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I had thought that, through the judicious application of my rights as a gentleman of means and a landowner I could, in perpetuity, avoid the unpleasantness of being in Wickham's presence. I chose to be called away on business when Wickham was expected to visit my wife's family during those rare and fleeting occasions in which I submitted to visit them. I chose also, through the good countenance of Bingley and the diplomacy of my wife, to continue to disallow Wickham entry to my estate. Elizabeth, remarkable woman that she is, understood this firmness of conviction and did not press for its relaxation even where, no doubt, much persuasion was being levied in her direction from the less fortunate members of her family. Through these efforts I was able to avoid Wickham's company, despite the familial connection, for eight long years. During the autumn of the eighth year of my marriage an event occurred which, unfortunately, required that both Wickham and myself to be in attendance.

My mother-in-law had been so long gripped by the terror of what would happen to her when her husband inevitably died before her that none of us were expecting the opposite to occur: for Mr Bennet to outlive his wife. And so, as dictated by familial loyalty and duty, my wife and her sisters- as well as their respective husbands- were called back to Longbourne to grieve with their father and bury their mother with the decorum she deserved due to her rank and positions- if not her personal affectations. The journey to Longbourne is quiet, my wife, for all her discomfort with the way her mother carried herself and her loose tongue, loved her mother and I try to be understanding. The death itself had been sudden, an autumn chill that had rapidly progressed. While I understand the quiet I do not like it. It is not a state I am used to while in the presence of
my wife and it allows me far too much time to think on what is to come. I can feel thunder steal its way onto my countenance and I know that, in her usual state, my wife would tease me endlessly for it and save me from my blacker moods. I worry about the scenes the Wickham will make now that I have no way to avoid him and I find my heart racing with the expected anger and embarrassment at his behaviour.

I should not have worried. The arrival at the house occurs late at night and we head to bed without even encountering the other members of the household. Breakfast is also a somber affair, the morning air is bitter with cold, and Wickham does not make an appearance before breakfast is almost over. I escape quickly to prepare for the funeral and to kiss my wife and bid her a fairwell. Funerals are no place for women and as such she and her sisters will be waiting here for us. The funeral itself goes well and it is not until we are returning to Longbourne a scant two hours later that I realise: he is ignoring me. Beyond the requirements of etiquette he does not meet my eye or say a word to me. Indeed, within my earshot he seems determined not to speak. I am pleased. The thought of him offends me; being under the same roof as him is unbearable. Instead I remain with Bingley, my father-in-law, Gardiner and some of the older men of the neighbourhood. He is conversing with Kitty's husband and some of the younger cousins of my wife. When we rejoin the ladies after the funeral this division remains and I am grateful for it.

And yet I find my eyes drifting to look at him, measuring him, where he stands by the window on the other side of the parlour. He has aged greatly, his penchant for alcohol and gambling and other forms of sinful living have ravaged the smoothness of his skin. The easy, open expression he had once worn has faded. Now his mouth has a tightness, his eyes a hardness, a coldness, and he has frown lines marring his forehead instead of the laughter lines I find I had been expecting. I had been unknowing of my expectations of him. It disquieted me to find that I had been considering him at all. Despite the ravages to his face his figure is slim and defined. His posture is upright, poised. His movements graceful and sure. I presume, but decline to enquire, that this is due to his position within the militia, a commission I had paid for in order to seal his consent to marrying Lydia.

I realise that, in my musings, I am being unconscionably rude as I find I have not followed the conversation of my own party. I determine to pay closer attention to Mr Bennett’s words only to start, my body tensing, my hand itching to curl into fists, as Wickham laughs suddenly across the room. My stomach twists bitterly at its awful familiarity. I find myself at once furious. Elizabeth touches my arm and I nod slightly, attempting to restore my calm. Is he unaware that we are at a funeral? The family is in mourning and he should respect the dead, even if she was a silly, ridiculous woman. How must his wife burn with shame at his unfeeling behaviour. I hear his wife laugh also.

Hastily I make my exit. I can feel that my face is red, burning with anger. I walk past his party, eyes glaring, but he does not seem to be aware of my passing. I am disappointed. I am ashamed by my disappointment. I am disquieted by the level of impact his presence has on me even without speaking.

The air in the hallway is cool. I realise that I have no plan in mind for what to do now. I had thought only of escaping. I wonder how ill my behaviour appeared and how dear Elizabeth is explaining my actions. I wonder if she said anything. A simple “Wickham” may have sufficed. I have long since allowed my Father-in-law and the Bingley’s into my confidence regarding my history with Mr Wickham. As ever such thoughts make me think of Georgiana. Briefly I worry about my sister, so recently married and so far away and outside of my care. I dismiss the urge to go to her, just to check that she is well. I shall see her soon enough. She is to spend Christmas at Pemberly with her new husband. I resolve to go for a brief walk in the grounds. I feel trapped and on edge inside. The air will do me good.
I call for a servant to bring me my coat.

Outside the air is crisp; my breath fogs the air. Beneath my boots the gravel path crunches. The sky is darkening; winter is on its way. It will soon be time for dinner. I choose merely to walk round the perimeter of the house a couple of times so as to be ready to go in should dinner be announced. I can feel my body relax as I stride, my head held high, the muscles stretching and warming with use. As I pass the window to the parlour I am proud of myself when I do not look in towards him.

Elizabeth is waiting for me on the front step as I round the corner of the house. She smiles at me as I near her, reaching out to take hold of my lapels, pulling me towards her. I go to her willingly. Standing on the steps she is slightly taller than I. She dips her head to kiss me. Her lips are soft, gentle, and smiling against mine. I return the smile, focussing only on the feel of her. When she draws back her fine eyes sparkle although I can see the sadness behind them.

“It is time for dinner Mr Darcy,” she tells me, a teasing tone in her voice. “Time to come inside.”

“As you command, Mrs Darcy,” I reply, my voice light as I step up beside her, taking her arm in mine.

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