"When God said ‘let there be light’, he had also known that one day one of the many girls called Mary would need to read the words that Moses uttered: ‘I am slow of tongue’. Mary considered only this, because she could not dwell on the insults which haunted her waking moments. Why had her parents allowed something as simple as a stumbling tongue to build a wall between their own passions and those of their child?"

This is Mary’s story, told in words which come far more rapidly to paper than they do to her struggling lips.
It was no great surprise to any of the assembled women that Elizabeth had been the one to respond. Mary in particular had been waiting for it, keenly aware that as soon as their esteemed mother had finished speaking, her second daughter would be ready with a quick witticism on her lips. And what a reply! She looked archly at their father before she said:

“It seems a single man in possession of a great fortune must be in want of a wife!”

Mr. Bennet hid a smile, Jane sighed and the two youngest looked confused.

Of all of them it was Mary who understood it best. When her oblivious mother began wittering on again about the new tenants of the great hall, she privately pondered that she and Lizzie might have been great friends, had not her own sense of humour been so lacking that she saw such comments as rude rather than entertaining.

Mary’s laughter, Lydia had once said snidely, was as slow and stumbling as her very tongue.

That, too, was true. Mary had no reply. If she wished to say something sensible she did not know how, and as so often happened she ended in silence, much as she had begun.

Mary did not laugh slowly. It was an odd noise, indeed: a low, groaning hum of sound which appeared forced from her grudging lips until it died, withering away rather than ending as if the offended ears of those around the girl had put in some complaint. If Mary felt the need to laugh – which was rarely – she covered her mouth with her hands and muffled the sound. Generally, the company would ask her if she was suffering from indigestion.

“N-no,” she would stumble, and redden, and look away from the scornful glances of her sisters. “I d-don’t, thank y-you for enqui-qui-quiring, ma…ma’am.”

When she was ten years old her mother had given her teaching into the hands of Jane and Elizabeth with two commands: one, that they should attempt to shape their sister into a shadow of the elegant manners and graces which she herself had taught to her eldest children. Two, that they should do something about her unfortunate habit of stuttering. It was, Mrs Bennet declared, most unbecoming.

“Well!” Lizzie had declared, “I fear to say that we have been given an impossible task!”

“Now, Lizzie.” Jane had an odd strength in her gentleness back then, before years of pampering had taught her to be softer and more obliging in all respects. “She only struggles when she is nervous, you know.”

“But she is always so!”

The eldest sisters schemed together, and after some deliberation arrived at a plan which they quickly put into action. Mary could not engage in the quick to-and-fro of polite company, or even hold a conversation without some unfortunate mishap in her speech. However, she had a keen mind and a good musical ear, and so the sisters enthused upon the tomes of verse and philosophy which they discovered in their father’s library.

“You must learn these, and be quite correct.” Jane smiled as she handed the stack of books to her sister. “If you cannot think of a reply, my love, then at least you can remember what someone else might have said, if placed at your table.”
“There’s so m-many of them!” Mary wailed, and coughed fitfully at the dusty leaves.

“If it is too difficult, then you could learn how to speak properly.” Lizzie had still never warmed to her task, and the fact that her sister plainly could not see the genius in her clever plan made her cruel. Mary blushed and fled.

Now, several years later, if anyone remembered that Mary Bennet stuttered then they did not mention it. She could recall hundreds of ancient, dead voices at a moment’s notice (sometimes it took her longer, for she had no natural skill for it) and sometimes it passed for conversation. Often, though, it simply made her envy the unstudied ease which even her youngest sisters possessed.

Still, if words came slowly to her lips, she prided herself, then at least she was also slower than her sisters at being foolish. When her father described them all as the silliest girls in the county, he was not incorrect.

“Will he be bearing regimentals?” Lydia was asking, excitement clear in her luminous gaze. Her mother made a frustrated noise, and Jane gently pointed out that a man with such a large fortune hardly needed to take a commission. The young addressee pouted out her lower lip and fell into silence, but with her the action was grudging and easily broken.

“Will he be interested in Jane, do we think, or Lizzie?”

“Hush, child.” Mrs Bennet flapped her hands impatiently at her favourite. “You must not say such things-!”

“But mother, do not you recall that you yourself..?”

“It is the height of bad manners to recall the past.” The woman said stiffly, and swept to her feet in a flutter of taffeta lace. “Especially if it is not your own!”

Having made such a declaration, the good lady hastened to the bell cord and summoned Hill to her side. In quick order she addressed the servant to make haste into town, and to summon the dressmaker to attend to the older Miss Bennets at his soonest convenience.

If the esteemed gentleman was to be interested in anyone, it seemed, his interest would be encouraged by the height of whatever fashions the country considered correct. The city’s opinion, naturally, was not consulted.

Mary hardly dared to raise her eyes to her mother’s, for once the woman began making arrangements her mind tended to flit ahead, and soon she was asking her husband if he would spare a little more pin money for her dear Lydia, “For she is quite as handsome as the elders, and may hold her own very nicely, I’m sure, if presented in just the right shade of…”

Against her father’s increasingly heated refusals, Mary looked back down at her book and thought that, all things considered, Plato was a far more entertaining read than many of the dry scriptures she had recently inherited from a distant clerical cousin. His books smelled of dust and made her think of other forms of decay, which surely was quite the wrong thing to dwell upon when ones thoughts should be raised to the heavens.

Plato, she thought, had died long before the Christ child was even a whisper in prophecy. He had written even before Mary’s favourite scripture, which she had always considered so sacrosanct that it was timeless. When God said ‘let there be light’, she thought, he had also known that one day one of the many girls called Mary would need to read the words that Moses uttered: ‘I am slow of tongue’.

Mary pondered these notions because they were far simpler than the insults she could not dwell
upon. Why, when her eldest sisters were dressed in their finest, did her mother’s mind slide past her middle child so easily? Why was Lydia bedecked in her mother’s jewels before Mary was even asked what colour stone would bring out her eyes?

Why had her parents allowed something as simple as a stumbling tongue to build a wall between their own passions and those of their child?

Why, in short, was Mary so unloved?
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

"What say you, Mary? For you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts."

Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how.

"While Mary is adjusting her ideas," Mr. Bennet continued, "Let us return to Mr. Bingley." -- Pride and Prejudice, Volume One, Chapter Two

Much to her mother’s horror, by the age of twelve Mrs Bennet’s middle child had become what the neighbours called ‘bookish’.

It was quite correct for the girl to read in the parlour in the evenings, of course, provided that the more serious book covers could be disguised behind the light blue dust-jackets Mary hemmed with such bad grace in the mornings. If she hid behind a book then so much the better! For no-one would be so impolite as to interrupt a young lady from her romantic musings, even if the poems she professed to read were really a series of sermons.

If they were polite to leave her in peace, so to was Mary’s conduct a model of propriety. It was when the girl opened her mouth that the problems began, and then eyebrows were raised.

No, she could read in the evenings. Mrs. Bennet could at least be glad of that small mercy. But it was when the wretched girl began opening books at the breakfast table that the neighbourhood began to whisper, and whispers were something the lady of the house could not abide.

“Mrs Didram should indeed be speaking more softly, what with her second eldest defecting to the French,” the good woman professed to her confidante, Mrs Lucas. “And you know, her Sunday lace is quite yellow and quite torn at the edges, but all this could be overlooked, my dear, if she did not indulge in the wicked act of gossip!”

Whether Mrs Didram’s Napoleonic shame was unearthed or not never emerged, for despite all of her proclamations Mrs Bennet did not confront her daughter about the new habit. She knew not how to address the strange child, whose thick spectacles made the lustrous eyes she shared with her sisters seem grotesquely opalescent. Mary bestowed her smiles rarely, and such gifts were so unflattering to her colourless cheek that her mother was quite at a loss as to how to speak to the girl.

“Let her be,” Mr Bennet decided at length, worried into irritation by his lady’s nightly sermons. “She is happy, I think, or as near it as any of the girls have a right to be. Let her be.”

Mary was unaware that she was the subject of such consternation, for her rebellious action was quite innocently done. She was the middle child, and well aware of it. Above her was a perfectly matched pair, as there was below. Those below her were children yet, giggling and snorting over
their porridge in a manner which Mrs Bennet insisted they would grow out of without her interference. (What a vain hope that became! Lydia in particular never lost the habit, and even as a young bride was wont to shock her husband with her violent exclamations over the morning post).

Those paired above Mary were adult beyond her comprehension, already wearing long skirts and filling out their tight bodices and their quick minds in equal parts. They did not giggle but laughed softly behind raised fingertips, dabbing their mouths gracefully and barely moving in case the steam from the teapot would tease apart their fastidiously coiffed curls. Jane’s never fell out, but it was a rare day that saw Elizabeth’s ringlets last past noon.

And then there was Mary, the girl in the middle. She might have summoned the maid to her room before dawn like her sisters, but she did not share her room like the two older ones did, and the prospect of sitting beside the dresser for hours tortured by curling tongs without a bosom companion to confide in did not appeal to her.

She refused to turn to the younger ones, who she genuinely could not understand half of the time, and did not want to understand for the remainder.

The paired doves had each other, and Mary sat alone. They rarely spoke to her. Logically, then, she began to bring a book down to the table in the mornings, and sipped her tea wrapped in the warm balm of Fordice or Swift. When she was feeling particularly daring she would bring Radcliffe or Woolstonecraft into her family realm. It was a chilling moment beyond anything those women could evoke when she realised that she could have read Lewis aloud and not a word would have been uttered.

Years passed, and it became a habit.

When Lydia’s flitting mind turned to the pursuit of that most female indulgence, she approached her sister to ask her which novels were the most shocking. Mary was almost at a loss; tempted to refuse, she listened to her sister’s heartfelt entreaties for nearly an hour before finally surrendering to a more stubborn mind than her own. In an act that was almost as perverse as Lydia’s newfound interest in the printed word, she produced a book whose hellish domains had long left her own nightmares: *Vathek*.

What a text! She recalled sleepless nights where she had been afraid to close her eyes, lest she reopen them in the depths of eternal torment. That dark prince taunted her dreams, mocking her pleasures for weeks until she turned to the church and confessed to the almighty that she had read about such profane deeds, and turned them over in her mind, and thus had done them in thought… had she done them in deed? Her mind had offended her, so how might she pluck it out?

The priest, in his goodly wisdom, told the girl to come back when she had committed a real sin. When she looked blankly to him, he further instructed that his lost lamb leave in peace and not dwell on such foolish whims.

Not to be discouraged from believing in her own damnation, Mary repented at length. She diligently applied herself to a study of the ethics of Solomon and Esther, until she was disturbed from her heartfelt penance by the pleas of her sister and petulantly handed her the very volume which had dominated her soul.

Consumed by guilt the next day, she hastened to her sister’s room and hesitated outside, horrified by the odd sounds which resonated from within. So akin to sobs, so muffled and unlike her loud sisters, they might have been the whimpered cries of the doomed, beautiful children *Vathek* had marched into the abyss. And yet when she opened the door and saw the tears shining on her sister’s cheeks, she felt a great passion of disgust, for they were laughing.
Mary made an exclamation. They stared at her, and then pointed merrily at something in the book. The page was creased and damp with their tears of mirth, and blotted the ink which calmly spelled out the seduction of the virginal princess. Both of the girl’s faces were lit with curiosity and flushed with laughter. Lydia spoke first.

“It’s… it’s n… no…not…”

“Oh, it is!” Lydia’s eyes burned with something beside delight for a moment, and she clutched at her stomach as if it ached.

“You… you… mustn’…t…” Mary attempted to retrieve the volume, and when she finally held it beyond her sister’s reach Lydia’s expression set.

“Give it back,” she ordered, “Or I shall tell mama that you have it.”

“And how shall you explain how you know what it’s ab-bow-bout?” The girl tried not to stumble, and saw her sister’s affected contrition with triumph. It was a short lived victory.

“I will tell father, then.”

“Just give it back, Lyddie.” Kitty sounded bored. At the age of seventeen she was no great reader; the delights of the book had only interested her slightly, and she had seen her sisters fight more often than she had finished a pair of shoe roses.

“Have Jane and Lizzie read this?” Lydia was unrepentant, and had snatched the book back with a gleeful exclamation. She opened it again to the offending section, finding the marred page with ease and running her thumb along some choice phrases. “Do they know about this?”

“I am not sure it is ac… accurate.” Mary said with dignity. Kitty looked up with a question on her lips, but Lydia shushed her with a shake of the head.

“Of course it is.” She raised her chin. “Or else why would he write it? Anyone who’s actually done those things who read this book would know in a moment if it’s not true, and then they would laugh at this story and not read another word of it. I say it must be the truth.”

Kitty’s eyes grew huge. “I don’t think men really do that, Lyddie. They wouldn’t. I mean, men don’t talk to the devil, do they? But that’s in the story, too.”

“Oh, you’re no fun.” Lydia tossed her head and promptly dropped the book to the floor. “Have it then, Mary, if you’re missing it so much. I will not say a word. Mama would probably be just as bored by the two of you as I am.”

The girl kept her word, at least to a point. The following morning Mary was dismayed to open her door in the morning, and find that the hallway held the gaunt silhouette of her sister Elizabeth. Unlike Jane, Lizzie seemed as if she would never grow into her long legs and arms, and at twenty even her dark eyes looked overlarge in her thin, juvenile face. Her bearing was as easily graceful as always, though, even if she had her arms folded.

She explained that Lydia had told her about a certain book, and that she wished to see it. “For,” she said, “I am sure it is not one that I have found, nor Jane.”
“No,” Mary mumbled, and handed her the slim pamphlet. Elizabeth perused it with intense alacrity for upwards of ten minutes, and then returned the book to its owner without comment.

“Where did you get it?”

“Aunt Philips has a steward, and it was a gift.” The girl explained the barest details in her slow, considered tones.

“I see.” Elizabeth pursed her lips for a moment at the implications of that story, and then a brightness returned to her eyes. “You are clearly skilled at keeping secrets! Perhaps Lydia was not the best person to confide in, but I can control her this time, I think. In future you must be more circumspect, dearest.”

“Must I stop reading?” Mary asked, and the plea in her tone was far more glaring than the hesitation over the words. Her sister frowned and shook her head, looking confused.

“I would never tell you that. This book is unusual, but it is certainly not as bad as our sister so merrily described it. In any case, it is probably for the best that one of us knows these things. I do not think we could dare ask mama! Papa would not mind us knowing, but we cannot ask him.”

She added the last with the certainty of being her father’s favourite: the only one who was sometimes allowed into the library while their father was resting in its solemn sanctuary. Elizabeth’s lips quirked in a smile and she turned her bright gaze towards her sister. “Perhaps now you should be the one to instruct us!”

Thus it so transpired that Mary and her sisters found themselves ensconced together in the parlour in the evenings, speaking in low voices. Between the three of them they had enough knowledge to wholly confuse their adolescent certainties.

Jane, as the more experienced and the one who was the longest ‘out’, could describe the different touches of tens of dancing partners. She mused over the way they spoke differently to her when she did something as simple as wearing different dresses, and how their breathlessness made her own heart race. Elizabeth made a hobby of illustrating men’s characters. She used her quick wit and lively eye to make assure declarations about everything from passion to pride which she claimed she could read in a man’s upturned lip.

Mary added to this expertise of mankind her forbidden reading: the words of men who were speaking to other men, read by an ignorant woman whose knowledge was grown in that refined chasm which lay between scripture and sensuous poetry.

Two weeks later, Netherfield Park was let at last.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

_They were at last obliged to accept the second-hand intelligence of their neighbour_  
_Lady Lucas._ -- Pride and Prejudice, Volume One, Chapter Three

The steward who Mary had mentioned to her sister was not a newly hired man, but a servant who had spent most of his life in the employ of the Lucas household. Like many such creatures, he had grown up with an intense sense of loyalty towards the family. Those estimable people repaid him with an utter disregarded for his affection, and so as an adult the boyish sympathy had turned into a desire for reparation.

His name, if any person thought well enough of him to enquire, was Luke. Just as his boots, shirts and meals were the unwanted leavings of the Lucas family, so too was his name. Like the boots, he wore it with a mixture of pride and utter disdain. Spoken on the family’s lips it was an insult, more proof of their ownership of the foundling house child who they purchased with food and sticks of firewood. On other lips it was a name that warmed him.

The Bennet family arrived in state that morning, forming a gagging line of pastels and flounces and muddied boots which they hastily let their petticoats drape over in the entryway before they were announced. The declaration was not needed; if the Lucases were deaf to the outrageous giggling of the two youngest girls then they could barely miss the obstinate proclamations of the mother, nor the responses from her eldest which were intended to be placatory, but ended with Elizabeth almost matching her mother’s tone. Of them all, Jane and Mary were always the quiet ones. Once the men had retreated she would be heard, but not before. Her voice was not designed for such domestic debates.

Luke waited, leaning against the topiary wall with his hands tucked into his breeches. It would not be long before the sweet sounds of feminine pastimes drifted from the window. After a long pause the percussive sound of the piano lid roused him from his reverie, and when the music began he knew that it was Mary’s fingers who brushed the keys. She played with a surety and skill which put the Lucas household to shame.

Her mother drowned out the rapid scales with her news of the new tenants at the great house. After a brief interlude where the good Mrs. Lucas attempted to breach the wall of conversation, and Mary’s playing was increasingly ignored, the tenor of the room altered. Now, rather than a graceful aria, the artiste embellished nothing more than a few simple scales with heavy, dissonant chords. The forebearance of the Miss Bennets – never a thing of much duration – was sorely tested, and at the last they entreated their sweet sister to play something lighter.

Mary, in much distaste, stated her adamant dislike for lighter music in general, and her sisters’ suggestions in particular. There was the sound of a most unladylike interruption, and when the music began anew it was under the clumsy fingers of the youngest Miss Bennet, and had taken the form of a military march quite unsuited to the dainty atmosphere Mrs. Lucas strove in vain to sustain.

Luke Lucas, much amused, lit his pipe and turned away.

A short foray into the garden bore the expected but much welcome sight of the pianist herself,
who in some agitation had ventured into the wilderness without taking the precaution of equipping herself with a stout pair of boots.

“I know your Missus Hill won’t be pleased to be cleaning those petticoats, miss!” Luke called out, and expelled a smoke ring to hide his grin.

“You should not speak of such things.” Mary folded her arms, and quickly unfolded them in order to keep her balance on the slippery ground. At her exclamation, Luke hastened to her side, and with his proffered arm they made good progress towards the more solid earth of the orchard. The steward waved away her gratitude with his pipe-hand, and she coughed at the smoke.

“I read,” Mary offered formally, “That tobacco is a good cure for ailments of the chest. Are you unwell?”

“I’ve never felt better, miss.”

“Then perhaps you would expel your pipe,” She suggested with a raised eyebrow, “Since I myself am not ill, either.”

“May the saints be praised.” Luke returned in kind, and dashed the glowing embers into the sodden grass.

They walked in silence for a time, which suited them both. Whatever conversation they had was rarely shared among their peers, and in such mixed company their own counsel was its own censor. They had played together as children. The familiarity of those long years allowed the young lady to accept the offered assistance when their path became troublesome, and allowed the young man to offer his arm without fear of offence. It did not provide them with a suitable topic, and so they lapsed into a contented, if frustrated, peace.

“Do you wish I should return you to your sisters?” Luke offered eventually, when the darkening sky promised a wealth of rain for the trees under which they walked. Mary shook her head absently, and then blushed and offered a reply.

“I do not wish to... they will not speak to me, and so I do not feel they will miss my company for some time.”

“You do not speak to me, either.” He pointed out, recalling the half hour they had just spent in absolute silence. To his surprise, the young lady’s yellowed skin turned a little pink. The gentle colour suited her cheeks, much as the way the cold had reddened the end of her nose made its flat shapelessness more apparent.

“I stutter.” She mumbled it, and blushed again.

Luke said in some surprise, “Stutter! What an idea. I never heard it! And I have known you all of my life, Miss Bennet.”

Mary shaped her next words slowly, and curiosity cobwebbed her eyes when she looked at him. “I... I do not think it matters if I get words wrong, when I’m with you.”

Luke felt the sting of those words immediately, and drew away from the lady with some haste. She looked at him levelly, and he saw the frankness in her dark eyes as a species of pitiable disdain.

The worse insult, which he felt most keenly, was that the lady clearly did not understand that her words had made such an impression. She was not a stupid girl, nor was she slow of wit or
temperament. There was very little chance that Miss Bennet would take back those words now they were spoken, and yet he wished to give her the chance.

“It doesn’t matter?” He repeated her own words back at her, and instead of apology he saw only irritation in her arch gaze.

Mary honestly did not understand his upset, although she recognised it immediately.

The girl searched her conscience for some lingering guilt to instruct her on her misstep, but having found none, she could only nod and repeat that it did not matter – not in the same way – because her mother was forcing her to shape words for lords and ladies, and Luke was a servant, and naturally (she explained) that was not the same thing.

Luke retreated back into their silence, but this time there was no comfort in it. Leading the girl back to the main house with a callousness which he had not known he possessed, he left her by the kitchen door. From thence, it took him only ten steps to stride into the kitchen and inform the housekeeper that he would soon be leaving her employ.

His anger was inscrutable, even to the man himself, and at the housekeeper’s urging he explained only that he wished to move on, and to see the world. The dislike for the household which had named him was well known, and his disaffection noted. The violence of his sudden conviction was born elsewhere.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

She was therefore obliged to seek another branch of the subject, and related, with much bitterness of spirit and some exaggeration, the shocking rudeness of Mr. Darcy. [...] "He walked here, and he walked there, fancying himself so very great! I quite detest the man." -- Pride and Prejudice, Volume One, Chapter Three

Mary lingered in the hallway of the lodge, making some comment about the tie of her cloak as her sisters threw their robes away with abandon. The spring rains had not yet receded, and as much as they all wished the dark clouds and heavy winds across the channel to christen the French in their icy blessing, so far their prayers had been meaningless.

The Miss Bennets proceeded into the dance in a gaggle, and much akin to the geese such a procession was named for they announced their entry with a cacophony of sound. If the hall had been lively before, the addition of such a large family of young women was fair set to drown out even the musicians. These estimable gentlemen had begun their set with the voice of a lone chalumeau in one shadowed alcove. Lydia and Elizabeth called out across the room, heedlessly at odds with this performance. Elizabeth made haste to her good friend Miss Lucas, and the younger girl to a group of young men who were old enough to dance, if not quite old enough to leave their mothers’ sides without blushing.

Mary yet lingered. She watched more people arrive, and braided the cords of her cloak until they were quite twisted. There were the landowners, of course, whose names she was not supposed to know, and then the married couples who seemed to infest the lower part of the –shire in complacent matrimonial bliss. Mary nodded to them politely, and allowed the noise of the atrium to drown out any mistakes she made in each greeting. Once they had exchanged such pleasantries it was understood that no further conversation need take place, and those of the guests who were not already warned away by attempting to breach Miss Bennet's wall of implacable quotation had surely been made wary by their mutual acquaintance.

Once the party had assembled Mary thought it safe to proceed into the hall, and promptly availed herself of a glass of wine and a dark corner. The presence of an enclosing footstool would discourage any demands for her hand, she hoped, and since there remained more than twice the number of ladies to men in the room she did not consider herself to be in any danger.

For some time this tactic worked admirably, and it was only when another lady sought to avail herself of the shadowed recess that Miss Bennet's private musing was disturbed. She looked up with quick alarm at the approaching figure, and quickly stepped back to provide her with some room. Seeing the other lady's distress, she made haste to avail her of both a handkerchief and a sympathetic ear. The latter was not required for some moments, as the prior was made ample use of.

"I am sorry," Mary was the one who broke the silence, and beneath the drowning music her words were sure and sincere. She understood exactly what had transpired, or a larger part of it than others might. The good lady swallowed back another cry, and allowed herself to be comforted by grasping Mary’s piano-gnarled fingers.
"He was a good boy. A good boy." She repeated, as if the words would make the grim truth stay its ruthless course.

"We are all proud of him," Mary clasped her hand more tightly, "But why are you here, Mrs. Ussel? I am sure even the most formal invitation might be excused under such circumstances!"

"My husband believed I would benefit from the distraction." The sodden handkerchief was more than an effective argument against that, and Mary offered the woman a second. As she accepted and thanked Miss Bennet, the woman confided in the girl that they had also decided that her son's death should be kept from the general company's knowledge for the present, at least until they had other news to distract them. Mary listened in some confusion, and begged for an explanation, which was reluctantly provided.

"He was placed in the fourth regiment of Lord Morval's light infantry, as I confided to your good mother, my dear, but which fact I beg you must not remind her of, for what transpired..." again, the handkerchief was raised, "What... occurred..."

"I beg you, d-do not distress yourself!" Mary cried, but the good woman was determined now to confide, and thus she spoke:

"The whole regiment was... I do not understand, but there was a simply fearful battle, and his troop I'm sure were quite, quite outnumbered. They... they retreated, back to their camp, and from thence they were decimated for cowardice in battle."

"Decimated?" Mary knew the word, and she understood it, but she could not comprehend that the boy who had grown up in the next village had fallen prey to such an outmoded punishment. Mrs. Ussel regarded her with distaste, and affected to explain.

"They were lined up, and one of every ten men was shot where he stood." She bit back a sob, "It will be in the broadsheets soon enough, for there were a great many of them, and it was a great disgrace. I beg you, Mary, to keep this fearful secret until such time as it is beyond my shame."

"Of course." The girl replied shakily, and was proceeding to enquire after the woman's health when there came a lull in the general sound of the room, and many heads turned towards the atrium. Mary had believed herself to be the last entrant into the company, but she spied five new faces through the crowd.

She trembled at the first, for they were women, and stylishly attired. It was not their elegant bearing or silken skirts which so affected the girl, but the way that their lips moved with a surety and rapidness. It declared their quick wit to the room at large, even if their current conversation was not best pleasing to those who might overhear.

The men interested Mary far less, although she perceived that there were three of them. One, a stouter gentleman whose face held the fleshiness of a hedonistic youth, was quickly making his way towards the single gaming table the hall could provide. The other two were younger and more vibrant. Mary's keen eye rested on them and she wondered if she could truly discern the brightness of alcohol on one's cheek, or the dourness of the orient on the other.

These thoughts were not disclosed, and unjust they may have been, for Mary was quickly summoned to her mother's side. The brighter man was amongst the gathered company, and as she made her curtsey beside her assembled sisters she caught that here, at last, was the promised Mr. Bingley.

His eye wandered between the ladies with the unmistakable air of a connoisseur, and what delight he took in all he surveyed! Even Mary was surprised with a nod of appreciation to her hesitant
genuflection, and found herself red in the cheek even when his eye had moved on toward her sisters. As with most eyes, though, the gentleman's were quickly drawn anew to study Miss Jane Bennet, and since her position beside the soft firelight was quite effectively designed, he delighted to follow the encouragement to take up the young lady's hand.

Mary opined that Jane had been somewhat thrown into the young man's yet undisclosed company, and was summarily hushed by her mother. It did not seem to mar the happiness of either party, the sister mused in private, and certainly the young man himself appeared equal to such behaviour. There could not be a dance in the whole of England whose partners were evenly matched, and a young man of such a look and half the consequence would soon grow accustomed to women's violent affections as a matter of course.

She was thinking this with some complacency (although directed at no lady or gentleman in particular) when the curt voice of the second gentleman recalled her to her senses.

"Thank you, madam, but I rarely dance." He moved away from the gathered women with some haste, and to Mary's consternation began to find his way toward her alcove. Without any acknowledgement of her presence or tenderness towards her wish to be alone, he rested against the wall and viewed the general company with unblinking attention.

Mary made sure not to show any alarm, and yet she could not enjoy the same thoughtful peace which she had first sought in this corner. Indeed, it was at some distance from the fire, and lacking both the warmth of her own thoughts or the smart waistcoat of her neighbour, she found herself shivering.

"Come, Darcy!" The bright man soon approached, and declared to his friend in a voice which carried to many of the dancers. "I must have you dance! I will not have you standing about in this foolish manner!"

Foolish manner! Mary found a deep blush spreading across her cheek, for although she knew her conduct to be unusual, never had it been described in such scathing tones by one whose word would be gospel to all and sundry. The man he had addressed turned slightly, and Mary saw a glint of amusement in his dark eyes as, for a moment, they sought her out. Seeking to meet her gaze, he won it and the corner of his mouth turned up. Mary understood and shared in its ruefulness; the man's friend must have seen it as a sneer, for he made some outcry of indignation, insisting that his friend dance.

"I certainly shall not." Darcy replied finally, and his voice carried with dignity rather than volume. "You know how I detest it."

Mary hid a smile, and moved away. She had no interest in the quarrels of such men, and when she heard her older sister being recommended she was glad of her own alacrity of movement. To be compared with Elizabeth at such a moment would have dulled her mood, and she took no pleasure in her sister's praise, nor in Mr. Darcy's censure of the same partner.

"Were you speaking to Mrs. Ussel?" Jane had broken away from the dance, and she made the enquiry in some haste as she saw Mr. Bingley making his way towards her for the second time. Mary nodded, mute in this crowd, and Jane kissed her cheek. "Darling, she looks very ill, and you likewise. I wonder if you might accompany her home. Once you are returned to Longbourne yourself, dearest, there will be ample time for James to return to us with the carriage – if you leave now."

"Thank you," Mary whispered, and felt a glow of love for her sister whose arm was already being taken by the eager young man.
He spared her a smile, but it was clear that he did not see her at all.

Mr. Darcy, in Mary's pretence, watched her with envy as she, the victor, was the one to make her glorious escape.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

"I shall be very fit to see Jane—which is all I want."

"Is this a hint to me, Lizzy," said her father, "to send for the horses?"

"No, indeed, I do not wish to avoid the walk. The distance is nothing when one has a motive; only three miles. I shall be back by dinner."

"I admire the activity of your benevolence," observed Mary.

-- Pride and Prejudice, Part 1: Chapter 7

The first and best conquest that Jane made at the dance was not that of Mr. Charles Bingley, but rather his more severe counterpart, Miss Caroline Bingley. Miss Bennet had even charmed the taciturn stormclouds of Mrs Hurst into something of a fair-weather friend. The note which she received the next morning was undoubtably from the former of the two women, and unlike her sisters she recognised the female hand immediately. Mrs. Bennet was not so perceptive, mistaking the upright thrusts of the consonants and the driving italics of the vowels for a masculine hand.

“It is from Miss Bingley,” Jane took the letter from her mother’s unapologetic clutches and opened it with her clean butter knife. Lydia took the opportunity to appropriate a slice of Jane’s toast for, as she quickly defended herself, it would only go cold. She was correct; Jane’s talents had never been shaped around the written word, and she wrote and read with a careful air that was more tailored towards the slow dance of embroidery thread and watercolours.

Today she read with even more of a ponderous air than usual, for her parents had spent the greater part of their breakfast thus far discussing their daughters’ general foolishness, and although the sentiment had been directed at the younger girls, it was Jane’s feelings which bore the brunt of the indignity. Seeing that both Mary and Kitty were as eager for distraction as herself, and Elizabeth’s eyes were luminous with curiosity, she began to read the letter aloud.

“My dear friend, If you are not so compassionate as to dine today with Louisa and me, we shall be in danger of hating each other for the rest of our lives...”

Then they are more like us than they would ever admit, Mary thought, privately amusing herself with the memory of those two ladies’ superior airs. She hid her smirk behind her napkin, but Kitty had spied her humour. To Mary’s surprise the girl grinned back – a shared moment of laughter, before Mary’s sinking heart understood that her sister was merely laughing at the sadistic image of the two women fighting, possibly tearing at each others’ bonnets in Lydia’s imagined pantomime. Mary’s smile faded, and she collected herself in good time to hear the end of Jane’s correspondence. The gentlemen were to dine with the officers.
“She will be exchanging one group of sisters for another, then.” Elizabeth murmured to Mary, with quick mischief in every word. As always, Mary found herself surprised at her sister’s intelligence, for it never shone so bright as it did when nobody was looking for it.

Jane frowned, for without a gentleman’s presence to affect her countenance she would have no call to ask for the chaperonage of her closest and dearest sister. It was unlike her to venture far alone in such a manner. Still, her spirits were high at the affection delivered within her note, and before her mother could lament the situation overlong she asked if she could use the carriage. Mrs. Bennet quickly refused, on the basis that a longer visit might well be brought about by a fortuitous fall of rain.

Every person assembled gaped, and even though Elizabeth attempted to make a joke her mother was implacable. When it transpired that the horses were occupied in the fields and no alternative was available, Jane was summarily dispatched. She parted from the company with a thick cloak and an air of abject humiliation.

“Straight shoulders, my love!” Mrs Bennet trilled, goodly woman and caring mother that she was. Her daughter must present herself in the best possible manner, or her motherly duty had fallen short.

Her daughter was indeed received with straight shoulders, but they were more frozen from the icy rain drops that soaked her cloak than drawn up in aristocratic grace. The elegant smile was rather a grimace of cold, and the kid gloves were ruined by the damp, but present herself she did.

Luke saw it all at a glance, and asked himself whether or not his new position in the Netherfield household was not more ludicrous than his feverish boredom at Lucas Lodge. He had never paid due attention to the eldest Miss Bennet, who he merely saw as fair and skilled as the rest of her sex, but he knew from Mary that the coiffed beauty had a gentle and unaffected nature. She certainly demonstrated it when, having needed to be helped down from her overlarge horse, she apologised profusely to the servant for having to rest in his arms for a moment.

“For I find myself very cold,” she whispered, and shivered somewhat against the damp, “And my head aches so, I am embarrassed to even have my presence announced. Perhaps I had best return home.”

“You have already been announced, Miss, and it will only grow colder. The rain looks fair set to snow.” Luke comforted her awkwardly, and turned her over to the more appropriate flour-dusted arms of the house cook. This kindly woman took the girl straight into the kitchen, for the great rooms of the hall held such enormous fireplaces that even a fairly prodigious blaze would not warm more than half the hearth, and certainly not a young woman.

Jane was summarily dried, and given hot milk to drink and ginger biscuits to calm her burning throat. On receiving information that her sickness had made the ladies of the house quite nervous to be in her company lest her fever spread, Miss Bennet was quickly taken to bed.

The Bennets heard it all, or the parts of it that were not too disquieting, the next morning. The expected snow had not fallen, and Luke found that he could cross the few miles to the Bennet household without undue distress to either himself or his attire. He delivered the message, and loitered in the dripping herb garden to await their response.

“Luke!”

The herb garden provided few places to hide, and after a brief moment of panic the gentleman decided it was better not to make the effort. The young lady had already seen him, and her summons could hence not be ignored. He raised his chin and returned her greeting.
“Miss Mary.”

“My sister, is she... is Jane...? The note did not clarify...”

“I understand that she has taken cold, Miss. I would not worry. She has been well tended since arriving in the hall.”

“Since...” Mary felt the laboured sting of his words keenly, and her happiness at hearing that her sister was not in danger looked marred. “She would have been well tended here.”

“She would not have taken sick in the first place, and you are well aware of that, miss.”

Mary blushed, and looked aside. “I did not have any part in it.”

“Of course you did not. I imagine you said nothing at all.”

What a retort! And how Mary paled at it, looking almost furiously at her oldest friend before drawing a deep breath for her own reply. She found she could not make one; not because of the slowness of her tongue, but because of the slowness of her mind. As clever and quick as she could be, she could not fathom the depths of his outrage. She understood that his affection for Jane was far less than her own, and his anger was wholly misdirected, but she knew not from whence it came.

She turned about and returned to the house, for within its walls her silence was a habit and not an accusation. Unknowing her own actions, she found her steps taking her towards Elizabeth’s room, where the woman was in a fierce confrontation with her mother.

Mrs. Bennet, finding that her daughter was determined to walk to Netherfield, had insisted that a box be made up for the servant to carry back with him, ahead of her daughter’s arrival. Elizabeth had agreed, for there are some essentials of the feminine toilette which a guest deigns to entreat from hosts far more compassionate than Miss Bingley. She soon found, however, that her comprehension of essentials was much removed from that of her mother. Where she had selected a modest grooming set, necessary garments and enough shifts that a fever-sweat would not outrun the laundress, her mother had taken an elaborate silken dress from the chest.

“They are a most respectable gathering, and they must entertain in the evenings.” The woman was insisting, brandishing green silk before her like the English flag. “You regarded their attire at the ball, Lizzie, so do not scold me now for wanting my dearest girl to look her best. She cannot appear to cards dressed in cotton!” And at this she glared at her daughter’s dress, which was indeed made of a light blue cut of that same cloth.

“I do not think,” Elizabeth insisted with heavy patience, “That Jane will wish to appear at all. How would she present herself with her head aching and her nose red from cold?”

That gave Mrs. Bennet pause, and while she was considering her daughter perceived Mary standing by the door. With a quick smile she summoned the girl to her side, and in a few directions they had filled the small chest with necessaries before their mother could collect herself enough to chose another frock. Defeated, the lady retired to her own room.

“And yourself?” Mary asked Elizabeth. The older girl shrugged, and now that she was in comfortable company she let the weary consternation show on her face.

“I only wish to be with her. I let her go alone, and follow mama’s direction, and she has come to this!” This last was declared with some anger, which was rapidly disguised. Turning to her sister, Lizzie rested her soft palm on the girl’s cheek. “And you must care for all who are here, especially father, and let it be known that they do not need to intervene any more than they have. They are
not wanted, but tell them instead that they are not needed, if it gives you more comfort.”

“You are angry,” Mary whispered, and saw that emotion at last on Lizzie’s face. “I w...wondered...”

Something set behind Elizabeth’s eyes.

“You do not see,” she declaimed, “The great harm which our mother can do. You were never her only charge, as Jane and I once were, and Lydia still is. Although she may have surrendered you to us before we were ready, we thank God daily that it was so. She must be loved and obeyed in all things, but if it comes to it then I would rather Jane and I be parted from her entirely than allow her to interfere in our lives as much as she would wish.”

“It was just one ride in the r...rain.”

Elizabeth looked at her archly, and was suddenly the distant older sister once again. “You do not understand.” She said, and turned away. “Ask Jane if you wish to, but do not ask me to speak of it again, for I never will.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

They found Mary, as usual, deep in the study of thorough base and human nature [with] some new observation of thread-bare morality to listen to.

– Pride and Prejudice, Vol. 1, Chapter 12.

Mrs Bennet descended on her ailing daughter with heartfelt cries of repentance, concern, reproof and all that is expected and quite genteel from a sorrowing mother. Having dispatched this duty, she proceeded to bid farewell to their magnanimous hosts, and set herself upon the end of Jane's bed. Looking about the well-appointed guest room with some pleasure, she bid her youngest daughter to join her in feeling the softness of the silk sheets, and her middle daughter to stop blocking the light. She might, it was suggested, explore the remainder of the public wing of Netherfield, and acquaint herself with her sister's future domain. Reporting back her observations was, of course, the main point of this dispatch – but Mary felt rather that being out of earshot of her mother's profusions would undoubtedly be the greater reward.

Much of the house was still shut off, since the tenants had not yet made up their minds to settle, and as such the unused rooms were left to gather dust. Areas of little concern to the young ladies in possession of the great house included (Mary discovered) a second, smaller hall for intimate parties, a chain of smoking rooms which the men had apparently forsaken in favour of the billiards room, and the library.

Her heart, rather sullen in the presence of her sister's obviously growing vivacity, leapt into her mouth. It was a library – and such a room as she, or her father, would be proud to boast of to every visitor, had it been within their own home. But it was not, it was here, and under the careless eye of Miss Bingley it had been left with stifling shuttered windows, ancient waxy pools in the sconces, and footprints in the dust.

The girl walked slowly through the room, admiring its twists and turns as much as the many books which lined the walls. Raising a hand, she ran her fingertips along the spines. Soft leather turned to the hard emboss of gold, and she felt the ridges of leaf patterns and the whorls of letters as one, pleasurable moment.

"They removed the most modern texts, I believe, to the drawing room at the front of the house." A man was suddenly there, his silhouette dark against the dimly lit room. He did not seem to notice Miss Bennet's gasp of surprise, but bowed politely. "If you are looking for a novel to pass the time, Miss Mary Bennet, then you would much better look there."

"Oh, no!" She cried, quite forgetting herself. "That is to say... I am not come looking for a b...book."

"Then you are in a strange room," He replied, with some humour. When she seemed unable to reply, he beckoned her a little closer. The motion was so like the gentle command of her father.
that Mary found her feet tripping forward, before she fully considered the propriety.

"I may be grateful for your intrusion, Miss Bennet," Darcy confided – for it was he - and he looked back at the shelves. "Unlike yourself, I am looking for a book. Perhaps you could advance your opinion as to which would be best?"

She looked at the hundreds of volumes and trembled. Taking note of that, he hastened to explain.

"I am looking for a gift for my sister, you see. When we began at this house I noted that this library, although somewhat smaller than my own, holds many volumes which I have not seen before. I thought to make a note and purchase them myself, upon my arrival in London, but my friend insisted that I take whichever book I desire from this collection. He has little inclination towards reading." His lips quirked then, and Mary could not tell if it was from laughter or distaste before he turned to look at her. "Well then, you are quite my sister's age, I think, and I believe I see hints of the same studious nature in your eye. I would welcome your opinion, Miss Bennet, but do let me know if I impose."

Mary blushed quite red, and was grateful for the dimly lit room. In the shadows it did not seem so terrible to have to speak. Mentioning the titles of a few popular novels, she was not discouraged by the wearied shake of his head, for she had been expecting such refinement. Venturing a few more titles, she was rewarded by a nod, and when she recommended a text which she considered quite daring, he even smiled.

"I do not think I will allow her to read that, Miss Bennet." He replied simply, and when she reddened in shame he shook her head. "No, I do not mean to insult your preference. It is only that she is yet more sheltered than yourself, and her experience with the world has not been instructive enough to give her a taste for such stories. For yourself, I think, it is a most fitting choice."

"How so?" She asked, comfortable enough with the man by now to challenge him.

He flushed. It was fascinating to see disconcertion on the face of a man, and Mary looked at him with awful wonder.

"Perhaps I said too much. I only meant that... I can see how such detailed worlds might provide a more tangible escape than those whimsical fancies most women seem to read. Your sister Elizabeth, I recall, chose a similar book last night. Perhaps she ultimately found the conversation of my companions a little distracting, but before their interruption she seemed most captivated by it. Perhaps I should let Miss Darcy read it."

"Escape?" Mary whispered, and he pretended that he had not heard the word.

"I thank you, Miss Bennet, for your sage advice. I will let my sister know to whom she is indebted." And with that declaration, he bowed and took his leave.

What an encounter!

Afterwards, sipping scalding Indian tea in the morning room, Mary found her eye drifting towards Mr. Darcy. Like herself, he had been summoned to pretend to be sociable over the bribery of a refreshment. Like herself, he was terrible at the artifice. She sat on the settle, he stood by the window, and the world revolved around each of them without taking much heed of their discomfort.

But, she realised, the comparison was not quite fair. For as often as she cringed away from Mrs. Hurst's critical eye, or Miss Bingley's sharp-edged comments about her attired or demeaner, a compliment or affection was addressed towards the man. And yet he remained taciturn, scowling...
where Mary knew she would have smiled. Yes, even smiled, for she knew she was quite capable of it, if she had ever been given reason to do so. And when more hurtful comments did reach him – addressed, to Mary's shame, by her mother – he seemed to find some consolation in the repartee.

He was thriving on discord and dislike. The very things which made the girl shrink away made him advance, and he seemed to revel in the attention.

Elizabeth, though quick to defend Darcy from her mother's comments, would not guard her sharp tongue as much as she ought. When she professed opinions, the man's replies were quickly made, intelligent... and there was something else. Some challenge that was spoken through his eyes and in the way he stood, as if he were daring Elizabeth to be more, to say more, than even Lydia had ever dared to goad her. When the girl's temper finally flared and she made some impassioned denouement, he appeared torn between contempt and approval.

Mary attempted to warn her sister of this, taking her to one side as the others were tying their bonnets on with elaborate wide bows, but Elizabeth looked arrogantly at her and laughed, an oddly frustrated sound.

"I will not have you repeating mother's nonsense." She declared, then: "There is nothing to worry about. I will be unmoved by whatever he might say, and never think better of him, for I know how much he hates me."

"But..." Mary began, and then choked. How could she say, "But that is what he likes"? It made no sense, even to her, and as much as she wanted to warn her sister to be wary of the man's sharp-eyed attentions, she could not even explain to herself why she believed it to be so. She thought briefly of enlisting Jane's help, but she instinctively thought that her gentle sister's nature would make her even more blind than Lizzie.

"Be c...careful," she managed, and fled.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

"Tell your sister I am delighted to hear of her improvement on the harp; and pray let her know that I am quite in raptures with her beautiful little design for a table, and I think it infinitely superior to Miss Grantley's."

"Will you give me leave to defer your raptures till I write again? At present I have not room to do them justice."

-Pride and Prejudice, Vol. 1, Ch. 10

The outcry of the family brought Mrs Hill running to the breakfast room, but her haste was born from curiosity rather than concern. Mrs Bennet's wail of anguish was too familiar to provoke concern, but even Miss Bennet's voice had sounded amidst the general cacophony, and there was a decided note of anticipation in its musical tone.

The only voice not raised was Mary's. Although her hands shook, it was for a different reason. As her father read aloud from the letter of a certain young clergyman to the rest of the table, she found her own attention drawn inexorably towards the letter which lay beside her own plate. It was addressed to her, but the hand was unfamiliar. It was a delicate copperplate in dainty brown ink, and unlike the twice-crossed script of Mr Collins, the lines of the address were widely spaced. It was an extravagant use for the thick, embossed paper. Mary subscribed to many editorial acquaintances, but she did not know anyone who wrote like that. She did not know anyone who could afford to! Those who could spare the expense would not suffer the indignity of being considered so proud.

As soon as the breakfast party broke up for smelling salts, gossip and the solace of the household chores, Mary made her way to the parlour. No-one would disturb her in the dim room until the afternoon sun brought warmth and light. She slit the wax with curious haste and read the most bewildering letter of her life:

My Dear Miss Mary

I hope you do not mind the familiar address when we have yet to be introduced, but I feel as if I know your character already and cannot bear to begin with the formality which custom dictates. Do forgive me if it is not to your liking.

But I begin poorly!

My brother urges me to write to you. He considers you a most fitting companion, which is the highest praise I have heard him bestow, and his judgement is never incorrect so I do believe his opinion to be true. I am told that you are like myself a quiet person, of solid stock, and that you share my passion for studies of music and literature.

Since losing my governess I have keenly felt the loss of a comrade in my daily studies, and having advised my brother of the fact, have received a recommendation towards you as a solution.

(That passage reads quite coarsely, but I fear I do not know the proper manner in which to...
address you. I would like to correspond with you, but until you reply I cannot guess at the tenor of your voice.

I fear this letter is most inarticulate, but I beg you to attempt a reply.)

The book which you chose was well received, and very enjoyable if a little dry in tone. Do you agree with my view? What are your opinions on Bach's Preludes, and is it true that you have six sisters?

I hope these questions will suffice to begin conversation, dear stranger.

- Miss Georgiana Darcy

Mary read it several times without comprehension, and found that her strongest feeling was not pride to have been so noticed by Mr. Darcy, but misery. One word swam before her eyes; even in the innocent girl's penmanship it mocked her.

Companion.

The girl who had penned this letter probably meant to write 'friend', but torn between her guilty formality and her natural exuberance she had settled on that word, and it stung. Companions were spinsters, matrons with untouched bodies and zealous eyes following their married partners with doglike adoration. They became chaperones or maiden aunts, withered and useless as they relied on the charity of their families or those who valued their company.

Miss Mary Bennet had finally attracted the notice of a man, and this was how he saw her. As a quiet person of 'solid stock'. She bit her lip and tried not to feel the insult. Another part of her mind could not help but wonder how he saw Jane, or Elizabeth. Perhaps their 'stock' was not quite so pertinent to the way he and Mr. Bingley discussed them. If, indeed, they thought of them at all! Mary could flatter herself that she, at least, was the first to be singled out by the gentlemen. Even if her selection was for most unromantic reasons, it was still more than the utter disdain which Kitty and Lydia had been awarded, for all that they fluttered their eyelashes.

Mary smiled and returned to the letter with a lighter heart. It was the work of but a minute to repair a pen whose sorry state bore testament to the carelessness of Lydia, and she began to write her reply. Unlike Georgiana's letter, Mary used small letters and spaced them closely together, and her words lacked the effusions of graceless inarticulacy which littered that lady's prose.

Miss Darcy,

I was surprised to receive your letter, but not unhappy once I understood its meaning. Of course I am much flattered by your attention, and the marked compliment your brother pays me in his recommendation. Would that he had discussed it with me, I would not be at such a loss to respond! For I believe that in penning this paragraph I have exchanged more words with yourself than he.

I am pleased to be your correspondant. I trust you will remain content to be mine!

I will answer your questions before asking my own.

You are incorrect in one respect: I have four sisters, not six. My youngest sister is rather energetic and may have given the impression of being more than one person in both volume and movement, but my elder sisters are too refined to be so confused. I have no brothers, which is a great sorrow to the family, although I am soon to be introduced to the cousin who inherits our estate. I pray that he becomes in truth the son that he is in law to my father, although my mother will not be
As for Bach, I admire his preludes as exercises to warm up the fingers, but find little interest in their sound. The notes are always spaced so distantly, and I prefer the close chords of more modern composers. There is something so chilling about music which is not intended for dancing or wooing, but to whisper secrets. Do you agree? I suppose this is odd as my first question to you, dear Georgiana, but I am curious. My family consider my dislike of reels and jigs to display a lack of talent.

I am glad you enjoyed the book, although it may be more due to my sister's influence than my own. Your brother, it seemed, perceived her enjoyment of it. I imagine she shares your opinion of its tone; I do not, but then I am accustomed to reading much more serious texts.

Yours in respectful affection,

Miss Mary Bennet

Mary frowned at the last endearment, and resisted the urge to blot out her entire paragraph concerning music. It was a view which ran decidedly counter to fashion, and even to her unfashionable eye it seemed forward. Still, she did not wish to mar the neatness of the page, nor waste paper, and so on reflection she let it remain.
"About a month ago I received this letter; and about a fortnight ago I answered it, for I thought it a case of some delicacy, and requiring early attention."

- Pride and Prejudice, Vol. 1 Ch. 13

It was some days before the return post might reach Longbourne due to the improvidence of an absolute mire of rain and mud, but for some reason the inclement conditions were no deterrent to the encroachment of Mr. Collings.

Mary wondered at his venturing in the rain, for in all other concerns the gentleman was a model of pedantic cleanliness and fastidiousness. She confided as much to Kitty, but the girl shrugged off the observation. Without the opportunity to enter the wider world and explore the domestic unhappiness thereout, the younger girls struggled to occupy themselves. Lydia's bright countenance had quickly grown sour, while Kitty became increasingly indifferent. While Lydia flitted from bonnet to spinet with restless haste, her sister slowly faded into a colourless shade.

Mr. Collings did, at first, provide some respite from the tedium of watching one's hair turn wildly against fashion in the static air. For the first few days, all five girls negotiated their way into corners and doorways, venturing into the servant's stairways and risking a scolding from Mrs. Hill if they were thence discovered. All this, and several squabbles, for a glimpse at the man who had broken into their feminine domain! And how ridiculous he was, and how Lydia choked on her mirth, until the third dawn dawned and they discovered his matrimonial intentions. Then their levity quickly fell; the foolish mannerisms and affected act of the gentleman became a chain which might bind them, and how loudly did those irons seems to call!

Only Jane might consider herself safe, but even her serene countenance was not soothed until overhearing her mother declare her eldest soon to be engaged.

"It is a falsehood," She told Elizabeth, "But unchristian as it may appear, I find the lie more appealing than the thought of being matched with our cousin, dear man that he is."

"Dear for the expense, and for little else!" Exclaimed that lady. "I would commit a thousand falsehoods to be spared his estimable company, and a thousand more to never hear mother speak of him more."

It may have been that her words were tempting the fates. Whatever the motivation may have been, it was her hand which Mr. Collings requested for the opening dances of the impending ball. Vicious compliment! Lizzie could no sooner refuse than she could wear boys' breeches, although she dedicated the greater part of the morning to creating excuses.

"But I must do it," She sighed, eventually abandoning the game altogether. "As much as I dread it, I anticipate my mother's reprimand if I refuse even less. Perhaps," she added, brightening, "I might sprain my ankle in the first dance."

"As our father wished on Mr. Bingley?" Jane shook her head reprovingly. "I dislike this habit of wishing harm as if it were a joke. I cannot bear to think of those whom I love being in pain."
"I shall tell father so," Elizabeth exclaimed, laughing, "But no-one else, for you may wish to repeat that to Mr. Bingley yourself!"

Jane reddened, and, on failing to regain any composure, quickly left the room. Elizabeth's gentle laughter did much to dispel the gloom of the day, and when the two sisters were reunited their shared confidence seemed to warm the very rooms.

Jane's unbidden admission softened her already glowing features, but being privy to the secret dramatically altered her sister. Elizabeth's transformation was odd, for in all respects she was the same creature she had ever been. When preparing for the ball, she took no extra pains aside from bemoaning her stained shoe roses. Yet there was an alteration. Her overlarge eyes laughed and seemed more shapely for it, and when she thought on her sister's happiness they carried a simple wistfulness which spoke of quiet elegance unlike her habitual liveliness. The sardonic thinness of her lower lip was removed; she did not smile, but her lips seemed fuller when that tension was relieved. Little could be done for the sharpness of her nose, and unlike Lydia she had not followed the habit of pinching it overnight to make it appear softer. Nothing could be done for her overlong arms and protruding elbows, either, but that was the day when she began to carry herself with a little more dignity, self-conscious and refined.

She was, Mary realised, unconsciously putting herself into Jane's role. With the admission of love had come the hope of a future which would make Miss Elizabeth the eldest of the unmarried daughters, and Lizzie was practicing her part.

Is this my sister? Mary wondered, watching her mending a bonnet in a colour quite unlike her usual preference. She makes such a study of character and we never ask her why. Is she learning how to be other people?

It was an unsettling thought, but Mary found that she could understand it. She had often wished that she could be someone other than Miss Mary Bennett. True, she generally wished that she could be Lizzie with her quick tongue, or Kitty with her quiet self-collection, but those wishes were for people complete. Elizabeth's act was not a mimicry but a new person, Lizzie-but-not-Lizzie.

The night of the Netherfield ball came about, and this time there were two undisputed beauties in the Bennett carriage. Nobody would be able to describe Elizabeth in words so unbecoming as 'tolerable'. If anyone else had noticed the subtle change in her countenance they did not remark upon it, but after two reels where her slippered feet were abused quite cruelly by her cousin, Lizzie sought sanctuary hiding in the alcove beside Mary.

"Ah, Miss Mary," For all that he began with an exclamation, there was no surprise in the cultured drawl, and before even lifting her eyes the lady knew to whom they would be directed. Mr. Darcy nodded in greeting; his shoulders did not bend at all in the mockery of a bow. Mary affected the deepest curtsey she knew how to sustain in reply.

He looked archly at her. "I see that you have your sister's trick of mockery after all."

"I do n...not make a ha... ha... habit of it, s...sir."

He waited patiently for her to finish, and if he was aware of the stutter he barely acknowledged it. "I believe you have received a letter from Miss Georgiana Darcy."

"Your sister?" She blurted out, appalled at the man's formality. He stiffened, and for a moment she believed that he was offended. Then, with some reflection evident in his eye, he smiled.

"Just so. I forgot that you may now claim an acquaintance with her, of all the women in this
room."

"Thank you," She chewed at her lip. He had ignored the stutter, but he looked most forbidding at this childish action until she desisted. "She seems..."

What? She longed to say 'lonely' or even 'desperate', but she knew that he would dismiss the tone of the letter with quick habit. Mary swallowed and then finished weakly, "...most eloquent, sir."

A look of pride came about his features, and he quashed it with an upward glance at the assembled company. "I trust you have replied."

"Oh, yes sir! Straight away, but you know our post is with the Bromley chase, and it may be some days in this storm."

"In future you will give it to my manservant and he will ride with it," The man said it so casually, as if it were nothing to send a man riding across the country, nor to give orders to a young woman he barely knew. Mary knew not how to respond, and so she bowed instead. When she looked up he had gone.

"You are very rude," she murmured after him, and then smiled when she saw him approached by her intolerable cousin. Here was one Bennett who he would not abandon so easily, and indeed it was only when he professed a desire to take up the next promenade that the gentleman left his side. Two women dancing together was permissible in these war-torn times, but two men would be laughable. Mary knew from Elizabeth's biting observation that Darcy would not tolerate being laughed at.

Her own mirth was cut abruptly short when she saw the young lady who the distinguished gentleman led to the central floor. It was not one of his elegant friends, but a woman who held herself so confidently that she barely looked like herself. But Elizabeth it was, and she took her place with much grace. As Mary watched, her sister's lips moved, and she laughed brightly at the man's reply.

They parted, and circled one another. It did not seem that their eyes ever parted, until Elizabeth's full lips shaped the word 'Wickham'. At that Mr. Darcy finally balked; before he could collect his thoughts his traitor eyes raced forth.

Mary froze, horrified, as his eyes sought out her own. As he held her gaze she saw such depths of emotion that she could not breathe. For a thousand heartbeats and none she was caught, drowning in the very soul of a man whose pain she could not possibly comprehend.

And then, in a single step, he tore his eyes away. The moment was gone.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

*How does Georgiana get on, Darcy?*
Mr. Darcy spoke with affectionate praise of his sister's proficiency.
"I am very glad to hear such a good account of her," said Lady Catherine; "and pray tell her from me, that she cannot expect to excel if she does not practice a good deal." "I assure you, madam," he replied, "that she does not need such advice. She practises very constantly."

- Pride and Prejudice, Vol. 1, Ch. 31

Georgiana Darcy knew how her story might begin.

She looked out of the window at the Darcy lands, cultivated by the Darcy servants who wore the Darcy crest on their uniforms. Darcy, Darcy, Darcy... the lush lands of Pemberley were lousy with Darcy. The name which launched a thousand... well, not ships. It was some comfort that there was no Darcy navy. But the name still held thrall throughout the earthen land.

Georgiana Darcy was just as owned by the name as her servants. The vital difference was that the servants were allowed to leave. Georgiana would be a Darcy until the day she died.

Yes, she knew how her story would begin. "Once upon a time there was a name, and the name was girled Georgiana..."

A secret smile crossed her soft lips at the thought, for its very contrariness seemed to be an act of rebellion. If her many tutors or her governess even suspected its existence they would be most displeased, and surely Fitzwilliam would hear of it, and then there would be a stern reckoning. Summarily warned against the evils of such liberating nonsense, the entire household would be subject to close observation lest their own thoughts seek out the indolent intellectualism. Worn down by her brother's affectionate tyranny, Georgiana knew she would quickly surrender herself to innocent pursuits. She would play arias from Figaro and paint Grecian bulls and satyrs in drab watercolours, and all would be quite correct, even if her own mind was a turmoil beneath her placid eyes.

Yes, Georgiana was a Darcy. She heard it spoken with awe when she entered salons and ball rooms, and the servants seemed to shrink at her footstep, but she wished it was not so. Because now she was not permitted to visit salons, or play at whist at a further venture than her own exquisite evening parlour, and apart from the servants there were no new faces in her life. There would not be, she knew, for a goodly time.

She turned away from the window and started at the sight of a butler, who handed her a silver tray. The letter on it made her heart race, but in her current mood she did not open the envelope once the butler had gone. The letter was from her confidante, and even that good lady had been selected by the Darcy estate. Without her brother's approval and selection, this letter would no more have reached her hand than a transcript from the devil himself.
She left the morning room with the letter tucked into her sleeve. The feel of the cheap cloth paper against her skin was both irritating and pleasurable, like an intimate secret. However distant the woman’s words may transpire to be, Georgiana thought, they were confided in her alone. The wax seal was unbroken and had not been tampered with. It was the first such correspondence since... since she had lost her good brother's trust. Having a private acquaintance was a decadent thrill after the months of grudging tedium, and she enjoyed it. The gradual warming of her brother, and this evidence of his affection, lightened her heart.

"I do not blame you," He had said, and she wished that she might believe him. His anger had been dark and absolute, and even in the light of his forgiveness she trembled. "No, all the fault rests with him. You conduct was..."

He had hesitated at that, because they both knew exactly where the man’s blame must end, and her own choice had begun. He would not have led her away unwilling, nor ventured further without her consent. It was the difference between scandal and abject disgrace, and that line was not to be borne. But still, in Fitzwilliam's eyes, his fifteen year old sister was but a child, led astray like a christian lamb.

"I am sorry," she ventured, and it was the wrong thing to say. Only Wickham's apology would suffice, and that would not be borne hence in this world or the next.

The glass beads that edged her dress rasped against the stair, and Georgiana raised her skirt a little higher. There was no-one to see her well-turned ankle on this stairway, and she might have raised the silken fabric as high as she liked. Her heart balked at the sinful idea, and when she mounted the corridor she guiltily let the skirt trail in the dust. Never mind that it would be unclean; she had many dresses, and cared not for the lye-burned fingers of her maids. She was a careless housekeeper beside the inestimable woman who ran the staff, and did not pay heed to her duties beyond the absolute minimum.

This had been the nursery, a lifetime ago. The windows had been dusty then, too, for children were not seen as people until their short frocks were set aside. But the floor had been clean. She had played at jacks and marbles and cards sitting here, legs stretched out against her brother’s on the polished floorboards. That was before the steward's boy had been permitted into the house.

Georgiana thought, I was happy, then.

She walked differently here, in the world where she had been a child. Her dainty steps were a little more carefree, and her upright poise relaxed. The glass beads on her skirt were meant to chime together with each whispering step, making a glittering wave about her feet. Now she lengthened her stride and they serenaded her with a series of heavy clicks. She dared not let down her hair from its intricate braiding, but she released some of the heavier pins. When she reached the nursery she set them down upon a table, where a clear circle of dust proved that this was a regular habit. Sighing with pleasure, the unburdened Darcy set herself down at the schoolroom piano and rested her fingers against the yellowed ivory.

Here, unmasked and unseen, the Darcy became little Gina once again.

She played until her fingers ached. Later tonight she would play intricate sonatas before the severe eyes of her visiting aunt, but now she could play the music which she enjoyed. She let her fingers dance without thought, blending the simple notes of folk tunes with the complex figures of Herr Mozart without pausing between them. There was skill in such playing, and more than a little art, but to Gina it was all the same. It was not music. To that she was deaf; to the solfege notes on thick vellum which her tutors pressed upon her she could be indifferent.

The music she had been taught was another part of being a Darcy - blending with her dress and
coiffure and bearing until she was invisible beneath it. Here, on the nursery piano, breathing in
dust, Gina played beyond music, and beneath it, and felt her thoughts and sorrows and regrets
becoming nothing beside it. She was lost.

Wickham had found her. She had turned one day, blind to the world, and he had been standing
there. She knew not for how long he had listened. He had leaned against the doorway and a slight
smile was constant upon his face, and he had said nothing. She thought that she loved him in that
moment. The swell of her heart had heard the voices of her fingertips until it overflowed, and in
that moment his smile became angelic.

Georgiana's fingers tripped against the keys, and a dissonant chord shook the strings in the old
upright instrument. The dull tone reminded her that the instrument was becoming untuned, and
that the grand instrument her brother had guiltily gifted her was exquisitely pitched. He haunted
that room as stubbornly as his enemy's ghost lurked in the rooms above. Breathing heavily,
Georgiana pulled the lid of the piano closed. She would have none of them.

The petulant motion dislodged the letter, and it fluttered to the dust. For a moment Miss Darcy was
tempted to leave it there, mouldering in the dust like her own stagnant life. Yes, it seemed like an
intimate way to dismiss her brother's choice of confidante! And yet, she was desperately lonely.
And she was frightened, too, for the world beyond her own gate had treated her most cruelly
when she had last ventured abroad. The letter, patient and unadorned, made no demands on her.
Her only complicity was to open the seal, and that was barely a hardship.

Georgiana did so, and read the letter with quick, nervous energy. When she had finished it she
stood up, and made her way to her morning room. The servants would see her footprints in the
dust and summon cleaners and a piano tuner before sealing the room shut for her secret playing;
Georgiana knew none of this. Neither, it had to be said, did her brother. The affection the servants
held for their young mistress had only increased since her incarceration, and they respected her
whims as much as they nurtured them.

Georgiana bid her maid fetch her writing case, and composed a reply in her mind while the
woman quietly unlocked ornate cabinets and found the mahogany box. Dipping her pen into the
silver inkwell without noticing its oft-polished shine, Georgiana began.

Dear Mary,

I thank you for your reply. You are quite right in moderating my tone, and of course we shall
correspond more openly now. I do hope this letter finds you well - and your four sisters likewise!
You see, dear friend? I am learning!

This morning I practiced a good deal upon the instrument, and yet I played not one note of Bach.
I trust you will approve, for I do agree with your opinion. He is quite unlistenable, and yet how
we must repeat his works to improve our playing! I admit I use to live in dread of his preludes, as
they betrayed my dislike of scales.
I am most intrigued to hear that music whispers secrets to you, my dear Mary. I have never heard
any whispers in the playing of my companions, but perhaps I might impart some of my own when
I perform. It would quite explain why I dislike being bidden to play some works before strangers. I
would much prefer to shape such melodies to my friends alone, for I know I might trust them to
keep it in their hearts and not upon their lips. I am not proud enough of my secrets to wish them
gossipped upon, nor, truth be told, of my playing.

Please tell me more of your family. I have a brother, as you know, but no sisters. I should have
liked to have a sister. I wish to know what it is like. Do not censor your words, sweet friend! I
insist on knowing every detail, for how else am I to know whether I am right to want such a
creature in my family? I have often supposed that my brother will marry me a sister who is quite
like myself, but recently I begin to wonder if he will find one who has naught in common with me at all. This worries me. At present, my brother is all I have, and he is not inclined to present me for sufficient seasons to find me a suitable match of my own. I suppose with two older sisters we are similar in that regard, but I do not mean to pry.

My dear Mary, I am quite astonished to hear that your sister has also made an impression upon my good brother! Has he aquainted himself with your family entire, then, to take advice from both yourself and - but I am sorry, I do not know her name.

I apologise. My brother's restraint in confiding in you any of his plan was probably due to my own failings. He would not have wished to cause offence if I had refused your overtures of friendship, nor would he place undue pressure on a lady to submit to his command. It is only in matters of business that he is forthright, and even then he is the very spirit of politeness. Is your cousin of a similar bent?

The door opened, and a steward entered to announce the arrival of Lady Catherine. Georgiana nodded absently and composed a brief farewell, knowing that the carriage would take some minutes to near the house, and that Lady de Burgh would take even longer to be divested of her hat.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

The ode in this chapter may seem utterly out of place for a young Regency era woman to sing, but it genuinely was! It is a popular poem originally published in 1640(!). It was set to music a little later and discovered in an anthology of women’s solo music called 'Elizabeth Rogers Hir Virginall Book' in 1836, implying that it would have been in popular circulation around the time P&P is set. Strangely, it's one of the less suggestive songs in that collection.

The mind reels.

Miss Darcy would never relate the word 'starved' to any part of her life, but it was that piteous state which had coloured her appetite of late. She did not lack food, but the less material sustenance of company had been long denied her, making her cheek pale and her eyes over-eager with every slighting glance.

Her aunt saw this nervousness as a hereditary trait shared with her own daughter, Anne. Her strident good health led her to offer the sure comfort to her niece that, at least, it was only an indisposition shared by the younger, female members of the family. She herself was only prone to a slight headache from time to time. It was common knowledge that the Darcy's circumstances would have been far worse if Fitzwilliam had been affected. Georgiana must pray to G-d, said the good woman, in gratitude for his giving weakness to the sister and thus overlooking the brother entirely.

Georgiana held her tongue, with only a small amount of impatience. She might have informed her aunt of the sharp head pains which sometimes kept her brother to his rooms for days at a time, or proven her own stout health by walking about the entire parkland without stopping, but neither option crossed her mind. If her aunt wished to name her an invalid so be it; in turn, she readily agreed to stay away from her detestably idle cousin Anne, pleading fear of being contagious. The obvious relief in her aunt's assent made slow anger warm her blood, and she excused herself to the instrument.

Her fingers were still loose from her earlier practice in the nursery, and so she felt content to let her mind wander as she began to play. Like most young ladies of the genteel persuasion she had gone to some trouble to prepare a portfolio of pieces which might run fluidly under the stream of conversation, both charming and soothing the visiting gentility.

Georgiana was not quite sure if her aunt truly was gentle, but she appeared to have little interest in the music itself. Rather, she commented at length upon the strength of her fingers, the quality of the instrument, the coast from which the ivory had been procured and finally, turning to one of her matronly companions, a piercing interrogation of that woman's family interests in the common practice of trade. Naturally, her companion was at a loss for words at her own humble beginnings, even if they were now several generations removed from her own position in society. Georgiana made herself appear serene, and continued to play unheeded.

Her portfolio was composed of simple works which she might ornament as she chose, and some of the songs which had become popular in the London season. Without anyone standing close by
to turn her pages, and thus discomfort her by their presence, Georgiana slipped from one song to
the next without any real thought, and let the lyrics embrace her tongue.

One in particular made her fingers slow (heedless of her governess’ training that to linger on ones
cadences was perfectly vulgar habit only practiced on the continent). She hummed it through a
few times, and then softly sang:

*Think not, dear love, that I'll reveal the hours of pleasure we two steal...*

The words were by Carew; Wickham had told her that in his laughing way, when first he heard
her sing it. He had lit upon her score with alacrity, near to dancing despite the minor mode the
piece was set to.

"Sweet song, little bird!" He had declared, and then he had leaned closer and employed the
pompous voice he had adopted since his time in the university. "But what think you of its
meaning?"

She had frowned at the score, which seemed easy enough to her innocent eye. Her heart raced a
little when she was near him, and she laughed too loudly and blushed with scant regard for
decorum, and she knew that these things would be apparent to his more worldly eye. "Why, it
means when we speak in the hallway, or chance upon one another in the garden..."

"Or loiter beside the piano?" He finished, lounging against the instrument. Seeing her bow of
agreement, he hid a smile and gestured at the keys. "Then please, continue to bring me such
pleasure."

"I think you tease me," she had replied, but had obediently returned to the music.

*No eye shall see nor yet the sun discry what thee and I have done.*

*The god of love himself, whose dart did first pierce mine and next thy heart,*

*He shall not know that we can tell what sweets in stol'n embracements dwell.*

"Ah! Now there's the blush your brother would be relieved to espy." Wickham declared, with a
cruel note in his voice. Georgiana coloured and found that she could not meet his gaze, whatever
humour might be lurking within.

"It speaks only of love, and modest Christian love at that." She informed her shaking fingertips, as
if to beseech them to be still. "A wife might sing this to her husband without reproof."

"And yet a maiden cannot even discuss it with her oldest friend without crimson blooming in her
cheek!" he exclaimed, and to Georgiana’s shock she felt his fingers raising her chin gently.

She shut her eyes, and for a moment was torn in an agony of the unknown. She did not know
what she expected, or what she wanted to do, or how she might respond without giving offence,
and before she could truly consider all of the options he removed his hand and she had no reason
to react at all.

"I apologise, Miss Darcy." He said with a touch of formality, "It pains me to see you
discomforted. I only thought you might consider the meaning in the words you sing so prettily for
your suitors each night."

"To what end, sir?" She could not meet his gaze, but there was a challenge in her words at least.
She heard the smile in his answer.
"To improve your performance, perhaps?"

"In music?"

"In many things." He raised her hand to kiss it, raising his eyebrow at how icy her fingers felt in his own, warm palm, and then he was gone.

Georgiana played very badly for the rest of the night, and it was a long time before she dared to sing in Wickham's presence again. When she finally did, of course, he told her...

"Georgiana!" The voice was loud, striking and unmistakably nasal. Georgiana wrenched herself away from her memory to find that her fingers had grown quite still, and her breath was too quick to summon a melody from her lips. Her aunt was looking to her most severely, but she knew she must have ended the song, for she had left no music incomplete since she was a child.

"I am sorry, aunt," She whispered, hiding her waxen hands under the lace of her skirt. "I feel unwell."
Chapter 11

My dear Miss Darcy. Georgiana.

You asked me to describe my sisters to you. I hope that you do not mind the delay in my setting pen to paper in this matter! Many events have transpired which have made the quietude needed for written discourse quite absent in our tranquil home. Since these events pertain to my sisters, I thought that perhaps you would find greater understanding of their characters and persons if I narrated their actions to you, than if I simply attempted to describe them to you.

I recount then, most faithfully, the events which filled the past two weeks of silence.

As you know, my family is in possession of a cousin - singular. Indeed, he has proven himself to be so singular that he has become quite notorious in the village and (as my mother laments) society at large. It does not surprise me, despite this infamy, that my mother has long overlooked his shortcomings in order to encourage his suit of my sister Elizabeth. Unlike my mother, my sister was not at all welcoming to his dispassionate passions.

Her refusal was (she claimed) rotted in his inconsistency. When he first arrived, it is true that his eye fell upon my eldest sister, Jane. Any woman might justly feel the insult of being considered second best, especially by a man whose opinion is held in low regard.

Elizabeth is my father's favourite, and has taken the offence with even less grace than one might expect. In many other respects she is refined and courteous, but upon receiving Mr. C-’s proposal of marriage she immediately fled to my father's side, like a scolded child, in order to enlist his intervention. Thus fortified, she allowed herself to feel superior in the abject mockery my good father directed at both her suitor, and his own wife.

I myself cannot feel so aloof, but happily I remain at enough of a remove that my discomfort was not remarked upon. Thus scorned and insulted in equal measure, my cousin has retrenched to the house of our neighbour.

Elizabeth claims to have been injured by her suitor's indifference. And yet – if you wish to know her character, I will confide – and yet, I feel that her dislike of Mr. C- may be more closely connected to her affections being bestowed upon another party.

I feel dreadfully wicked for setting such words to paper. My mother would never abide such gossip! Please excuse my impropriety, dear friend, in the guise of honesty. I trust that you will recognise candour, even in handwriting as lamentable as my own.

So much for Lizzie. My younger sisters, Lydia and Catherine (or Kitty), are much engaged with the attentions of the local militia.

These men are encamped here until (one presumes) clement weather and a suitable vessel enables them to make the crossing to the continent to confront the French. At present they are supposed to be refining those uniquely English skills which will allow them to triumph on the battle ground. I do not know what these skills are; nor have any of my servants witnessed them being enacted in the practice yards.

In truth, the officers seem to be dedicated to avoiding the training of their men altogether. They spend a large portion of their time playing at cards and dancing. My sisters are delighted with their repose, but I find myself a little uneasy. If I were to make a career on the battle ground, I would hope that my training would prepare me for the toils of war. These men seem content to
trust in fate, or G-d – whichever one allows them to remain at whist the longest.

Lydia and Kitty are much occupied in distracting the officers. Elizabeth does not mean any harm in her own intimacy with another enlisted man, Mr. W-, but I fear that she has fallen into the same trap. I congratulate myself that my clumsy feet and charmless smile make me as useful to the militia's military pursuits as my sisters remain to its recreational ones.

And this leaves me to describe Jane, who has had no dealings with either the militia or with my cousin. No doubt she would have been encouraged towards either, since she is fair of face and sweet of character, but my mother leaves her alone. This is due, in part, to her connection with a friend of your brother's. I believe, indeed, that your whole family may be acquainted with Mr. Bingley and his sisters, and Mr. Hurst? As you may already know, then, they have been in residence near Longbourn for many months.

My eldest sister has built upon her friendship with Mr. B- and, having achieved a convivial state, has been encouraged to close her eyes to the world beyond that friendship. She thus mends bonnets and crafts lace, and plays scales with no resolution or resolve. I find her life tedious even as an observer; I cannot imagine having to live it. But Jane does not complain. She is considered by all to be in a most blissful state.

And those are my sisters. Take their characters and interpret them however you wish, Miss Darcy, for I often struggle to make sense of them. I should perhaps give you clues as to their intimacies – that is, that the younger two barely leave one another's sides, and the elder two are just as inseparable – but I believe you could guess that from my recounting.

I consider myself removed from either pair, and stronger for it. What they cannot do without each other's assistance, I have learned to do unaided. But it has left me bereft of a bosom companion, and as sweet as the ear of my sisters can become when they hear an interesting tale, I fear that they find my slow and stumbling speeches a little tedious. In writing, I can at least structure my thoughts.

And now to the censor this letter must go. Pray that my cruel pen doth not erase all sense from this text – for there is little enough to be found as it stands!

In confidence,

Mary
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience and encouragement. I have a whole notebook full of chapters to type up for you, so don't worry - this story hasn't stopped!

It is a cruel trick to twist the strands of time to further scrutiny, but back to purpose this narrative must return. In sympathising with Miss Darcy and her correspondence, many details have been missed which, good reader, we must recover and recount with the same painful fixation with which Miss Mary Bennet laments their passing.

Within the Bennet household it had been no secret – or, at least, a secret poorly observed – that the Netherfield Ball was to be the turning point of the family's fortunes. From whom else would such knowledge be concealed, but from their houseguest. The man's estimable wisdom did not extend to the nuances of the female psyche, and thus he was content. His own fortunes being assured by both entail and intention, Mr Collins proceeded about Longbourne in a self-congratulatory stupor which even the effusions of Mrs Bennet could not permeate.

Elizabeth was perhaps the best placed to be aware of this, once her father had sojourned to town to escape the obsequious shadow which haunted his inner sanctum. Even she feigned obliviousness. She was possessed of an excess of nervous energy which captured her thoughts as completely as her sisters surrendered their own to the militia.

Naturally, Elizabeth flattered herself that her own sensibilities were mature and merititious compared to the whimsies of those less refined ladies of her set. She did not linger upon Mr Wickham's visage, because it was more correct to be flattered by his wit. The touch of his hand paled before the proper, feminine tremblings evoked by a man's distant and polite regard. Thus, Elizabeth rationalised away the genuine warmth of a fleeting passion, and instead committed herself to the logical surrender of the intimacies of her mind and spirit. She was well positioned to lose her heart in the same bloodless vein, had it not been for the unwanted memory of other eyes.

Even as Wickham's held her captive, those darker eyes pierced her to the quick. The recollection alone left her speechless, and she grew frustrated by the insistence of the memory's return. Tom, she forced her mind towards the night ahead, and recalled the reservations which her cousin had already made upon her time. Her resulting pique chased even the amiable Jane from her side for much of the daylight hours.

Mary happened upon another of her sisters as she hid from the chaos in the orchard. For a moment the face which Kitty turned on her was filled with hostility. Then, the girl's face softened.

"I apologise." Her voice was hushed. "I thought you were Lydia."

This was such a reversal that Mary's mouth fell open. Kitty saw, and her laughter was rueful, quite removed from the shrill giggles she expressed alongside her counterpart. She gestured towards the house, where maids were rushing from laundry rooms to chambers with their hands full of silk and satin. From one window they could hear the strident tones of the elegant Mrs Bennet, and Lydia's answering shrieks of excitement.

"They are talking of the officers." Kitty's voice was still quiet. "I could not bear another minute of
it, since I know how many more hours I must yet abide."

"I thought you were fond of the soldiers."

"Oh, yes! But I would have liked to choose them, to pursue my own interests. Lydia, you know, decides who we should speak to even though I am older than she. Tonight she shall laugh and dance, and I with her – but it is she who shall hold their regard. Jane shall be beautiful, Lizzie shall be quick, and I shall trail behind my sister to make up a fourth hand at whist."

Mary considered this, not surprised by the omission of her own name. "I shall be just as forgettable."

"You!" Kitty gaped at her. "I have heard you play, Mary. As soon as you find the instrument the room shall be yours."

The young lady felt a wave of heat cross her cheeks, and realised that her sister's words had made her blush. It had been their honesty, the note of indifference as though she were stating a fact rather than forming a compliment. Then Kitty spoke again, and Mary felt the heat of pleasure crumbling away from her burning cheeks like ashes.

"I'll never have a chance." Kitty said piteously. "I'm bright enough at most things, but one cannot dream of outshining the stars."

She proclaimed this last part broadly, like Mr Collins invoking a proverb, and Mary felt a surge of hatred. No. She thought, You can speak so easily. In that soft voice you could shape music without needing to strike a single chord.

She found herself studying her sister, seeing her for the first time as a rival rather than as the child who had always appeared so much smaller than the vivacious Lydia. Not beautiful, exactly, but her skin was soft and her dark brown eyes were filigreed by long, shimmering lashes. She was too overshadowed by her sisters to have the chance to refine her wit or conversation, but she had used the time honing another talent to a fine edge.

Mimicry was the domain of both the common actress and the most notorious courtesan. Used by a young woman it had a more subtle value. Mary had read enough novels to recognise the skills of a woman who could easily become what the person in front of her desired. It was a dangerous talent, and as much as she envied Kitty she was also afraid for her. To become someone else's creation, she would have to reject every notion of herself. Catherine would be gone, surrendered completely into another person's whims.

In Gothic novels the men boasted of such conquests; the goodly called it love and the wicked, bewitchment. No-one ever asked the women how it felt to be spirited away so far from their own desires. In the end they escaped their dungeons and towers and threw their bodies into freedom so desperately that they committed their very souls to oblivion.

Would Kitty surrender herself – abandon herself – in that way? Mary recalled the slavish fascination Lydia coaxed from the girl and felt such a strong surge of pity it called tears to her eyes. Kitty was right to call herself forgettable. She was less than a stranger to people who could only love her pretence. At seventeen, her sister believed that her only chance to outshine her sisters was to become someone else's plaything – now, it was Lydia, and before that it had been their mother. Mary shuddered at the thought of the man who would recognise that desperate loneliness and steal Kitty away from herself forever.

Kitty watched her with hollow eyes, channeling Lydia's impatience with the ease of long habit. Mary realised that she had been staring silently at her sister; evidently she had been doing it for
long enough for the rare moment of sisterly confidence to return to its usual distance. Before she lost the sympathy which burned in her veins, Mary reached out and grasped her sister's hand. The girl's limp fingers were cold, as eerily lifeless as her accusing gaze.

"I'll help you." Mary did not stumble over the words in her race to silence her better judgement. "Jane cannot be less beautiful, and Lydia and Lizzie will never hold their tongues. But I? I can help you."

Kitty's expression transformed into utter contempt. "You?"

Mary resisted the urge to pull the girl's pretty curls from her silly head. "Would you prefer to beg mama for her jewels? I am sure if you cry enough she will give the sapphires to you instead of to Lydia tonight."

The girl snorted at that foolishness, shaking her head. Somewhat scolded by her older sister's clipped tone, she considered the offer. Upon working out its meaning, she accepted with equal parts gratitude and incredulity. Even if Mary had not made her offer in earnest, that look of doubt would have angered her into action. It was clear that Kitty did not believe that her sister would keep her promise. Even Lydia would think twice before volunteering her own reputation!

For the rest of the morning Mary wavered between excitement and regret. Having made her impetuous promise, she refused to entertain the temptation to recant. Still, what would she gain but the pale affection of a sister who would forget her gratitude as soon as Lydia made her next cruel joke. And Mary had a great deal more to lose. The Netherfield Ball was never intended to be her own triumph, and yet a small art of her had been looking forward to displaying her talents before such an estimable gathering.

The girl had chosen her programme with care, accounting for the current fashion and the trembling of nervous fingers before even consulting her own preference. She had selected the Sonata in A by Herr Mozart and had practiced it at length. At first her family had hummed the motif at table; before Mary was content with her playing they had started closing their doors the moment she opened the instrument. Mary could play the piece with her eyes shut by the time she had made her promise, and so she understood her sister's incredulity. It would be just as unbelievable to watch Lydia spending weeks embroidering a coin purse, only to throw it into the fire unused.

At first, Mary thought that she could still play the Sonata. She could deliberately fumble her way through the faster sections: Allegro Idioco, as her music tutor used to call it. When she sat down at the pianoforte to practice this deceit her fingers refused to oblige. She had trained them so well that they would not hesitate over even the most intricate inversions. She tried other pieces with similar success, and lamented the perils of adhering to a strict practice routine.

The foolishness of her quest suddenly struck her, and Mary bit back a smile. Georgiana would be taken aback when she read about this! The girl's letters were full of such effusions of musical delight that she must play exceedingly well. The notion of deliberately performing poorly would doubtless horrify her. Mary's playful mood faltered when she remembered that her companion's brother would be at the ball a few hours hence. She was sure that Mr Darcy would be appalled at such a lack of refinement. His disgust might even reach his ward entirely. This thought came the closest to changing Mary's mind. In the weeks since Mr Darcy's astonishing proposal she had come to cherish her intimacy with Georgiana. It was a secret which Mr Darcy must have kept from the haughty judgements of his
companions, and which she had concealed from the grasping machinations of her mother. How would she react, indeed, to possessing such a connection! Mary felt like the secret protected her, and it protected Georgiana, and without it they would stop being themselves and sink back into their roles. The noble lady and the spinster stutterer, each rooting its way into their native soil like a tic into unfeeling flesh.

Would she risk that for her sister's happiness? Mary had promised, and so she knew that she would abide by it. And besides, it was only a single song. She could say that she was ill, or had overindulged in the wine or the desserts. Her disgrace would only last a few hours, long enough for Kitty to outshine her, and then it would be forgotten.
When she was handed down from the carriage into the torchlit promenade of Netherfield Park, Mary was still struggling with the options before her. She carried the Sonata to the footman and blushed when Luke took it from her hands. She had quite forgot that he would be present, and she had been so caught up in her sisters’ intrigues that the notion of apologising for the hurt of her absence had never occurred to her. As much as the man still looked coldly at her, she realised that she loathed the thought of looking pathetic before him. He had always professed such a delight in hearing her play, more so than her family volunteered, and now when his heart was already set against her the prospect of disgracing herself further made Mary feel ill. Before these agonies could be expressed, Luke had turned away and busied himself removing another lady's cumbersome overshoes. The moment passed; Mary made her way into the echoing expanses of the ball room.

After Mr Darcy's astonishing dance with Elizabeth the party soujourned to the dining hall, where tables heavy with elegant fancies awaited even the most ravenous appetites. The crystal may have been rented, by the silver shone with the Bingley crest. Of course, it was safer to transport metal than glass, and so the residents could not be faulted with hiring the dainty tableware over risking their family treasures for a short-term lodging.

The design on the silverware was unusual, being formed of two contrasting styles. Miss Bingley was heard to explain that the new style had been incorporated into their traditional crest, to modernise and enrich the family shield. Now, around those stolid knightly arms, the exotic bouquets of sugar cane and Antiguan foliage illustrated the scope of their great holdings.

A few decades ago such a display would have been considered vulgar, but – as Miss Caroline delicately sampled a delicate pastry, she reminded them of the inestimable renown of their father's renewal of fortune. His commercial and political ventures had brought the family from disgrace back into the forefront of polished society in the space of a few short years. No-one would have disputed the lady's word, although Mary could not help wondering if the late Mr Bingley would have boasted of his enterprises in such a manner. She espied Mr Bingley escorting Jane from the table, and knew then that Caroline was ignorant of the ignominy her words suggested.

It is a common conceit that the possession of wealth can forgive social ills – and the greater the fortune, the more sincere the absolution. While the Bingleys did not have the standing to permit them the notoriety of the nobility, their financial consequence granted them some freedom to express opinions counter to common truth or even fashion, if they so dared. Had Miss Lucas spoken so plain of her father's rise in fortunes she would have been scorned. Caroline Bingley, swathed in satin and bedecked in pearls, rejoiced in the ruthlessness of her forebears.

Those estimable men were of noble stock, with centuries of good breeding and connections to the noble houses of Spain, England and… but the Gallic country's name was best left unspoken. The unfortunate weakness of Miss Bingley's grandfather was also evaded; the narrative of her father recovering the wealth lost at the tables and thresholds of Venice was a far better tale.

By astute dealings and strict economy Joshua Bingley had gained an enviable reputation as a filial son. Upon his death, it was said that his son inherited several thousand pounds a year from extensive holdings in the West Indies. Charles Bingley had never visited the plantations himself, pleading a weak constitution, but when the fashion turned towards his outmoded family crest he lay claim to that land's aesthetic intrigues as quite his favourite design. The new crest paid respect to his father, erasing a little of the ignominy that his grandfather had brought to the family name.

It was said, although in whispers, that had Mr Bingley troubled himself to examine his business in
Antigua he would have been less inclined towards an enjoyment of the sugar field. Such concerns
did not trouble the young man; upon becoming the master of his estate he delighted in sharing his
fortune among those in his company who still believed that sugar brought sweetness in its wake.

Mary wondered if Mr Darcy knew differently. He watched his companion with the slight
amusement of a hostler breaking a newborn foal. It was whispered that he had been offered a
share in one of Bingley's endeavors, but had politely declined. He had little need for money, as the
farmlands and slate mines of his own estate were diligently overseen and productive enough to
keep his tenants in a goodly manner. Darcy often oversaw the harvest himself, expressing an
aversion to the kind of boredom Bingley so enjoyed.

When Jane was drawn away from Caroline's arrogant boasts, Mary saw Mr Darcy smile for the
first time that night. It was a cruel expression, not so much a sneer as a twist of the lips, and so full
of self-satisfaction that it would not have looked out of place adorning the face of Mr Collins.
Whatever thought the man had been enjoying had evidently been proven correct. Mary asked
herself if that platitude had concerned Bingley, Caroline or Jane. She could not help but believe
that the man would not be flattering her sister; when Mr Darcy looked upon Jane his entire bearing
seemed to draw up and away, intractable even at that remove.

Kitty appeared at her elbow, her gloves already stained from the sweating escort of nervous
soldiers. She attempted to conceal them beneath her shawl, and her voice was breathless. "You
remember your promise to me?"

"I w…would scarce forget." Mary returned heatedly, and then mollified her temper. "I h…heard
you practicing all a…afternoon."

"I am nervous." Was the confession, and then there was a shy laugh. "I know full well I have not
the talent to outshine the ladies here, but with your assistance I can at least be favoured among our
family."

"You are not a p…poor musician." Mary spoke with more honesty than tact. "Be clear, be c…
confident; your voice is s…sweet and you shall shine."

"I am grateful." Kitty reached up and kissed her sister. Mary recoiled a little; it was such an
unnatural gesture that she could not trust or believe in its affection. Nevertheless, Kitty was
smiling, and then Lydia called and the girl vanished to her sister's side.

"She is a vixen." A voice said with some humour. Elizabeth approached, and her face was alight
with intrigue. "What mischief is she planning this time?"

Mary defended her younger sister as best she could. Elizabeth studied her with level surprise, and
then her tone became as overbearing as that of the gentleman whose arms had of late borne her
about the gavotte. "Well, no doubt your judgement is quite sound, my love, for you to so sacrifice
yourself upon the altar of Kitty's pride."

"She is not p…proud." The girl stumbled indignantly, and again attempted to explain the depths of
emotion whose surety had so turned her heart. In such halting language the descriptions weakened
into excuses, and she found herself tripping even more in her disquiet, and eventually fell silent
with much of her heart still so burdened that the sense of the matter was quite removed. Lizzie
shrugged and returned the opinion that she could not work out the difference between this event
and her sisters' habitual foolishness.

"Recall you, Mary, when they conspired to trip Jane from her pony last year?" She asked. "They
said they meant not to hurt her, only to muddy her fine gown, but I do not think they would have
lamented a few bruises marring her features for the dance that night."
Mary thought then of Kitty's shared confidance, the bitterness: Jane cannot be less beautiful. She coloured.

"That was L…Lydia's scheme, not Kitty's." She protested, and reminded Lizzie that a thirteen year old child was prone to such weaknesses of character that an older girl would not indulge in. Her sister scoffed, and her words were sharp.

"Clearly, the want of a few years allows for far better judgement. You, I think, would not indulge in any foolishness."

It was some time before Mary could imagine some retort, by which time her sister's hand had been captured by Charlotte Lucas. The young lady affected such effusions of wonder at the behaviour of Mr Darcy that Lizzy was easily coaxed away.

Mary looked about her, at the crowing mother, indifferent father, and sisters who, through their simpering, sarcasm and silliness all betrayed themselves as just as deplorable as each other. How they all seemed to hate each other! How obvious it must appear to each person who gathered about the ballroom and studied the creatures within. Mary felt she deserved not her own reputation, which she knew to be both unearned and unwanted. She was not vain, or coarse, or full of unwarranted pride. Those were vices indeed, and must indeed be cultivated through conscious desire and repeated habit. What was Mary's defect, then? She stuttered! She might as well have been born ugly or lame, for all of the effort that her vice had demanded from her. Lydia might task herself to be less petty, but Mary could not train herself to speak with ease. Yet, despite the obvious pointlessness of wishing for a resolution, it was she among her sisters who felt the greatest sting of rebuffal. She was, and always would be, the least among them all.

The thought made her angry, a species of pique which moved her to action. When the ladies were urged to exhibit she advanced upon the instrument with such alacrity that she caused some upset with the ladies of the house. No matter - - her heart was resolved towards proving her deficiencies, was it not? Both the minutiae of social impropriety and the shrewish affectations of Caroline's upset served only to flatter the hypocrisy of Mary's mind. And so she played, and instead of Mozart or Handel she let her heart run into her fingers and scream out her loneliness.

This time it was they who stood speechless; she berated the company with the most brilliant articulacy graced upon her, and let them feel every perfect phrase resonant with the plaintive cries which could never fall from her lips. Minor chords, yes, and the major triads which shone with the hope of broken sunlight before the bleak clouds of the lower octaves returned. Then the thunder, the tenuto lingering over crass sforzandi, her fingers aching until she leaned upon the pedal and let the vitriol ring out unaided.

Thus disconnected from the keys, she found out the faces of her sisters and saw not one iota of comprehension, only embarrassment and anger. Meeting their eyes in turn, she picked out the trite refrains of their own rehearsed performances, mimicking their hesitations and idiotic simplicity just as they had mocked her stumbling words. She followed them with a rapid phrase which showed more true skill than the whole of their works could ever aspire to. Their faces reddened, even Jane's, as they understood the insult.

Mary was set to continue her own angry tirade when she looked around once more and saw the two faces in the room who were alight. The first did not surprise her: Mr Bennet was quite flushed with wine, and he was laughing with such honest amusement that, in this moment, his daughter felt close to her father. The estimable man was renowned for his sardonic wit, and there were few men in the county who were so ready to be delighted by the idiosyncrasies of those around him. His laughter was muffled by a raised handkerchief, but it was not cruel. He met Mary's heated eyes as if he was sharing a joke. She smiled back and her fingers found a gentler refrain,
affectation sweet in the lilting chords.

The second face was also predictable, and yet it was astonishing. Mary had so convinced herself
of Mr Darcy's disgust that his smile quite unnerved her. She knew it not, but he had heard such
performances before. Of every person about her, he was perhaps the only one who could hear the
words amongst the cacophony. His amusement was born from the indulgence of nostalgia and,
indeed, more than a little admiration for the skill which such an exhibition required.

Mary finished her set and sat in the seat with her heart thudding. She remained there for so long
that people began to murmur to one another: surely she did not mean to perform another piece? At
least, not another such piece? As if he had been summoned to her side, her father appeared and
spoke thus:

"You have delighted us long enough." Only Mary could see the gleam in his eyes and hear the
genuine note of pleasure in his drawl. Then he leaned closer, conspiratorially, and pulled a face at
the neat stack of popular whimsies waiting upon the music stand. "Let the other young ladies have
time to exhibit."

She smiled shyly at her father and took her leave. It took her all of her art to evade the anger of her
sisters, and so caught up was she that the ball was near ended before she was discovered in the
dust of the library. It happened that her intruder was Luke, who laughed at her exclamation of
surprise and pressed a piece of paper into her hand.

"He said you should have it." He leaned on the first word heavily, and the words were a
meaningful drawl. Then his shoulders drew back and his tone became arrogant. "I told them all I,
and none other, would know your hiding place."

"How clever of y…you." She returned sourly, "To seek me in s…such a distant remove. I am n…
near two chambers away f…from the others!"

He looked about him and raised his arms in a shrug, the gesture wide and graceless. The gold
frogging on his tunic strained against the seams for a moment. "None of the other ladies would
bother coming here."

Luke was smiling a little as he looked back at Miss Bennet, and she knew that she had been truly
forgiven. Whatever ill she had committed to him must have been resolved – or, at the least, by
boasting of his familiarity he had reminded himself of the pleasures of their intimacies.
Exchanging a few further awkward, yet well meaning, pleasantaries, Luke gifted her a second
smile and left her in peace.

Mary waited for him to leave before she broke the seal on the note. She watched the wax crumble
to the floor, and opened the heavy paper. Defying her cautious heart, she spelled out the elegant
hand.

You have surpassed yourself, Miss Mary Bennet. Be not alarmed by my message; your
performance is of the character which I have oft felt the lack of these twelvemonths complete. I
detect my sister's hand in your artistry and applaud you both – regrettably at this written remove,
but naturally our connection cannot become common knowledge, and your display tonight
demonstrated improprieties enough in other respects for me to keep my counsel. Nevertheless, I
am convinced that Georgiana should enjoy the pleasure of your company, and have determined
that you should visit her at her convenience.

I write this note in some haste, in advance of her invitation, as I appreciate that both discretion
and the necessary preparations for travel will take some time. As to your parents, I have related
your father to my sister's notion of offering musical patronage, and suggested that your unique
manner may intrigue her. He made some witticisms which you may guess at, rather I spare you the details and assure you that he has promised to make all arrangements required. It only remains for you to await my sister's invitation - - In good faith. D.

So. She had not been consulted – but then, neither had Georgiana. Mr Darcy had observed, planned and acted so rapidly that any objections either of them made would be far too late. Mary found that she could not feel anger towards the man, however proudly he had acted. She had no chance to doubt herself at this remove, and now could only enjoy the thrill of excitement which his letter arose.

Tucking the paper into her sleeve, she abandoned her hiding spot and went to find her father. Upon gaining the atrium she was informed that he had departed long minutes before, and so too had her sisters and mother. Mary drew her shawl a little tighter around herself and stood alone in the doorway, waiting for the carriage to return.

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