I Have Thought of You Often

by BurntOrange

Summary

Though his life has progressed, Darcy is still haunted by his love for Elizabeth Bennet. Deciding to indulge his demons in the hope of finding some rest, he contacts a house that specializes in female companionship. The woman he is brought to will not serve as an adequate replacement for Miss Bennet...

Notes

In a P&P world in which much as gone wrong, they each make the best of their circumstances...

“Miss Bennet!”

He could not stop the words from escaping his mouth.

She stood very suddenly when she heard her name, recognizing the voice before she saw its owner. He only saw the pained look on her face for a moment before she turned her back to him and rested a palm against the wall.

The confusion of the man who had seen him into the room was palpable to Mr. Darcy, though the man quickly regained his composure.

“So you are acquainted!” the man announced, as though this were a happy meeting on the street.
“Liza”, he continued, “where are your manners? Greet your guest.”

Elizabeth did not mistake this command for a suggestion, though it took her a moment to turned back around, a tight smile fixed firmly on her face.

“I apologize.” She said with a dip of her head and bend of her knees. “Mr. Darcy, please sit. Mr. Hamish that will be all - unless Mr. Darcy would like anything other than wine...?” She allowed her voice to trail off as she shifted her eyes to Darcy's.

Darcy raised a hand that clearly dismissed the man without removing his eyes from Elizabeth. Mr. Hamish took his leave of the room with a simpering “If there is anything you require...” and a pointed look in Elizabeth's direction from behind Darcy's back.

Darcy became conscious of the state of undress which Elizabeth was in, and for the first time in a while she found herself uneasily aware of it. After a pregnant pause she broke eye contact with Mr. Darcy and gestured for him to take a seat, not allowing herself to fidget with her clothing as she desired.

She wore a red dressing gown, loosely tied and barely covering her body, over a transparent white chemise. He wore his typical jacket and cravat, and took the offered chair in as formal a fashion as he could muster, given that he had already been drinking that evening for some time. The unexpected sight of the woman who had stolen his affection three years before had sharpened his attention somewhat, but he found his mind distracted once again as she continued to smile and reached for the wine.

As she poured him a glass he found he could not bare the quiet with so many thoughts racing through his mind, his purpose for being there and the question of how she too had arrived in this room. Without much preparation he found himself blurting out, albeit in his soft, gentle voice “Miss Bennet, I am so very embarrassed for you to find me in such a position, at such an establishment.”

Her motions stilled for a moment before she straightened from pouring the wine. She kept her back to him as she ground out the words “Do you mean to mock me, Mr. Darcy?”

He found himself at a loss for words as he scrambled to find her meaning. She had had that effect on him many times before, of feeling out of his depths in their conversation. He had found that using few words was his best defense in such a situation. She turned around, the false smile still fixed on her face, her eyes sad, but defiant.

“I am well aware of the contemptuous level at which you now find me. There is no need to allude to your own shame, thereby demonstrating how much more substantial is my own.”

With her first few words Darcy understood her meaning, but his attempts to interrupt her were overrun.

“That is not it at all Miss Bennet.” He supplied with all the sincerity he could muster.

Her mouth opened in a silent laugh of embarrassment and resignation as she offered him the wine, which he accepted, and she took a sip from her own glass before placing it on the table.

“I beg you forgive me for my rudeness, Sir. It is not my place.” She dropped her eyes to the ground and her brow furrowed as a thought seemed to come to her. “Unless, of course, that is what you wish of me. You have admitted that I have tortured you in the past, perhaps you would like to see me humbled. I am quite at your disposal and will respond as you request.” Darcy found himself unable to break her soliloquy, though she left him halting pauses to step in. “Only tell me
now if you would appreciate most my indignation, my affection, my acquiescence... my shame. Only speak it now, if you are kind Sir, so that we may slip into our roles and I can give you your satisfaction.”

His dazed silence unsettled her, but seemed to break the prison of her thoughts, and so she responded as she had been taught. She quickly closed the gap between them to kneel at his feet with an apologetic smile.

“I am so sorry, I should not say such things. The mistress is forever saying I talk too much. Only your unexpected presence startled me. Who we were matters not. Allow me to bring you your satisfaction Sir. I can be whoever you like.” She draped her arms across his knees and tried her best to look contrite and pleasing.

Darcy stared in stunned silence. He wanted to laugh.

‘I can be whoever you like’ she had said.

She did not know the irony of her statement. Though laughing seemed appropriate, it was not his inclination. He did not know how to respond to the clearly lost and uncomfortable woman before him, but he knew he could not stand the silence.

“I have thought of you often these past years.” he admitted quietly. The smile disappeared from her face and the pain returned for just a few moments before a neutral mask overtook it. “Pray, how long have you been here? What brought you here?” he inquired as gently as he could.

Still resting across his lap, she address his knees with her answer. “So much has happened since my father died. I will not burden you with the history. I have been here nearly a year, to pay off my debts.” A sad and determined smile settled on her features as she turned her face to his, “I am almost complete. It will be a blessing, though I've no other prospects so I may as well stay. Such is life and I shan't complain.”

The distress deep in his eyes caused the momentary cheerfulness to slide away from her face. She found that it was she who could not bare the silence now and began making excuses again.

“I thought I had become better at telling men what they wanted to hear, but listen to me!” she laughed, plaster smile back in place. “But I never could seem to keep my demeanor sweet in your presence” she teased.

Darcy's face retained it's stoicism throughout her remarks and his own response “In that I will count myself lucky, to have known the true Eliza Bennet, unlike other men.”

She smiled at him indulgently, but confusion flickered in her eyes.

“Truly Miss Elizabeth, I have thought of you often these past years.”

“I have thought of you also, Mr. Darcy, if you truly care to know. With the situation you see me in, how could a woman not regret rejecting your hand when offered?”

“Though you did not love me.” It was a statement of fact.

“Though I did not love you.” She echoed. Her words did not seem to upset him, they were both practical minds and so she continued, what had she to lose?

“I have often since thought that I could have easily learned to care for you. But how was I to know our paths would not cross again, my father would die so soon, Jane and her husband would move away from the country and lose all connection with us...” The ghost of a smile stayed on her
face as she recounted her misfortunes. She had long since come to terms with them. Darcy watched most intently.

“I have since married as well...” he volunteered, and Elizabeth gave a congratulatory smile in his direction. The tension between their bodies began to abate as they shared such uncomfortable admissions. He found himself reaching for her hair as she relaxed against his legs.

They sat like this for a minute or two, both reflecting on the peculiarity of the situation, before Elizabeth began to press into this touch. She brought herself up on her knees and turned to face Darcy fully. He did not know how to respond as she reached for his cravat. She had it off, and several of his buttons unfastened, before he found the will to still her hands.

“I cannot allow it.” was all he could say, his eyes staring down at her hands, now covered by his own. She searched his face with confusion, waiting for him to supply a reason.

“You see, Miss Bennet, this is far too...”

It took him a minute to find the courage to continue.

“As I have said, I have thought of you often these past few years since we last met in Kent. You have haunted me. While in town, I decided to indulge my demons such that I might find some rest. Thus I cannot allow this.”

Elizabeth said nothing, continuing to search his face, not understanding. He realized such few words could not explain the situation.

“I inquired at this house with specific requirements” he explained. “A woman of your build, curling mahogany locks, rosy complexion.... deep brown eyes....Little did I know that you... that it...” He found it difficult to continue. “I was prepared to pay a woman to take your place” he finally said firmly. “I am unprepared to pay you, yourself, to participate in my sick indulgence. It is too cruel to put you through and will only worsen my condition.”

It was her turn to sit in stunned silence. After a few minutes Mr. Darcy could not help but chuckle and it was as authentic as it was uncharacteristic. Eventually Elizabeth joined him, but it quickly died out.

She carefully stood and adjusted her robe to suit her modesty. She gave Mr. Darcy a genuine, though tentative, smile as he also stood.

“Please address Mr. Hamish to receive your refund.” She told him kindly, though the uneasiness was detectable in her voice, still laced with confusion.

“That will not be necessary.” He assured her. “But may I make a request?”

“Anything.”

“May I call on you tomorrow afternoon? For tea?”

Elizabeth’s smile widened. “That would be delightful Mr. Darcy. It has been some time since I have encountered someone around whom I can be myself.”

Mr. Darcy bowed and Miss Bennet curtsied. It has been more than a year since anyone of standing had shown her that curtesy.

He saw himself out.
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