evident distress, or whether she should Elizabeth to pretend herself fine, whichever might best help. Such kindness was at that moment more impossible to bear than any cruelty could have been. Elizabeth could no longer speak for her tears, and Georgiana took her hand and led them to sit side by side on the small landing bench.

“Forgive me,” Elizabeth said when she had regained some slight composure. “I did not mean to trouble you.”

“But we are sisters now, and sisters confide in one another.” How Georgiana must have wished for such a confidante, these many years! Yet Elizabeth knew she must disappoint.

“This is a private matter, dear Georgiana. When you are married, you will understand the need for privacy between husbands and wives.”

By this Elizabeth meant only the natural confidentiality between spouses. But Georgiana’s quick mind leaped ahead and glimpsed a shadow of the true meaning. She drew herself upright, so that her statuesque height was more apparent than her usual shyness, and said, “I can hear that too, if you wish to be heard. Some subjects are unfit for the ears of untouched young girls, but – not unfit for mine.”

Her meaning struck Elizabeth and made her gasp. “Good God! Wickham!”
Georgiana ducked her head, but her words were not so bashful. “He is not such a villain as to have – to go so far as – I am still a maid, and I may go to my marriage bed with honor. This I swear.”

Elizabeth believed her, but … “What do you mean, Georgiana?”

By now Georgiana’s blush was such as could be seen even by candlelight. “Wickham showed me those tender affections which – though usually practiced only by husbands and wives – might allow a man and woman to know all the pleasure of the marital act without committing one’s self fully to sin. I am ever thankful he presumed no more, and shamed of my weakness in giving way so far, but I am not sorry for the knowledge itself. Forgive my speaking of it, but I wish only to show that I can hear you, as a good sister – almost as a married one – if you need to speak.”

It had been hard enough for Jane to speak of such subjects to the sister she had known for a lifetime, discussing the man who loved and valued her as wife; Elizabeth could well imagine the torments Georgiana endured, shy as she was, speaking of intimacies with a man who had abused her trust and her heart. This she had done for love of Elizabeth, and no gratitude could be great enough.

“Dear Georgiana.” Elizabeth took her in an embrace. “How good you are! And yet this subject cannot be shared between us. You are sister to another, as well, and I think the very confidences that would comfort me would prove distressing for you.”

“I had not looked at it in that light.” Georgiana considered, then nodded. “You are right, of course. I see my brother as a brother, not as a husband, and it is better such. But may I sit with you a time, then? Even silence can be consolation when shared.”

And so they clasped hands and sat together beneath the stars for quite a while, until Georgiana was near nodding off and Elizabeth sent her to bed.

Despite her own exhaustion, Elizabeth lay awake some time longer. Her mind was much occupied with Georgiana’s words – about practices that allowed men and women to know pleasure, even without the ordinary joining of bodies. Elizabeth had hardly dreamed of such. Jane’s stories had suggested that the ultimate act was far from the only part of marital intimacy that could be enjoyable, but to do without it altogether? And yet to share a bed in mutual delight?

It had to be admitted: This showed some ingenuity on Wickham’s part. How loathsome to think that a man so unprincipled could easily share a woman’s bed, while one so noble as Darcy was denied this.

But if Darcy could do as Wickham had done – if he could in some other fashion give her the pleasure of matrimony, if not the act – might he not come to see himself a worthy husband? This perhaps could relax him to the point where he might be willing and able to try again. And might not her own sense of deprivation be slightly lessened by this practice?

Elizabeth resolved to make one more trip to her husband’s bedchamber, the better to explore this most interesting topic.
Reasoning that, by the time she had made her decision, Darcy would be soundly asleep, Elizabeth waited until the next night for her expedition.

The household retired early. As soon as Fletcher had readied her for bed, Elizabeth tucked herself in – but only to wait. When enough time had passed that she could feel certain of meeting no one in the hall, she took up her candle and walked from her room to Darcy’s. She rapped softly, and the drowsy reply was, “Yes, yes, and what is it?” Polite though his tone was, obviously he thought her a servant.

She opened the door and walked in, her candle steadier than the heart which trembled in her chest. Darcy sat upright in bed, but was apparently too recently roused from slumber to fully grasp the meaning of her visit. “Elizabeth – you are not in your bed?”

“I am now, sir.” With that she put her candle on the nearest table and clambered between the sheets in which he lay. “You see, this is my bed too – or so I have it, and on very good authority. Did not you stand before the vicar and declare that you had endowed me with all your worldly goods? Each and every one, and thus the bed is included.” Elizabeth smiled to gentle the effect of her wit. “Though on second thought I shall leave you sole possession of the barouche. Far too fashionable for a simple country girl like me.”

Darcy leaned back slightly upon the pillows, and he smiled too, though the expression was wistful. “You are singular, Mrs. Darcy.”

“Ah, that is a comment that can be a compliment, or far from it as could be imagined.”

“Every compliment that can be uttered by the lips of man, or deserved by the virtues of woman, is rightfully yours. Along with the barouche.” But the flicker of humor did not last long. “I can well imagine what impulse has brought you here. It grieves me – for your sake, not your own. Until last night I had hoped you had found some measure of … acceptance, contentment even. I ought to have known better. Did not I say that this marriage could not long please you?”

“Not as it stands, sir, but I am given to understand that a more satisfactory arrangement might be contrived.”

“What do you mean?”

How was she to say this? The source of her information could not be named, and as for the specifics, Elizabeth had no sure knowledge. Assaying her courage, she ventured, “I would of course wish for our mutual happiness in marriage. But I have come to understand that – that – that a woman’s satisfaction in such matters may not be wholly dependent upon the pleasure of the man. And so now I ask you to give to me what I would so gladly give to you if I could.”

By the astonishment on Darcy’s face, Elizabeth knew she had made her meaning clear. “My word. Though I knew much of Shakespeare to be improper, I had never imagined his work to be so … thorough in this regard.”

“You do neglect the comedies.” This was close enough to an answer without being an outright lie. Georgiana’s privacy could be maintained.

Darcy did not seize her, but nor did he push her away. He seemed to be turning the idea over in his mind, that way and this, as anyone might examine an object never before beheld.
Very softly, Elizabeth said, “You have married a spirited woman, sir. I take you as you are, but you must take me as I am, too.”

“I had not considered this,” Darcy said, as though in apology. Elizabeth did not feel any such to be required. All society decreed – firmly, if however artificially – that this matter was solely the province of the male. The personal desire of a married woman was considered a thing invisible – a mere weed in the garden, sometimes to be cruelly plucked, but more often left to thrive on attentions directed elsewhere. It did not shock her that Darcy had not ascertained this himself; but for their circumstance, would she have been so quick to recognize it? Elizabeth suspected not.

“Well will you now consider?” She tilted her head closer to his. How she had enjoyed those first fevered kisses. The memory of them had become almost poisoned for her through the subsequent pain of their nightly separation, but now – as she breathed in the scent of his skin, found her eyes drawn to his slightly parted lips – now the poison was drawn out, and only the warmth remained. “For me, my love?”

“For you, my dearest Elizabeth. Anything for you.”

Darcy kissed her then, his hands cradling her face as gently as though she were porcelain. No fragile thing, Elizabeth would gladly have welcomed a more passionate embrace – but was not any beginning at least a beginning?

And as they continued, as Darcy eased her back onto the bed, he became less gentle. Perhaps he had begun this for her pleasure alone, but as his breathing quickened – as his hands caressed her tumbling hair, the lines of her body – as he came to settle his weight upon her – Elizabeth knew that at least so far as this their enjoyment was quite mutual.

His kisses were no longer satisfied with her mouth. Elizabeth did not startle when he kissed her throat, for she remembered this much. Yet she had not expected him to reach for the hem of her nightgown. When he lifted it, she helped him to remove the garment – little though she had expected ever to be naked before him. Like all proper young women of her class, she even bathed in a simple shift. Yet the bashfulness she would have expected to feel did not arise; instead, she found herself willing to be seen, even … proud.

If only Darcy would remove his nightshift as well, she thought – but touch was more needful than sight, and touches he provided.

When his hand at last stole to the very least mentionable place, Elizabeth understood at last. This was known to her of course by her own actions late at night, in the privacy of her own bed, ever since she ceased to be a child. Though such things were never spoken of, she assumed this behavior to be universal and natural – a pleasure so great, so quiet and so harmless could be denied by no person. She had previously wondered whether this was an activity shared by husbands and wives and was pleased to find her suspicion confirmed.

Very pleased.

Extremely – extremely pleased –

Elizabeth began to moan in a manner most wanton. Rather than withdrawing in disgust, however, Darcy seemed to be only encouraged by her behavior. Did she dare -- ? But necessity overrode modesty. She began rocking her hips as she did when she was alone, a motion she had found instinctive and helpful; he responded with yet more fevered kisses, with a pressure that increased until at last Elizabeth cried out her happiness.
When she could know herself again, she was cradled against Darcy’s chest, his hands combing through her hair. He murmured, “You told me you were a spirited woman, and my dear, you did not lie.”

“I am in all ways honest,” she said, and the slight wordplay on the term – an “honest woman” being one who admitted no sexual misconduct, and thus one probably more dishonest than others – was not missed by her husband. But there was sadness in his smile. No doubt her satisfaction had only increased his knowledge of his deprivation. “Was it – difficult for you to bear?”

“To touch you? Never.” Darcy kissed her forehead. “Yes, I am reminded of – of all that I would wish to do, and cannot. To see you so ardent, so warm, and to know that together we might – but that is only my difficulty, mine alone. Far greater is the sense of comfort that comes from knowing I have finally in part done my duty as my husband.”

Blessedly, he had learned to focus on everything he could give rather than his perceived inadequacies. Pride could now bolster him, rather than punish. “My darling Fitzwilliam. You are generosity itself.”

His smile took on a curious, searching quality. “At last you have called me by my name.”

Elizabeth did not respond to this with words, merely kissed him again. Afterward she knew the great, long-delayed pleasure of falling asleep by her husband’s side.

In the earliest hours of the morning, she awoke. At first she was conscious only of her new place in Darcy’s bed, with him spooned behind her, his snoring very soft against her shoulder. But as Elizabeth luxuriated in this embrace, something else became apparent to her about Darcy’s person …

So that was what Jane had meant about a man making ready to fence!

Assuredly Darcy’s ailment was of mind, and not of body, which was precisely as Elizabeth had suspected. Her first heated impulse was to awaken him, that they might claim this chance for a consummation.

But she thought better of it. To draw his awareness would be to renew his anxiety. Darcy must rediscover for himself the vigor of his body, and then – then, at last, she would be a wife.

Until that time, all she could do was invite more practice of this sort, which was a wifely duty she did not in the least mind undertaking.

**

The servants at Pemberley were, to a soul, honest and well-disposed toward their conscientious master. So it was that gossip about the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Darcy had been confined to a few sidelong glances and sad shrugs. To be sure, Mrs. Darcy was a generous mistress, and her good sense and kind heart more than compensated for the mild defects of her upbringing. And there was no denying that she had fine eyes and a vivacious spirit; certainly, Mr. Darcy came alight when she entered the room, and his eyes followed her wherever she went. But even the best-bred servant could not help wondering why Mr. Darcy himself never proved as devoted as his gaze – why the linens were so crisply undisturbed for them both – why no one had ever heard sounds behind a bedroom door that suggested, perhaps, morning tea could wait. Whatever could be the problem?
They were therefore much relieved when Mr. Darcy’s valet reported he had walked in to find them asleep and abed together that morning – fortunately, so quietly that he was able to back out again and discreetly wait Mrs. Darcy’s retirement to her own quarters before disturbing his master again. Though no one had spoken doubts before, they were all glad to talk at length in the young couple’s defense: They were private about such things, seeing one another in the dead of night only, disguising such evidence as servants might see with a modesty that – if somewhat devoid of common sense – nonetheless spoke well of the Darcys’ delicacy.

All was now answered. And yet the next few weeks quite undid their logic.

Either Mrs. Darcy was found in her husband’s quarters, or him in hers, every single morning afterward. Before, she had often possessed a strange melancholy obviously at odds with her fiery spirit – but now, now she smiled when no one had made a joke, ran her hands over every curve of hard wood or any stretch of velvet, closed her eyes when a savory bite entered her mouth, and bent toward her husband as naturally as a morning glory toward the sun. And Mr. Darcy’s own temper had improved. Though his saturnine moods still held sway too often, that had been ever so; now at least those moods broke to allow through moments of mirth and playfulness. It was like seeing storm clouds drifting apart, shot through with rays of sun.

They had ever been friendly to one another – but only now was there evidence of true passion.

“Suppose they controlled themselves as long as they could,” Fletcher said one evening to the washerwoman.

“Mind your place,” said the washer-woman, who knew more of the story than anyone else save the couple themselves, and their sheets. But she’d seen odder things in her time.

**

Dawn awoke Elizabeth; her husband’s bedroom faced east, and so the rising sun filtered through even his heavy curtains. She smiled to see him lying next to her, hair mussed, nightshift akimbo.

The night before, he had for the first time not merely touched her with his hand, but lowered his mouth to her. The indecency had shocked her for the few moments before excitement overtook all notions of modesty. With no thought to his own deprivation, Mr. Darcy had brought her to the very heights – not once, or twice, but more times than she could well count. Not that she’d had much thought of counting, or mind left to think at all.

Elizabeth muffled a giggle in her pillow, then sat upright in bed, the better to consider him. He lay sprawled on his back, nightshirt hitched so that she could see most all of his powerful legs. What a well-made man he was. She found her mind wandering to some of the games Jane had described. What would Darcy make of it if she commanded him to spank her like a naughty child? Or if she importuned him to wear a blindfold? Although she suspected these frolics were not precisely to his taste, perhaps others were – and he might enjoy those enough to forget himself, mightn’t he?

And Jane and Bingley had even pretended they were horses …

Darcy stirred, then smiled up sleepily at his wife. “Good morning, my love. You seem pleased with it, or with yourself – I dare not dream you so pleased with me.”

“You please me greatly, my love, as surely you recall. I was merely thinking, sir – ”
“Yes?”

“I have always found it foolish that women are expected to ride sidesaddle. It is a most precarious seat. You men, I think, are far more secure.” With that, Elizabeth slid one thigh across Darcy’s body, until she knelt astride him. “I see I was correct. This is much better.”

Darcy closed his eyes, his expression half-pleasure, half-pain. How he must wish to be able to answer as her husband at this moment!

But Elizabeth did not want to remind him of what he could not give her – only what he could. She shifted her weight, back and forth, pressing insistently against him; the sensation was far more delightful than she had anticipated. “Oh,” she whispered. “Oh, I must –”

“Yes.” Darcy seized her at the waist, and he began to push and pull with her movements, increasing the intensity of every touch. Elizabeth was much impressed with her own audacity, but the insistence of her body demanded more than modesty could ever claim.

As she moved atop him, giving in completely to her own abandon, Darcy’s hands left her only long enough to pull away her nightgown. Now she was entirely naked in the morning light – this, too, was new – but Elizabeth did not regard it. She leaned back, trusting Darcy to catch her, to guide her.

His hands were no longer content with the flesh at her belly. He reached up, palming her breasts, bending back her head, thrusting his fingers into her mouth. Elizabeth licked the salt from his skin, and he groaned –

--and it was then she became aware of the new pressure grinding against her.

Darcy’s eyes widened; his expression became desperate. “Elizabeth –”

“Yes,” she whispered. She did not know whether she spoke affirmation or permission, and it did not signify which. Whatever her husband felt, whatever he desired – in this moment, she would accept it all.

He clutched at her hips, lifting her up – she felt an unfamiliar fumbling, a warm pressure both soft and hard at once – and then pain like splitting in two, and yet somehow welcome all the same. Elizabeth bit back her cry as her flesh parted for him. Her joy must eclipse her discomfort … and even now she knew this was right, for the discomfort was already fading, while the joy only increased.

Darcy’s mouth hung open in wonder as he began to move beneath her – and she continued to ride him as she had before, though it was even better now. She marveled in the rippling of his body; impatiently she pulled up his nightshirt, and he even paused just long enough to divest himself of it, their bodies still joined. Now Elizabeth could see all of him, touch him, watch the workings of his muscles – even look down to where their bodies met, at this forbidden and yet necessary sight. Every rule of propriety told her she should have been shamed to witness; every instinct of a wife told her this was as beautiful to him as it was to her.

His fingertips found her again. By now he knew her well, and so thrilled was she that it took only the barest few touches for her to find her own release – a delicate, fluttering thing, lovely though slight, like a butterfly. What concerned her far more was Darcy’s increasing abandon – the hoarse groans that issued from his throat – and then a cry so ragged that she knew its meaning at once.

At last! Elizabeth thought as she leaned down to kiss his panting mouth. At last I am his wife in truth.

“My loveliest, sweetest Elizabeth.” Darcy covered her overheated cheeks with kisses. “You have
conquered me. You have healed me. In all ways you are perfection.”

“I deserve not such praise, Fitzwilliam. What we have found here, we have found together.”

He shook his head as he pulled her against his chest – a curious, delightful sensation, to be pressed against the length of him, skin to skin. “I was a man broken. You restored me through your patience – and through your impatience. Through accepting me as I was, but not accepting what I thought to be my fate.”

*And through the advice of women,* Elizabeth mused, but was wise enough not to say.

**

“And about time!” exclaimed the washer-woman on the next laundry day, but her loyalty to her good master and mistress was such that, when the scullery maids asked what she meant, she only shooed them away and went back to her work.

**

It came to pass some months later that the engagement of Colonel Fitzwilliam to Anne de Bourgh was announced. Lady Catherine did not openly condemn the match – with Anne close to spinsterhood, she could not well protest any eligible man making her daughter his choice. But Elizabeth and Darcy were given to understand that Lady Catherine was as cool upon the subject as could be maintained in politeness, and had given many spurious reasons why Rosings would be no fit place for the young couple to remain after their wedding. Thus Darcy wrote to his cousin to suggest the license for their marriage be taken in his parish, and inviting them to stay the first several nights at Pemberley. This offer was accepted with gratitude.

“I am glad of it,” Darcy said that night as he finished his letter in reply – the parchment laid along the small of Elizabeth’s naked back. She liked the distant scritch-scratch of pen through parchment against her skin. “Though I always knew our ‘engagement’ to be only Lady Catherine’s fantasy, I never was certain that the mother’s delusions had not been passed to the daughter. My cousin is a fine girl despite her unfortunate health and upbringing; she should have her share of happiness. I would have disliked causing her heartbreak.”

Elizabeth had always thought Anne de Bourgh looked uncommonly cross – but then, living with Lady Catherine might have that effect on the best of tempers. She glanced flirtatiously over her bare shoulder at her husband. “And your pride is not wounded at finding yourself so easily replaced, sir?”

“Am I very easily replaced?” Darcy set aside his letter and quill; it was his hand he laid upon her back now, warmth against warmth, and she stretched in languorous delight. “I should not have believed you thought so. I must teach you otherwise.”

“I greatly anticipate the lesson.” Elizabeth pushed herself up to clamber into his lap and his waiting arms. They kissed twice, then thrice, before he pulled her close and buried his face in her hair.

Their path had not been completely smooth since that first fine morning. Darcy’s anxieties still
overcame him from time to time – but less as the months drew on. His attentions to her pleasure never wavered, regardless of the state of his own desire. What mattered most was that they shared an intimacy that allowed for both happiness and disappointment, that each of them knew themselves accepted not only for their virtues but also in spite of their flaws. They did not play as innocently as children – that, Elizabeth thought, was left to those as carefree as Bingley and Jane – but they could laugh. They could try. They could even fail. This was as good a beginning for a marriage as any other, she believed.

When they released one another, it was only to make their final few preparations for bed – Darcy putting his letter on the desk and sprinkling it with sawdust so that the letters might dry legibly, or Elizabeth pouring herself a tumbler of water from the pitcher. He said, “We must invite as many friends and family as possible to the wedding. Lady Catherine will discourage her own acquaintance, and Anne has few other friends of her own.”

“Jane and Bingley will come, I feel sure.” Elizabeth could not wait to see her dearest sister again, that they might have a far more thorough conversation on all the delightful aspects of their marital duty. “I expect the Hursts and Caroline Bingley will be able to endure a visit to Pemberley at this late date. And no doubt the Lucases will come to pay all due honor to Anne, even though she was never presented at St. James’ Court.”

Darcy smiled. “What of the Collinses? Will the man’s loyalty to his patroness lead him to disregard her heir?”

“I suspect Lady Catherine will insist upon his attending, so that he can report on every detail.”

“And so you will be reunited with your friend Charlotte, if she can be away from her young son so long. Or perhaps the boy will come with her? I know not when children are considered of an age to travel.”

“Time will tell.” Elizabeth longed to see Charlotte and her son, even if the poor little fellow was doomed to carry a name so cumbersome as deBourgh Collins.

And time would tell in other ways, too. She and her husband might soon have their own reasons to discover when a child was old enough for visits to family. But this was at yet only a suspicion– no more than the curl of Elizabeth’s most secret smile.

Darcy picked her up her nightgown, as though to return it to her, then thought better of his action and tossed it aside, before doffing his own garment to join hers on the chair. They hid nothing from one another any longer. To think she had once believed he would never see her unclad, or hear her laughter in bed. How little she had understood marriage! But she had come to understand her husband, and that, Elizabeth felt sure, was enough. So it was that she smiled invitingly before turning to the candle at their bedside.

“You have asked for a lesson.” His teasing voice evoked pleasant shivers in her limbs. “And yet you are the one who has taught me.”

“It is only a matter of patience, practice and smiles.”

“What is that?”

“Some advice I received once,” Elizabeth said, “wiser than its giver.” And then she laughed, and would explain no more, and Darcy had no choice but to silence her with kisses.
THE END

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