Netherfield, After

by sixbeforelunch

Summary

Jane and Bingley, after all is said and done.

Jane wakes up in the middle of the night with a hand on her waist. It is not entirely unprecedented. She has shared a bed with her sister for as long as she can remember, she is used to the presence of another. But Lizzy’s hands were small and cool, and this hand is large and warm and there is nothing between them, no thin linen chemise standing as a barrier between their skin.

She remembers then, she has been Mrs. Charles Bingley for these fifteen or sixteen hours at least. Strange that she should feel a flush of embarrassment now. Earlier they were made, as they say, one flesh, and there was nothing of mortification then, much to her surprise. Yet now she feels the great need to put something on and she slips free from the bed and finds her chemise, lying on the floor where it was rather hastily discarded earlier.

Covered, she climbs back into the bed, Charles’ bed, and settles on her side, looking at him. Tonight is full moon. The curtains on the window are not quite closed, the bed curtains entirely open, and with the additional help of the thin light from the fire, she can see him very well.

He is asleep on his side, his face turned so far into the pillow, she wonders how he can breathe. He is still...uncovered. The realization fills her with a shiver of delight. It is exceptionally warm for late-November, and the fire is still struggling to give heat even as it slowly dies. There is a counterpane on the bed, in addition to the sheet, but he has tossed both half off of himself. He did warn her that he cannot sleep when he is warm. She smiles to herself and thinks that at least she will never worry about him stealing her covers, as Lizzy was prone to do.

He is beautiful. She traces the lines of his body with her eyes, thinking how strange and wonderful it is to see him like this, in this way that she had never before seen any man. She has never thought before of how much a man's clothing hides. Even his neck has been always hidden from her view
by collars and cravats. (She has a flash of memory, of Charles cursing and struggling with his cravat as he tried to un-knot it with one hand and remove his waistcoat with the other. It was not a particularly successful operation.) His neck, like the rest of him, is long and thin. He is thinner than she expected, but there is unmistakable strength in him, in lean muscle under soft skin. (Another flash of memory, Charles wrapping his arms around her and drawing her toward the bed, the momentary burst of fear as his grip tightened and she realized she didn't have the strength to pull away, the smile that she couldn't contain when she realized she didn't want to pull away.)

The hair on his chest is as red as the hair on his head, neither thick nor very thin, but curly and soft. She reaches out one hand and runs her fingers through it, amazed that she is allowed to touch him this way.

He shifts and she looks up to see him staring down at her, eyes wide and unblinking. He brushes his fingers across her lips and her eyes flutter shut.

"Jane."

She opens her eyes.

"This is real?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Good. Very good." He moves to kiss her and stops, a strange expression crossing his face.

"Charles?"

"I dreamt about you."

"Just now?"

"Before. Before, when we were...after I left. I dreamt of you often."

They have not talked about it, not really. She would rather not, and he does not know what to say. There is no blame to be laid, or if there is it does not fall at either of their feet. It was all misunderstandings and the best intentions gone awry, and even Charles' sisters, at whose feet Jane will lay some blame, the blame of deception and deceit, wanted what was best for their brother, or told themselves so to excuse their own selfishness.

"Good dreams?"

"I enjoyed them while I slept. Waking up was rather unwelcome."

She smiles, but there is sadness in it. It is a silly sadness. They are here now, together, and all is well.

Charles tangles his hand in her unbound hair, then trails his hand down to her neck, to the fabric of her chemise.

"Are you cold?"

She shakes her head.

Jane has always been sensible and steady, the feeling that overcomes her now is neither. She feels as though she could float away and she rests her hand on his chest. The beat of his heart is strong and sure.
"I love you," Jane says.

Charles says, "Jane." It means the same thing.

He kisses her, gentle but demanding, yet he doesn't demand anything that she is not willing to give a thousand times.

The fire finally dies. Neither of them notices.

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