A Conversation at Dawn

by Ralkana

Summary

Some early morning exercise leads to a slightly earlier resolution to our story.

Notes

Disclaimer ~ All of the characters belong to Jane Austen. Also, I have used more of the novel's direct language in this story than I normally do. If you recognize it, it's most likely hers.

Timeline Note ~ This story takes place the morning after the dinner party at Longbourn in Chapter 54.

It was just before dawn when Elizabeth rose from her bed, unrested. Sleep had eluded her for most of the night, respite forgotten as her thoughts circled fruitlessly around the puzzling and unsettling behaviour of a certain gentleman from Derbyshire.

Wrapping her dressing gown tightly around herself in the chill of her bedchamber, she moved to the window and stared out into the lightening sky.

Why had he come, if he was only going to be silent and dour again, as he had been before? Was it only for Bingley? If it was for Bingley, why did the younger man seem so uncertain of his actions in his friend’s presence?
What had happened to the pleasant, polite man she had met at Pemberley, the one who had gone to so much trouble to put her and her relations at ease? Had her sister's foolish actions driven away the last vestiges of his regard?

Her Aunt Gardiner must be wrong -- what he had done, he could not have done with Elizabeth in mind. Surely if he had, if he still wished to court her good opinion, he would be able to look at her now. He would be desirous of her attention rather than merely civil and distant, would he not? Could it be that his enmity toward her sister's scoundrel of a husband was enough to overcome any tender feelings he might still possess?

She sighed, resting her forehead against the cool window glass. Lydia's shamelessness and her own misguided cruelty had clearly destroyed her every chance at happiness.

But why then had he come?

Groaning in frustration, Elizabeth pushed away from the window. She looked once more at the pearly grey sky. The morning looked clear -- and cold -- and she dressed with that in mind.

"If I must drive myself mad with speculation," she murmured as she slipped down the stairs and through the quiet house a short while later, "I can at least do so out of doors."

She walked briskly away from Longbourn, her breath misting before her in the crisp morning air. Her thoughts wandered as she wandered, but they kept returning to him -- to his eyes.

She recalled how he had so often stared at her during his first visit to Hertfordshire. She knew now that he had been admiring her, not censuring her as she had thought then, and the knowledge sent shivers through her that had nothing to do with the chill of the autumn morning. She thought of the way his eyes had narrowed and flashed in his anger at Hunsford, and how they had widened in shock -- and pain, she realized, her heart aching with the memory -- when she had berated him so cruelly while defending the rogue whose name she preferred not to think.

Shaking her head, she pushed those thoughts away, endeavouring to remember instead the way his eyes had widened when he had first seen her at Pemberley, and the unmistakeable flare of delight he had been unable to conceal before the awkward confusion of the moment had set in.

She slowed to a stop along the path as she recalled the grim solemnity in his eyes at the inn in Lambton, when she had first realized what Lydia's infamy had cost her, cost them all. Another sigh slipped from her as she thought once more of the way his gaze had slid indifferently over her as he greeted her -- civilly, not warmly -- during his most recent visits to Longbourn, and how he had barely bothered to meet her eye as she had served him coffee the previous evening.

She should take it as proof, she knew, that she had sunk in his regard, that his attentions to her had ceased, and she was astonished to find that the mere thought had tears pricking at her eyes. She blinked them away, freezing as she heard the quiet jingle of a horse's tack in the still morning air.

It was coming from a clearing up ahead and through the trees, and she wondered who else was out so early. With a start, she realized that her ramblings had drawn her nearly to Netherfield, and she considered that it might be one of the gentlemen from that house.

Her breath caught. Might it be Darcy? Perhaps this was an opportunity, granted by Providence, to speak with him away from the chaos of Longbourn and the interruptions and foolish machinations of the neighbourhood girls. If it were, would he even wish to speak privately with her? What could she say to him?

At the very least, she must thank him for all he had done for her sister, for her family, regardless of
how awkward and uncomfortable such a moment was bound to be, and despite his apparent wish
for secrecy. He needed to be made aware that at least some portion of the Bennets appreciated his
incredible kindness and generosity, for he did not deserve her younger sisters’ indifference, her
mother’s petty incivility, and her father’s sardonic amusement at his expense.

She crept slowly toward the clearing, wishing to observe her fellow wanderer before making her
presence known. If it was not Darcy, she would quietly depart, as she was not in any humour to
meet with other company this morning.

She recognized his horse first. The impressive stallion stood placidly, idly cropping at the grass at
the side of the clearing, unconcerned, though his ears were alert. A tree stump near him held a
gentleman's hat and neatly folded coat, gloves and riding crop laid carefully beside them, and she
gave a quiet gasp as her gaze flew to the clearing’s other occupant.

Unaware of her presence, Darcy paced, coatless, the fine lawn of his shirtsleeves billowing gently
around him in his agitation.

He was magnificent, and she found it difficult to breathe as she watched him quickly walk the
length of the clearing and back again, the distance effortlessly eaten up by his long, powerful
strides. His hands were never still as he anxiously twisted his signet ring around his finger in an
unending circuit. His brow was furrowed, his mouth drawn, and she wished desperately for the
right to smooth away the signs of his unease.

What troubles you so? she thought sadly, and she realized that she had never, in the whole of their
acquaintance, seen him laugh. Bingley’s cheerful laughter and charming smile were more than
familiar to her, and if she concentrated, she could even recall the sound of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s
friendly chuckle, but this solemn man before her had never laughed, and she was certain she could
count on one hand the number of times she had seen his careful, controlled smile. How lonely and
careworn a life he must lead, she thought, with so little laughter in it!

She longed to be the one to see him truly smile, to make him throw back his head and laugh
heartily, to comfort him and ease his worries and soothe his pains, but it was not her place to do
so. It might have been, but her own vanity and wilful prejudice had cost her the opportunity.

Or has it? she wondered, hope and anguish warring restlessly within her. Might he not be
wrestling with the same worries that besieged her? Might he not, even at this moment, be thinking
of her as he paced so fretfully?

No, that was her vanity speaking again. His life was full -- too full -- of cares and worries and
responsibilities, and it could be any one of them that now caused him concern.

But what if it is not? the obstinate voice within her persisted. What if it is not Miss Darcy, or
Pemberley, or the burgeoning unrest in the counties of the north? What if it is you?

Elizabeth bit her lip and chafed her gloved hands together as she watched him pace and think, and
she longed for just one moment of insight into his troubled thoughts. If only she could see how he
felt, merely once, she would know how to act!

A vague memory floated to her – she and Charlotte had been discussing Jane and Bingley. What
was it that Charlotte had said? ...there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in
love without encouragement. In nine cases out of ten a woman had better show more affection
than she feels.

She swallowed her gasp as the words registered. She was a simpleton.
He had been grave and silent, it was true, but so had she! She was longing for any reassurance that he still loved her, and he was unable to see that her opinion of him had changed. Both of them were so wrapped up in their own apprehension that they could not clearly see the other.

How could she expect this proud, reserved man to renew his addresses when she had given him absolutely no indication that they would be welcome? How could any man, so cruelly and viciously rejected, gather the courage to try again, even if he could overcome his wounded feelings and injured pride?

She knew that he had loved her once—ardently, and with the utmost force of passion, she remembered, his words thrilling through her as they always did—and yet, she was now filled with confusion and dismay. How much more discomposed might he be, who had only been exposed to her disdain and her ire?

She could not show him, as Charlotte had advised, more than she felt—that was impossible—but she could begin by showing him something of what she felt.

Resolved, she took a single step forward before stopping once more.

"How?" she whispered. How could she do so? She knew that she could sometimes be bold—some might say impertinent—but could she truly bring herself to speak to him of this with his own feelings as yet unknown to her? What was she to say? What if she was wrong, and his regard for her had long since dissipated? Could she bear to see disdain in his eyes? Indifference? Even worse, pity?

It would be no more than he had suffered at her hands, it was true, but that did not quell her unease.

Darcy suddenly stopped pacing and ran a hand through his hair, his deeply unhappy sigh audible even across the clearing. She watched in alarm as he glanced at his horse and set his shoulders, clearly having come to some sort of resolution.

Panic shot through her at the thought of him leaving. What if he left Netherfield, went to London, to Pemberley, what if she never saw him again? Could she live with herself, with the regret of never knowing his true thoughts and feelings, with the regret of never having revealed her own? Could she live always with the pain of this uncertainty?

She could not. She walked into the clearing.

"Good morning, Mr. Darcy," she greeted him, grateful beyond measure that her voice did not tremble.

Startled by her sudden appearance, he only stared at her for a long moment. Even in her confusion, she had to smile—he looked now exactly as he had when they had so unexpectedly crossed paths at Pemberley.

"M-miss Bennet," he finally stammered, his bow jerky as his fingers hastily fumbled over the buttons of his waistcoat to make sure they were properly fastened.

He strode quickly toward his horse and his belongings, and for one terrible moment, she believed he might just climb onto his mount and ride off without another word. Relief swept through her as he reached for his hat and his coat, and she only just swallowed the objection that came to her lips as he donned his coat and settled his hat on his head.

"Please forgive my appearance, Miss Bennet; I was not expecting your arrival."
She must have made some acceptable reply, for he nodded, but she knew not what she had said, still lost in the muddle of her own mind -- she could not believe that she had nearly told him to remain half-dressed in her presence!

Elizabeth knew that there was absolutely no justification for such a shameless request, but it was only that he had not seemed so intimidating and formal in his shirtsleeves. Indeed, she knew that she would not soon forget the easy way he had moved, his body unencumbered by the tight fit of his coat, nor the way the slight breeze had ruffled his dark curls. She yearned to unravel the intricate splendour of his cravat, to feel the smooth skin of his strong jaw under her fingers, to see his bare neck unguarded and exposed.

She gasped, her cheeks flushing crimson with such unmaidenly thoughts, and she fought the urge to turn away. Darcy regarded her with some concern, his fingers busily twisting his ring once more.

"Miss Bennet?" he asked, quiet alarm in his voice, "Are you well? You look rather flushed."

She forced herself to smile, banishing hazy thoughts of his strong limbs and his handsome form. "I apologize for my momentary confusion, Mr. Darcy, my thoughts were... unavoidably drawn in another direction. Please forgive my inattention; indeed, I am... pleased to encounter you this morning."

His hands stilled. "Are you?" he asked after an endless moment, and her heart ached at the uncertainty in his tone. "I am glad to hear it," he finished.

"I am," she answered, "For I believe it is time the tables were turned." She gave him an arch smile when he regarded her, puzzled. "This morning, it is my turn to intrude upon your solitude, as you did upon mine so many mornings at Rosings."

Too late, she realized what her words implied, and she watched in dismay as his half-hopeful, half-perplexed expression fell into complete mortification.

"I assure you, Miss Bennet, your presence could never be an intrusion," he said softly.

"Oh, no, I did not mean to imply that your presence was unwelcome, sir," she said hastily, but the damage had already been done.

"I am sure you did not, Miss Bennet, but we are both aware that it was."

Elizabeth resisted the urge to stamp her foot in frustration. Oh, why had she not just left him to pace and think in peace? This was not going at all the way she wished! Rather than showing him that her feelings had altered in every way, she had only succeeded in reminding them both of their painful past.

The moment stretched awkwardly between them, as neither could look at the other. All of Elizabeth's hard-won resolve had fled in the wake of her blunder, and she knew not what to say. At the very least, she determined, she could not depart without offering him the thanks he so richly deserved.

"Mr Darcy," she began softly, staring at the ground, but before she continued, she took a deep breath and forced herself to look into his eyes. The quiet pain she saw in them nearly made her falter once more, but she pressed on.

"Mr Darcy, though I understand you may not wish to hear it, I must tell you... I can no longer help thanking you for your unexampled kindness to my poor sister. Ever since I have known it, I have been most anxious to acknowledge to you how gratefully I feel it. Were it known to the rest of my
family, I should not have merely my own gratitude to express."

To her astonishment, he turned abruptly from her and paced away before striding quickly back, running a hand once more through his hair in his agitation.

"I am sorry, exceedingly sorry," replied Darcy, in a tone of surprise and emotion, "That you have ever been informed of what may, in a mistaken light, have given you uneasiness. I did not think Mrs Gardiner was so little to be trusted."

Elizabeth was truly grieved now. She had known that he would be unhappy that she was aware of his actions, but she had not expected him to react with quite so much concern. Rather than calming him or relieving his distress, she had only compounded it.

"You must not blame my aunt. Lydia's thoughtlessness first betrayed to me that you had been concerned in the matter; and of course, I could not rest till I knew the particulars. Let me thank you, again and again, in the name of all my family, for that generous compassion which induced you to take so much trouble, and bear so many mortifications, for the sake of discovering them."

There was a moment of silence broken only by their agitated breathing, and Elizabeth thought, *There. It is done.*

Even if nothing else came of this horribly awkward encounter, she had done what she most wished. If he could not love her, he would at least know that she was aware of his extraordinary liberality, that she no longer thought so ill of him. Though it had certainly caused him some momentary unease, she hoped that, as time passed, he might remember her words this day rather than... that day.

He took a deep breath, obviously preparing himself to speak, and she found herself holding her own breath in anticipation. She willed him to look at her, but he kept his eyes very firmly focused on his hands.

"If you *will* thank me," he replied, "Let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you might add force to the other inducements which led me on, I shall not attempt to deny. But your *family* owe me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe I thought only of *you.*"

His gaze finally found hers with the last of this speech, and Elizabeth felt her breath leave her in something very close to a sob.

There, in his glorious eyes, she saw everything she could hope to see. His admiration, his regard -- did she dare to still call it love? -- and his fear that she still felt as she once had, all were clear to her in the depth of emotion in his gaze.

Unthinkingly, unconsciously, she stepped closer to him, delighting in the way he drew in his breath and stood taller, folding his hands behind his back. She knew, with a certainty that amazed her, that he had done so to keep from reaching for her.

"Miss Bennet -- "

"Mr Darcy -- "

They spoke as one, and both stopped, embarrassed.

"Please, Miss Bennet, continue."

"Oh, but -- "
"I insist."

She wondered desperately what he had been about to say, but she nodded. Gathering her courage, she forced herself to continue facing him when her dearest wish was to look anywhere else.

"Mr Darcy, please allow me to apologize for the terrible way I misjudged you. Words cannot express how truly sorry I am."

It was almost comical the way his eyes widened in surprise. Whatever he had been expecting, it was certainly not that.

His face smoothed into the blank mask she knew so well, and she nearly panicked until he sighed -- a soft, defeated sound -- and shook his head.

"No apology is necessary, Miss Bennet, for I do not believe it was that grave an error," he replied, and his voice was weary, and full of regret. "What did you say to me that I did not deserve? I behaved abominably, and you were quite correct to censure me."

She stared at him, astounded and outraged by his assertion.

"Corre -- I was not!" she said heatedly. "I was bitter and angry and cruel -- "

"Miss Bennet -- "

" -- and so stupidly, wilfully blind, and I will not allow you to think that you deserved it!"

Darcy was staring at her in astonished disbelief. "Miss Bennet -- "

She felt tears fall, and she angrily dashed them away. "I was such a fool -- "

"Elizabeth, please!"

His pleading tone and the use of her Christian name shocked them both, and they stared at each other, wide-eyed.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Bennet, I do apologize, most sincerely," he said hurriedly. "I should not have -- I did not intend -- "

"Fitzwilliam," she interrupted, surprising them both into silence once more. She revelled in the way his name felt in her mouth, the treasured, cherished name she had said so often in the sanctity of her thoughts, but never, never aloud.

He was staring at her as if she'd struck him, his eyes wide and his lips parted, his face pale but for his cheeks, which were ruddy with astonishment, and she could not help but smile. He was so very dear.

"Fitzwilliam," she said tenderly, "Please, you must not believe what I said then -- I did not rightly know you when I abused you so. You must let me tell you now, you must know that you are... you are truly the best man that I have ever known."

She heard his quick indrawn breath, and she watched his eyes, his beautifully expressive eyes, go bright.

Her words had moved him to tears, she realized, and something within her fluttered with joy that she could so profoundly move this serious, reserved man, that she had finally given him something other than pain.
"I..." His voice was hoarse and unsteady, and he cleared his throat and tried again, his tone one of stunned wonder. "I thank you, Miss Bennet. I find myself at a loss for words."

"Oh, dear," she said wryly, using humour -- as always -- to mask her uncertainty. "Miss Bennet, is it? Should I apologize, sir, for the liberties I have taken in addressing you? Have we returned to such formalities?"

Still staggered nearly beyond his comprehension, Darcy only shook his head and said warily, "I will, of course, comply with whatever the lady wishes."

"Oh, the lady wishes..." She laughed softly, and her gaze found the ground before she forced it up to hold his once more. "There is... so much the lady wishes for, sir."

Her wistful words seemed to banish the last of his confusion. He stepped closer, close enough for her to feel the heat of his body, and it should have alarmed her or unnerved her, but all she wanted was to close the minute distance between them, to take him in her arms and be taken into his. She folded her hands before her to stop herself from touching him, biting her lip as she remembered how he had done nearly the same thing moments earlier.

His face was very solemn, his eyes beseeched her, and his voice was quiet and grave. "I have but one wish. Surely, you must know that. Surely, you can see... Elizabeth, I promise you, if you -- if you feel the same as you did in April, one word from you will silence me on this subject forever, but I beg you, tell me please, have I any hope?"

Her smile widened, and she felt tears of joy well and spill, soft warmth on her cheeks. Maybe she had been forward, perhaps even shameless, and she might still be even more so, but she would not -- could not -- let him worry and wonder, not anymore.

"I love you, Fitzwilliam. Most ardently."

"I am dreaming," he whispered, even as he raised his hands to cup her cheeks, his thumbs sweeping away her tears in a tender caress. "I have fallen asleep here in this clearing, and I am yet again dreaming of you, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth."

Somewhat startled by the intimation that she had figured in his dreams, and more than once, Elizabeth laughed shakily, bringing her own hands up to cover his.

"You are awake, sir; I promise you."

He smiled then, the true smile she had so longed to see, and an expression of heartfelt delight diffused over his handsome face, transforming it in such a way as to completely steal her breath. His gaze never left hers as he took her hand in his, brushing the gentlest of kisses over her gloved fingers before he brought their joined hands to rest over his heart. It thundered under her touch.

"Elizabeth, my dearest love, please, I must ask, I will not presume, not ever again. Will you accept my hand, and my heart, and all that I am? My wealth, everything I own, my very name -- none of it means anything without you. Say you will be mine?"

Emboldened now, made courageous by his constant, steady love and his sweetly hesitant joy, she took the last step into his arms, euphoric as she looked up into his beautiful eyes.

"Oh, Fitzwilliam, do you truly not know? I am already yours," she murmured, and she was smiling as his lips met hers.

END
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