

Lizzie Bennet's Diary

T. K. Marnell

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June 23, 2016

The Day Mr. Hollywood Came to Town

Dear Diary,

I tried to write today. And by “I tried to write today,” I don’t mean I intended to write, but then I whittled the hours away reading back issues of *Writer’s Digest* and arguing with people on Reddit. I honestly, truly tried.

After breakfast, I sat down right away to work. I didn’t even check my email to see if my agent finally read my last manuscript. She’s had it for two months and three days now. Not that I’m counting.

To get in the Writing Zone, I read over the outline for my new novel. I decided to make a few tweaks to the plot...and then I had to do a bit of research...and then somehow it was 11 a.m.

I opened a new Word document, determined to start the first draft today.

“Daaarling!”

I heard Mom screeching in the foyer. Even from my loft on the third floor, every drawn-out syllable was loud and clear. Dad must have just come home from his morning round of golf.

“Susan Long just called. The house on the corner has been sold at last!”

I tried in vain to concentrate on my writing. The cursor blinked on the blank Word document in front of me.

"You'll never *guess* who our new neighbor will be." Mom waited patiently, but alas, Dad did not try to guess. "I *said*, you'll never *guess* who our new neighbor will be!"

"I'm sure I won't, so why don't you just tell me?"

"Welp," I said to myself, "Guess that's plenty of work for today!" I closed my laptop on the blank document and joined my parents downstairs.

Dad was filling the electric kettle in the kitchen, looking the perfect picture of upper-middle-class retirement in his white golf shirt and khakis. Mom hopped up and down beside him in a satin robe and fuzzy slippers.

"His name is Charles Bingley, and he's from California. He bought the house on the corner as a second home. Susan says she heard from Beverly that his house in Los Angeles is worth more than 5 million. Aaand..."

I was tempted to beat a drum roll on the kitchen island.

"He's a *Hollywood producer!*" Mom burst out. "A real Hollywood producer! Ooh, how lucky for our Janie!"

Dad placed a bag of black tea in a mug and opened a box of Scottish shortbread cookies. "What does our new neighbor's profession have to do with Jane?"

Mom batted Dad on the arm with a giggle, as if he'd just told a great joke. "This is the big break she's been dreaming of all her life!"

What Mom said was true...if you replace "she's been dreaming of" with "*I've* been dreaming of" and "all her life" with "all *my* life." Jane dreams of playing Portia at the annual Shakespeare Festival

in Ashland. Mom dreams of seeing Jane on the red carpet at the Oscars.

“We must make sure he sees Janie on the stage. We can give him a ticket to *Into the Woods* as a housewarming gift. No no no, that’s too obvious. Let’s give three tickets to Susan, and she can mention to him that she and Dan are going...”

“Good Lord, woman! Are you trying to win an award for Craziest Stage Mother? The man bought a vacation home here to relax, not to be henpecked into sitting through community theater productions of *Into the Woods*.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Oh, Dad. Don’t you know that when a man with showbiz connections comes to town, he *must* be scouting for movie stars? What other *possible* reason could a wealthy Californian have for buying a vacation home in a sunny resort town famous for hiking and skiing?”

Mom crowed, “Exactly! You see, the smart one agrees with me!”

Dad let out an exaggerated sigh. He pushed the shortbread cookies towards me and winked.

The front door opened. Jane’s voice sang out, “I brought lunch!”

I joined Jane in the foyer and relieved her of two plastic bags. The Styrofoam boxes inside smelled of fresh flatbread and spicy Middle Eastern cuisine.

“Mm, falafel!” I said loudly. Then I leaned towards Jane and whispered, “A Hollywood producer is moving in down the street. Mom says your dreams are coming true. Act delighted.”

Jane smiled, and my self-confidence fell by ten points at the sight. I, who inherited our father’s stocky genes and haven’t stepped into a gym since college, can pass for “cute” with the aid of careful makeup and flattering clothes. My older sister, who inherited our

mother's willowy genes and runs twenty miles a week, is drop-dead gorgeous when barefaced in yoga pants. I'd resent her for her looks if she weren't so gash-darned lovable.

Mom flew towards Jane and grabbed her in a lung-crushing hug. "My beautiful, beautiful Janie, you'll just *die* when you hear what Susan told me on the phone!"

When Mom repeated her big announcement, Jane's convincing expression of surprise and joy proved she's more than just a pretty face. Her high school classmates didn't call her "Janie Zellweger" for nothing.

Jane said, "How exciting! Where are Mary and the twins? Have they heard the news?"

Behind us, the front door opened and closed with a BANG! Mary stomped in, her mules clomping on the hardwood.

"What's up, Doc?" I asked.

"Budget cuts!" Mary spat.

Mary works as a reference librarian at the local community college. The most highly educated of we five Bennet daughters, she has a PhD in Information Science that earned her sky-high debts and a rock-bottom job that pays \$15 per hour, 20 hours a week. From the sound of it, one or both of those numbers just sank even lower.

"I'm sorry. On the bright side...Jane brought falafel!"

I held up one of the bags and jiggled it. Mary glowered at me and stormed up to the second floor. Her bedroom door slammed shut, and the one next to it opened. Kitty stuck her messy brunette head out, blinking groggily.

Kitty called down the stairs, "What's going on?"

I called back, "Mary's poor, and Jane's going to be a movie star."

“What?!” Kitty squealed. “Lydia, Jane’s going to be a movie star!”

My two youngest sisters scrambled downstairs in their pajamas. Kitty and Lydia were born one year apart, but we call them “the twins” because they’re identical in nearly every way. They wear the same clothes, dye their hair the same shades, and spend every waking moment together doing the same things.

They even register for the same classes each term at Oregon State University, where they’ve been on-again, off-again students since high school graduation. For Lydia, that’s six years so far. For Kitty, seven. As far as I know, neither one is anywhere close to completing a degree.

Jane and I set out lunch on the kitchen island, while our mother and the twins gossiped about Mr. Hollywood. Did he earn his money or inherit it? What kind of movies does he make? Do you think he knows Ryan Reynolds and Blake Lively?

Dad said to me, “If Ryan Reynolds were a college major, the twins would have graduated years ago and your mother would have an honorary doctorate.” He tuned out the chatter and checked the day’s stock prices on his iPad.

Mom dragged him back into the conversation. “Darling, Susan says Beverly Lucas is going to invite the producer to her Independence Day barbecue next Saturday. Why she’s calling it ‘Independence Day’ when it’s really July 2nd, don’t ask me. Bring it up with Tom tomorrow morning at the golf course, and get him to invite us too.”

Dad closed the cover over his iPad. “Why would I do that?”

“You know Beverly won’t invite us herself! She’s had a petty grudge against us for two years because the director of *Grease* gave the role of Sandy to Jane instead of Charlotte.”

I sat down and filled a plate for myself. “Really? It isn’t because you called that director, pretending to be Beverly Lucas, and told him Charlotte was dropping out of the audition due to a sudden unplanned pregnancy?”

Mom pursed her lips. “*Anyway*, if you care anything for Jane, you’ll talk to Tom about the barbecue. It’s not a big deal. Just bring it up casually.”

“Good lord! If it’s not a big deal, call Beverly yourself. Tell her you want to use her barbecue to parade Jane in front of the Hollywood producer. Better yet, just skip the party and introduce yourself to the man directly. Knock on his door with a cake and say, ‘Welcome to the neighborhood. Here’s my daughter. Please make her the next Scarlett Johansson.’”

“You don’t care one bit about your daughter, do you? You don’t care if her dreams are shattered because you can’t be bothered to get an invitation to the Lucas’ barbecue!”

As our parents bickered over her future, Jane ate her lunch quietly. Others might see her as a pushover because she never spoke up to Mom about her real dreams. But since I have the same Mom, I know Jane simply deals with her the same way I do: humor her for a bit while she prattles, then go on with life as if she’d said nothing at all.

Lydia piped up, “How come you all assume the producer will make Jane the next Scarlett Johansson? What if he scouts me instead?”

“Or me!” Kitty said.

“Or me,” I joined in. “Scarlett’s got nothing on me in skin-tight black leather. Come on, Dad, get us into that party so I can star in *The Avengers 4*.”

The twins shrieked with laughter. Jane hid her quirked mouth behind a piece of flatbread. Mom ignored us all and whined at Dad.

Dad raised his voice. “No matter what any of you say, I will not talk to Tom about the barbecue. There’s no point.”

He sipped his tea. “Because he already invited us this morning. We’re to bring a savory side dish.”

Mom gaped at Dad. Then she let out a squeal that pierced my eardrums. “Daaarling!” She pounced on Dad and kissed him on the cheek. “I just knew you were planning one of your surprises! Isn’t it wonderful, Jane? You’re going to meet a real Hollywood producer!”

Jane smiled as usual.

Mom’s mouth was off to the races. “What are you going to wear? The red mini dress with the sequined bodice? No no no, that will make you look like you’re trying to get his attention.”

Lydia said, “How about the green maxi dress?”

“Yes! That one shows off her shoulders beautifully. Oh, but it hides her legs.” Mom brightened and clapped her hands together. “Kitty, go get that long skirt with the high slit in it. The blue one with the white flowers.”

“But that’s *mine*!” Kitty wailed.

Dad said, “Now don’t fuss, Kitty. One blue skirt with white flowers is a small price to pay for the chance to meet Ryan Reynolds.”

I did not get any work done for the rest of the day.



July 2, 2016

The Day I Fell In and Out of Love in 10 Minutes Flat

I

Dear Diary,

It's nearly midnight and I'm way too riled up to sleep. Ooh, I'm so boiling mad, you could probably fry an egg on my head.

In fact, I'd be tempted to try it...but the twins just came in from one of their house parties, and they're gabbing it up in the kitchen. If they saw me put raw eggs on my head, they'd probably think it's a natural deep conditioning treatment I saw on Instagram. They'd want to try it themselves, and they'd look so ridiculous I couldn't be angry anymore. I want to be angry right now. I deserve to be angry right now.

The cause of my anger, surprisingly, isn't my agent—though I'm miffed about her behavior, too. It's been nearly two weeks since I nudged her about that manuscript, and still she hasn't replied. Is literary agent ghosting a thing? If she doesn't contact me by the end of the month, I might have to light a fire under her tuchus with empty threats of contract termination.

But my agent's silence is merely an irritation. I'm **hopping mad** because today I met a man, and I thought he was my soulmate, but then he turned out to be a conceited, judgmental, small-minded lemon-sucking jerk.

(No, I don't mean he literally sucks lemons. Get with it, Diary. I mean that's what his stupid face looks like. Yes, I'm a twenty-eight-year-old published author and I just wrote "stupid face." Who doesn't regress to elementary school when they're hopping mad?)

Let's start at the very beginning. It's a very good place to start.

I woke up at six this morning, not because I went to bed early last night or because I was too excited to sleep, but because Mom was making a racket in the kitchen. Dad added to the chaos by shouting that if Mom persisted in making smoothies at dawn, he was going to throw out the Vitamix once and for all. Even the twins dragged themselves out of bed at the crack of 9 a.m., complaining that making so much noise on a Saturday morning was child abuse.

As soon as Jane came in from her morning run, Mom pounced on her with protein shakes, hair curlers, and shimmering body butter. By the time we left for the Lucas' at eleven, Jane looked like she was ready to compete in Miss America.

I, on the other hand, looked like I was ready to compete in the Deschutes County Rodeo.

Like all literary greats, E. Bennet has more important things to do than take care of her health and hygiene. She does laundry when she must, which is when she has nothing left to wear.

And like all true artists, E. Bennet lives in the moment and does not stoop so low as to plan ahead. If there is a big event she has known about for weeks, she does not check her closet the night before to make sure there is at least one decent outfit available.

In short, E. Bennet goes to parties at her posh neighbors' homes wearing ripped jeans, riding boots, and a pink flannel shirt.

When we arrived at the barbecue, Tom Lucas was blasting Saint-Saëns' Organ Symphony in every room. According to Dad, Tom spent the past month installing a whole-house in-wall stereo speaker system, and talking about little else on the golf course.

Since I know you don't watch movies, Diary, I'll explain that the Organ Symphony is the one with the distinctive melody used in the 1990s masterpiece of animatronic puppetry, *Babe*.

I tried really, really hard to contain myself—but when I shook Tom's hand, I couldn't resist saying, "That'll do, Tom. That'll do." He didn't get it.

Beverly Lucas and Mom greeted each other with air hugs and artificial smiles. Beverly cooed over Mom's lovely potato salad, but regretted that there wasn't enough room on the refreshments table for it. Mom cooed over Beverly's gorgeous red-and-blue cheesecake, but regretted that it was sitting out in the sun, so she didn't feel comfortable allowing her children to eat it.

Charlotte Lucas waved at me from the other side of the yard. Charlotte works for a mortgage lender and dresses the part of "professional woman" perfectly. Even today, at a casual backyard barbecue, she wore a button-up blouse and crisply pressed slacks.

I joined her with a "Howdy!"

"Howdy, indeed." Charlotte looked me up and down. "I didn't know you were into the cowgirl style."

"I dressed down out of consideration for Jane. I worried that my radiant beauty would upstage her at her big debut."

I peered around the Lucas' large backyard. Dad was drinking beer with his golf buddies. Kitty and Lydia were playing badminton

with a group of teens and twenty-somethings. Jane chatted with two middle-aged women she knew from Pilates class.

“So where’s this Hollywood producer my mom keeps going on about?”

“Ah, so that’s why Jane doesn’t look like herself. He’s not here yet. *My* mom has been peeking out the front door every two minutes to look for him.” Charlotte rolled her eyes. “She tried to doll me up, too. I told her no way, my acting days are over. Besides, he’s not really a producer.”

“You mean it was just a rumor?”

“Not exactly. He *has* produced a couple of movies, but he doesn’t own a production company or anything. I talked to him for a few minutes when he was moving in. I got the impression he’s a trust fund kid who has some friends in the film industry, and he helps them out when they ask.”

I elbowed Charlotte playfully. “Ooh, you talked to him already? My mom will be furious that you got the jump on Jane! So what’s he like, this mysterious stranger with the five-million-dollar home in L.A.?”

Charlotte shrugged and popped a grape into her mouth. “He’s just normal. A nice guy. You know, obscenely rich people aren’t much different from anyone else.” She chewed her grape thoughtfully. “Though to be honest, he’s...”

“He’s what?”

“He’s kind of an idiot.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I couldn’t even come up with a good joke. “Uh...how so?”

“You’d have to be an idiot to buy that house at asking price. One million in this neighborhood? It’s worth seven-fifty, at most. I asked

him why he didn't negotiate for a better price, and he said paying a little extra was worth it for the view."

I tried to wrap my mind around the idea of having so much money that a quarter of a million dollars is "a little extra." My mind wasn't flexible enough to succeed.

Suddenly, Beverly Lucas rushed over and grabbed Charlotte's wrist. Mom scurried over to Jane and pulled her away from her Pilates friends. Both women half-dragged their adult daughters to the refreshments table on the patio.

At that moment, two men in their thirties stepped through the patio doors to the backyard.

One man was tall and thin, with a big smile on his face. Every inch of him, from his side-parted hair to his cream-colored cardigan, screamed "nice." This, I supposed, must be Charles Bingley, the not-really-a-producer from Beverly Hills.

The other man...

Let me just say, Diary, that while I don't judge people who enjoy hooking up with strangers—all power to them—I am not personally one of them. I have to be in an exclusive relationship with a man to feel comfortable enough for physical intimacy. When I date, I want to get to know each other as friends first before we jump into bed. Once we reach the stage of calling each other cutesy nicknames and ending text messages with hearts, *then* I'm ready to try more than kissing and snuggling.

But there have been exactly two occasions in my life when I have been inexplicably overwhelmed by the urge to pull a complete stranger into a locked room and tear his clothes off.

The first time was when I was living in New York, working as an editorial assistant for a women's magazine and writing novels on

the side. I met a friend for brunch at a small cafe, and there I saw the world's most handsome waiter. While he was taking my order, I suddenly had a steamy fantasy of the two of us in a small, dark closet in the back of the restaurant. Of course I didn't act on the feeling and quickly shook it off.

The second time was today, when I met the man named Will Darcy.

II

Unlike with the waiter, the rush of lust didn't strike out of the blue. At first I only thought the guy standing next to Mr. Hollywood was just my type: dark-haired, clean-shaven, with a classic sense of style. Not many men under sixty wear tailored sports coats to backyard barbecues.

Out of curiosity, I sidled up to Mom and Jane to hear the introductions.

Beverly Lucas said, "This is my daughter, Charlotte. She works at Collins Mortgage."

"We've met!" When Mr. Hollywood smiled, rays of sunshine escaped through his teeth. "Charlotte has given me tons of great advice about the area. I feel like we're best friends already!"

"Is that right?" Beverly shot a glance of triumph at Mom. "You know, Charlotte also does musical theater. She was the leading lady in *Oklahoma!* three years ago."

Mom cut in. "Charlotte has such a lovely voice! It's just a shame that directors care more about looks than talent, so Charlotte has landed so few roles."

She twittered like a transparently manipulative parakeet. “Oh, silly me—I haven’t introduced myself! I’m Lucy Bennet. This here is my daughter, Elizabeth.”

I waved with an awkward smile.

“My youngest girls, Kitty and Lydia, are playing badminton over there. They’re students at OSU. Aren’t they cute? I have another daughter, Mary, but she had to work today. She finished her doctorate last year. We’re all so proud of her.”

Mom pushed Jane forward a bit. “Oh, you’re here too, Jane! I’m so sorry, I nearly forgot you. This is my oldest, Jane. Coincidentally, she’s an actress, too!”

When men meet my sister, it’s not uncommon for them to metamorphosize from humans into dogs. Some stare at her with bulging pug eyes and start talking in a panting, breathless way. Others bark with unnatural laughter and prance around, begging for attention. The worst ones transform into wolves who feel entitled to mark her as their territory.

But Mr. Hollywood turned into a species I’d never seen before: a terrified, cowering puppy.

“H-how-how are you?” he said. His hand shook as he held it out to Jane.

“I’m well, thank you.” Jane clasped his hand in hers, and I half expected Mr. Hollywood to scamper away and hide under a table. “How do you like Oregon so far?”

Mr. Hollywood’s mouth opened and closed. I don’t think his brain was in a state to handle such a complex question.

“Rain,” he said finally. “It hasn’t rained. I thought there would be a lot of rain. I brought five umbrellas and I haven’t even used one yet.”

Jane giggled.

I gaped at her. Jane doesn't giggle in front of men she doesn't know. She smiles in her cool, classy way, and her calm voice builds an invisible wall with a big hanging sign that says, "Sorry, Not Interested." Yet in front of the babbling Mr. Hollywood, she actually *giggled*.

Jane said, "When people think of Oregon, they think of Portland and the coast. It rains all the time over there. But on this side of the Cascades, it's all high desert. When my college friends come to visit, they're always shocked that the climate is so dry."

"Right?!" Mr. Hollywood relaxed a bit. "I was looking forward to wearing galoshes, too."

Jane giggled again. "Wait until winter, and you can wear snow boots every day."

"There's *snow*?!" Mr. Hollywood's eyes grew as big and round as if he were three years old and someone had just told him there are establishments called "toy stores."

I said, "What brings you to Bend? A lot of Californians vacation up here for the skiing, but it sounds like that's not your thing."

"Ah! That's because of this guy." Mr. Hollywood looped his arm around the neck of the man standing beside him, who hadn't spoken a word so far. "He's the sheriff 'round these parts."

"Deputy district attorney," the man said. "A deputy district attorney. One of many."

He said nothing more. We waited, but he didn't say his name, or "nice to meet you," or even "howdeedo."

After a few seconds, Charles Bingley laughed and said, "Meet Will Darcy. Take a look, ladies: he's filthy rich, crazy smart, and almost as handsome as I am!"

Will Darcy gave a stiff bow of his head, then resumed standing there as still and silent as a statue.

Okay, that was weird. But Will's eyes were pretty, so I was willing to overlook the weirdness. His black hair was a little long and swooped down over his forehead in an alluring way. His lips were fuller than most guys'. His posture radiated confidence and maturity.

I smiled at him, hoping I didn't look quite as gooey as Mr. Hollywood did when looking at Jane. "So you two are good friends?"

Mr. Hollywood announced, "He's my bro! Um, not *literally* my bro, I mean...we're, like, bros." He glanced at Jane and blushed.

Will said, "We were roommates at Stanford."

"Yeah, that! I stayed at Will's place last month with my sister, and she was like, 'It's great here. You should get a place.' And I was like, 'Why not?' And here I am!"

If my jaw weren't fixed firmly to my skull, it would have hit the floor. The man had spent a million dollars because "why not?"

The last movement of the Organ Symphony struck up over the speakers. Mr. Hollywood cocked his head. "Hey, I think I know this song."

Tom Lucas said with approval, "You like Saint-Saëns? The subtle low tones of the pipe organ are spectacular, aren't they?"

"It's called 'Sand Sauce'? Hm, I know I've heard it before, but I don't know where."

Will said, "*Babe*."

"Hm?"

"The movie about the sheep pig."

"The what?"

Perfectly stone-faced, Will said, "That'll do, pig. That'll do."

He met my eye by chance, and that's when it happened. I stared into this man's serious toffee eyes and thought, "Here is my soulmate. I want to get married and make babies with him. Right here, right now."

My hormones careened out of control. My breath hitched. My body tingled. Crazy visions of pouncing on him in a random bedroom of the Lucas' house flashed through my mind.

Yes, Diary, I wanted to jump the man's bones because he referenced a children's movie. I swear I'm not a pervert. I'm just a healthy twenty-eight-year-old woman with a biological drive to make out like crazy with hot lawyers who appreciate fine cinema.

Beverly Lucas said, "Charles, you must not have had many opportunities to get to know the neighborhood yet. Why don't you take a walk with Charlotte while my husband fires up the grill?"

Mom said, "Oh, but Charlotte has her own apartment on the other side of town. There's been so much new construction recently, she might get lost. Jane, darling, be a good neighbor and show Charles around."

Beverly spit venom at Mom through her eyes. "Charlotte works in real estate. She knows the city better than anyone else here."

Charlotte said, "Not really. I'm a loan processor, not a realtor."

Mom spat back to Beverly, "I'm sure she knows *maps* very well, but actually living here is different, isn't it? Jane goes for a jog on these roads every morning."

Jane said, "But I don't often come up this way..."

Mr. Hollywood said, "That's all right, we can explore together!" From the way he looked at Jane, it was clear he didn't see anyone else around him.

Hesitantly, Jane agreed to walk around and show Charles the best views. Mom glowed beatifically. Beverly Lucas fumed murderously. Charlotte cut a slice of cheesecake for herself.

After Jane and Mr. Hollywood left, the others drifted away. I stood by the refreshments table with Will, who made no motion to go somewhere else. I took this to mean he was in love with me too.

I put on my cutest, brightest expression. "So you work for the DA's office! You must get a lot of lawyer jokes at parties."

"I do, yes." Will fell silent again.

I said, "I can't imagine working with police and criminals every day. Is it a stressful job?"

"It can be." He didn't elaborate.

Man, he was not making this easy. Clearly small talk was not Will's strong point. But that was fine, because I wasn't as interested in *talking* with him as I was in doing certain other things.

I leaned closer with the excuse of reaching for the cubed honeydew melon. My arm *accidentally* brushed his. "I've heard lawyers often work sixty hours a week or more. That must be tough on your girlfriend."

(Yes, Diary, I *am* my mother's daughter.)

Will's phone buzzed. He pulled it out and looked at the screen. "Excuse me, I need to take a call."

He walked into the house without a backward glance. I stood on the patio alone and deflated, holding a serving spoon and a plate of honeydew melon.

I don't even like honeydew melon.

III

Kitty and Lydia joined me on the patio, breathless from their badminton game.

Lydia asked, "Is the Hollywood producer here yet?"

"You just missed him."

Kitty screeched, "What?!"

"Sorry, girls. He fell for Jane already. Sadly, none of us three will be cast in *The Avengers 4*."

Lydia sniffed, "Of course he fell for Jane. Any man with eyes would fall head over heels for a Bennet girl at first sight." She tossed her long coffee-colored hair. "Why aren't the burgers ready yet? I'm *starving*."

As the twins ran off to make a ruckus at the barbecue, Jane and Mr. Hollywood came through the patio doors. Mr. Hollywood made a joke that wasn't funny at all. Jane laughed and batted his arm.

Let me repeat, Diary. She **laughed** and **batted his arm**.

I remind you that we are talking about my sister, Jane Bennet. Jane, who spent all of adolescence pining for the boy next door but acting so indifferent around him, no one had any idea until many years later, when she casually referred to him as her high school crush. Jane, whose college boyfriend dumped her on the day she bought red lingerie and invited him to her place for the first time, because he'd believed he was the only one in love and assumed "I want to talk about us" meant "let's break up."

That Jane had, on this historic day, voluntarily reached out and touched a man's arm. His *bare* arm. For Jane Bennet, this was akin to throwing herself at Charles Bingley sighing, "Take me!"

I asked, "How were the views?"

Charles beamed. "Beautiful! I can't wait to spend more time here." He gazed fondly at Jane. "A *lot* more time."

Jane asked, "Is lunch ready?"

I said, "Tom is still working on it. But this honeydew melon is delicious. Here, have some!"

I put the plate in Jane's hands and excused myself to the bathroom. Not only did I actually need the bathroom, but I felt like a third wheel hanging around those two lovebirds.

After washing my hands, I checked my appearance. I hadn't worn any makeup because I hadn't expected to meet my soulmate at the neighbors' barbecue.

I combed my hair with my fingers and applied the tinted lip balm I keep in my purse. The look didn't exactly scream "Take me!" Jane style, but sex appeal is all in the attitude, right? I practiced my best come-hither expression in the mirror. When Will Darcy came back after his phone call, he'd be putty in my hands.

As I walked back through the hall, I heard a man's voice.

"My God, Will! What are you doing?!"

I peeked into the living room. Mr. Hollywood was standing with his hands on his hips. Will Darcy was sitting on the Lucas' reclining leather couch with a laptop.

"I can't believe you brought your work computer to a Fourth of July party! What the heck is wrong with you?"

"How was your walk?" Will asked. "That...uh...actress. Do you like her?"

"Like her? Dude, I'm going to marry her! She's the most perfect angel I've ever met!"

"That's nice." Will continued typing.

"I think her sister is into you."

I felt my cheeks warm. Was I that obvious?

“What was her name? Elizabeth. She’s really pretty too. For God’s sake, put that away and go talk to her! Can’t you stop working for two minutes? It’s a three-day weekend!”

“Indeed it is. So there will be plenty of weekend left when I’m finished with this.”

“Do you really not get how rude you’re being to Tom and Beverly right now? How can someone so smart be so stupid?”

Will stopped typing and looked up with a frown. “Did you just say you’re getting married?”

Mr. Hollywood grinned. “Yup. So...do you like her?”

“Who? Your actress?”

“No, not Jane. Her sister. Elizabeth.”

My heart raced. I held my breath and strained to hear the answer.

Will quirked an eyebrow. “Sorry, Charles. I’m not interested in settling down on the farm with a plump wife to raise goats and chickens.”

My racing heart stopped dead. I looked down at my pink flannel shirt, my ripped jeans and riding boots.

So I wasn’t dressed to impress today. And maybe I wasn’t as svelte as Jane, or as sophisticated as Charlotte. But still, how could he say something so mean?

I’d thought he was just my type. He wore a tailored sports coat. He quoted *Babe*. I couldn’t believe Will Darcy turned out to be such a...a...small-minded lemon-sucking jerk!

When I raised my head, Will was looking straight at me.

I said, “We don’t have any chickens, actually. Just the two goats in the spare bedroom upstairs.”

Will blinked, but his stoic expression didn't change.

I held my head high and walked away.

Haaa. The sun is up now, my back hurts, and my eyes feel like they're burning up in their sockets...but I feel so much better after writing all that out.

The more I think about it, the more I realize how hilariously absurd that conceited jerk really is. I mean, what's so bad about raising goats and chickens? Everyone likes hot wings!

I'm not going to waste any more of my time thinking about that guy. I'm not going to dwell on the experience of having my heart ripped out of my body, thrown in the dirt, and trampled into a bloody pulp.

Actually, you know what, Diary? I'm *glad* I had this experience. It's never a bad thing for a writer to meet horrible people and feel horrible things. I can bottle up the heartbreak and put it away for reference later.

Maybe I'll take a stab at a mystery novel next. The victim will be an insufferable deputy district attorney who makes enemies of everyone around him with his caustic remarks. The heroine will be a brilliant novelist who stumbles upon him dead in City Hall, poisoned by his own acid tongue. Ooh, plot bunny!

Now I'm going to take a hot, soothing bath, put on my pink flannel pajamas, and drift off counting my lucky stars that I'll never, ever see Will Darcy again.



July 9, 2016

The Day I Nearly Died of Mortification

I

Dear Diary,

I have a confession to make: I still haven't been able to start the first draft of my new novel.

Every time I open the blank Word document and try to get to work, I remember that big-name editor tearing into my last book. I hear her saying the premise is too "low concept," the writing doesn't *compel* readers to turn the pages, and every character who is not absolutely essential to the plot must be swiftly and mercilessly executed.

("Character development"? What's that? Doncha know every chapter must end with a cliffhanger and every scene must drive the plot plot plot plot plot?)

I try to shake off those memories and recapture the joy I felt when writing in my early twenties—before Lizzie Bennet, aspiring writer, turned into E. Bennet, published author.

But when I put my hands on the keyboard, I remember what that editor said when I refused to make fundamental changes to the

story and the book deal fell through: "If you're too proud to write for the market, there's no point in writing at all."

Speaking of pride, mine suffered a near-fatal blow today, thanks to the nutty schemes of Mrs. Lucy Bennet.

First, some background info: since it's too unhealthy to sit alone in my loft all day, I've resolved to improve my physical and psychological well-being by getting out of the house every morning for some fresh air and exercise.

This sudden resolution to work out has nothing to do with avoiding that blank Word document. I've read that exercise stimulates the creative juices, so I'm really not using my health as an excuse to run away from my writer's block. I'm actually tackling it head on!

The decision also has nothing to do with that nasty remark about my figure I overheard at the Lucas' barbecue last Saturday. I forgot about Will Darcy the very next day. In fact, I can't even remember his name.

Anyway, on Tuesday I bought a monthly pass for the Juniper Swim & Fitness Center. Every morning since, I have dutifully ridden my bike over there to swim laps. I'm up to ten laps already!

This morning, I was toweling off in the locker room when I received a call from Jane's phone. When I answered, the person on the other end was not Jane.

It was a man, and he was weeping desperately. "Elizabeth?! Is this Elizabeth? My God, answer me!"

"Yes, this is Elizabeth," I said quickly. "Who is this? What's wrong?"

"Jane... My angel... My angel is *dying*!"

To save you the suspense, Diary, I will tell you now that Jane was not, in fact, dying. But I nearly died from mortification when I learned the whole story later.

After the Lucas' barbecue, Mom was convinced that the smitten Mr. Hollywood was going to whisk Jane away to Los Angeles and turn her into a big star. She harped on Jane to text him, to friend him on Facebook, to drop hints about how much she's always longed to visit California. Jane managed to hold Mom off for a few days by claiming she didn't want to chase Charles off by acting too desperate. Besides, Charles had already promised to call her when he came back to Oregon for the weekend.

But Mom, ever proactive, decided to hurry things along. This morning, after confirming with Susan Long that Dan had seen Charles arriving late last night, Mom handed Jane a hot pink sports bra and ordered her to go for a jog in front of Charles Bingley's house.

Jane tried to refuse, but Mom worked herself up into one of her "panic attacks." She screamed and sobbed until Jane broke down.

And so Jane jogged around the neighborhood, but she did not see Mr. Hollywood. Though the temperature had climbed up to the nineties, Mom forced Jane to go back out again. Jane ran around the block in the blazing July sun for twenty minutes...forty minutes...an hour.

At half past eleven, Charles Bingley arrived home with shopping bags from Trader Joe's. Jane saw him and waved, then dropped to the ground and vomited.

While Charles was calling me in hysterics, Jane was relaxing in a cold bath and sipping iced strawberry lemonade. I did not know

this at the time. All I knew was that a man was wailing that my sister was dying, and I had to get to her right away.

I didn't even change out of my wet swimsuit and flip-flops. In a panic, I grabbed my backpack, hopped on my bicycle, and sped towards home as fast as I could.

At Charles Bingley's house, I dropped my bike on the lawn and rushed up the steps to the front door. I rang the bell and doubled over panting, dripping with sweat and chlorinated water.

The door opened, and Will Darcy stared at me from the entryway.

I asked, "Where's Jane? What happened?"

Will looked me up and down. "Did you...*swim* here?"

I felt like slapping him. My sister was dying and the man was making snarky comments about my attire! "Where's Jane?!"

"Don't worry. Jane is fine."

"But she's dying!"

Will stepped aside and motioned behind him. Jane was sitting on a loveseat with a plate of sliced watermelon, laughing and telling Mr. Hollywood to stop fussing over her. Mr. Hollywood spritzed Jane with a misting fan and asked if he should pick out the black seeds for her.

When the panic drained out of me, I had no more strength left in my shaky legs. I squatted on the porch with my head in my hands. "What the heck!"

"Who is it, Will?"

A blond woman appeared beside Will. The voluminous skirts of her vintage satin dress filled the doorway. When she saw the drowned rat collapsed on the porch, a.k.a. me, she gasped and clutched the string of pearls around her neck.

(Yes, *really*, Diary. She really wore pearls, and she really clutched them.)

Will said, "This is Elizabeth Bennet. Charles led her to believe that Jane is dying."

Jane called from inside, "Lizzie?"

I tried to stand up, but my morning workout and the frantic bike ride had turned my quads into Jello. Instead of standing upright, I started to fall backwards.

Suddenly there was a strong arm around my waist, and I was pushed up against a warm body. I looked up, and Will's face was mere inches from mine. My heart, which had been pounding painfully against my ribs, stopped altogether.

Arrogant jerks should not be allowed to have beautiful eyes. It's too confusing. The strongest thought in my head at that moment was, "Pretty." The second strongest was, "Eww, don't touch me!" And the third strongest was, "Oh no, his clothes will get wet."

"Are you alright?" Will spoke softly only because I was so close, but it sounded far too much like the voice a man uses in the bedroom.

I pushed him away. "Thanks, I'm okay."

The woman in the vintage dress stretched her expertly painted lips into a strained smile. "Please come in, Elizabeth. I've heard so much about you and Jane from Charles. I'm his sister, Caroline."

Now that I looked at her properly, I saw the clear resemblance between Caroline and Mr. Hollywood. They had the same face shape and high nose bridge. They were about the same height, too, though Caroline cheated by wearing four-inch heels around the house. She looked and carried herself as if she were channeling the ghost of Grace Kelly.

Caroline ushered me inside, holding her skirts a safe distance away from me. I apologized for coming in this state and making a mess. She graciously waved me off and told me not to worry about it...though when I stepped onto the pristine mahogany floor, a tortured squeak escaped from her pearl-clad throat.

I knelt beside Jane. "What happened?"

"Nothing. I just felt a little sick while jogging, that's all."

"Of course you felt sick. It's ninety-five degrees out there! Are you suicidal?"

Jane giggled. "Oh, Lizzie. I'm *fine*. Really."

I sighed. "Come on, let's go home."

Mr. Hollywood yelped. "No, she can't go! Google says..." He checked his phone. "It says, 'Get the overheated person inside to rest, preferably in an air-conditioned room.' To get home, you have to go outside! It's hot outside! She can't go outside!"

Will put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'll drive them home. I have to get going, anyway."

Caroline said, "But you haven't had lunch yet!"

Will said, "I'm not hungry."

"But...but I made a *quiche*!" Caroline twisted her lacy apron in distress.

Mr. Hollywood said, "Dude, what's the hurry? You should go after lunch. Do you like quiche, Jane? Should I make something else?"

Caroline's mouth puckered. I gathered she'd just realized that holding Will back for lunch meant she would be stuck with Jane and me as well.

She quickly straightened her face and said in a flat voice, "Oh, yes. You must stay. The more the merrier. Um, Elizabeth..." She

glanced at the puddle under my feet. “Would you like to take a shower?”

I said, “It’s fine. I can run home quickly to change.”

Mr. Hollywood said, “No! No running! Then you’ll get sick, too!”

I felt something drape over my shoulders. It was a thick, fluffy bath towel. I was confused. I was even more confused when I saw that Will was the person who had put it there.

Will said, “Gynecologists advise women to change out of wet swimwear as soon as possible, to avoid infections.”

I stared at him.

He added, “The bathroom is down the hall, on the left.”

I had an inkling that in a few minutes, I would be eating the most awkward lunch of my life.

II

Though I always feel weird taking showers in other people’s homes, it was a relief to strip off my wet bathing suit and rinse the chlorine from my body with warm water.

I put on the fresh clothes in my backpack and braided my damp hair. I was starving. My brain concocted many possible excuses I could use to avoid eating at the same table as Will Darcy, but my stomach threw a tantrum to rival one of Mom’s. It wanted food *now*!

Before joining the others in the kitchen, I called Mom. I told her what had happened to Jane, and I said Mr. Hollywood’s friend would drive us home after lunch.

As any loving mother would be to hear that her daughter had collapsed from heat exhaustion on a neighbor’s driveway, Mom was ecstatic.

“Just as I planned!” she crowed.

“Hold on, you *planned* for Jane to collapse in front of Charles Bingley’s house?”

“Not to *collapse*, obviously. She was only supposed to catch his attention, and then he’d invite her in for a drink. But what a great opportunity! Make sure she takes advantage of it and milks all the sympathy she can out of Charles.”

“No, Mom, it is *not* a great opportunity. Jane could have died!”

“Pff, people don’t die from getting a little overheated.”

“Yes, they do! Hundreds of people die from heatstroke every year!” I closed my eyes and exhaled slowly. “We’ll be back soon. Charles’ sister made a quiche.”

I hung up on Mom as she was asking what Caroline was like, and whether she was in the film industry, too.

I turned to head towards the kitchen. Will Darcy was standing close behind me. I gasped in surprise. He said nothing.

After an uncomfortable moment, I said, “Um...thanks for letting me use the shower.” Then I realized it was nonsensical to thank him when this was Mr. Hollywood’s house.

Will stared at me with his usual cold, inscrutable expression. I smiled awkwardly and walked passed him.

Suddenly he said, “Ms. Bennet.”

Ms. Bennet? I hadn’t heard anyone call me “Ms. Bennet” since... well, ever.

“Yes, Mr. Darcy?”

“If your sister is planning to sue Charles for suffering personal injury on his driveway, I must warn you that the Bingleys have excellent legal representation.”

His words didn’t make any sense to me at first. “What?”

Will crossed his arms. “Your family would only lose thousands of dollars in lawyers’ fees. Any judge would see through such an obvious scam right away.”

“Scam?”

My brain slowly comprehended Will’s insulting accusations. “Wait, wait. You think Jane is the sort of person who would purposely fall down on her neighbor’s property and then sue him?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time a pretty woman has scammed a wealthy man.”

Diary, I shouldn’t have called Will Darcy a small-minded, lemon-sucking jerk. That description is far too complimentary. He’s the rudest, most spiteful worm to ever dirty the air of Deschutes County with his toxic words.

I said, “Do you even hear the venom that comes out of your mouth? Or are you immune to it because you’ve been exposed to yourself since birth?”

Will sighed. “There’s no reason to get upset. I wasn’t making any implications about your sister’s character. I was only stating facts. The Bingleys are formidable. Provoking them would be unwise. That is all.”

Usually I keep a cap on my sharp tongue, so it doesn’t slip out and cut someone. With this man, the cap came off.

I took one step closer to him. “Are you planning to rape me, Mr. Darcy?”

His brow furrowed. “Excuse me?”

“Because if you are, I must warn you that I’m skilled in Judo.”

Will clenched his jaw. I fluttered my eyelashes.

“Why do you look so offended, Mr. Darcy? I’m not making any implications about your character. I’m only stating facts. After all...”

I tilted my head. "It wouldn't be the first time a wealthy man has raped a pretty woman."

I tossed my braid over my shoulder and spun on my heel. I was halfway to the kitchen when Will called after me.

"Are you a lawyer, Ms. Bennet?"

His bewildered expression was so funny, I couldn't stop a wide, genuine smile from spreading over my face.

"From you, Mr. Darcy, I will take that as a compliment."

You'd think the most mortifying events of the day were over now, wouldn't you, Diary? Nope. For as long as I am the daughter of Lucy Bennet, the humiliations will never cease.

As we were sitting down to plates of quiche and salad, the doorbell rang. Caroline put down her engraved silver serving spatula to answer it. A moment later, Mom rushed into the kitchen and threw her arms around Jane.

"My beautiful, beautiful Janie! How are you feeling?"

Mom cupped Jane's cheeks in her hands and gasped. "Your face is so red! How could you be so careless, to go jogging in this weather? Don't you know that hundreds of people die from heatstroke every year?"

Jane's face really was as red as a ripe strawberry. However, the reason for that wasn't her recent overexposure to the sun, but our mother's terrible theatrics. You'd think a woman who'd spent the past twenty years pushing her daughter onto the stage would have picked up a couple of basic acting tips, at least.

The doorbell rang again. Mom said, "That must be the twins."

Caroline put down the spatula again. She looked as if she wanted to scream in frustration, but Grace Kelly never screams. She sashayed out to open the door, and Kitty and Lydia bounded in, exclaiming over how fancy and expensive the furniture looked. Kitty swore she'd seen that exact same loveseat on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

Lydia dropped a duffel bag on the table in front of Jane. "Robe, toothbrush, clothes for tomorrow."

I wanted to pick up my spoon, crawl under the table, and dig a tunnel back to our house.

I laughed nervously. "Um, tonight Jane is going on a retreat with her theatre company. Thanks for packing for her, Lydia! She should get going right after lunch..."

Mom said, "I also brought this, so you won't be bored."

She whipped out a DVD case and oh-so-casually tilted it so Mr. Hollywood could see the cover. "It's the recording of your performance last year as Marian in *The Music Man*. While you're recovering here, you might as well use the time to study."

Using a spoon to dig a tunnel would take too long. It would be much faster to dive out the window and make a break for it.

Mr. Hollywood exclaimed, "One of Jane's plays? I want to see! Can we watch it now?"

Through clenched teeth, Caroline said, "You haven't touched your quiche yet."

Mr. Hollywood said, "After lunch, then. Do you have to leave right away, Jane?"

He gazed at her with big puppy eyes. Jane melted. "I guess not."

"Great! Let's watch the play after lunch, and you can stay for dinner!"

Caroline slammed her spatula down on the table. "Will is driving Jane home, and he needs to get going soon. Don't you, Will?"

Throughout the conversation, Will had ignored everyone to read something on his phone. He said, "I did, but not anymore."

Caroline pouted. She plopped down in a chair, grabbed a fork, and ate the remaining quiche straight out of the pan.

Mom sat down too, uninvited. "Are you all settled in now, Charles?"

"Yes, I..."

"Are you enjoying Bend? There are so many fun things to do around here, aren't there? Have you been to Smith Rock yet? How about Tumalo Falls? Kayaking the Deschutes river is very popular, though I can't handle it myself. Do you have a kayak yet?"

"Not yet. I..."

"Oh, and you *must* take a walk around Mirror Pond sometime. There's a cute coffee shop right by the water. Janie always enjoys that, don't you darling? She adores the Old St. Francis Theater downtown, too. Such a fun little place. Do you like watching movies, Charles? What am I saying, of *course* you do!"

While Mom tittered shrilly, Mr. Hollywood finally got a word in edgewise. "That all sounds amazing. I love it up here, I really do. I think Bend must be the most perfect place on earth!"

Will spoke up. "I wouldn't call it 'perfect.' This area is too isolated, and it's lacking in diversity."

Mom puffed up like a threatened porcupine. "*Isolated*, you say? Portland is only three hours away. And Bend is plenty diverse. There's a Mexican family right down the road!"

As much as I hated to defend a poisonous worm, my mother's overreaction was too embarrassing. I said, "Calm down, Mom. Mr. Darcy lives here too."

Lydia wrinkled her nose. "Mr. Darcy? Since when do you call people 'Mr.'?"

"Did I do that, Ms. Bennet? I didn't notice."

Lydia rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Hey, Charles, when are you going to have a housewarming party?"

"A housewarming party?"

"You *are* going to have one, right? Didn't you buy this big house so you could have people over?"

Mom said, "Yes, you *must* have a housewarming party. Your home is so beautiful, it would be a waste not to show it off to the neighbors."

Mr. Hollywood fidgeted. I don't think he liked the idea.

Will said, "You can say no, Charles. It's your house. You don't have to invite strangers inside just because they live nearby."

Mom's sharp quills puffed out again. Lydia stuck the tip of her tongue out at Will.

Mr. Hollywood looked between Will and Mom, then glanced at Jane. He said, "Certainly, I'll have a housewarming party. But I've never had one before, so you ladies will have to help me plan it, okay?"

Kitty and Lydia squealed. Mom clapped her hands together. "I knew you belonged here the minute I saw you! Not like *some* people, who don't have a neighborly bone in their bodies."

Mom glared meaningfully at Will. He didn't seem to notice and continued to read on his phone.

I shoveled cold quiche into my mouth and waited for this nightmare of a day to end.

III

After lunch, Mom and the twins took off. I tried to slip out with them, but Mom stopped me on the driveway.

“No no no, Lizzie. You must stay and help Janie.”

“Help with what? Her temperature is back to normal.”

Mom shook her head. “Not with that, darling. With *Charles*.”

She leaned close and lowered her voice. “Janie is the sweetest, most beautiful girl...but she’s also stupidly naive. She refuses to self-promote because she believes her talent will speak for itself. You’re the smart one, Lizzie—you know how the business *really* works. All the talent in the world is useless without connections. If Janie doesn’t connect with the right people, she’ll spend the rest of her life singing ‘Goodnight My Someone’ to a half-empty small-town theater.”

Now, Mom acts crazy, but sometimes the things she says are so undeniably logical, I wonder if she’s secretly a genius. Or a sociopath. Manipulative behavior, casual lying, lack of remorse or shame... Oh my word. My mother is a potential serial killer.

She hugged me lovingly and murmured, “I’m counting on you. We must take advantage of this golden opportunity before it slips away!”

And so, barred from my home for the rest of the afternoon, I trudged back into Mr. Hollywood’s living room.

Jane and Mr. Hollywood were flirting with each other on the loveseat, paying scant attention to *The Music Man* in the

background. Caroline was doing something in the kitchen, and Will was typing on his laptop.

I sat down in the window seat and opened the Kindle app on my phone.

“Who’s ready for cocktails?” Caroline sailed out of the kitchen with a tray of glasses. Each one was filled with a bubbly pink drink garnished with pineapple wedges and maraschino cherries.

She offered the tray around. Will declined and said he’d be driving home soon. Charles said he doesn’t like fruity drinks. Jane said they looked delicious, but she should avoid alcohol today after her heat stroke.

I took a glass to be polite. I’ve published stories before that nobody wanted to read, so I know how dispiriting it is when you make things for people and nobody wants them. I tried to make Caroline feel better by exclaiming over how delicious the drink was and begging for the recipe.

But my compliments didn’t help. Rejected, Caroline set the tray on the coffee table sulkily. She took a cocktail for herself and gulped the whole thing down in one go.

Caroline is very thin, which made that single drink very potent. In an instant, her whole personality changed. Grace Kelly vanished, and Marilyn Monroe appeared.

She picked up a second glass and perched on the arm of Will’s chair.

“What’re you up to, handsome?” Caroline looked at Will’s screen and gasped. “Such big words! I can’t understand any of them!”

Will said something about a deposition.

Caroline giggled. “Wow, more big words! I could *never* do the work you do. It’s too hard!”

"Then it's fortunate you went into event planning instead of law."

"Oh my gosh, being a lawyer would be *impossible* for a girl like me. For someone as smart as you, it must be easy."

"It would be easier if I could concentrate."

A laugh escaped me. Caroline and Will looked my way. I pretended I was reading something hilarious and laughed again on purpose.

Caroline called to me, "What're you up to over there, all by yourself?"

"Reading a book," I said.

"A *book*? Don't tell me you're one of those rude people who go to get-togethers and ignore everyone to read *books*."

Ugh. I hate to admit it, Diary, but Caroline was right. I was acting just like a certain horrid individual who brings his laptop to barbecues and plays with his phone during lunch with friends.

Ashamed, I put my phone back in my pocket.

Will said, "Elizabeth is a writer. Reading books is as important to her work as reading bridal magazines is to yours."

Did he...Google me? Was that what he was doing on his phone over lunch? I was equal parts creeped out and flattered.

Caroline polished off her second drink. "Weddings are fun. Books and depositions aren't fun. You guys have un-fun jobs."

She reached for the last cocktail. "I didn't fly all the way up here to watch you guys work all weekend. Let's go to a concert or something. Ooh, Will, you should bring your little sister! You're always telling us how much she loves music!"

Will stopped typing.

Caroline said, “How come Gianna never comes to visit us with you? She spends too much time at home by herself. Teenagers should be out doing teenager things.”

Will’s face changed from stony to stonier. He didn’t respond.

“Gianna’s so adorable. She must have boys lining up at the door!”

“Certainly not,” Will said.

“The whole Darcy family is pretty. I don’t know how it’s possible you’re still single.” Caroline poked his cheek with another giggle.

Will dodged her finger with a tilt of his head. “I haven’t yet found a woman I want to date.”

Mr. Hollywood overheard him. He called from the loveseat, “You mean you haven’t yet found a woman you think is good enough for you!”

You know, Diary, I make fun of Mr. Hollywood in these entries, but I’m actually coming to like him more and more each day.

Caroline said, “Maybe you haven’t looked very hard. There are tons of single women everywhere. What kinda gal are you looking for?”

Will closed his laptop. “I’m looking for a woman who’s intelligent and rational. She should be ambitious in her career, tenacious in her hobbies, and in good physical condition. She must have a bachelor’s degree at least and a FICO credit score of 740 or higher. Above all, she must have a thorough knowledge of the arts, sciences, economics, history, current events, and...literature.”

His eye met mine, and I flushed. He was making fun of me.

I said, “No wonder you’re single! Forget about dating—you should just advertise for the position of ‘girlfriend’ and start accepting resumes. You can set up interviews with the top candi-

dates and extend an offer of marriage to the applicant with the most professional demeanor.”

Will said, “I just don’t see how I could be happy with a woman if we can’t have interesting discussions.”

“Discussions between lovers don’t usually focus on art history and molecular biology. Do you really fantasize about lying together under the stars, whispering about the latest advances in cancer research?”

“I admit I’ve had limited dating experience, so I don’t know what lovers usually discuss. Perhaps you could teach me.”

Since I know you’ll deliberately misinterpret that line, Diary, I must say that Will was *not* flirting with me. He meant it sarcastically, in an “Oh, you think you know so much” sort of way.

I said, “Let me ask you something. If a woman like that even exists, do you believe you would meet her requirements for an ideal boyfriend?”

Will’s mouth quirked slightly. “Well, it’s clear I wouldn’t meet yours.”

“You should be relieved. I got a C in Physics, and my credit score is only 730.”

Caroline drained the last glass. She kicked off her heels and wrapped her arms around Will’s neck. “I know I’d be ecstatic to catch a hunky guy like Will. He’s super handsome and super smart. I don’t know anyone more perfect.”

Will peeled her off. “Nobody is perfect. I have several flaws.”

I gasped. “*Several* flaws, you say? Do tell! What’s your biggest weakness?”

Will raised an eyebrow. “I thought I was the one interviewing spousal candidates.”

“I’ve decided to give it a try myself. Tinder has been disappointing. So, Mr. Darcy. Tell me about a decision you regret, and what did you learn from the experience?”

Will moved his laptop to the coffee table. “Most women would ask a man about where he works and whether he likes cats or dogs. Why do you want to know my regrets instead?”

“So I can make fun of you, obviously. I couldn’t possibly date a man I can’t tease. If I go five minutes without cracking wise, I get the shakes, I break into a cold sweat... It’s a real problem.”

Though it was only a joke, Will seemed to consider my question seriously. “A decision I regret?”

He leaned towards me with his elbows on his knees. “I gave the benefit of the doubt to someone who didn’t deserve it, and he abused my trust. From that experience, I learned that people can be hiding malicious intentions under friendly smiles.”

Will stared straight at me. His expression made my breath stop.

I said, “You were supposed to tell me something I could make fun of. I can’t tease you about that.”

“Did I fail the interview, then?”

I wish I hadn’t asked that silly question, Diary. I wish he’d refused to answer it. Because when you’ve seen hurt in a man’s face, it’s very difficult to continue hating him.

I was perfectly comfortable despising the poisonous worm, but then he had to go and remind me he’s a human. And not just any human, but a man with gorgeous eyes that made me fall in love with him for approximately ten minutes last week.

Fortunately, I had the strong presence of mind to remind myself why I’d fallen *out* of love after those ten minutes. Will Darcy had insulted both me and my family in the most offensive ways possible.

Even if those eyes made him look like a wounded puppy right now, he was really a vicious wolf who could turn and bite my head off at any moment.

Caroline groaned. "Sitting around like this is so *booooring!* I'm all dressed up and I wanna go ouuut! Do you still need a ride home, Elish...Liza...Lizzabeth?"

Will broke eye contact with me, and I could breathe freely again.

"No," I said. "I'll swim back the way I came."

After reflection, Diary, I have come to the conclusion that Will Darcy is a vampire.

Think about it. Dark hair and smooth pale skin, icy attitude, hypnotic eyes. I didn't see him take a single bite of that quiche. At the Lucas' barbecue, he fled from the sunny backyard and hid inside with his laptop at the first opportunity. And he bears a striking resemblance to Robert Pattinson.

Anyway, I have bad news for you, Diary. I'm afraid I'm going to have to lock you away in a drawer for a month or so. I spent so much time today writing about my life, instead of writing my poor neglected new novel.

Tomorrow! Tomorrow is the day I will begin the first draft. I mean it this time. I will start at dawn and get in a solid 2,000 words by dusk. I will not let the ghosts of editors past spoil my sparkling literary future. I will not waste the day away documenting Mom's crazy schemes or Jane's romance with Mr. Hollywood.

And I definitely, *definitely* will not spend any more time thinking about vampire prosecutors.



July 10, 2016

The Day I Learned My Father Is a Stubborn Fool

Dear Diary,

How was your brief stay in the drawer? I know I said you'd be in there a lot longer than a single night, but something happened this morning that killed all hopes of writing those 2,000 words.

The short version: it's highly probable that within the next few weeks, we will lose this house, my parents will divorce, and my sisters and I will have nowhere to live.

Now for the long version.

I've known for many years that Dad is not the best husband in the world. He belittles Mom all the time, even in front of the neighbors. On Mom's birthday Dad hands her a hundred dollar bill, and on their wedding anniversary he does nothing. I've never once seen him wash his own clothes or dust his own study.

But I didn't realize how dysfunctional their marriage really is until today.

I was sitting down to write after breakfast when Mom started screeching up a storm. This is not an unusual occurrence, so at first

I merely got up to shut my door. Then I heard her wailing about the fate of the house.

“It’s *my* house too! Why didn’t you tell me?! What’s going to happen to us?”

Dad said, “Nothing’s going to happen. I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it? They’re going to throw us all out in the streets and you say, ‘Don’t worry about it!’ You don’t care at all that your wife and daughters are going to be living in a cardboard box under a bridge!”

I went downstairs. My parents were in Dad’s study. Mom was clutching a Swiffer duster in one hand and a fistful of papers in the other. Dad was standing with his arms crossed and his jaw set, looking out the window.

I asked, “What’s going on, Mom?”

Mom waved the papers at me. “Pack your things, Lizzie! Your father has lost the house, and we’re all going to be homeless!”

I extracted the papers from her clenched fist. They were threatening notices from a mortgage lender. Many threatening notices from a mortgage lender, going back to May. I scanned through them quickly.

Past due...default...delinquent...thirty days...foreclosure.

I couldn’t believe it. The letters couldn’t be real. The lender must have made a mistake.

Dad wasn’t the kind of person who would miss three months of mortgage payments. He wasn’t the kind of person who would ignore notices like this and go to the golf course every morning as if everything was peachy.

He wasn't the kind of person who would hide such a huge problem from Mom...from us...from *me*.

"Calm down, Mom. It's probably a clerical error. They meant to send these to someone else, not to us. Right, Dad?"

I smiled at him, hoping Dad would say it was all a silly misunderstanding. But he didn't. He just stood there with his arms crossed, not looking at either of us.

My smile faded. My God, he really was that kind of person.

The front door opened and closed. Jane's voice floated out from the kitchen. "Mom, where are those blueberries from the farmer's market?"

Jane appeared in the doorway of the study in her jogging clothes, her bangs damp with sweat. "Mom?"

"Janie!" Mom threw herself at Jane. She sobbed incoherently about cardboard boxes and bridges.

I motioned to Jane to take Mom out of the study. Quick on the uptake, Jane patted Mom's head. She led her out, assuring her in a soothing voice that everything would be okay.

I closed the door to the study and locked it from the inside. Then I faced Dad and mirrored his posture, crossing my arms.

"What happened?"

"Don't worry about it. Your mother is making a fuss over nothing, as usual."

I rattled the papers in my hand. "*This* is not *nothing*, Dad!"

"I said I'll take care of it. Everything would have been fine if your mother hadn't gone poking her nose into my files."

I closed my eyes for a moment. Angry confrontation was not the best way to deal with this. The harder I pushed Dad to admit he was in denial, the harder he would dig in his heels and insist he wasn't.

I uncrossed my arms and sat in the armchair by his bookcase. I tried speak calmly. "It's six thousand dollars, plus late fees. How are you going to take care of it?"

"The RV. I've put it on Craigslist. Tom is interested in it too."

"Okay, great. That'll take care of the amount past due. But what about next month? And the month after that? We can't just keep selling our stuff forever."

When Dad didn't respond, I asked, "How did this happen? I thought your pension covered everything."

Dad dropped his arms. "It did...until I took the remainder out as a lump sum last year."

He sank into his leather desk chair. "Mary got into some trouble with credit cards during her PhD program. You know how she is. She hid it from us and kept trying to pay it off on her own. We found out about it when she moved home after graduation and your mother opened her mail. By then her balance was over twenty thousand and growing."

Dad was in no position to complain about his daughter hiding her financial woes from her family, but I didn't point this out.

He continued, "Mary makes so little, and it all goes into those blasted student loans. She could never dig herself out of that hole. I took the lump sum to pay off her cards, and I intended to use the rest to pay off the mortgage. But then the twins said they needed another year to finish their degrees, and your mother's car broke down and she needed a new one, and..."

Dad didn't finish that sentence. He didn't have to. I knew the rest.

"And you, Liz, completely and utterly failed as a writer. Your publisher demanded their fifty-thousand dollar advance back in

full, and you had to borrow it from us and crawl back to Oregon with your tail between your legs.”

I said, “I’ll get a job.”

“No!” Dad thumped his desk. “I’m not going to take money from my own daughters. Parents are supposed to take care of their kids, not the other way around.”

“Taking care of us is the reason you’re in this mess. We’re all adults now. We should be taking care of ourselves.”

I stared down at my clasped hands. “To be honest, I haven’t written a word in months. I’m not following my dreams. I’m not working hard to rebuild my career and pay you back. I’m just leeching off of you and Mom. It’s time for me to stop being selfish, and to get a real job like everyone else.”

“And what kind of job would you get, with your resume? Bagging groceries for minimum wage? That wouldn’t even cover half of it. If you want a ‘real job,’ you should have started one years ago.”

My eyes stung. Dad had never spoken to me so harshly before. I wanted to say that’s not fair...but it was fair. Everything he said was true. I’ve never held a steady full-time job. My resume has nothing on it but a BA in English, and a short stint waitressing at a Tibetan restaurant one summer, and two years working part-time as an editorial assistant for a fluffy magazine.

Dad softened his tone. “I don’t want you to get a ‘real job,’ Liz. You’d be miserable. I don’t want to see my kids make themselves miserable to support me. I’d rather live in a cardboard box under a bridge.”

I pulled myself out of my self-pity party. “Then...we need another solution. Have you called the lender to negotiate? I’m sure they’d rather lower the payments than lose a ton of money in foreclosure.”

Dad shook his head. "They already modified the terms of the loan for me last August. They're not going to do it again."

I racked my brains. "Then...Charlotte! Charlotte Lucas!"

Dad raised his eyebrows. "What about Charlotte?"

"Charlotte works for a mortgage lender! What's it called? Collins Mortgage Company. Maybe she can do a...what do you call it? That thing where you get a new mortgage to pay off another one?"

"Refinance. I already considered that. With our situation, it's very unlikely a lender would be willing to do that for us."

"But we have to *try*, at least."

I stood up, filled with fiery determination. "I'm going to call Collins Mortgage right now. Cheer up, Dad. Lizzie Bennet is on the case!"



July 11, 2016

The Day I Met an Android and a Poet

I

Dear Diary,

I am dead tired.

I wasn't tired a minute ago. I was brimming with gumption and verve. There are problems to solve! Houses to save! Pies to bake! (More on that later.)

But then I sat down at this desk and *wow*, I am tired. Today was draining in every possible way: physically, intellectually, and emotionally. I feel like I just ran a 5K while filing my taxes *and* playing therapist for a friend who's going through a horrible breakup.

And now I have to bake a pie to suck up to a mortgage lender.

The receptionist for Collins Mortgage Company called me back as soon as their office opened this morning. She told us if we could get there by nine, we could meet for an hour with the head mortgage advisor, Mr. Collins himself.

I helped Dad gather the documents that Google said we would need: tax returns, credit reports, and the letters from his current

lender. I made copies of the letters because the originals were wrinkled and splotchy from Mom's tears.

After the blow-up yesterday morning, Mom locked herself in her room for the rest of the day. When Jane brought her a sandwich for lunch, Mom refused to eat it. She said she'd soon be starving to death on the streets, so she'd better to get used to going hungry.

When I visited her to talk about my plan to refinance the mortgage, Mom shooed me away because she couldn't bear to look at me. I reminded her too much of That Man who broke her heart to pieces after thirty years of marriage. Thirty years! Thirty years of trust, all gone in an instant...just like this house!

When Lydia texted Mom to say that she and Kitty were going to order pizza and watch an all-night marathon of *Pretty Little Liars*, Mom texted back that they should do it on the big Ultra-HD TV in her room. Presumably, her reasoning was that the repo men would soon barge in to take the TV away, and we should get as much use out of it as we could before then.

The *Pretty Little Liars* marathon lasted all night, as advertised, and was accompanied by two whole bottles of wine. And so Dad and I decided to let Mom sleep it off while we drove downtown to meet Mr. Collins.

Collins Mortgage Company is located kitty-corner from the Deschutes County Courthouse, in that cluster of red brick banks, boutiques, and fashionably rustic restaurants south of the river. Last summer I met Charlotte for lunch at one of those restaurants, and I spent nine dollars on a roasted potato. Nothing else. Just the potato.

(When the server brought the check, I asked if this extravagant vegetable was grown at the top of Mount Olympus, fed with holy

water from the river Styx by Zeus himself. He said no, it probably came from Idaho.)

I could tell what sort of clientele Collins Mortgage Company was out to attract from their strategic choice of neighboring businesses: a microbrewery, a sushi bar, a fancy bicycle shop (excuse me, “cyclery”) and an exotic natural beauty store. They might as well have hung a sign on the door saying, “Enter forthwith, all ye Silicon Valley hipsters!”

Inside, the receptionist greeted us with a bright smile. She said Mr. Collins would be with us in just one moment. She spoke into an intercom and, indeed, just one moment later a man strutted out of an office to meet us.

Are you familiar with the word “android,” Diary? No, not the operating system for smartphones. I mean “android (n.): automaton resembling a human being in form and movement.” Robots that look like people.

Androids are fantastical beings invented by science fiction writers to explore dramatic themes like the nature of humanity and the ethics of artificial intelligence. They don’t *actually* exist.

At least, that’s what I thought before I met Winston Collins.

Winston’s coal-black suit was starched and pressed, his back ramrod straight, and his hair stiff with shiny pomade. He walked rigidly and deliberately, as if he planned every twitch of a muscle in advance.

“Paul Bennet, I presume.” His hand shot out towards Dad as if his shoulder were spring-loaded. “And Elizabeth Bennet.” The arm swiveled towards me. I shook the hand gingerly, afraid that if I pulled too hard, it might break off.

“Let us retire to my office to converse,” Winston said.

Apparently, Winston's programmers thought his speech would sound more convincing if they installed a thesaurus in his brain.

As soon as we sat down, I launched into a nervous explanation of my parents' financial hardships. I tried to play up sympathy for my poor, retired Dad who'd worked so hard all his life to afford a home for his wife and five daughters, only to lose it all through no fault of his own. Since I'd never spoken to an android before, it didn't occur to me that appealing to pathos might not be effective.

Winston reviewed Dad's documents. For each one, he slowly scanned the text, then placed the page under a gaudy paperweight on his desk. He inspected the paperweight for fingerprints and wiped it with a microfiber cloth. Then he picked up the next piece of paper, and the loop began again.

I jiggled my knee, glancing at the clock on the wall after every minute that ticked by. I bit my thumb to stop myself from breaking the uncomfortable silence with a joke.

After an eternity, Winston finished reading. He wiped his paperweight one final time before speaking to Dad.

"Upon assessing your credit worthiness, Paul, I have come to the unfortunate conclusion that it is not possible to refinance your loan. The most prudent course of action would be to put your property on the market."

My heart sank. "That can't be the only option, right? Aren't there, you know, programs to help people like Dad? Government things?"

"The programs to which you allude, Elizabeth, are not applicable to this situation. I apologize that I am unable to offer alternative solutions."

No way. Selling the house couldn't possibly be the only solution. I couldn't accept that. I refused to accept that. I refused to believe there was no way out because...

Because if Mom and Dad lost the house, it would be my fault.

If I hadn't been so stubborn—if I'd only made the changes that editor wanted—the mortgage would have been paid off in full by now. If I were a proper twenty-eight-year-old adult with a steady job, instead of a leech who drains away all of her parents' savings, Dad would never have ended up in this state. He would never have had to sit in a pretentious downtown office and listen to a robot tell him his credit is worthless.

Dad put his hand on my shoulder. "It's alright, Liz. This is what I expected."

No, it wasn't alright. I had to fix it. I would fix it, no matter what I had to do.

And this, Diary, is the moment I decided to do something truly horrifying. I'm not proud of my choice. All I can say is that, in my panic, I felt it was necessary at the time.

I sucked up to Winston Collins.

"That's a *beautiful* paperweight," I gushed. "Where did you get it?"

Winston's eyes shined. "This paperweight was gifted to me by the mayor *pro tempore*, Catherine de Bourgh, upon my entry into the Downtown Bend Business Association. She purchased it for me personally from a master glass artisan on Etsy."

"Oh, I can tell it's a real masterpiece! The glass is so perfectly round! And the bubbles inside are so...bubbly! Catherine de Bourgh has fine taste in art."

"Are you familiar with Catherine?"

“Of course! I see her in the news all the time. Her stance on potholes is so spot on. You must be very good friends with her, for her to give you such a lovely gift.”

Winston's chest puffed out subtly. “I would not presume to call us ‘friends,’ but Catherine has, on a number of occasions, been so gracious as to advise me on the subject of City Council elections.”

I widened my eyes in a doe-like manner. “Are you planning to run, Winston? I can *totally* see you on the council. We need more young men with fresh ideas in local politics.”

Don't gag at me, Diary. I'd never sucked up to anyone before, and I think I did a pretty good job.

Winston glanced at his watch and stood. “I apologize that I could not offer a more encouraging response to your query, Paul. Elizabeth.”

He extended his hand to Dad. Dad shook it firmly and thanked Winston for his time. Winston swiveled his hand towards me, and I grabbed it with both of mine.

“Charlotte Lucas lives in our neighborhood, and she's always said such *wonderful* things about you, Winston. She says you know more about the mortgage industry than anyone else in Central Oregon. She wasn't exaggerating!”

Winston thanked me for the compliment and started to pull his hand back. I clung to it desperately. “I *hope* we can become good friends. Are you free for dinner tomorrow? You should come to our house with Charlotte! I'd love to talk more about...you know...my Dad's situation, and what we can do about it.”

Ugh, I was so transparent. How did I end up sinking so low, grovelling to an android for a loan?

Dad put his hand on my shoulder. “Come on, Liz.”

He walked out of Collins Mortgage with his head held high. I slunk out after him.

On the sidewalk, Dad turned to me with his arms crossed. “Paperweights? Potholes? *Dinner?*”

I said, “If I have to choose between my pride and the house, I choose the house. Look, maybe he only said no because he doesn’t know how trustworthy and reliable you are. If he comes to dinner and gets to know you better, maybe he’ll change his mind.”

“Give it up, Liz. All the chicken cacciatore in the world will not change a mortgage lender’s mind. We’ll put the house up for sale and downsize to a more affordable place outside of Bend. End of story.”

“End of story?”

I flipped my hair behind my shoulder. “You know what a writer does when she gets to the end of a story, right Dad? She *revises*. She rewrites it until it becomes the story she wants it to be.”

Though Dad smiled as if I were making one of my jokes, I was dead serious. “The End” is just the beginning for me.

II

After leaving Collins Mortgage Company, I didn’t feel like going straight home. After all, I’d gone to all the trouble of dressing up in a frilly blouse and pencil skirt for the meeting. I’d even put on tiny pearl earrings to make us look like hoity-toity rich people. If I went right back to the house after a single hour, my snazzy outfit would go to waste.

I told Dad I wanted to stop by the public library, and that I’d walk the two miles back to our neighborhood.

“Library, my foot,” he teased. “I see how it is—sending me into the lioness’ den alone with the bad news.”

I waved goodbye as Dad drove off, then stretched and took a look at my sunny surroundings.

Across the street was a massive red brick building with the imposing stone sign, “Deschutes County Courthouse.” From Google Maps, I knew the building directly behind it contained the office of the District Attorney.

I’ve never been inside either building before, but I’m sure they’re horrible dark, drafty places full of withered vampires in stuffy suits.

I smothered the childish impulse to stick out my tongue in the general direction of the vampire den. I turned in the opposite direction and strolled down Bond Street, into the tree-lined shopping district.

When I was born here in the eighties, Bend was a rustic little mill town of thirty thousand people—an insignificant speck in the Oregon high desert. Then the timber industry collapsed, and Bend reinvented itself as a paradise for outdoorsy types and retirees. Like a teenager hitting puberty, in the 1990s and 2000s Bend went through a rapid growth spurt and identity crisis. The city shed its “cute” image and strove to become “cool.”

Now, with a population of more than ninety thousand, Bend is not so little or rustic anymore. The downtown area is jam-packed with trendy restaurants, posh art galleries, luxury outerwear emporiums, and high-end spas that advertise services like “airbrushing” and “microblading.”

And so, Diary, you can imagine my surprise and delight when I turned onto a lesser-used cross street and stumbled on a tiny independent bookstore.

I'm telling the truth! It was a *real* bookstore, selling *real* printed books! In 2016! I felt like I'd just discovered the rare bones of an ancient species, beautifully preserved in amber.

The logo painted on the window read Annie's Bookstore & Cafe. I stepped on the woven welcome mat and opened the cherry red door. The bell on the handle jingled cheerfully.

Inside, bookshelves lined one long wall, and sepia photographs of classic authors decorated the others. Fairy lights criss-crossed on the ceiling, illuminating the customers in the eclectic vintage seating. An older man in a cowboy hat lounged in a paisley armchair, reading a hefty presidential biography. A college student in a hoodie and ripped jeans curled up in a rocking chair, typing on her Macbook.

"Welcome to Annie's!" An employee called out to me from the register. I waved hello and walked along the shelves, browsing the options.

In the nonfiction section, I spotted several books about real estate and financial planning. I picked out a book that claimed to be "the authoritative guide" to mortgage programs. The price printed on the barcode was thirty dollars.

To be honest, Diary, I can't afford to spend thirty dollars on a book. I live off a thin trickle of royalties from a novel I published three years ago. My family is in dire financial straits and might soon be on the streets. Thirty dollars is ten loaves of bread. Sixty pounds of potatoes. One hundred twenty packets of ramen noodles.

I should have put the book back on the shelf and kept walking towards the public library, which would certainly have many similar books. Mary would have an aneurysm if she found out I'd paid so

much for a single paperback, when her whole career is dedicated to getting people the information they need for free.

But the shop was so cute, and the owners must struggle so hard to make sales in this brave new world of Amazon. If locals like me don't support them, by this time next year Annie's Bookstore will be yet another Banana Republic.

Silencing Mary's angry voice in my head, I carried the book to the register.

Not only was the shop impossibly charming, but the boy behind the counter was too. He had the pretty face of a pop idol, topped with a mop of curly hair and a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. He looked like he was a little younger than Lydia, maybe twenty-two or twenty-three.

The name tag on his flannel shirt said George.

George smiled at me and scanned the barcode on the book. "Mortgages, huh? Doing a bit of light reading for fun?"

"Absolutely. Nothing like calculating amortization schedules before bed for a relaxing end to the day."

George laughed. Two perfect dimples appeared under the apples of his cheeks.

Then his face changed. "Hey, have we met somewhere before?"

If an older or plainer man had used that cliché line on me, I would have been disgusted. But because George was such a good-looking kid, I was flattered.

(Yes, Diary, I know I'm shallow. No need to point it out.)

"I don't think so," I said.

"Hm, I swear I've seen you somewhere. Thirty dollars even."

I handed George my credit card. He glanced down at it, and his blue eyes grew bigger than they already were.

“Oh, wow! You’re E. Bennet! I *knew* I’d seen you somewhere before. You wrote one of my favorite books!”

Before I published my first novel, I fantasized that it would become an international bestseller on the scale of *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*. I would walk down the street and fans would fall over themselves for my autograph. After a while I’d grow tired of fame, and I’d take to wearing a baseball cap and oversized shades everywhere to avoid the attention.

Of course that didn’t happen, not just because my novel didn’t become the next *Harry Potter*, but because nobody recognizes writers. We’re not actors or politicians. I don’t even know what any famous writers look like. If I were to step into the same elevator as J. K. Rowling, I’d have no idea who she was and would simply ask, “Can you press number five for me, please?”

So now that the fantasy had miraculously come true, I didn’t know how to respond.

My natural inclination was to squeal, “A fan! A real live fan! Oh my God!” But somehow that didn’t strike me as appropriate behavior for a Famous Literary Author.

“I’m glad you liked it,” I said graciously, flipping my hair over my shoulder. I was so happy I was wearing the frilly blouse and pencil skirt.

George gushed, “I’ve always wanted to meet you! You’re actually one of my role models, you know? There are other authors from Bend, but none of them are as good as you are. Don’t tell any of them I said that, though. I’m kind of working on a book myself, actually, so...”

He ran my credit card through the scanner, and the machine made a harsh beeping sound.

“Oh no. Not *now*.” He tried a second time, and the machine beeped again.

George’s cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink. “I’m so sorry, it does this all the time. It’s not your card, I promise. This machine is really old. The owner keeps telling me he’ll get a new one with a chip reader, but he hasn’t yet. Do you, uh, happen to have cash on you?”

“Of course. No problem.”

I took out my wallet and grandly removed the two twenties I carry around for emergencies. Famous Literary Authors don’t worry about little things like spending their limited emergency cash on inessential purchases.

George accepted my twenties and gave me a ten in change, with profuse apologies. Poor boy. He looked like he wanted to crawl under the counter and die from embarrassment.

The bell on the front door jingled, and I glanced towards it without thinking. In an instant, the wonderful glow of my Famous Literary Author moment died.

Will Darcy stepped inside the bookstore, removing a pair of sunglasses.

His eyes met mine, and I swiveled around to avoid them. My heart was beating rapidly. Obviously, this was because I was startled and annoyed to see my mortal enemy appear all of a sudden. Not for any other reason.

George smiled at Will. But there was something off about that smile. It wasn’t genuine, like the smile a man gives a friend, or even businesslike, like the smile an employee gives a customer.

It was irritated. Almost hostile. On a face that wasn’t as affable as George’s, that smile might have been called...a sneer.

“Hey, big bro. What brings you here?”

III

“Big bro?”

I couldn’t have heard that right. This bubbly, curly-haired cherub in front of me could not possibly be related to the frozen-hearted vampire behind me.

George continued, “What’s up? Did you come here to invite me to lunch? Wow, lunch with the great Will Darcy. I’m so excited!”

These words might seem sarcastic to you, Diary, but that’s because you didn’t hear George speak them. His tone was very warm and friendly. And the way his baby blue eyes lit up, I could see he was truly excited to see Will.

Will remained silent. Though I was studiously avoiding eye contact with him because...reasons...I sneaked a look at him.

His expression sent a chill down my spine.

Will Darcy is always stony-faced, but by that I mean he has a face that looks like it was carved out of marble by Michaelangelo: pale, immobile, and inhumanly perfect.

This was a different kind of stony-faced: a cold glare that emanates barely suppressed fury. The kind of expression that makes guilty criminals quiver before judges and treasonous subjects cower before kings.

Will stepped beside me and placed his hand on my shoulder. I jumped.

“Ms. Bennet,” he said.

“Yes, Mr. Darcy?”

Conscious of George standing nearby, I tried to speak in a suave voice appropriate for a Famous Literary Author. But to my mortification, the words came out high-pitched and girlish instead.

I couldn't help it. Will's expression was so severe, I was afraid he was about to arrest me!

But I quickly realized lawyers don't arrest people, and I blushed. Then I felt my cheeks warm and, even more mortified that Will might misinterpret my blushing to mean something else, I blushed hotter still.

George said, "You two know each other? Dude, why didn't you tell me you know my favorite author?"

Will's eyes didn't stray from mine, and his hand didn't move from my shoulder. "I'm glad I ran into you. I have something to discuss."

George sighed. "Right, you have more important things to do than talk to lesser mortals like me. Too busy saving society and breaking hearts, aren't you?"

Again, Diary, the words were *not* as contemptuous as they appear in writing. George's tone was gently ribbing. You know, the way boys tease people they like.

Will acted as if he couldn't hear George, or even see him standing there. Yet his jaw twitched slightly when George spoke, and his posture stiffened when George leaned towards us with his elbows on the checkout counter.

Will asked me, "Are you available on Saturday at 6 p.m.?"

"This Saturday? Yes, I am."

I hate myself for answering so quickly and truthfully. Will's vampire superpowers must be highly useful in court. He just gazes

straight into criminals' eyes, and the whole truth comes tumbling out of their mouths.

Belatedly, I asked, "Why?"

"Charles has tentatively chosen that time for his housewarming party."

"Oh."

I couldn't think of anything wittier to say than "oh." Maybe my head went blank because the dynamic in the room was so surreal. George was calling Will "big bro," Will was treating George as if he didn't exist...and why did Will keep his hand on my shoulder for so long, as if we were intimate friends?

George asked, "How's Gianna doing?"

The fingers on my shoulder tightened. Something raw and frightening shot through Will's eyes. Then, in a split second, his face turned back to marble. His hand dropped to his side.

The flash of emotion appeared and disappeared so quickly, I wondered if I'd imagined it.

Will said coolly, "If Saturday at six works for you and your family, I'll let Charles know."

George raised his voice. "She's my sister too, you know? I worry about her."

Will turned and strode out of the bookshop. The bell on the door clanged behind him.

The shop seemed unnaturally silent in the moments after Will left. George pouted, his mouth in a tight line. I stood awkwardly at the checkout counter, unsure what to say.

George exhaled and relaxed. He met my eyes and laughed. "Sorry, that situation just now was super uncomfortable, huh?"

"Not really," I said to be polite.

“Bend is still a small town in a lot of ways, isn’t it? Crazy that you’re friends with Will.”

George placed my book into a small paper bag with the Annie’s logo. “But it’s not surprising. He’s friends with everyone who’s anyone around here. Everyone loves him.”

“I don’t love him!”

I spoke more loudly than I intended. George stared at me in surprise.

I cleared my throat. “I mean, he’s kind of stuck up and judgmental. And sometimes the things he says are really rude. I don’t see what’s so lovable about him.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them. I have no idea what came over me. Talking trash behind a person’s back feels so dirty, even if that person deserves every word.

And the man I was trash-talking was George’s brother, too! Even if a person doesn’t have a lovey-dovey Brady Bunch family, insults to parents and siblings are absolutely off limits. I mean, Mary isn’t the most lovable person either, but if someone came up to me and said, “Mary is kind of dowdy and abrasive,” I would be *livid*.

I grimaced in shame. “I’m so sorry, I...”

“No, don’t be! It’s a relief to know there’s one other person who feels that way. Everyone else treats Will like he walks on water.”

Under his breath, George added, “They have no idea what he’s really like in private.”

George handed me the paper bag. He smiled at me shyly. “My shift is over in a few minutes. Do you have time to stay for a coffee, Elizabeth? My treat.”

“Oh! Um...” I checked my watch. It was almost noon—my parents might have filled out a Zillow ad and a divorce application by now.

George turned that adorable shade of pink again. “It’s just...I’m so lucky to meet you like this.”

He looked down and fidgeted with a cup of pens on the counter. “I know it sounds strange, but when I read your book for the first time, I felt as if...you knew me. Like, even though we’d never met, you were writing straight to me, and you understood me better than anyone else in the world. So I...I really want to talk to you and become friends in real life.”

Of all the compliments I’ve ever received about my writing, that was by far the sweetest and most heartfelt. How could I say no?

“Of course,” I said. “I’ll drink anything with sugar and whipped cream in it.”

George is such a nice and earnest boy. At the time, I didn’t know why Will had treated him with such childish hostility, but I knew it must have been for some petty reason. How could he not adore such a cute kid brother?

As I learned over the next hour, Will’s behavior towards George was beyond petty. It was downright cruel.

IV

I sat down at one of the rustic round tables near the bookshelves. George brought me a caramel macchiato with a big dallop of whipped cream, plus a surprise brownie. This kid sure knows the path to a woman’s heart, and it’s paved with sugar.

I sipped my drink. It was thick, sweet, and delicious. I licked whipped cream from my lips and said, "So you're working on a book?"

"Yeah, I am! It's not very good, but...yeah."

"Don't put yourself down. Every great story starts out as a terrible first draft. Instead you should say, 'It's not very good *yet*.'"

George laughed shyly. "You're right. I'm just not used to talking myself up, you know?"

"What genre is it in?"

"It's kind of hard to describe." George rubbed his neck. "I like to write in a way that breaks down the traditional barrier between poetry and prose. Like, stories told through poems, but untethered from the structures of grammar and rhyme and logic. That doesn't make any sense, does it?"

I hid a smile behind my cup. It's so cute when young writers think they've invented something new.

"You mean modernist narrative poetry? Like *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot?"

"Yeah, like that, maybe!" George blushed. "I don't actually know who that is, because...I couldn't afford to go to college."

For a moment I felt guilty for dropping an allusion to an obscure literary title, as if I'd been trying to show off how educated I was.

Then I felt guilty for feeling guilty, because what's wrong with being educated? Was I going to become one of those women who pretend to be ignorant to protect other people's egos? Hardly!

And then I processed everything George had said, and I was confused. He was the brother of the Stanford-educated, designer-sports-coat-wearing Will Darcy, but he couldn't afford college?

As if he could read my mind, George said, “You’re probably wondering how that is, when Will is so well-off. The truth is, we’re not blood-related. My last name is Wickham, though I never knew the man who gave it to me. Will is my stepbrother. I think of him as my real brother, but he... Well, you saw how he was earlier.”

George rubbed his thumb along the rim of his coffee cup. “Robert—that is, Will’s dad, Robert Darcy—promised to help me pay for college. My plan was to go to Yale and get a BA in Creative Writing. I actually got in, and I was so stoked.”

He turned his face away, eyes downcast. “But the month I graduated from high school, Robert passed away.”

“Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry.” I never know what to say to people who have lost someone precious. From the way George’s face crumpled, I could tell the grief was still fresh for him.

“Robert was a great man, you know? He was good to my mom, and I knew he meant it when he said he would send me to Yale. When I showed him that acceptance letter, I’ll never forget the look of pride on his face, and the way he hugged me. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a *dad*.”

George took a deep, unsteady breath. “But then Will inherited everything, and he refused to keep Robert’s promise. He said since Robert hadn’t adopted me, I wasn’t a legal heir, and he was under no obligation to help me with my education. He said if I wanted to go to college, I’d have to choose a state school I could afford, and get loans and a job.”

I gaped at George, stunned. Though the coffee I was holding was hot, my hands went cold. I knew Will Darcy was a stuck-up jerk, but I could never have imagined he was so selfish and greedy!

I *despise* privileged people who disparage the struggles of the less fortunate. Will Darcy had everything handed to him on a silver platter: a degree from one of the top private colleges in the country, friends in high places like Charles Bingley, a cushy job in county government.

And he had the *gall* to tell a young kid, his own *brother*, to forget about Yale and “get loans and a job”?

Will couldn't possibly have any idea how difficult it is to work your way through school, or how crushing student loans can be. Thanks to her master's and PhD programs, poor Mary will never be able to support herself, or buy her own house, or start her own family. Many of my friends in their twenties and thirties are barely scraping by, working two or three jobs to pay off those loans, on top of sacrificing an arm for rent and a leg for childcare every month.

I asked, as if there could be a valid answer, “Why? Why would he do that?”

George shrugged, as if he had accepted his sad lot in life long ago. “I probably shouldn't say this, but I feel like I've known you forever, so... The truth is, Will has always been jealous of me.”

Jealous? Will Darcy? He thinks he's Mr. Perfect. Why would he be jealous of anyone?

“Robert never loved Will, and Will knew it. I mean, he loved him because he was his son, but as you said earlier, it's impossible to really love Will. He's always strutted around like he's God's gift to man. Actually when Will was in high school, he was worse than he is now, if you can picture it.”

I could picture it easily. Will must have been one of those teenagers with an inflated sense of his own abilities and importance in the world. He was likely the smartest kid in class, and so

he assumed he was the smartest human on the planet. I imagine he shot belittling, sarcastic remarks at his family members just to feel clever. And when his father attempted to bond with him, preppy teenage Will probably acted like playing catch or watching movies was beneath a sophisticated man like himself.

George said, “When Robert married my mom, we hit it off right away. Robert sort of saw me as the son he always wanted Will to be. While Will stayed home to study, Robert took me out camping and fishing. Will *hated* me for it. He thinks I stole his father’s love from him, when he’s the one who lost it. It’s his own fault for being such a douche.”

The crass word “douche” startled me, but it’s understandable that George feels bitter towards his stepbrother. He just wanted to have a dad, too, and it was unfair of Will to resent him for it.

Though I can also see Will’s perspective too, sort of. It must have been lonely, being the one left behind.

George picked up his coffee again and took a swig. “That’s why Will refused to help me with my tuition at Yale. He couldn’t stand the fact that Robert liked me better, and he was overjoyed to kick me out of the Darcy family as soon as he could get away with it.”

He opened his arms wide and said, with a forced smile, “So here I am, a lowly but noble clerk making minimum wage at my mom’s bookstore.”

“Wait, your mom owns this store?” I looked around, seeing the shop with new eyes.

“She used to own this store. My mom is the one and only Annie Wickham of Annie’s Bookstore Ampersand Cafe. Opening a small bookstore like this was her lifelong dream. She loved it more than anything. But...”

George looked downcast again, and for a moment I worried his mother had passed away, too.

"No matter how hard Mom tried, she couldn't make enough sales to keep the store afloat."

"I'm sorry," I said for the second time. "Running an indy bookstore must be so hard these days."

"Yeah, it is. Mom tried to save the store by begging Will for a loan. He's rolling in Robert's money, you know. But even though she'd cared for Will like her own son since he was sixteen, he refused to help her, just like he refused to help me. So Mom was forced to sell Annie's to new management."

George quirked a smile and held up his coffee cup, which had the Annie's logo printed on the side. "At least they kept the name! And the furniture, so that's something. Mom picked out all the furniture and decor herself."

"She did a great job. This place is beautiful."

"It is, isn't it? One day, when I save up enough money, I'm going to buy it back for her. It'll take a few years, but...once I finish my book and sell it, Annie's will really be Annie's again!"

As I looked at George trying valiantly to look cheerful, clutching that coffee cup with his mother's name on it, my heart broke a little.

Seeing that adorable bookstore, I knew what kind of person Annie Wickham must be: warm, creative, and upbeat. Every lovingly preserved antique, every quirky black and white photo, every cozy rug on the distressed wood floor proved that Annie had poured her soul into this place. She must have been *devastated* to lose it.

I burst out, "I just can't understand why Will would treat you guys that way! Even if you're not blood-related, you're still family. Just because of some sibling rivalry when you were kids, he wouldn't

help you with college or your mom with her store? That's just so... *petty.*"

George shrugged again. "I know he feels guilty about it, at least. You saw it earlier. He can't even look me in the eye. He knows he was wrong, but he's too proud to apologize."

Ah, so that's why Will behaved that way towards George. Guilt explains everything: why Will acted so stiff, why he pretended George didn't exist, why he kept staring deep into my eyes instead of looking anywhere else. If he'd looked away, he would have seen the store Annie built with love, then lost because of him.

Guilt explains that scary flash of anger, too. George was being so nice and brotherly, even though Will treated him terribly. His cuteness made Will remember why their father preferred spending time with George. It reminded him of the fact that he's the opposite of George: cold, aloof, and unlovable. Most of all, it reminded him of his own pettiness and cruelty.

Will must have hated being confronted with the fact that he's not a perfect prince, but a heartless brother and an ungrateful stepson. And so he was angry. But he quickly covered up his anger, because showing he was angry would be admitting that he knew he was wrong. And Will Darcy could never be wrong.

(That psychoanalysis is kind of brilliant, isn't it, Diary? If I hadn't majored in English, I would have made a great therapist.)

I drained my drink and pushed the cup aside. "Will might be a big ol' meanie, but I want to help you fulfill your dreams."

George big blue eyes grew bigger. "What do you mean?"

"I can't send you to Yale, but I can help you realize your dreams of being a writer. If you're comfortable with other people reading your work, I'd be happy to provide feedback and advice."

The look of joy on George's face was dazzling. He glowed as if I'd just waved a magic wand and made a Christmas tree appear in front of him, with a dozen presents underneath all addressed to him.

"You'd *do* that, Elizabeth? For me? Oh wow, I...*thank* you!"

"No problem. We members of the Will Darcy Anti-Fan Club should support each other."

And that, Dear Diary, is how I became a mentor. I have my very first sort-of-student!

Ugh, I wish I hadn't spent so much time writing this entry. I thought it would be a lot shorter, but so many things happened today.

I also wish I hadn't told Will I'm free on Saturday evening. Now I'll have to see him at Charles' housewarming party.

No, scratch that. I'm glad I told Will I'm free on Saturday, because now I know exactly where he'll be. I will go to that party and I *will* give him a piece of my mind. My very first sort-of-student deserves an apology, dang it, and I'm going to get it for him!

But now, I must research how to make a cherry pie. Charlotte says it's Winston's favorite. With her help, I roped him in for dinner at Chez Bennet at 6 p.m. tomorrow.

So that makes the To Do List...

- 1) Bake pie.
- 2) Save house.
- 3) Destroy Will Darcy.



July 12, 2016

The Day the Android Came to Dinner

I

9 a.m.

Dear Diary,

Last night I tossed and turned until sunrise, worrying about the house. As the hours dragged on my body grew heavier and heavier, but the synapses in my brain fired faster and faster, and my stomach growled louder and louder.

When the sky began to lighten, I gave up on sleep. I sneaked into the kitchen and scarfed down a big slice of the cherry pie I'd baked before bed. Then I plopped down on the living room couch, turned on the Weather Channel, and instantly passed out.

Maybe if I hadn't eaten that pie, I wouldn't have had that ominous dream.

I dreamed that I slept through the dinner with Winston and Charlotte. When I came to, I was lying on the floor. My loft was empty. Only my laptop lay beside me, opened to a blank Word document.

Jane came in, dressed like Black Widow from *The Avengers*. She said Mom had packed all of our things and sent them ahead to

#4 Cardboard Box, The Bridge, Bend, OR 97703. This distressed me because I didn't know *which* bridge was The Bridge, and Jane wouldn't tell me. She just smiled and vanished.

Then Will Darcy appeared in front of me. I asked how he got in. He said he flew through the window. I asked if he does that often, and he said, "I like watching you sleep. It's kind of fascinating to me."

(No, Diary, I will not disclose how many times I watched *Twilight* in my college years. It was ironic viewing, okay? *Ironic.*)

Will trapped me in his hypnotic gaze. He slowly bent his head towards mine and murmured, "Don't move."

I said, "But I have to. The bank took the house."

And then Mary shook me awake.

Still out of it, I panicked when I saw 8:45 on the analog clock over the TV. I asked Mary if it was morning or nighttime. Mary asked me if I was drunk. She chastised me for leaving my dirty dessert plate on the coffee table, reminded me that I am twenty-eight years old and even Kitty and Lydia sleep properly in their beds, and huffed off to work.

Though I'm really tired, I'm too stressed out to go back to sleep. When vampire prosecutors appear in your dreams, it's clearly an omen for dark times to come.

But instead of dwelling on dreams, I should get busy! I have eight hours to bake a new pie, whip the first floor into guest-worthy shape, and figure out how to convince a mortgage lender to loan tens of thousands of dollars to an aging couple with no credit, no jobs, and no savings.

No problem.

9 p.m.

Dear Diary,

Should I just start packing now?

Alright, alright, I shouldn't give up yet. On Saturday I'll get one more chance to convince Winston Collins to help my parents...if I can survive another conversation with him without dying of either boredom or the overwhelming shame of licking his boots.

When Winston and Charlotte rang the bell at six o'clock, I was standing on the other side of the door waiting to do my best Caroline Bingley impression. I'd gussied myself up in a long floral summer dress and full no-makeup makeup. Though I don't own a lacy apron or a pearl necklace, I did manage to scrounge up the nude pumps I bought in 2010 for my first job interview.

I shook hands with Charlotte, because she doesn't care for hugs or air kisses. Winston's spring-loaded arm shot out to offer me a bottle of Pinot Noir. I cooed over it as if it were the most beautiful bottle I'd ever seen.

When Winston stepped into the entryway, he looked down and tapped his toe on the floor, as if testing it for solidity. "Is this peel-and-stick vinyl?"

Dad came up behind me. "Yes, it is. It's a fraction of the price of real marble. Easy to clean, too, from what my wife tells me."

Winston tested the floor with his toe again. "Hm. The pattern is quite convincing until you look at it closely."

As I hung up Winston's coat and Charlotte's purse, Winston said, "The mayor *pro tempore*, Catherine de Bourgh, installed genuine imported Italian travertine tiles in her foyer. I had the pleasure of seeing them when I attended her annual Christmas party last year.

Her foyer is three times the size of this one. The effect of the tiles on the expansive floor is stunning.”

Dad said, “I see. If I ever have a hankering to spend another weekend on my hands and knees, I will certainly purchase genuine imported Italian travertine tiles.” He motioned towards the living room. “Shall we?”

As we moved into the living room, Mom sashayed down the stairs in a glittering floor-length evening dress.

“Charlotte!” Mom trilled, as if Charlotte’s visit were the most wonderful surprise. She wrapped Charlotte in a hug and planted an air kiss on each cheek. “And this must be the famous Mr. Collins. You can call me Lucy.”

Mom dangled her hand towards Winston. He shook her fingertips delicately.

I guided Winston to the couch and sat him in front of a plate of cheese and crackers on the coffee table. Usually for gatherings I buy prepackaged snack trays from the grocery store, but because this was such an important dinner meeting, I’d assembled the plate myself by cutting the block of Tillamook cheddar and opening the box of Triscuits with my own two hands.

I said, “Please, enjoy the appetizers while I set the table and call my sisters to dinner. They’re all so excited to meet you, Winston.”

Winston said, “Charlotte has told me you have a rather large family.”

“Oh yes,” Mom said, “Five girls, and we adore them all.”

“Catherine de Bourgh has one daughter. She believes it is most environmentally responsible for families to have two children at most. As she said to me at her annual Labor Day picnic this past

May, 'Winston, when you get married you must have two children. One is too lonely and three is too much. You must have two.'"

Dad said, "That is excellent advice. Did you hear that, Liz? You and Jane get to stay. Your mother and I will send the other three back for a refund."

I exclaimed, "Is that the timer beeping? I'd better get those rolls out of the oven before they burn!"

I scurried to the kitchen to set up dinner as quickly as possible, before Dad could tell one joke too many and send our only hope of saving the house storming out the front door. Charlotte followed me and offered to help.

As we moved chicken cacciatore and salad to the dining table, I said, "Thanks again for snagging Winston for dinner."

"No problem. You know I'd do anything for you if you give me food."

She plucked a cherry tomato from the salad bowl and nibbled on it. "Although, to be frank, I'm not sure it will do any good. Winston passed along your parents' docs to me for review. I have to tell you, girl, their situation is pretty bad."

I removed the hot dinner rolls from the oven and carried them to the table. "I know it's bad, but you've worked miracles with worse before, right?"

"I have, and as a professional I'll try to do it again. But as a friend, I need to be honest: it would be better for your parents' financial health to sell."

Charlotte looked around the kitchen and dining area with a critical eye. "They could get six hundred for this place, at least. Comparable properties in Redmond or Sisters are going for four

hundred. If they're willing to move out of Bend, your folks could pay off their outstanding debt and still have a decent chunk of change left over."

Oh, to be as cool and logical as Charlotte. I suppose she has to be, to tolerate having a robot for a boss. Unfortunately, we Bennets are human beings with messy emotions, and to us our home is more than "property."

I said, "For twenty years Dad put on a suit and tie every weekday to peddle insurance, and Mom went door to door selling Mary Kay cosmetics, all so they could afford to build their dream home on the butte near the golf course. I can't just let them give it up now and spend the rest of their lives in a cookie-cutter two-story in the burbs."

I pulled the second cherry pie out of the fridge and removed the foil on top with a flourish. "That is why I toiled in a hot kitchen all day to bake this pie for Winston. If it doesn't do any good, and we have to sell the house in the end, well...at least we got to eat pie."

Charlotte laughed, and I did too. That was my last genuine smile of the evening.

II

Miraculously, all of my sisters managed to sit down together at one table for the dinner with Winston and Charlotte. I can't remember the last time we pulled that off. Usually Jane is at rehearsal, the twins are at a party somewhere, and Mary is recovering from the disappointments of the real world by watching Korean dramas in her room.

(Remember this well, Diary: one should never interrupt Mary when she is watching her Korean dramas. I made that mistake once, and I was lucky to escape with my skin.)

As we passed the food around, Winston looked up at the light fixture over the table. “That is an unusual chandelier.”

Mom gushed, “It is unique, isn’t it? I saw it at Home Depot and fell in love with it. It makes the room feel so airy and elegant, don’t you think?”

Winston said, “Catherine de Bourgh has seven chandeliers in her home, including two in her kitchen and one in each of her three bathrooms. All seven are custom-ordered hand-cut crystal chandeliers. As Catherine said to me, ‘Winston, if you buy a chandelier, you must custom order one made of hand-cut crystal. A real chandelier is a work of art. Those so-called chandeliers in big box stores are merely lamps.’”

Mom puffed up, and Dad opened his mouth to make another crack about Catherine’s excellent advice.

I hurried to ask, “So, Winston, what do you like to do in your free time? Do you hike? Watch movies? Play video games?”

Winston pursed his lips. “I do not prioritize diversions such as sports and games over more constructive pursuits. As Stephen Covey wrote in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the way you spend your time is a result of the way you see your time and the way you really see your priorities.”

With that answer, my hopes for engaging Winston Collins in a pleasant and productive dinner conversation flew right out the window. Diary, this man is not merely an android with a thesaurus in his brain. He’s an android with a thesaurus in his brain, a bizarre

fixation on the mayor *pro tempore*, and a penchant for reading bestselling self-help books.

Dealing with such a man will require a superhuman level of patience. And though E. Bennet possesses many extraordinary and attractive qualities, she is not known for her patience.

I said with forced cheer, “Amazing, you can quote that by heart! So...you like to read nonfiction?”

Winston nodded. “As Napoleon Hill wrote in *The Law of Success*, the object of your definite chief aim should become your ‘hobby.’ My chief aim is to improve myself, as a means of improving the world. Therefore, I strive to cultivate excellence through nightly instructive readings. I take no days off. As Stephen Covey wrote, we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not an act, but a habit.”

Through a mouthful of chicken, Mary said, “As Robert Greene wrote in *The 48 Laws of Power*, too much respect for other people’s wisdom will make you depreciate your own. Excellent people think for themselves once in a while, too.”

I kicked Mary’s shin under the table. “Ha ha, what Mary means is, you’re at the pinnacle of excellence already! You’re a successful businessman in a difficult industry. You must be bursting with wisdom you could share with others. I bet you could write your own self-help book at this point, and it would be even better than Stephen Covey’s!”

Dad pushed the butter dish towards me. He muttered, “Put some butter on your roll, Liz.”

I whispered back, “I already did.”

“I’m not sure you laid it on thick enough.”

I ignored Dad and said to Winston, “You’re also active in local politics, aren’t you? Have you decided to run for City Council?”

Winston swallowed and dabbed his mouth. “Catherine de Bourgh posed the same query to me at the last business association dinner meeting. As I said to her, “Though I have frequently entertained the idea of contributing to the Council in my humble way, no one could hope to compete with the bold and effective leadership you have shown during your service to the City of Bend.”

Mary curled her lip in disgust. Lydia pantomimed throwing up, and Kitty giggled. Charlotte served a second helping of salad onto Winston’s plate, presumably to encourage him to fill his mouth and keep it closed.

“Wow,” I said, “That’s quite a compliment.”

My admiration was genuine. Winston is many levels above me in the skill of sucking up.

The corners of Winston’s mouth rose slightly. “Though I am a man of limited talents, my honeyed tongue is the envy of my acquaintances. I have perfected my way with words through many years of intentional practice. Winning friends begins with friendliness. It is important to always make the other person feel important, and do it sincerely.”

Kitty giggled again. Lydia nudged her and asked Winston, “Is that something you read in a self-help book, too?”

“Yes, I did. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie. Catherine de Bourgh recommended it to me on the day she gifted me my paperweight. She said to me, ‘Winston, to become a successful man, you must read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. No other book can compare.’”

Dad said, “Catherine de Bourgh is very generous with her advice. She gives it to people freely when they don’t even ask for it.”

I shot Dad a warning look, which was sadly ineffective. He continued, "I don't know how the City of Bend could survive without her. No one would ever figure out which books to read, or how many children to have, or which chandeliers to hang in their bathrooms. All would be chaos."

Was Dad trying to lose the house? Would it kill him to keep the jokes to himself for one measly dinner? Note to self: buy Dad a diary so he can get the snark out of his system in private, like I do, instead of dooming the whole family to life under The Bridge.

Grabbing the reigns of the conversation, I asked Winston, "Do you think Catherine de Bourgh will support your run for the Council? She must like you a lot. She bought that lovely paperweight for you personally."

The corners of Winston's mouth fell. "Unfortunately, Catherine is very busy during this election cycle. Her top priority is, understandably, to support the political ambitions of her nephew, Will Darcy."

I choked on my sparkling water. "Her nephew *who*?"

Kitty piped up helpfully, "He said Will Darcy. Isn't that the guy who hangs out with Jane's boyfriend?"

Jane said quietly, "Charles isn't my boyfriend."

Mom jumped in, "But he soon will be, darling. He just needs a little push."

Winston asked the table at large, "Are you familiar with Will Darcy?"

Lydia pulled a face. "Yeah, we know him. That guy is such a di—"

"Dear, *dear* friend of ours!" I drowned Lydia out. "It's the funniest thing—his roommate from Stanford, Charles, owns the house on the corner. We all had lunch together on Saturday. I also

met up with Will at a bookstore yesterday, literally minutes after leaving your office.”

Pretending to be best buddies with Will Darcy left a bad taste in my mouth, especially since I now know what a horrible person he is.

But though I’m a novice at sucking up, I’m advanced enough to realize that this tenuous tie to the Great Catherine de Bourgh could be our life preserver. I seized on it and clung to it with all my might.

“Will is a super guy. He’s super handsome and super smart and...uh...” What else did Caroline say? “I don’t know anyone more perfect. We only met a few weeks ago, but I feel like we’ve known each other forever. I even dreamed about him last night.”

Both Jane and Charlotte gave me weird looks. I regretted sharing that last part.

Winston said, “Ah, then you must know that he is running for election as a judge. Though I have never had the honor of meeting him personally, I know enough of him by reputation to expect he will be successful. Not only does he have a sterling pedigree as Catherine’s nephew, but he has a spotless record as a deputy district attorney. Catherine tells me Will has never lost a case. His ethics and dedication to justice are unparalleled.”

I bit my tongue hard. Too bad that “dedication to justice” doesn’t apply to Will’s own behavior.

I said, “Would you like to meet him? Charles is having a party this Saturday. Will invited me, so I know he’ll be there.”

For the first time since I’d met him, the spark of life appeared in Winston’s eyes. He was so excited at the prospect of meeting Catherine’s nephew, he dropped a forkful of salad onto his shirt and didn’t notice.

"No, no," Winston said. "I could not presume to attend a party to which I was not invited."

"It's fine, you can come as my plus one! Charlotte will be there too." I turned to Charlotte for support. "Right?"

Charlotte wiped the globs of Caesar dressing off of Winston's shirt. "Yeah, I can make it. Do you want to go?"

Winston nodded enthusiastically, sending another forkful of salad tumbling onto his lap.

Mom said, "Wonderful! You can be Lizzie's date. Lizzie loves books too, you know. She's the smart one of the family. Earlier you mentioned that you aren't married yet..."

Dad interrupted, "Now don't go pushing our daughters on the nice mortgage lender, Lucy. None of them can be relied upon to produce exactly two children. Liz, in particular, hates being told what to do so much, she would deliberately have triplets."

"Besides," Lydia said, "Lizzie's dreaming about our dear, dear friend, the super handsome Will Darcy." I glared at her, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

Mary sawed at her chicken forcefully. "Don't forget super smart. The writer is the smart one of the family, after all. Not the faculty librarian with the PhD, nope."

Jane placed on a soothing hand on Mary's shoulder. "That's not what Mom meant. She only meant Lizzie has a lot in common with Winston."

Charlotte said to me, "I did notice you putting the moves on Will at my parents' barbecue. Have you asked him out yet?"

Kitty looked around the table with wide eyes. "Lizzie's dating Will? Since when?"

I threw down my napkin and stood up. "Who wants cherry pie?"

I don't know how that dinner conversation veered so far off the rails, Diary, but I should have expected it. When a plan depends on the cooperation of the Bennet clan, it is all but guaranteed to fail.

After that, I didn't get a single chance to bring up the real purpose of Winston's visit: the refinancing of my parents' mortgage. During dessert all he would talk about was the venerable Catherine de Bourgh and her nephew, freaking Will Darcy.

Yes, Diary, I *have* noticed that the name Will Darcy appears frequently on these pages. It's not my fault. He just keeps popping up in my life uninvited. It's not like I *want* to talk about him in every entry.

You know what else I've noticed, Diary? You always make the snidest comments and ask the rudest questions. I don't know where you got that attitude from and frankly, it's getting on my nerves. If you don't start treating me more nicely, I'll have to buy a new journal to share my thoughts with. Is that what you want? I didn't think so.

On Saturday, I will see Winston at Charles' housewarming party, and then I will make my final attempt to persuade him to help Dad and Mom. Until then, I have four days to get some actual work done. I still haven't started on my next book, and my agent still hasn't contacted me about my last manuscript. Methinks it is time for another nudge.

But first, to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream—hopefully about something other than sparkly vampires this time.



July 16, 2016

The Day I Danced with a Vampire

I

Dear Diary,

After three months of radio silence, my agent finally responded to me! Hallelujah! Break out the champagne and Godiva bonbons—the person who’s supposedly working for me deigned to send me a two-sentence email!

In the first sentence she said she finished reading my manuscript, and in the second she asked me to call her Monday morning to talk. After being ignored for a quarter of a year, I would have appreciated a third sentence explaining why it took her so long to get back to me. Something like, “Sorry, I’ve been traveling to conferences nonstop...,” or “Sorry, I’ve been dealing with a death in the family...,” or even “Sorry, my dog ate my email account.”

The lack of *any* explanation at all makes me suspect she’s been avoiding me. But that’s just me being a hypersensitive artist. You know how we writers are, Diary—so needy and unreasonably demanding, we expect to command our agents’ full attention for whole minutes every single month or two.

I wish I had spent the last week writing my next book, so I'd have some progress to report on Monday morning. Unfortunately, my responsibilities as a mentor temporarily eclipsed my goals as a writer.

Late Tuesday night George Wickham emailed me the draft of his book. Thanks to my ghostly agent, I know how nerve-racking it is for a writer to wait (and wait, and wait) for feedback. So I dropped everything else to respond to my first student as soon as possible.

Because George is young and this is presumably his first book, I went in with low expectations. I assumed his work would be like the mediocre stories I concocted at his age: imaginative and ambitious, but melodramatic and riddled with clichés.

My assumption was incorrect. G. Wickham's postmodernist epic poem is not mediocre.

It's **horrendous**.

Oh, my word, Diary. How can I begin to describe this "poem"?

Take *Catcher in the Rye* and *Ulysses*, strip them of all voice and nuance, and smash together the meager remains. Then rip up a copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and sprinkle the pages liberally throughout. Finally, skim through this grotesque mélange of erotica and coffee shop philosophy and insert line breaks

at random for

no reason,

really...

...and you have this book.

The story, such as it is, follows a nameless teenage hero who is unjustly exiled from his dreary Oregon hometown after a jealous classmate exposes the hero's affair with their sultry 12th-grade

English teacher. The hero sets off on a surreal backpacking tour of the world, in which he...

1) Stares at mountains and lakes in Thailand, brooding about mortality.

2) Stares at lagers in London pubs, brooding about the superficiality of mankind.

3) Beds sultry women of all nationalities, brooding about the absurdity and pointlessness of sex. (While having lots of it. Lots and lots of it.)

Had the book been mediocre, I could have responded to George within a day, offering key suggestions for improvements and some peppy cheerleading. But because the book is horrendous, I had to spend the better half of a week carefully composing my feedback.

How on earth am I supposed to tell a nice kid like George that his writing is horrendous, without hurting his feelings?

How can I break it to him gently that every female in his book appears to have walked straight out of a 1930s pulp mystery, all legs and breasts and histrionic coquetry?

Or that his hero comes across as a self-absorbed, mildly sociopathic poser with delusions of grandeur?

Since George isn't a sociopathic poser, I know the obnoxiousness of his hero is the result of his inexperience as a writer. George must have a fascinating narrative and complex characters in his head, but he doesn't yet have the skills to build them on the page.

My job as his mentor is to teach him those skills. Accordingly, I spent Wednesday through today reading every word of his work, painful as it was, and choosing which "areas for improvement" to highlight first. I wrote exhaustive comments in the margins, then deleted them all because they were too negative. I tried being frank.

I tried being humorous. I tried ending my criticisms with emoticons and animated GIFs.

None of it worked. No matter how many winky faces I tack on to my sentences, my underlying message is still, “This book is horrendous. If you want to tell this story, you’ll have to toss out this draft and start again.”

This is not a message I can send over email. It’s a message that needs to be delivered in person, and I dread being the one to do it. I dread seeing George’s sunny face fall, his chin quiver, his shoulders slump when he realizes the book he worked so hard on is nowhere near publishable, and the day he can earn back his mother’s beloved bookstore is so very far away.

And so, after agonizing over my response for four days, I simply told George I was enjoying his book and would love to meet for coffee sometime to talk about it.

I’m a bad mentor, Diary. What kind of teacher is afraid of telling the truth to her students? One day, I’m going to be one of those mothers who lets her kids fill the grocery cart with gummy bears and Cocoa Puffs because she’s too cowardly to deal with tears.

I’m such a chicken, I felt relieved when George emailed to say he wasn’t going to Charles’ housewarming party, after all. At the end of our conversation in the bookstore, George had told me to have fun at the party on Saturday, since he’d overheard Will inviting me. He said he’d met Charles a few times and he was “a cool guy.” George looked so hurt and sad to be excluded from the guest list, I encouraged him to drop by and take the opportunity to mend fences.

At first George was excited to hang out with Will, whom he still loves as a big brother even after everything Will did to him. But this

morning he wrote that if he showed up Will would get angry, and then Will would ruin the mood at his friend's party. George doesn't want anyone to be unhappy because of him, so he decided to stay home and read instead.

After this miserable disaster of an evening, I wish I had stayed home to read, too.

Winston rang the doorbell at 5:45. Since I'd told him Charles said the party would be "nothing fancy," Winston had dressed down in a crisp charcoal suit complete with vest, tie, and bowler hat. I complimented the hat in particular. Winston treated me to a recitation of the mayor *pro tempore*'s strong opinions on hats while we walked across the street to the Lucas' house to meet Charlotte, then made our way to Charles' vacation home on the corner.

When Caroline welcomed us at the door, I wished that I, too, had worn a suit and bowler hat. Apparently, a southern Californian's "nothing fancy" is a Central Oregonian's black tie event. Caroline wore a floor-sweeping crimson mermaid gown and more diamond jewelry than Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

She was acting a bit like Marilyn too, which told me she'd had at least one drink so far.

"Elizabeth!" Caroline managed to say all four syllables without slurring, so she wasn't too far gone yet. "What a lovely dress, and what a handsome date." She winked at Winston, who turned bright red. Charlotte rolled her eyes.

Caroline invited us inside and directed us to the kitchen for cocktails and hors d'oeuvre before gliding away to entertain guests.

A surprising number of people had managed to fit into Charles' living room and kitchen. Most of them were elderly retirees I recognized from the neighborhood. A few of the sprier couples danced

in the center of the room to the jazzy music playing from the huge entertainment center.

I spotted Mary in the kitchen, piling appetizers onto a plate and covertly wrapping some in napkins to slip into her purse.

Jane was talking with Charles on the sectional. She sat close enough to him to brush her knee against his, and her cheeks flushed a pretty pink. I don't think I've ever seen her so happy and in love.

Will Darcy stood alone in a corner, checking his phone. Unlike the gussied up Caroline and Winston, he was dressed casually in a blue polo shirt and khakis.

As if he sensed me looking at him, Will lifted his head. I turned away in the nick of time to avoid meeting his eyes.

He seems so clean and respectable from the outside. Looking at Will, you wouldn't imagine he's a malicious person who sabotaged the happiness of his cute younger brother and hardworking stepmother. It goes to show you, Diary: looks can be deceiving.

Winston moved away from us to greet my parents and the Lucases. Charlotte leaned towards me and said, "My mom says your mom claims Jane has Charles wrapped around her little finger. Are they going out?"

I grinned. "Jane says they're just friends, but I don't believe her. I mean, look at her—she's head over heels for him!"

In response to something Charles said, Jane looked down shyly and tucked her hair behind her ear. Egads, she was practically begging him to whisk her off to bed.

Charlotte frowned. "You and I have known her forever, so we can tell she's head over heels. But does Charles know that?"

"What do you mean? He's an idiot if he can't see how much she adores him."

“But Charles *is* an idiot, as we have long since established. Look, if Jane really likes him, she needs to say so. None of this ‘just friends’ nonsense. If she keeps playing it cool, he might think she’s not interested and move on.”

I laughed. “That’s not going to happen. He’s crazy about her.”

“So was Tony, and Brian, and Joel. They’re all married with kids now.”

I was annoyed at Charlotte for being such a Negative Nellie. But I didn’t have time to respond because Winston joined us and asked, “Is Catherine’s nephew here?”

Will was still standing in the corner, but he was no longer alone. Caroline had joined him with two champagne glasses in hand.

I said, “Yes, he’s right over there. Would you like to meet him now?”

But there was no point in asking, because Winston was already striding through the room towards Will with surprising speed and agility.

Before I could catch up, Winston shot out his hand and said, “Good evening, future Judge Darcy. I am Winston Collins, Elizabeth Bennet’s date. How do you do?”

I hurried towards Will and, in a bold and desperate move, hooked my arm through his. “Will! This shirt is the perfect color for you. You should wear it more often!”

I gave him a dazzling smile that I hoped made us look like convincing BFFs. Will stared down at me as if he were uncertain whether he should call for medical assistance.

I said, “Winston is Charlotte’s boss. He knows your aunt Catherine, too.”

Winston said, "Catherine de Bourgh is an estimable leader in the community. She has been so kind as to guide me during my entry to the Downtown Bend Business Association, as well as to instruct me on matters of a personal nature."

"I see," Will said.

Caroline hugged Will's other arm—an admirable feat given that she was still holding two full champagne glasses. "Oh, Will, this is my *favorite* song! Come dance with me."

I was close enough to Will's face to see his eyes widen ever so slightly in trepidation. He said, "I might be mistaken, but I believe I heard the doorbell ring."

Caroline pouted and freed Will's arm. She set down the glasses and sashayed towards the door. Will's face relaxed.

I couldn't help teasing him. "You don't like dancing?"

"I don't like dancing with Caroline when she's drunk. I would like dancing with you, if you want to."

I didn't know how to respond, so I laughed as if he'd just told a joke and batted his shoulder. "Winston is thinking of running for City Council."

I gave Winston an encouraging look and tilted my head towards Will. Winston cleared his throat. "Though I have frequently entertained the idea of contributing to the Council in my humble way..."

Will glanced at Caroline, who was weaving her way back towards us. He interrupted Winston's speech to say, "I'd be honored if you would dance with me, Ms. Bennet."

"What? I..."

Will extracted his arm from mine, then held out his hand towards me. "Please."

He locked eyes with me and activated his vampire superpowers. It's the only logical explanation for why my voice said, "I'd love to, Mr. Darcy."

II

Will and I joined the other couples on the impromptu dance floor. I'd assumed we would sort of face each other and sway, but to my surprise Will placed his right hand on my waist and took my hand with his left. I rested my free hand on his shoulder because I didn't know what else to do with it. As Will spun me slowly in time to the music, I felt like a character in a BBC period drama.

You can't imagine how surreal it was, Diary, to be surrounded by elderly retirees in my neighbor's living room, dancing to slow jazz with the man I like least in the whole city of Bend.

Even weirder, Will seemed content to merely look at me while we danced, without saying a word. His silence wouldn't have been so strange if his expression had been aloof or hostile, but it was alarmingly pleasant. If he wasn't angry, why was he just staring at me without speaking?

Since he wasn't inclined to initiate a conversation, I took up the mantle. "What's so bad about dancing with Caroline when she's drunk?"

Will's eye twitched. "Alcohol makes Caroline very...affectionate."

I giggled. "I've noticed. I think she's cute when she's like that."

Will guided me away from Dan and Susan Long, who were twirling and dipping enthusiastically. "If your date over there drank too much and started feeling you up, would you think he's also 'cute'?"

I imagined an “affectionate” Winston and shuddered. Why did Will have to put such a disturbing image in my head? But I got the point: sexual harassment isn’t cute.

I couldn’t admit I was wrong to Will, so I said, “Winston isn’t my date.”

Will raised an eyebrow at me.

“I mean, technically he is, but only because...family reasons. The word ‘date’ is so loaded. He’s my ‘guest.’ My ‘plus one.’ I’m not *dating* him. Or anyone else, for that matter.”

Will smiled at me in an indulgent way, as if I were a fluffy kitten swatting at his ankles. “I see. Thank you for telling me.”

I flushed. Will made it sound like I was desperate for him to know that I wasn’t dating Winston. Which I was, but only because I don’t want anyone to think I’m romantically involved with Charlotte’s android boss, not because I want Will in particular to know I’m single!

I changed the subject. “Your posture is so formal. Did you take ballroom dance lessons as a kid, or do you watch a lot of *Dancing with the Stars*?”

“I took one quarter of social dance at Stanford. Charles registered for it to meet women, and he needed, in his words, ‘a wingman.’”

“Uh huh, you took it only because Charles asked you to. As a healthy college-aged guy, you couldn’t have had any interest in meeting hot coeds yourself.”

“Rather than ‘asked,’ it would be more accurate to say ‘pestered’ or ‘begged.’ I had no interest in the class for myself. I didn’t go to Stanford to pick up women and learn the cha-cha.”

I was sorely tempted to ask Will to show me the cha-cha. I resisted the impulse with all my might and said, “You should have

taken a class in communication skills instead. They're much more useful than the cha-cha. No one dances like this anymore."

There, I thought. That should make it clear to him that I wasn't angling to date him. Nothing kills a man's interest quite so gently and efficiently as giving him advice.

Will asked, "Would you prefer me to hold you a different way?"

He let go of my hand and moved both of his to the small of my back. To my dismay, my arms wrapped themselves behind his neck in response. It was merely a reflex, I swear.

Will's face was very close, and the room was very warm. I'm pretty sure Charles' air conditioner wasn't working properly.

I broke eye contact and looked towards Charles and Jane on the sectional. "Speaking of Charles, he seems to be serious about Jane. Do you think he might move up here permanently?"

Will followed my eyes. He stood up straighter and frowned. "Is Jane serious about him?"

He stared intensely at Jane. Though I don't like him at all, I *was* the one he had his arms around, so the way he was ogling my sister offended me on principle.

"Why do you ask? Were you thinking of asking her out?"

"Certainly not."

He seemed repulsed by the idea. Okay, so he wasn't ogling her after all. But now the way he was *dissing* my sister offended me on principle.

"What's wrong with Jane? She's sweet and gorgeous, and she's really dedicated to what she does. Plus, she makes delicious blueberry waffles."

Will finally pulled his eyes away from Jane and turned back to me. "She smiles too much."

Of all the ridiculous criticisms I've heard about Jane—and believe me, I've heard some outrageous ones from jealous rivals and catty stage mothers—that was by far the most absurd. She *smiles* too much?!

I said, “You’re right, she ought to scowl more. Jane would be perfect if she were only a tad grouchier.”

“She ought to express what she’s thinking. It’s difficult to gauge her intentions when her response to everything is an insipid smile.”

Charles’ air conditioner must have kicked on, because I cooled down rapidly. I had forgotten that this was the man who, in this very house, accused my ailing sister of scamming his friend for money. It must be an occupational hazard of a deputy district attorney to see evil lurking in everyone you meet.

I said, “Jane smiles because she’s a happy person, not because she’s harboring nefarious plans! Your brother George smiles a lot, too. Do you think he’s hiding bad intentions? Of course not—he’s just being nice and friendly.”

Will stopped moving to the music. His expression turned to stone once again. And he was complaining that *Jane* is unreadable.

He said, “Being nice and being friendly are two different things. A man who doesn’t make friends easily might be perfectly nice, while a man who acts charming might be a vicious narcissist who’s willing to hurt people to get what he wants.”

I had to suppress an eye roll at the irony of Will Darcy, of all people, talking about vicious narcissists who hurt others. He’s the one who destroys the dreams of his relatives as punishment for bruising his ego. He’s the one who broke an innocent girl’s fluttering heart by making a crack to his bro about “settling down on the farm with a plump wife.” Not that I dwell on such insignificant things.

Seizing the chance to get justice for George, I pushed Will harder. "It's true that a person who acts friendly might not be truly nice, but that doesn't mean all friendly people must be secretly cruel. George happens to be both friendly *and* nice. Plus, he has a lot of potential as a writer."

Yes, Diary, I *did* say George's book is horrendous. But that doesn't mean he has no potential. All first books are horrendous. I can't even look at the filename of the first novel I wrote in high school without burying my face in shame.

George hasn't had any practice or guidance. Once he studies the craft, reads more widely, and writes many more stories, I'm sure he'll bring out the hidden talent buried under all that postmodern posturing.

Will's hands tightened on my back. "I wasn't aware you're good friends with George."

"We met the other day. He told me about the book he's writing, and about how he's working to buy his mother's store back for her. He's a good kid. I want to help him, don't you?"

Will bent his head down and lowered his voice. "It seems you don't know George at all, then. For your sake, I hope it remains that way."

The song ended. Will released me. He backed away so quickly, I felt a little rejected. It's bizarrely frustrating to be rejected by someone whose attention you didn't even want.

With a curt nod goodbye, Will left me to join Charles and Jane. I headed back towards Charlotte and Winston.

What did Will mean by "For your sake, I hope it remains that way"? Was that supposed to be some kind of threat? Like, "Don't

help George follow his dreams, or else!” Or else what? The Great Mr. Darcy will get mad and refuse to speak to me again? The horror!

I didn’t make it to Charlotte. As I picked through the crowd, Caroline Bingley caught me. Literally. She hooked my arm with perfectly manicured fingers and held me in place.

Caroline smiled at me, her teeth unnaturally white. “Elizabeth! Let’s have a little chat, girl to girl.”

III

Caroline led me outside to talk. The home has no backyard to speak of—only a wrap-around balcony over a steep drop down the side of the butte. I leaned on the wooden railing and looked out over the tree-covered city of Bend, towards the rolling blue Cascades and snow-capped Mount Bachelor in the distance. I could *almost* understand why Charles would think the view worth a “little extra” quarter of a million.

Caroline slid the patio door closed, muffling the music and conversation inside. She fanned herself delicately. “Finally, a little peace! Entertaining is so exhausting, and Charles doesn’t lift a finger to help.”

“You don’t enjoy hosting parties? But you’re so good at it!”

“Oh, you’re sweet. But naturally I’m good at it, because it’s my job. I run around coordinating events all week. The last thing I want to do on a weekend away is get all dressed up to play Martha Stewart.”

Since I’ve met Caroline Bingley on two occasions, and on both she was wearing *haute couture* and whipping up gourmet meals of her own volition, I doubted her complaints were entirely genuine.

Caroline leaned on the railing beside me, in the attitude of a fashion model posing for pictures. "I've noticed you and Will have been getting close."

Oh my gosh, I thought. It's actually happening to me. I'm going to be in a cat fight for the first time in my life.

I've seen this scene in movies before, Diary. The popular jock pays some minor attention to the underdog bookworm, and the head cheerleader swoops in to cut up her gym clothes and pour drinks on her head. I'd never experienced or witnessed such extreme bullying in real life, though.

I've had conflicts with other girls over boys, of course, but they weren't nearly as dramatic. When I was in middle school, a boy asked me to the movies, and our classmates rushed to tell a girl who liked him. The girl declared she would never eat lunch with me ever again. The next month she forgot all about it, and we partnered together to build a potato battery in science class.

I said, "We're not close at all. We were just dancing because... uh..." I couldn't tell Caroline that Will was avoiding her, so I trailed off.

Caroline took my hesitation the wrong way. "Don't be shy. I've known Will for more than ten years, and this is the first time I've seen him take the initiative with a woman. If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know."

She winked at me. I gaped at her. "I thought you were...*you* know. Interested in him for yourself."

Caroline giggled. "*Obviously* I'm interested in Will, silly. Who wouldn't be? But I'm not so desperate as to cling to a man who likes someone else. He's hardly the only eligible bachelor around. There are thousands of them in Los Angeles alone."

So...she wasn't going to pour a drink on my head? I was slightly disappointed. I was looking forward to having an excuse to leave the party early.

Caroline continued, "Honestly, I don't have the time to think about romance right now. I'm starting my own business, and that takes top priority in my life."

In the blink of an eye, Caroline whipped out a case of business cards. She presented one to me with a blinding white smile. I don't know how she hid those cards in that tight dress.

"If you manage to snag Will, I do weddings of all kinds and sizes. Traditional church weddings, destination beach weddings, rustic outdoor weddings—whatever your dream wedding looks like, I can make it happen. I'll take care of your wedding venue, wedding day setup, even your wedding invitations and favors. You can leave it all to me and enjoy your big day!"

While Caroline was delivering her sales pitch, the word "wedding" lost its meaning from excessive repetition. I chanted it in my head, marveling at the strangeness of the syllables. *Wedding, wedding, wedding...*

I said, "Thanks, but I really have no intention of dating Will, much less marrying him."

"Sure you don't." Caroline winked at me again. "Also, I couldn't help overhearing a little of your conversation. You're friends with his former stepbrother, George?"

Former stepbrother? Is that how Will refers to him? As if they're no longer related, just because Will says so? If it were that easy to sever family ties in a fit of pique, I'd have one former mother and two former sisters right now. Maybe three.

I said, "We're not 'friends' exactly. I'm sort of his writing mentor."

Caroline rested her hand lightly on mine. "I wouldn't mention that to Will. In fact, I wouldn't say the name 'George' around Will at all, if you want him to like you back."

I am so sick of everyone assuming I'm into Will Darcy. Whether he likes me or loathes me, I couldn't care less!

"Why not?" I asked in exasperation. "George is sweet. Why does Will hate him so much?"

"I don't know the whole story, but I do know he hurt Will terribly. From what I've picked up over the years, George and his awful mother tried to get money out of Will after his father's death. That boy is bad news. I'd steer clear of him, if I were you."

I drew in a shaky breath to temper my rage. Apparently, Will wasn't satisfied with kicking his brother out of the family and condemning him to a life of poverty. He's also been going around to his high-society friends, painting George and Annie as scheming money-grubbers. How *dare* a boy from the unwashed masses dream of getting a Yale education! The audacity of those social climbing Wickhams, to claim entitlement to the same love and opportunities as a true Darcy!

Though I knew Caroline was firmly on Team Will, I was so incensed by his nastiness I couldn't hold my tongue. "I'm sorry, but I *do* know the whole story, and you've only heard Will's side of it. He's not the perfect man you think he is. In fact, he's a total jerk!"

Caroline lifted her hand from mine, as if she'd just noticed she was touching something dirty. "Obviously I misunderstood how you felt about him. My mistake."

I think she wanted to take her business card back, but it was already tainted by my fingers.

Caroline glided towards the patio door. She cast an imperious glance back at me. “It seems I shouldn’t have stepped aside so easily. Since there’s no competition, maybe I do have the time to think about romance, after all.”

She spoke as if her words were supposed to upset me, but they didn’t. If Caroline likes petty, stuck-up men who disown their brothers and spread malicious lies about them, she’s welcome to take as many as she wants.

It also didn’t upset me to go back inside and see Caroline snaking her arms around Will on the dance floor. He put his hands on her waist, the same way he’d held me earlier. Which was perfectly fine, because I have no patience for men who say one thing and do another. He *claimed* he didn’t like dancing with her, but he sure didn’t look like he was putting up a fight.

One person at the party *was* putting up a fight, and an inappropriate one for the time and place. Mary squared off against Tom Lucas, who appeared to have pushed one of her hot issue buttons.

“The Oregon Promise program is not ‘a waste of taxpayer money,’” she said. “Community college scholarships are the only way many students from low-income families can afford the degrees they need to compete in today’s workforce.”

Tom harrumphed. “Back in my day, nobody helped me through college. I hauled boxes in a hot factory every summer to pay my own way. These entitled kids today expect everything to be handed to them by the state.”

Mary spat, “You’re right, how stupid of them not to live in an era when a couple of months at a minimum wage McJob could cover

college tuition for a year! Your generation was so wise to be born in a booming postwar economy. Thanks to that great foresight, you can now enjoy your Social Security and Medicare benefits while moaning about the ‘entitled kids today’ who have to pay for them!”

Dad put a hand on Mary’s shoulder. His voice was jocular, but his words were harsh. Too harsh. “Now now, Mary. I doubt your paychecks are big enough to contribute more than a few cents per month to Social Security. Even with three degrees, you’re still working a minimum wage McJob.”

Mary’s face crumpled. She spun on her heel and rushed out of the party, slamming the front door behind her.

I normally love Dad’s sharp wit, but not when it cuts one of us. I moved to follow Mary out and give her a hug, if she’d let me.

But then the slow jazz stopped abruptly, and the speakers blared the opening beats of a pop song with inappropriate lyrics. Lydia stood in front of the entertainment center, messing with the controls. A cable connected her iPhone to the sound system.

I changed course from Mary to Lydia. I grabbed her arm and hissed, “What are you doing?”

Lydia giggled at me. Her face was slack and her eyes were glazed over. She was high. Whether she was intoxicated from a legal or illegal substance, I didn’t know, and I didn’t care to find out.

I took the iPhone out of Lydia’s hand and disconnected the audio cable. The music cut off just before the singer finished the last word of the charming line, *Damn, you’s a sexy b—*.

“Hey!” a lanky young man I didn’t know whined. He was as doped up as Lydia. Did she bring him here?

I looked around and spotted Kitty with a group of other twenty-somethings in the kitchen, helping themselves to the alcohol. They whooped as one of them chugged straight from a bottle of gin.

As immature as the twins can be sometimes, I couldn't believe they would invite their rowdy friends to Charles' housewarming party, as if it were an open kegger. Their judgment must have been killed dead by whatever it was they ingested, injected, or inhaled.

I said, "You need to leave."

Lydia snatched her phone back. "Shut up, Lizard Face! You act like you're all that, but you're...you're stupid! You're just...you're just a stupid failed writer! No one wants to read your stupid books!"

The boy beside her laughed, though I don't think he comprehended anything Lydia said. Lydia gave him a dazed high five.

I repeated that she needed to leave now, and take her friends with her. I blocked her hand when she tried to plug her phone back into the sound system.

"Oh my God!" Lydia screeched. "Take a chill pill and go away! Go blow your Mr. Darcy or something!"

I nearly slapped her. I know Will heard that. Everyone in the house heard that.

While I was too angry to move, Lydia plugged in the audio cable and cranked up the volume. Kitty and her friends in the kitchen cheered and sang along. The elderly ladies nearby were upset by the language in the song. One of them covered her ears in distress, which the party crashers found hilarious. They sang the offensive words even louder.

It took all of my self control to stop myself from grabbing Lydia and Kitty by the scruffs of their skinny necks and throwing them out in the street. Since my words wouldn't reach them and violence

wasn't an option, I went to fetch the only person those idiotic girls might listen to: Mom.

Mom didn't even notice that her youngest daughters were out of control. She was too busy bragging about her eldest to Beverly Lucas.

"See, what did I tell you? Janie has Charles wrapped around her little finger!" Mom boasted loudly over the pounding bass.

Charles glanced at Mom from the sectional, and then quickly turned his face away and pretended he couldn't hear her. Jane shut her eyes, her lips in a tight line.

I touched Mom's arm. "Mom..."

Mom waved me away, the champagne in her glass sloshing over the rim. "He's going to give her the leading role in a movie, you know. He's completely smitten. I wouldn't be surprised if he pops the question by the end of the night. Janie has always been so beautiful. She can make any man fall in love with her if she puts her mind to it."

"*Mom!*" I repeated.

But before I could tell her to about Lydia and Kitty, the music stopped.

Will Darcy dropped the electric plug of the sound system to the floor. That icy, frightening look I saw at the bookstore was back.

He addressed the party crashers at large. "Thank you for coming to congratulate Charles on his new home. However, this gathering is by invitation only. Please move to a venue more appropriate for your celebrations."

Lydia's lanky friend said, "Hey man, relax. It's only music."

"And you are only committing two misdemeanors. Criminal trespass in the first degree and disorderly conduct in the second

degree. Shall we invite the good officers of the BPD to drop by and see if there are any more?"

Though the boy's mental faculties were compromised, he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't understand the words "criminal" and "officers." Or recognize the intimidating authority of Will's voice and stance.

"No," he mumbled, slumping like a puppy before a pack leader. He tugged at Lydia's arm. "Let's go."

Lydia started to protest, but Jane appeared and wrapped an arm around her. Jane led Lydia and her friend outside. Kitty and the group in the kitchen followed after them, subdued.

Will's expression returned to normal. His eyes slid to mine. The look in them was much crueler than rage, or hatred, or disdain. It was pity.

I desperately wanted to turn into vapor and float away, never to be seen by him or anyone else again.

Somehow I survived the rest of the evening, though it didn't last too long because the party crashers ruined the event for everyone.

I was too upset by the incident to talk to Winston about the mortgage situation. Luckily after walking Charlotte and me home, Winston asked me to meet him for lunch on Monday. Maybe he changed his mind after I introduced him to his idol's nephew, and now he's willing to help us. At least one good thing came out of this horrible day.

I'm not speaking to anyone with the last name Bennet right now, except for Jane. I'm furious at Lydia and Kitty for obvious reasons, irritated at Mary for picking fights with crotchety old men, and

disappointed in both Dad and Mom for their profoundly incompetent parenting.

Neither of them even bothered to apologize to Charles and Caroline, or to discipline the twins. Around midnight I did hear some angry shouting and ear-splitting screams, followed by the stomping of feet and the slamming of doors. But if historical patterns hold true, by tomorrow morning Mom will be driving the twins to a JCPenney Doorbuster sale and Dad will be cracking wise about the number of bags they come home with, as if nothing happened.

I feel like spending the whole day tomorrow holed up in my loft in my pink pajamas, binge-watching a campy nineties show on Netflix and eating tortilla chips with hot chocolate for every meal. Maybe on Monday, after I discuss the sale of my last manuscript with my agent and work out a deal to salvage my parents' house with Winston, my mood will improve. It couldn't possibly get any worse than it is now.



July 18, 2018

The Day I Got Dumped, Hit On, and Disowned

I

Dear Diary,

Today was the worst day of my life.

I do not say that lightly, as I might have in my adolescence. All of the previous “worst days of my life” pale in comparison to this one.

When I was twelve the worst day of my life was when an unflattering haircut befell me on the morning of my crush’s birthday party.

When I was twenty the worst day of my life was when Dad called to tell me our thirteen-year-old Scottish Terrier, Mr. Miyagi, had finally succumbed to kidney disease.

When I was twenty-six the worst day of my life was the day that fancy-pants editor gave me the ultimatum to either rewrite my manuscript with the changes she wanted or pay back my fifty-thousand-dollar advance in full.

That was a legitimately bad day that kicked off a very bad month. But from the sheer number of extraordinarily bad things that happened today, July 18, 2016 raises the bar for “worst day of my life” far, far above the heights achieved before.

At 9 a.m. I called my agent. I teased her lightly about her vanishing act, which she laughed off nervously. Then, in a rush, she said she read my last manuscript and it’s “brilliant, as usual,” but she didn’t *love* it and didn’t believe she could sell it.

As I sat tongue-tied, she rambled about hooks and comps and the “tight market” for literary fiction. She said while I’m “an exceptionally talented writer,” she doesn’t have the right contacts to sell my books, and there are many other agents in the business who would be better able to support my career.

In other words, she dumped me.

I said I understood completely; her job is to sell books that make money, and mine don’t. I wished her good luck and hung up.

Because it’s true, Diary. Her job is to sell books that make money. Publishers don’t care how “brilliant” a book is. They care only about whether they can sell the concept in a thirty-second sales pitch to Walmart buyers and Hollywood studios. If I were a “real writer,” I’d forget about literary merit and strive to churn out guaranteed blockbusters with sexy elevator pitches.

It’s *Jane Eyre*...with BDSM!

It’s *Crazy Rich Asians*...with zombies!

It’s *The Hunger Games*...at an elite prep school in Manhattan! *Gossip Girl* meets unbridled dystopian violence! (Tagline: “High school will change everyone. May the seating charts be ever in your favor.”)

I'm not even sad about losing my agent, Diary. I'm *relieved*. Getting published was the worst thing that ever happened to me as a writer.

I didn't pen my first published novel in the pursuit of fame or fortune. I wrote it because writing was my passion, once. That story took over my thoughts the moment I woke up in the morning and refused to let them go until I went to sleep at night. Writing it was cathartic, exhilarating, joyful—better than first kisses and chocolate ice cream and afternoon naps combined.

I wrote it for readers, too. Not for their money, but for *them*. For readers like George Wickham, who feel like no one understands them. When George told me how deeply my novel affected him, I felt happier than I ever did at the sight of a royalty check in the mail. I realized then that it doesn't matter to me if my books never make a single cent, as long as I can reach the heart of one reader like him.

Lizzie Bennet, aspiring author, understood that. Then E. Bennet, literary darling, usurped Lizzie's office chair and locked her up in a remote palace to wither away. Brainwashed by "the industry" into believing that the worth of a novel is measured solely by its sales reports, E. Bennet smothered the joy of writing through her debilitating fear of editorial conflict. Maybe this "breakup" is a cosmic sign that it's time for Lizzie to gather her ragtag band of unlikely allies and overthrow E. Bennet to reclaim her rightful place at the writing desk.

I'd like to wax eloquent on the tyranny of capitalism some more, but as I said before, an absurd number of bad things happened today. I must leave enough space on these pages to cover them all.

So for now I will simply conclude, "Publishing sucks," and move on to disaster number two.

After stewing and pacing around my loft all morning, at half past eleven I banished the conversation with my agent—that is, my ex-agent—from my mind. I dressed in a classy black sheath dress for my lunch meeting with Winston. I sneaked into the twins' room while they were sleeping and borrowed a liquid lipstick in a “power color.” As I applied the berry-red hue with a brush, I perked up. My career might be in shambles, but the house would soon be safe.

Yes, my morning was so bad that I was looking forward to lunch with *Winston Collins*. My lifelong dream had just imploded and my entire identity was in crisis, so things could only go up from there, right?

(I can hear you laughing darkly at me, Diary. It's not a pleasant sound.)

Winston asked to meet at a seafood restaurant in the Old Mill District, which should have been my first clue that something wasn't right. Old Mill, south of downtown, is named after the shuttered pine sawmills that powered Bend's economy from the 1920s through '50s. In the '90s developers took over the ruins to build shiny new shops, restaurants, parks, and million-dollar waterfront townhomes. Today Old Mill is the sort of place people visit to have a leisurely meal outdoors and do some window shopping before a movie at the IMAX theater. It's not the sort of place where people meet to discuss mortgages.

In fact, Winston seemed to have no interest in discussing mortgages at all. Every time I tried to bring up my parents during lunch, he changed the subject and talked my ear off about something ridiculously dull.

Seriously, does Winston Google “most boring topics of conversation” and use the results as inspiration? No, he doesn't, because

I just Googled those keywords myself and the lists returned are nowhere near as spectacularly banal as the subjects Winston prattles on about.

For one dreadful hour, I feigned interest in Winston's epic adventure to find parking nearby, the battery life of his current phone compared to his previous one, the Microsoft Excel function he learned about this morning and its various potential uses, and the origins of his dress shoes.

I nearly wept with relief when the waiter brought the check. Winston insisted on paying for both of our meals, which should have been my second clue. But I was preoccupied with figuring out how to get Winston off the subject of shoes and back to mortgages, so I didn't notice the big red flashing warning signs.

After we left the restaurant, Winston suggested a walk along the river. I agreed with a show of enthusiasm, naively hopeful that he was ready to talk about business now.

We strolled along the paved path by the wide, lazy Deschutes. The sky was a clear blue, the leafy banks a bright green, and the rippling water deep turquoise. Ducks preened and napped on the shores. Paddlers in canoes floated by, out for a fun afternoon with their lovers and dogs.

I sighed, imagining I was not in a torturous meeting with Winston Collins, but on a date with an interesting and handsome companion like...Mr. Miyagi. I miss Mr. Miyagi.

Winston asked, "What is the matter, Elizabeth?"

I said, "I'm worried about my parents' house. If they can't find a way to pay off their mortgage soon, they'll be forced to sell." I widened my eyes up at Winston pitifully. "Is there really no chance of refinancing? None at all?"

Winston smiled. "Do not be silly, Elizabeth."

My spirits soared. Enduring the torture was worth it! My parents could keep their dream home!

Then Winston said, "There is no reason for you to continue this transparent charade."

I stopped short, confused. "Charade? What charade?"

"You do not need to use your parents as an excuse to spend time with me. I am aware of your romantic interest in me, and I assure you I return the sentiment."

My head swam. I felt like I was standing in one of the canoes bobbing on the water, instead of on solid ground. I repeated dumbly, "An...excuse?"

Winston said, "As John Gray wrote in *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, women talk about problems to get close, not to get solutions. A woman under stress is not concerned with finding solutions to her problems, but rather seeks relief by expressing herself and being understood."

Without permission, he took my hand. "I understand your feelings, Elizabeth. From now on you may speak openly about your affection for me, without the pretense of consulting my professional opinions."

I tore my hand away, my skin crawling. "Wait, wait. You thought that I, a woman whose parents are facing foreclosure, approached you, a mortgage lender, as a *pretense to get close*?"

Winston cleared his throat and opened his arms, as if addressing an audience from a stage. "As Stephen Covey wrote in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, love...is a verb. Love, the feeling, is a fruit of love, the verb."

Oh my word, he prepared a monologue.

“Love is something you do, the giving of self, like a mother bringing a newborn into the world. Love is a value that is actualized through loving actions...”

“Stop! Please stop!” I cut him off in desperation. “I didn’t agree to have lunch with you because I want to date you. I’m honestly trying to find a solution for my parents’ situation. I have no interest in you personally.”

Winston frowned. Then he nodded wisely. “A man commonly makes the mistake of thinking once he has proven his devotion, a woman will know that she is loved. This is not the case. He must remember to reassure her again and again. I will reassure you of my passionate regard for you, Elizabeth, as many times as you require to feel secure.”

The tilapia I ate for lunch squirmed to come back out and join the other fish in the river. “Please listen to me. Not to Stephen Covey, not to Mars and Venus what’s-his-name...”

“John Gray.”

“Listen to *me*. I really, *really* don’t want your ‘passionate regard.’ I want your help! Just because I’m a woman and you’re a man doesn’t mean my motives for approaching you were romantic in any way. Look, it’s like...you go to Catherine de Bourgh for help all the time, right? You ask her for advice on business and politics. Do you do that because you’re secretly attracted to her and you want an excuse to ‘get close’?”

Realization dawned on Winston’s face. “Ah. I understand now why you are angry.”

Finally, I thought, I’ve gotten through to him.

“But your jealousy is quite unfounded. Catherine is many years my senior, and I feel nothing but respect for her as a pillar of the community.”

Winston resumed his speech about how proactive people turn love into a verb. The words drifted away on the breeze, meaningless to me.

I'd thrown away my dignity for the sake of the house. I baked two pies. I simpered and flattered. I degraded myself in front of my family and Charlotte and Will.

All for what? For my efforts to be grossly misinterpreted as flirtatious attention-seeking, because I have a pair of breasts and a uterus. Dad was right—Winston was never going to consider helping us. I made a fool of myself for nothing.

Talking over Winston, I said, “Thank you for lunch. I'll pay you back for my half through Charlotte. Goodbye.”

I spun on my heel and hurried away. I knew I was giving up my family's only chance to keep the house, but that didn't stop my feet from moving as quickly as they could to get far, far away from the “passionate” Winston.

Remember when I said The End is only the beginning? Well, I got it backwards. As I found out when I arrived home, my ill-fated acquaintance with Winston Collins was the beginning of the end.

II

As I drove Dad's car home, I daydreamed about turning onto Highway 20 and driving straight west through the mountains, not stopping until I hit the Oregon coast. There I would sit on the rocky cliffs and let the sounds of the rustling trees and crashing waves drown out every stressful thought in my head. Lured into a peaceful

nap by the warm sun, I'd forget all about my disappointed hopes and my soon-to-be disappointed family.

I didn't want to face Dad and listen to him say, "I told you so." I didn't want to face Mom and tell her she'd have to choose between The Burbs or The Bridge. Most of all, I didn't want anyone on planet Earth to find out that Winston Collins declared his love for me by quoting extensively from *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Maybe in a year or two, I'll be able to tell the story of The Self-Help Serenade at parties, and it will be hilarious. But right now my failure is too humiliating, and the consequences of it are too serious, for even me to laugh about.

How could Winston believe I had a crush on him? Was it my fault? Had I flirted with him unintentionally? Sure, I'd gone out of my way to curry his favor. I flattered him. I baked his favorite dessert. I invited him to a party. But if bending over backwards to be nice to someone means a woman is in love, then every woman in America must be in love with all of her neighbors, her kids' teachers, her bosses, and her in-laws.

No, Winston's bizarre interpretation of my actions wasn't my fault. I was angry at myself for even considering whether it was my fault. It was one-hundred percent Winston's fault for believing that Mars and Venus drivel.

Although, as I discovered when I stepped into the kitchen at home, the misunderstanding might not have been *one-hundred* percent Winston's fault, after all.

Mom shuffled back and forth on the tile, her purple robe billowing behind her. She said into the phone, "No no no, Winston. Lizzie is head over heels for you! She can't stop talking about how

wonderful you are! She's just painfully shy around men, the poor thing."

I dropped my purse on the table with a thud. I should have known. There isn't a thought in Winston's head that wasn't put there by someone else, whether it's Catherine de Bourgh, Stephen Covey...or Lucy Bennet.

"Oh no no no, she didn't mean any of that! She said she ran away because she was overwhelmed with happiness. Yes, yes...she'll call you soon. I'll make sure of it."

Mom hung up and rounded on me. "I'm disappointed in you, Lizzie. You're supposed to be the smart one."

"Not smart enough to figure out what was going on. How long have you been whispering in Winston's ear, undermining me?"

"I'm not 'undermining' you. I'm *helping* you. Did you really believe Winston would give us a hundred thousand dollars for a cherry pie? Don't be stupid."

Kitty and Lydia slunk into the kitchen in their pajamas, yawning and stretching. "What stupid thing did Lizzie do now?" Lydia asked.

Mom answered, "She doomed us all to a life on the streets, that's what. She chased Winston Collins away, and now he'll never give us that loan."

Through gritted teeth I said, "He was the one doing all the chasing. I did the best I could to convince him to help, but he wasn't interested in anything I had to say."

Mom said, "Of course he wasn't interested in your *words*. The only two things that interest a man are power and sex. If you want to get something out of him, you have to offer him one or the other."

"I'm not going to trade sex for a mortgage! That's insane!"

“Oh, Lizzie.” Mom shook her head as if she pitied me. “With your skills, how else are you going to get a roof over your head?”

Kitty gasped. Lydia laughed and popped a mini doughnut in her mouth.

“Writing is the only thing you can do well, darling, but you can’t make a living from it because of your principles. You say you’d never compromise your art for sales, and that’s fine. But artists need to eat too, and your father and I can’t feed you forever. If you don’t want to write for money, you’ll have to find someone who will earn money for you. Someone like Winston.”

I sat down at the kitchen table and rubbed my temples. Mom’s twisted logic made me dizzy. I don’t want to write for the market, therefore I must seduce Winston Collins? *What?!*

Mom pressed on. “Winston is a successful businessman. He could save us from foreclosure and provide very well for you. You could write all day and never have to worry about selling your books to pay the bills. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“No, it wouldn’t! How could it possibly be ‘nice’ to be trapped in a relationship with a man I can’t stand because I need him to pay the bills?”

“You’ll learn to live with it. We all do.”

I didn’t hear that. I did *not* hear that. My mother did not just admit she’s a gold digger. Oh my God, half of my DNA is tainted beyond repair.

Mom sat beside me and patted my hand. “Now give Winston a call, darling. It’s for your own good.”

I snatched my hand away. “For my good, or for yours? You couldn’t care less about my writing or my happiness. You just want to whore me out to Winston for his money!”

Mom snapped, "Well I wouldn't have to if you hadn't taken all of ours, would I?"

I felt like her words were invisible knives she plunged into my chest, piercing my lungs so I couldn't breathe.

Mom twisted the knives in deeper. "You have only yourself to blame, Lizzie. If you hadn't ruined your career by acting so immature, your father and I wouldn't have lost everything we built together. We scrimped and saved for this house, all while sacrificing the best years of our lives to raise you and your sisters."

She laid a hand over her heart and sighed pitifully. I think I saw a halo appear over her head. "When I was your age, I had dreams too. I was a rising star in the modeling world before your father bought those cheap condoms at the gas station. Designers begged me to do their shows in Paris and Milan. But I couldn't, because I had to marry your father and be your mom. Now I'm old and gray, and this house is all I have left. I had hoped to spend my few remaining years here, but now..."

Dad's voice boomed from behind us, "That's enough, Lucy!"

Mom jumped in her chair.

"You can't blame our kids for being born. We made them, and we made this mess. Liz has nothing to do with it. We could have paid off the mortgage if I hadn't insisted on renewing our club membership last year, and if you hadn't insisted on buying that Subaru and indulging the twins for so long."

Lydia said, "Hey, leave us out of it! We didn't do anything."

"I agree," Dad said. "You don't do *anything*. You don't work, you don't study, you don't even wash your own dirty clothes. You sleep all day and drink all night. And that's going to change today, or you will no longer live in this house."

The twins and Mom stared at him in silent shock. Then they all started shouting at once.

Lydia pointed at me. “She’s the one who effed up, so how come we’re the ones in trouble?”

Kitty protested, “I need my rest ‘cause I’m working really hard to graduate! I took three classes last term and one of them was at like nine in the morning!”

Mom said, “I never said a word about it before, but you’ve always played favorites with Lizzie. I don’t see why it’s okay for her to refuse to make money, but it’s not okay for Kitty and Lydia to enjoy their youth while they can.”

Dad retorted, “Then to be completely fair and unbiased, let’s prostitute all five of our daughters to Winston. He can take each one for a test drive before deciding which one he wants to buy.”

Mary stomped down the stairs. “You’re *all* being ridiculous, and ridiculously loud. We don’t need Winston. We can just rent out the twins’ room when they go back to school. Problem solved.”

I stood up. “You know what? That’s a great idea. Mom, Dad, you can rent mine out too. Starting tomorrow.”

I’m done. I’m done with this family, and I’m done with feeling responsible for saving them all. While I was groveling before Winston Collins, they did diddly squat, and now because I refuse to sleep with him *I’m* solely to blame for the loss of the house?

I took Mom’s antics for twenty-eight years. I took her tantrums and her guilt trips and her blatant preferential treatment of her oldest and youngest daughters over the three in the middle. But I would not take being bartered for money like a blow-up sex doll.

As I grabbed my purse, Mom grabbed my wrist. "Don't be stupid, Lizzie. Just call Winston and say you'll go out with him. Once he gives us the loan, you can break up with him."

I shook her off. "I'm packing my things. You can rent my loft for five hundred a month to cover the mortgage. That's a better deal than paying Winston interest on a loan, so I'm worth more to you gone than I am staying here. You should be ecstatic, since you measure family by their monetary value. I'm just a mortgage payment, Dad's just a Chase Sapphire Preferred card, and Jane's just an airline ticket to Beverly Hills."

Mom screamed, "Elizabeth Bennet, stop right there! If you take one step out of this house, I will never see you again!"

"Oh goody," I said. "Then I'm getting a great deal, too."

I walked away and didn't look back.

And that is how you, dearest Diary, ended up here on this coffee table in Charlotte's East-side apartment.

You'd think I'd feel something right now, what with this being the worst day of my life. Despair, maybe. Anger. Fear, because I have no job and no safety net. I'm twenty-eight years old, I have no place to live, and my worldly belongings amount to an outdated phone, a clunky laptop, and a backpack full of wrinkled clothes. That's pretty depressing, in the abstract.

Yet I feel nothing but exhaustion...and relief. There's something cathartic about total ruination. When everything is dead, there's no more pressure to keep anything alive. I have no agent to appease, no house to save, and no family to help. Maybe the fear will set in tomorrow, but right now, I feel free.

I do feel guilty about imposing on Charlotte, though. Since she has only one full-size bed and we're not that close, she left to stay with her parents tonight. I said I was fine with the couch, but she insisted I make myself comfortable.

I don't think I can be comfortable sleeping in someone else's apartment, especially a glamorous one like this. I'm sitting on a cherry-red suede couch, writing on a glass coffee table, with my backpack lying on a furry gray ottoman/beanbag/thing. Charlotte called it a "pouf." She's only two years older than I am and she can afford furry gray poufs. I don't even know where, or if, I'm going to get food tomorrow.

But that's for Future Lizzie to worry about. Present Lizzie is first and foremost concerned with taking a bath, maybe drinking a second cup of Charlotte's fancy chamomile and peppermint tea, and going to sleep. Then Future Lizzie will be well-rested and ready to fix her life.



July 22, 2016

The Day I Learned the Vampire Might Not Have Fangs

Dear Diary,

This past week has been a blur. Each day went by frustratingly slowly and appallingly quickly at the same time. I've felt like a seahorse with no reef to anchor myself on, tumbling through the dark ocean at the mercy of the currents.

But today I found my reef, and it was rooted where I should have seen it all along.

On Tuesday morning Lydia called to scream at me. She said I'd given Dad the bright idea to make each of his daughters pay him \$300 a month to stay in the house. He'd cruelly disturbed the twins' beauty sleep at seven in the morning and commanded them to get dressed, eat breakfast, and find summer jobs. He was being totally unreasonable, and it was all my fault.

I didn't point out that charging rent for the rooms was actually Mary's idea. But I couldn't help pointing out that one-bedroom apartments in Bend rent for \$1,000 a month or more, and that it was hardly unreasonable to expect a twenty-four-year-old woman to find a job. Lydia cursed me out and hung up.

On Wednesday I visited Annie's Bookstore & Cafe to find George. I wanted to tell him in person that I was sorry I couldn't work on my feedback for his book, because my life is topsy-turvy right now. Though I couldn't tell him about my personal problems, because Famous Literary Authors don't have problems, I said my family is in crisis and I need to help my sisters find jobs.

George was sweet and understanding, as always. He even offered to help. His manager is looking to hire some temporary employees during the tourism season, and George could put in a good word for my sisters. "If they're related to you, they must be really smart," he said.

I wish I could apply to work at Annie's. What could be better than spending all day in that lovely little store, surrounded by books and coffee? But Famous Literary Authors don't need temp jobs to get by, so I thanked George and sashayed out with the breezy air of one who is far too busy and successful to have worries.

Over the phone I passed the job tip on to Dad, who assured me the twins would be gainfully employed by the end of the week and I needn't worry about the house. He didn't try to convince me to come home, because he knew I'd refuse. He only joked that he's glad he was environmentally irresponsible enough to have more than two children, because now he doesn't need to go through the effort of finding tenants. It took thirty years, but with patience and daily watering he grew four of them himself. I tried hard to laugh.

Yesterday Mary asked me to meet her for lunch at the community college. She said she was planning to move out too, and she suggested splitting the cost of an apartment. Though every day I leech off of Charlotte is another fatal strike to my pride, I'm not

sure Mary and I could live together without one of us eventually committing sororicide.

I told Mary I'd think about it. Then Mary handed me a print-out of a job posting. The college Writing Center is looking for part-time tutors. The hours are limited and the pay isn't great, but as Mary so tactfully said, it's something I "might actually be qualified to do."

Today I grabbed my laptop and wandered down to Mirror Pond. Though we call it a "pond," it's really a calm section of the Deschutes River between two dams. On clear summer days like this, the water reflects the bright blue of the sky and the deep greens of the surrounding pines and weeping willows.

I sat down at a rustic picnic table outside the Crow's Feet Commons Cafe. A historic landmark, the building was once the residence of Arthur Goodwillie, who in 1904 became the first mayor of Bend at the ripe old age of twenty-seven. Now the Craftsman bungalow is a quirky cafe filled with colorful oil paintings, floral couches, a cozy fireplace and an apple-red swing hanging from the ceiling.

Though I couldn't afford to go inside for a snack, I could sit on the covered porch surrounded by natural beauty and pretend I'm a contributing member of society. I opened my laptop and filled out my application for the Writing Center. The position won't pay enough to live on, but at least I'll be able to buy my own food.

My lunch with Mary was the only proper meal I've had since Monday. Every morning I have a bowl of Raisin Bran for breakfast with Charlotte, to show her I'm eating well and doing fine. Then I get through the rest of the day on cheap granola bars. I *could* buy real food with my credit card, but I don't want to take on any debt

until I'm certain I can pay it off. I can't rely on my parents to bail me out anymore.

The scent of a Sparrow Bakery Ocean Roll wafted through the air. Oh, the torture! No Bendite can resist the lure of an Ocean Roll: a heavenly pillow of flaky croissant dough filled with sticky vanilla sugar and cardamom. My mouth watered and my stomach growled.

"Elizabeth?"

I looked up from my laptop. Will Darcy stood by my table in a suit and tie, holding a coffee and the tantalizing Ocean Roll in a brown bag. I couldn't see it, but I knew it was there.

Why, I asked myself in despair, *why* must I run into this man of all people? It occurred to me only then that Mirror Pond is a five-minute walk from the office of the District Attorney, and the restaurants in the area must be frequent haunts for the vampires of its employ.

The last time Will saw me was at my family's lowest point: acting like gangsters at Charles' housewarming party. Now he saw me at *my* lowest point: jobless, homeless, and malnourished.

I was angry at him for seeing me like this, for standing there in that snazzy suit looking all rich and handsome and holding an Ocean Roll. My teeth clenched in rage. He's a lemon-sucking jerk who looks down on everyone and dances with other women and now he *dares* to hold an Ocean Roll in front of me?!

"May I join you?" Will asked.

"Sure," I said automatically. Stupid social conditioning.

Will sat down across from me and took the Ocean Roll out of the bag. He commented on the weather...probably. I don't actually remember what he said or how I replied, because the perfume of

that roll overwhelmed my thoughts. It called to me. Taunted me. Dared me to snatch it out of Will's hand and swallow it whole.

"Do you want this?" Will offered me the roll on a napkin.

"What?" I tore my eyes away from it. "Oh. No, thank you."

Will took the roll back. "It's too sweet for my taste. Maybe the ducks will appreciate it."

He tore off a piece from the edge. I gasped at his barbaric mistreatment of the precious local treasure. As he drew his arm back to throw the piece towards the pond, I lunged across the table and grabbed his wrist.

"No! Don't!"

Will raised an eyebrow at me. I let go of his wrist and cleared my throat. "We're not supposed to feed the ducks. It teaches them to harass people. If you're *determined* to throw it away, I suppose I can do you the favor of eating it."

"I thank you for your generosity."

I plucked the roll from Will's hand and gobbled it down savagely. The melted sugar smeared all over my hands and face, but I didn't care. My tongue danced with delight and my stomach purred with contentment.

Will sipped his coffee while watching me, amused. He must have been thinking I wasn't much different from the ducks.

I swallowed and dabbed my mouth demurely. "I didn't have time to eat breakfast this morning. Usually my table manners are impeccable. Despite my looks, I didn't actually grow up on a farm."

Will's expression turned serious. I'm not sure why those words came out of my mouth, and I wished I could put them back. The dig made me look like I've been dwelling on that offhand comment of his all this time, when I really forgot about it long ago.

Will put down his cup. "I think there's been a misunderstanding, and I've been meaning to correct it. That day when you heard me quip about settling down on the farm, that was..."

I hurried to say, "It was a private conversation, I know."

"...an inside joke."

Now that I was no longer starving to death, I could process the words Will said. But I thought I couldn't have heard them correctly. "What?"

"It was an inside joke between Charles and me. I know you didn't grow up on a farm. I did."

I nearly squawked "What?!" again like a parrot. I could not put "Will Darcy" and "farm" in the same mental image.

Will folded up empty brown bag neatly. "The joke started in our freshman year at Stanford. Back then I was, shall we say, hard to get along with."

Back then? I was tempted to repeat. *"Back then" you were hard to get along with?*

Though I didn't voice my thought, Will used his supernatural abilities to hear it in my mind. He cracked a smile, and it was disconcertingly good-natured. "I know it's difficult to believe because I'm the life of the party now, but yes, 'back then' I was an uptight wet blanket."

Did...Will just make a self-aware joke? Will can joke? Will is *self-aware*?

With that stony face and voice it was hard to tell if he was joking, but he must have been. Has Will been cracking jokes this whole time, but his delivery is so dead-pan I've missed them?

He continued, "Though I acted like a prepster, I grew up surrounded by crops and livestock. My father owned thirty acres

on the south side of town and leased most of it out as farmland. When my dormmates caught wind of this, they had a lot of fun with it. They nicknamed me 'Farm Boy' and asked me when I planned to go home and settle down with a plump wife to raise goats and chickens."

While my mind reeled from these revelations, I said blandly, "That's not very nice."

"They also called Charles 'Beach Bum' because of his fondness for Hawaiian shirts. They didn't mean any harm by it."

This is why I've never had guy friends, Diary. Men have a peculiar way of bonding by bullying each other.

"You see where this is going. When Charles asked me about you at the barbecue, I answered the same way I always do when he pushes me to pursue a woman: that I wasn't ready to settle down on the farm with a plump wife to raise goats and chickens. I didn't know my words would reach the woman in question and hurt her feelings."

"My feelings weren't hurt," I said, while my brain worked furiously to rearrange my entire world order.

For the past month, I've been hating Will because of a stupid misunderstanding? My heart broke into a thousand tiny pieces because of a sophomoric inside joke? I started exercising daily for *no reason at all?!!*

"Really," I said. "I did misunderstand, but it didn't bother me."

Will didn't buy my lie. "If I'd known you were nearby, I wouldn't have said something that could be easily misunderstood. Although..." His brows drew together. "Even if you overheard, you must have known I couldn't have been talking about you."

"How? Charles asked you about Elizabeth, and that's my name."

“But you’re not plump.”

He said this as if it were an obvious statement of fact. As if that day he had joked that he didn’t want a blond wife, and my hair is brown, so I must have known he wasn’t referring to me.

Incredulous, I said, “Don’t you know that when people refer to ‘that fat girl,’ every woman within earshot will think they’re talking about her?”

“That makes no sense. You’re extraordinarily attractive. Why would you believe that any man would disparage your looks?”

If I had been eating or drinking anything just then, I would have choked on it. How could Will say I was “extraordinarily attractive” with no trace of embarrassment, as if that were also a simple statement of fact?

At that moment, a light bulb went off in my head. I suddenly understood Will.

Why didn’t I see it before, Diary? The evidence was always there. I should have realized it when he handed me that towel after Jane’s heatstroke, when he cornered me in the hallway, and when he danced with me at Charles’ housewarming party.

Will Darcy...is a **lawyer**.

I propped my elbow on the table and cupped my chin in my palm. “Have you ever noticed that everything you say is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

Will looked surprised, then contemplative. “Is that a compliment or a criticism?”

“Both. Telling the truth is good, but telling the whole truth all the time isn’t. For example, it’s true that it’s unhealthy for women to sit around in wet swimsuits. It’s probably true that my family couldn’t win against the Bingleys in a lawsuit. And it might be a

teensy bit true that my big sister is so gosh darned nice, it's suspicious. But why would you *say* things like that and alienate people?"

"I don't believe in lying to gain the good opinion of others."

"You don't have to *lie* to be tactful. This is a cafe, not a courtroom. You're not on record here. You don't have to be totally and unflinchingly honest."

Will leaned forward. "I see. Then I won't tell you you're extraordinarily attractive."

"You can tell me I'm attractive, just leave out the part where I'm irrational. See? Selective truth-telling isn't *lying*. It's just being polite."

"My intention wasn't to be polite."

His eyes locked onto mine. I'm not sure what makes Will's eyes so beautiful. Objectively, neither the shape nor color is unique. They're just eyes. Everyone has them.

And yet, his are inexplicably more fascinating than the eyes of other people. I stared into them, thinking, "He's perfect."

Will is intelligent and articulate. He has a decent sense of humor and, judging from his work ethic, a strong sense of responsibility. He's highly educated, but not sheltered. Though he can be arrogant and insensitive, I realize now that he acts that way because he's honest to a fault.

Maybe, just maybe, he's the elusive person I've been looking for my whole adult life.

The ideal beta reader.

I blurted out, "Would you like to read my manuscript?"

Until I said that, I didn't know I was looking for a beta reader. But now I feel that my meeting with Will must be predestined. Fate

threw him in my path at my lowest point as a writer to help me climb back up again.

And I *am* still a writer, even if I make a living doing something else. Writing is my reef. I lost sight of it for a while, but now I see it clearly even in the darkness. I will apply for other jobs to support myself, but I will also polish up my last book and write more of them. Many more of them.

For the longest time I feared writing, because I had to make money from it. Now I have nothing to fear. Freed from the anxiety of publishing, I can write whatever I want. Not what a literary agent thinks editors will want, not what an editor thinks her bosses will want, not what a marketing team believes the shoppers of Walmart will want. What I want.

Losing everything didn't kill my writing career. It *liberated* it. Lizzie Bennet is back!

I explained to Will, "I wrote a book last year and publishers weren't interested, so now I'm thinking of posting it online. I'm looking for beta readers to give me feedback."

Will said, "I'd be happy to read it, but my feedback won't be useful to you. I don't know anything about writing fiction."

"That's a plus. Writers make the worst beta readers, second only to family and friends. Writers try to turn every story into *their* story. Family and friends say nothing but nice things because they're worried about causing offense."

"I see. You're asking me because I'm tactless."

I found a small notepad in my backpack and wrote down my email address. "Exactly. I need someone who isn't concerned with being polite. Someone who's willing to tell me the absolute truth about my work, even if it breaks my heart."

I tore out the page and offered it to him. "Someone like you, Mr. Darcy, if you can spare the time."

Will accepted the paper solemnly. "Of course. I would be honored to break your heart, Ms. Bennet."



July 29, 2016

The Day I Learned My BFF Has Weird Taste in Men

I

Dear Diary,

Though last Friday I asked Will to tell me the absolute truth about my last manuscript, I secretly hoped the “absolute truth” would be that the book is perfect and there’s not a single thing I could do to improve it.

Like every writer, when I ask for constructive criticism I really mean, “Please gush about how brilliant I am.” We all know, intellectually, that criticism of our work isn’t a personal attack on us as artists, but it’s so difficult to separate the two. When a reader says, “There is this one tiny flaw in your story,” we hear, “You’d better pick up knitting or something, because this writing hobby isn’t working out.”

I did try my hand at knitting once, in college. I made approximately one inch of a scarf before I gave up and went to the mall to buy one instead. We all have our talents, and doing handicrafts isn’t mine. So I’d better make this writing hobby work, even if I’m not

actually the best wordsmith in the universe, and my stories aren't flawless, and Will is a big old meanie for pointing that out!

This morning I met Will again at Mirror Pond. This is not unusual because every morning I meet Will at Mirror Pond. We don't plan to hang out or anything; it just sort of...happens.

Since moving out of my parents' house, I've fallen into a routine: eat breakfast with Charlotte, go for a swim at the Juniper Fitness Center, and then take my laptop to the Crow's Feet Commons to search for jobs. Having a predictable schedule like this makes me feel less like a powerless seahorse tumbling around in the vast ocean, and more like a responsible adult with commitments and goals and stuff.

Because Will is an *actual* responsible adult with commitments and goals and stuff, he also has a predictable schedule. That schedule includes taking a lunch break at approximately 11:30 a.m. to walk around the downtown area, buy food, eat the food, and return to work before 12:30. That's how he ended up at Annie's Books the other week, and it's how he ends up sitting across from me every weekday at our picnic table by Mirror Pond.

Luckily for me, the food Will has been buying of late has not been to his taste, and I get to eat it all. He keeps going to bakeries and ordering new pastries to try, but they're inevitably too sweet for him, and he gives them away.

I have wondered why he keeps buying sugary pastries when he doesn't like sweet things. Why doesn't he try savory foods instead? But over the past week, I've learned that Will is a lot sillier than he looks.

For one thing, he's a compulsive flirt. In every conversation, Will sneaks in at least one comment that's too smooth by half. Now

that I think about it, he's always been a bit of a Casanova. We'd known each other just long enough to match names to faces when he dropped the line: "I don't have much dating experience, so perhaps you could teach me." At the time I thought he was being sarcastic, but it turns out he's actually a player in a square's clothing.

It's a good thing I'm smart enough to know he's just messing around. I wonder how many poor girls have thought Will was hitting on them and got their hopes up. When George teased Will about "breaking hearts," I thought he was only ribbing his bro about his good looks. Now I suspect Will has a history of accidentally seducing people with his heart-fluttering jokes.

Another silly thing about Will: he's one of those men who wear the same favorite outfit over and over. Dad is the same way. He has a beloved white golf shirt that he's worn to death, and he gets fussy when Mom tries to replace it. No matter how many nice new shirts she entices him with, if the white golf shirt is tolerably clean, Dad will insist on wearing it.

Will's equivalent of Dad's white golf shirt is the blue polo shirt he wore to Charles' housewarming party. On the days he goes to court he wears a suit, but on every other day he wears his blue polo shirt. I've seen it three times this week.

To be fair, Will does look good in that shirt. The sapphire color flatters the cool undertones of his pale skin. The cut fits his figure perfectly, stretching slightly across his broad chest. On hot days, he undoes the buttons at the collar after his brisk walk to the pond, and I must check all around us to make sure there are no women in need of emergency care after swooning at the sight.

Today, in addition to the carrot cupcake he handed over because he doesn't like carrots, Will served me a compliment sandwich.

He began with the bottom piece of bread: the transparent praise. "It's very well-written," he said. "The premise is interesting, and the dialog is clever."

My heart sank. When a reader says your story is "very well-written," you know there's something terribly wrong with it.

Through a mouthful of cake I asked, "Is it too low-concept?"

"I'm not familiar with that phrase."

"I mean, was the pace too slow? Were you bored by the side characters who didn't have anything to do with the main plot? Did you want more nail-biting cliffhangers that *compel* you to turn the pages?"

"No, the pace was fine. The side characters were interesting. I dislike cheap cliffhangers."

I swallowed the last bite of my cupcake. "So what's wrong with it?"

At this point Will was supposed to vehemently deny that there was anything wrong with the book. He was supposed to say it was the best story he's ever read, and that big-name editor doesn't know anything about writing, and my ex-agent is an idiot for dumping me.

But he didn't. He regarded me seriously for a moment, and then got to the meat of it.

"I didn't feel anything."

I had steeled myself for a myriad of criticisms, but that one had never occurred to me. "You didn't *feel* anything?"

Will cracked one of his Casanova smiles. "Believe it or not, I am capable of feeling things other than self-satisfaction and contempt for my fellow man. I can feel a wide range of emotions, actually. The book didn't trigger any of them for me."

Though it was painful, I asked, “Can you elaborate? Were there parts where you thought you should feel something, but you didn’t?”

Will thought carefully. “There wasn’t a specific part. It was a pattern. Every time things started to get intense, you pulled back. Every touching moment turned into a big joke. Every painful moment turned into a detached psychoanalysis of the characters, as if...”

I prodded, “As if what?”

“As if you were afraid of feeling the pain yourself.”

I wanted to argue against everything Will said, but I knew I shouldn’t. I knew I should thank him for his honest feedback, but I couldn’t. So I just sat there, sulking.

Will reached across the table and wiped a bit of cream cheese frosting off my lip. “You asked me to break your heart. I want you to break mine.”

What did I tell you, Diary? Too smooth by half.

To top off the compliment sandwich, Will said, “I know for a fact you’re capable of it. You could make me feel the greatest happiness and the deepest despair. So why don’t you try?”

For a solid moment, I hated Will Darcy with a violence I normally reserve for bigots and grapefruit. Will has never written a novel. He has no idea how hard it is.

It’s easy to glance over a finished story and say, “This isn’t as good as it could be. Why don’t you try harder?” Will doesn’t know that each of the forty chapters in that book took me many days to write. He’s never had to sit at a picnic table and listen to someone calmly dismantle the work of six months in the span of thirty seconds.

So how dare he say something so...so...*absolutely true*?!

I wanted to regress twenty years, pound my fists on the table, and wail, “It’s not faaaair!” Everything Will said was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, dang it. I knew the story lacked heart. I’ve always known it.

My ex-agent was irresponsible and spineless, but her assessment of the manuscript was valid. She didn’t love it, because I didn’t love it. Writing it was a chore. I was trying too hard to be brilliant, instead of trying hard to touch my readers. I hid behind wit to protect myself from the savage words of imaginary critics, for whom I believed cynicism would equal “hard-hitting masterpiece” and sincerity “sentimental Chick Lit.”

The result: a book that is intellectually impressive and utterly forgettable. My choices are to spend another six months rewriting it, or to abandon it and move on. I’ll make that choice later, because right now I have more than enough issues to cry into my pillow about.

While I was preoccupied with hating Will and myself and everyone else in existence, Charlotte walked up to our table. I jumped when she said, “Hey, guys.”

“Hey,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

Charlotte raised the tall cup and brown bag she was holding. “You hyped this place up so much, I figured I’d check it out.”

Will greeted Charlotte and excused himself. He went into the cafe and came back shortly with a can of San Pellegrino. He put it on the table in front of me. “I’ll email you the file with my comments tonight.”

I nodded, still pouting. Will squeezed my shoulder, his hand cold from the soda can. I patted it and met his eyes with a tiny smile to show there were no hard feelings. Will headed back to work.

Charlotte took Will's place at the table. "So...are you guys exclusive now?"

I didn't understand what she meant at first. Like, did I give Will an exclusive read of my manuscript?

Then I figured out what "exclusive" means to most people. I laughed. "What? No. We're just friends."

"Like Jane and Charles are 'just friends'?"

Her suggestive tone irritated me. I opened my soda and took a swig before responding.

"Okay, I admit that at first I was into him, because I'm not blind. He's hot. But then we started hanging out, and he's not my type at all. I like men who are cute and considerate. Will is too 'alpha' for me. He's a guy friend who reads my books and gives me snacks, nothing more."

Charlotte removed the tea bag from her cup. "How's the water?" she asked.

I looked at the can in my hand. "I'd say it's more like a sparkling lemonade. It's kind of sugary."

"I mean the water in De Nile. Is it comfy? Is that why you want to stay in it?"

I glared at Charlotte. She sipped her tea.

I said, "Why is it so hard for people to believe a man and a woman could be platonic friends? You spend a lot of time with Winston. Are you guys 'exclusive' too?"

"Yeah. About that."

Charlotte set her tea aside. "I'm sorry to do this, but you need to find a new place by the end of August."

I ducked my head in shame. Charlotte shouldn't be the one apologizing, as if she were letting me down by failing to give me a

free place to live. For the past week and a half, she'd been nothing but selfless and accommodating. She even went out of her way to borrow an air mattress from her parents, so I wouldn't have to sleep on the couch.

I said, "No, I'm sorry for leeching off you for so long. I have an interview at the Writing Center on Monday. I'll definitely get a place of my own by the end of next month. Before then, I hope. I know it must be frustrating for you to have me taking over your living room and eating all your food."

"That's not it. I don't mind you staying as long as you need. The problem is, my lease is up on August 31, and I'm not going to renew it." Charlotte fidgeted with her hands, pulling at each of her fingers in turn.

Charlotte doesn't fidget. Ever. Her fidgeting made me a little scared about what she might say next.

To fill the awkward pause I said, "Okay?"

Charlotte folded her hands on the table and sat up straight, looking every inch the banking industry professional. "I'm moving in with Winston."

My brain refused to accept the commonly agreed-upon meaning of those words. The implication was inconceivable.

I said, "You mean, he's going to be your new landlord?"

Yes, that must be what she meant to say: Winston owns rental properties, and he offered Charlotte a good deal because they work together. Charlotte is the most sensible woman I know. Every important life decision she faces, she weighs carefully in the light of her professional ambitions and financial health. She wouldn't...

"No, I mean we're going to live together. As partners...and parents. I'm pregnant. Winston is the father."

II

After Charlotte announced her pregnancy, my mental state roughly resembled the following.

“Aaah! No way! It’s a joke, right? Please tell me it’s a joke. Oh my God, it’s not a joke. You’re serious. You seriously have a tiny human embryo in your uterus. What were you even...and when... *how?! He’s a robot! How could he... Nooo now I have a mental image and it’s not going away get it out get it out get it out!*”

To my credit, I didn’t say any of that out loud. I sat frozen with what I imagine was a blank deer-in-the-headlights expression.

“The traditional response,” Charlotte said, “is ‘Congratulations.’”

I couldn’t say that. For the sake of our friendship I could resist saying what I was thinking, but I couldn’t force myself to say something I didn’t mean. “When did this...I mean, how long have you guys...”

Charlotte calmly unwrapped her Monte Cristo sandwich. “Remember that day you came over after fighting with your folks?”

Of course I remember that day. It was the worst day of my life. I remember every painful word of the phone call with my ex-agent, every humiliating moment with Winston at the Old Mill, and every tense heartbeat of my showdown with Mom.

I remember the warm feeling of relief when Charlotte texted, “U can crash @ my place.” I remember thinking she ought to be sainted as she fixed me a cup of herbal tea, and put guest towels in the bathroom, and kindly offered to stay with her parents so I could have the...oh.

I said, “You didn’t stay with your parents, did you?”

“Winston was upset. He thought you guys had a connection, though I’d tried to tell him that was wishful thinking. I went to his place with a bottle of wine to cheer him up.”

But you didn’t have to go that far to cheer him up! I bit my tongue hard.

Charlotte said, “I want to be clear, this wasn’t a drunken accident. We decided, mutually, that this is what we wanted.”

“You mean you got pregnant *on purpose*?”

“Yes. Well. Sort of. We decided to become a family; the third member of it just showed up sooner than expected.”

Charlotte sighed and put her sandwich down. “Winston cries when he drinks. That day, he had a lot to cry about. He was upset because you turned him down, but not really because he wanted *you*. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“He was upset because he wants to settle down. He’s thirty-seven already. He wants to have kids before he’s too old to raise them. He wants the two-story house with the white picket fence and the playset in the backyard. And I said, you know, that’s what I want too.”

“Really?” That was news to me. Charlotte never struck me as a white-picket-fence-and-playset sort of person.

“Yes, really. The single life was fun in my twenties, but now I want some stability. There comes a time, you know, when a gal gets bored with *Cosmopolitan* and wants to start reading *Good Housekeeping* instead.”

“I get that, but...” But...*Winston Collins*?!

Just because Charlotte wants to settle down doesn’t mean she has to settle. There are hundreds of single men with good jobs in

Bend. At least ninety percent of them must be more interesting than Winston Collins. A cardboard cutout of Ryan Reynolds would be more interesting than Winston Collins.

I couldn't understand it. I still can't understand it. Charlotte is one of the most intelligent and driven women I know. She likes pantsuits and yoga and artsy films with ambiguous, vaguely depressing endings. How could she stand to spend even a single night with Mr. Self-Help, much less a whole lifetime?

I said, "I just think you deserve someone who's as awesome as you are. Winston is so...not."

Charlotte's face hardened. "I wasn't going to say anything, but if you're going to criticize my choice of partner, I won't hold back. You're so smart it's scary sometimes, but to be honest, when it comes to people you're kind of close-minded. You leap to conclusions about them based on what you see on the surface."

Wait, wait. We were talking about Charlotte starting a relationship with Winston. How did the conversation get turned around to my personal shortcomings? And I do not leap to conclusions about people without giving them a fair chance.

(If you dare to say Will Darcy's name right now, Diary, it's back into the backpack with you. He was an exception, and under the circumstances it was perfectly reasonable to conclude he's a lemon-sucking jerk.)

"I've worked with Winston for three years. I think I know him well enough to decide for myself whether he deserves me. How long have you known him? One month? You've talked to him only a couple of times, but you assume you know everything about him."

“No, I don’t! It’s just, he’s so awkward. He acts so stiff, and he talks about nothing but the mayor *pro tempore* and those ridiculous self-help books. He’s like a robot with no free will.”

“Have you ever stopped to think that he might be acting that way because of you?”

And we’re back to me again. Apparently everything is my fault today. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re hot, girl!”

Charlotte ran her fingers through her hair in exasperation. “Don’t you get it? Winston acts stiff and awkward around you because you make him nervous. You’re gorgeous and funny, and he wants to impress you. He doesn’t normally yap about chandeliers and quote Stephen Covey like a poser. He’s normally very nice and easy to talk to. The Winston you see isn’t the Winston I know. But that didn’t even occur to you, did it? You decided he was a robot the moment you met him.”

The more she talked, the more Charlotte worked herself up. “And what’s so ridiculous about reading self-help books? Other men spend all night chugging beer and watching football, or playing *Call of Duty* or whatever. How many guys can say they spend their evenings trying to become a better person?”

That’s when I realized what, upon reflection, I should have noticed long ago: Charlotte loves Winston.

I don’t think she’s “in love” with him. She doesn’t love him the way teenagers want to love: passionately, obsessively, spending every moment of existence consumed by thoughts of The One. She doesn’t love him the way I’d want to love my husband, either: joyfully, loyally, trusting him fully with even the darkest parts of myself.

But she does care about him. She cares enough to humor him, to defend him, and to wipe oily globs of salad dressing off his shirt at dinner parties. She loves him enough to make a baby with him, though I'm still squicked out by that mental image and I'm going to do my best not to think about it.

I reached across the table and put my hand on Charlotte's. "You're right. I'm sorry. Winston is a good man. I'm sure he'll be a good father, too. Congratulations."

"Thank you." Charlotte relaxed. "I don't mind if you share your concerns about Winston with me, as long as you don't insult him. I know you just want me to be happy. You can also share the cheeky thought that's making your mouth twitch right now. Go on."

I tucked my lips between my teeth. "It's just...I'd bet twenty bucks that when you told Winston he's going to be a daddy, the first thing he did was rush out to buy a stack of parenting advice books."

Charlotte's mouth quirked too. "I wouldn't take that bet, because then I'd owe you twenty bucks. He's at Barnes & Noble right now."

To tell you the truth, Diary, I still think Charlotte is making a terrible mistake. Though she attacked my judgment of people, her judgement isn't perfect either. Winston isn't a bad guy, but it's not a good sign when the best thing you can say about your chosen life partner is, "At least he doesn't play *Call of Duty*."

Plus, Charlotte thinks I'm in denial about Will, which shows how little she understands people. I know why she got the wrong impression, though. If I saw another woman hanging out with Will, I'd also assume she must be in love with him. He's handsome and chivalrous, and his suave one-liners would make any girl melt into

a giggly puddle, and I still haven't figured out why his eyes are so hypnotizing. They're just eyes! They're not even an unusual color or anything! They're not sapphire blue or stormy gray or any other striking color that would make you say, "Wow, those are beautiful eyes." They're just brown. Plain old boring brown. Their power defies rational explanation.

Anyway, it's Charlotte's life, and she's made her choice. All I can do for her, as a friend, is say "Congratulations" and support her when things get tough. And things will get tough in the next nine months, I expect, because she literally has a miniature person forming inside of her. Oh my word, that's terrifying. It's hard enough for me to keep houseplants alive; I can't imagine growing a whole human being.

I can't even take care of myself, though I'm getting better about it. I'm going to have to stop by my parents' house to pick up a smart outfit for that Writing Center interview on Monday. I haven't been to a job interview since my early twenties, and to be frank I'm scared silly. But I'll power through, and soon I'll be a proper adult with a steady job, a place of my own, and maybe even a furry gray pouf.



August 27, 2016

The Day that Stupid Vampire Went and Ruined Everything

I

Dear Diary,

Remember when I took back all the mean things I've said about Will Darcy? Well, I take *that* back. Will is a judgmental, selfish, impulsive idiot, and I was naive to think we could be friends.

I can't believe I was so gullible. I actually thought Will was a good person. He charmed me with his smooth jokes and his Ocean Rolls, but all the while he was plotting to betray me. I shouldn't have trusted him, and Ocean Rolls are forever tainted now, and *why does sex have to ruin everything?!*

Life was going so well until today. I started my new job at the Writing Center, which is on the ground floor of the community college library. The atmosphere there is lovely, my supervisor and coworkers are very nice, and the training sessions have been surprisingly fun and informative. I had no idea there's so much to learn about teaching.

Now that I have a steady (if meager) paycheck, I can finally stop leeching off Charlotte. Jane introduced me to a group of her theatre colleagues who need a new roommate by September 1, which is magically perfect timing. They're an eccentric bunch, but the rental looks clean and they assured me everyone obeys the house rules: no illegal drugs, no dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, and no existential crises in communal areas after 9 p.m. (Fine print: "Having an existential crisis in private is acceptable, as long as it is not accompanied by Coldplay.")

Mary sulked when I declined her offer to live together, but sulking isn't much different from her usual demeanor, anyway. Since we work in the same building, when our schedules line up we meet in the staff break room to eat our packed lunches. After a few days of sitting at the same table, our sisterly relationship returned to its normal state of mutual resigned tolerance.

When Mom heard about Charlotte's life changes from Susan Long, she called me in a huff. She said she always knew Beverly's girl would "end up that way," and Winston Collins is an odious little brown-noser, and she's glad her daughters have higher standards. I think that's the closest to an apology I'm ever going to get.

As for the twins, they're working at Annie's Bookstore & Cafe until they return to OSU in late September. On their first day of work, Dad had to coax them out of bed with loving threats. Then Kitty and Lydia met George Wickham, with whom they both fell violently in lust at first sight. Now they race each other to doll themselves up and rush to work in the mornings.

Though I imagine my youngest sisters are more interested in George's baby-blue eyes and cute dimples than in his mind, I hold out hope that he'll have a positive influence on them. To appeal to a

nice literature-loving guy like George, the twins will have to at least pretend to be considerate and responsible young women who read things other than the comments on their own Instagram posts.

This afternoon I stopped by my parents' house to pack the remainder of my clothes and other items that didn't fit into a hastily packed backpack. Jane helped me strip my bed and gather various toiletries, office supplies, electronic cords of mysterious origin, and other forgettable miscellany that appears to pop into existence on moving day.

As I taped up the last cardboard box, Jane asked for the tenth time, "Are you sure you don't want to live here with us?"

For the tenth time I replied, "Yes, I'm sure." For variation I added, "Every writer is obligated to spend at least one year of her twenties living in house full of crazy artists. I'm nearly past the deadline."

Jane said, "I'm going to miss you. We don't laugh as much without you around."

"It's not like I'm not moving back to New York. I'll be ten minutes away, for goodness' sake. And you're not going to live here forever, either."

I pushed Jane's arm teasingly. "Charles has a soft nougat heart pumping caramel through his veins, but even he couldn't stand to live with the in-laws. He'll whisk you away to Beverly Hills, and you'll be so busy being a movie star, you'll forget all about us. We'll have to go down to the Regal and shell out fifteen bucks a piece for matinée tickets just to see your face."

Jane quietly wound up the packing tape. Something was wrong. Though her mouth smiled, her face was tired and her eyes were sad.

Come to think of it, I'd been so busy fixing up my own life, I hadn't paid any attention to Jane's. While packing we talked about my moving plans, my new job, and my conflicted feelings about Charlotte and Winston. Jane hadn't talked about herself at all.

I asked, "How is Charles?"

"He's doing well, I think. He's decided to rent out the house on the corner. We probably won't see him around much anymore."

Jane delivered this news so casually, as if she were talking about some elderly neighbors we occasionally waved to while picking up the mail. Because of her placid tone, the full import of her words didn't sink in right away.

"Wait, he's renting it out? As in, he's not going to stay in it anymore?"

Jane nodded.

"Did he find another vacation home he likes better or something? Like, some picturesque cabin in Sunriver?"

Jane shook her head.

So...Charles is gone? Completely? He dropped a million dollars on a house, spent a couple of pleasant summer weekends in it, and then lost interest and handed the keys over to a property management company?

What about the famously expensive views? What about "the most perfect place on earth"? What about Jane? Just a few weeks ago Charles was worshiping Jane like Pip trailing after Estella. What on earth happened?!

I had so many questions swirling around my head, but the only one I could ask was, "But...*why*?"

Jane shrugged with a small smile. "Because he got tired of flying back and forth, I guess. And because...Will told him to."

II

I climbed the steep trail, my leg muscles straining. I stopped to let my lungs catch up with the rest of me, closing my eyes and gulping down the warm pine-scented air.

Central Oregon is different from the west side of the state in many ways: the weather, the politics, the fashions. You're unlikely to spot anyone in Portland wearing a cowboy hat unironically.

But one thing we have in common is the trees. The city of Bend is half buried in junipers, aspens, and firs. On my first morning back from New York City, disoriented from jet lag, I strolled outside and looked around at the greenery in bewilderment. A neighbor walked by with her dog and asked, "How are you?" I exclaimed, "I'm surrounded by *plants!*"

Down the road from my parents' house is an entrance to a network of hiking trails that wind through the many plants, up to the top of the butte. Unlike your stereotypical Bendite, I'm not an outdoorsy type. I flounder for excuses when people say I *must* visit such-and-such beautiful lake or national forest or really big rock. These trails are the one exception.

In the early '00s I wore down many a pair of Sketchers on these trails. If I was bored and felt like playing Harriet the Spy, I headed for the route overlooking the park for an afternoon of people-watching. If I was feeling romantic and wanted to emulate Anne Shirley skipping through the White Way of Delight, I bounded along the paths with the most breathtaking views. If I was upset and wanted to sulk in the wild hills, despising mankind like the vengeful Heathcliff, I crept into the secret shady nooks where no one would find me.

I can no longer remember which path was which, but even if I could they're all different now. New housing developments have popped up on the butte over the last ten years, and with them came pristine asphalt paths that displaced the wild dirt ones. Builders put in shiny new parks to lure in families. Gated mansions and golf courses obscured the natural views. None of the paths are secret anymore because they're all on Google Maps.

I railed at the forward march of progress, because at that moment I was very upset. I would have liked to make a beeline for the darkest, most secret corner in which I could seethe murderously at mankind...and at one man in particular.

"Will told him to," Jane had said. And that made no sense whatsoever.

First, Will and Charles are as thick as two highly educated, expensively dressed white-collar thieves. Why would Will shoo his best friend eight hundred miles away? And second, even if Will did suggest renting out the house, why would Charles listen? He's thirty-four years old! His friends can't "tell him" to do anything he doesn't want to. Then again...we *are* talking about the guy who bought a million-dollar house because his sister said he should.

I asked, "What do you mean, Will 'told him to'? Did they have a fight? He doesn't want to see Charles anymore?"

"Nothing like that. Will just thought it was a waste of money for Charles and Caroline to fly up here every weekend. He said it would make more sense to plan longer visits once or twice a year, and to rent out the house the rest of the time. Caroline thought that was a reasonable idea, and Charles agreed."

"Oh yes," I said. "Very reasonable. Perfectly and unassailably level-headed. But what about *you*?"

Jane stood up and stretched gracefully. “I...have a craving for Abby’s Legendary Pizza. Hawaiian or vegetarian? What do you think?”

What do I think? I think Will doesn’t give a fig about the tiny dent a few plane tickets make on Charles’ and Caroline’s massive trust funds. I think...I *know*...that Will campaigned to send Charles away from Bend for one reason only: to separate him from my sister.

Because I saw it, Diary. I saw the disdainful curl of Will’s lip when he looked at the two of them at Charles’ housewarming party. I heard the dismay in his voice when he asked me whether Jane was serious about Charles. I felt his animosity when he cornered me at lunch to inform me that the Bingleys would crush Jane if she tried to scam Charles out of his money.

Jane couldn’t seriously expect me to swallow the story that Will casually advised Charles to save money by giving up his little slice of heaven and its resident angel, and Charles answered, “Yeah, okay, that’s reasonable.” Charles would laugh off a suggestion like that. If pushed, he would protest amiably. If pushed too hard, he would melt down in tears at the thought of abandoning the love of his life.

There is only one possible way Will Darcy could have convinced his friend to leave Bend: he poisoned Charles’ feelings for Jane.

I can easily imagine Will whispering in Charles’ ear. Nasty whispers that sounded like the reasonable concerns of a friend.

“You barely know her, Charles. You’re infatuated, not in love.”

“She has a pretty smile, but who can tell what she’s thinking?”

“You know her family has money problems, right? Their mother nearly sold Elizabeth off as a bride for a mortgage. Elizabeth tried to pass it off as a funny story, but it’s not funny at all. With parents like that, can you truly believe Jane likes you for yourself?”

And Charles, poor Charles, being humble and affable and a complete idiot, trusted his friend's twisted judgment and ran far, far away.

I asked the trees around me, "What the heck is *wrong* with Will?!"

The trees rustled sympathetically, but they made no answer. They've lived such a long time, yet they're no help at all.

I stomped up to the crest of the butte. Will was supposed to be my first guy friend. My ideal beta reader. A stony-faced, slightly pompous, disarmingly childlike BFF I could trust with my complaints and my worries and my embarrassing secrets.

But Will was only pretending to be trustworthy, and I'd fallen for it. I confided in him about my frustrations with my family, never suspecting he'd turn around and wield them as weapons against Jane. Dad always liked to say, "Snakes don't bite lawyers, out of professional courtesy." I'd thought it was a joke.

I sniffled and wiped my eyes with my sleeve. I wasn't crying. My eyes stung because of the dry wind. My nose ran because of the intense exercise. My chest felt like it was collapsing in on itself because I'm out of shape.

A hand touched my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

I shrieked and jumped away. Will Darcy stood before me, frowning with concern.

Of course he did. A vampire prosecutor's supernatural abilities include hypnotism, telepathy, and the ability to show up precisely when he is not wanted. I meet my first real-live fan at a bookstore, and boom, Will shows up to ruin the moment. I slink off to Mirror Pond to quietly glue the pieces of my life back together, and what do

you know, there he is to witness my humiliation. I hide in the woods to rage at him in peace, and ta-da! Enter the devil himself, stage left.

“Sorry,” Will said. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“The *Music Man* DVD. Jane left it behind, and the cleaning service found it. Charles asked me to return it to her.”

My initial surprise melted away in the heat of the anger that flared through my whole body. I wanted to ask Will how he had the gall to face Jane after sabotaging her relationship with Charles. I wanted to demand an explanation for why he did it, and berate him for whatever he said in response until he felt as miserable as Jane does.

Instead I said, “Well, she’s not here. She’s at the house.”

“I know. I just spoke to her. She said you were taking a walk up here.”

So he followed me? All the way up to the top of a hiking trail? He wasn’t even dressed for it! He was wearing Oxford shoes and khakis and that freaking blue polo shirt for the millionth time.

Of all the angry thoughts swirling in my head, the one that burst out of my mouth was: “For heaven’s sake, don’t you have any other shirts?!”

Will blinked at me. “You said I should wear this one more often.”

“And you *listened* to me?!” How dare he listen to me? How dare he stand there looking all innocent and confused about my reaction, after everything he’s done to hurt me?

Will opened his mouth, then closed it. He opened it again and asked, “Are you free for dinner?”

How oblivious can a man be? Were Will's telepathic powers on the fritz today? I wanted to scream at him until his ears rang, and he was thinking about *dinner?!!*

Through clenched teeth I said, "I'm eating with my family. Jane ordered pizza."

Will kicked at a loose rock in the dirt. He cleared his throat. "How about lunch tomorrow?"

I balled my fists to stop myself from strangling him. Will is supposed to be so smart, so how could he fail to understand that "Jane ordered pizza" meant "I hate you, and I never want to see you again"?

I said, "I'm moving into my new place tomorrow. I'll be busy all day."

"I can take you to a restaurant afterwards."

The nervous, hopeful look in Will's eyes confused me. I crossed my arms and stared at the vista below. "I'll be tired, so..."

"I'm in love with you."

III

"I'm in love with you."

I thought I must have imagined that. I must have been light-headed from the hike up the butte, and I was having visual and auditory hallucinations. I've read that happens to mountain climbers on Mt. Everest. Exhausted and deprived of oxygen at high altitudes, the climbers imagine meeting fellow hikers who don't exist.

I'd walked only fifteen minutes to reach the top of the butte, so it isn't quite Mt. Everest—but hallucination was still a possibility, right? It was easier to believe that I was having a psychotic episode

than it was to believe Will Darcy was actually standing there, announcing he's in love with me.

But I knew it wasn't a hallucination, because no mirage is so finely detailed that you can see a man's pupils dilate with panic. If I were merely imagining Will's presence, my addled brain wouldn't give him the expression of a man who accidentally pressed a button to launch a nuclear missile.

I said, "What?"

And I immediately hated myself for saying that, because it sounded like I was asking Will to repeat himself. The first time was distressing enough. I rushed to say, "Wait, no, I heard you the first time. You don't have to say it again."

"I didn't intend to say it like this." Will raked a hand through his hair. "I planned to bring it up in a more appropriate setting, but we couldn't agree on a time. So. Here we are."

So it's my fault he blindsided me with a *non sequitur* declaration of love? What is an "appropriate setting" to declare you're in love with someone, anyway? The words wouldn't be any less mortifying in a fancy restaurant than they were on a hiking trail.

Why did Will have to say them at all? Why couldn't he lock up those feelings and treasure them secretly until they wilted away, like everyone else does? Why did he have to force them on me, and put me in this horrible position of having to answer him?

I didn't know how to answer. I couldn't even remember how to speak. I'm proud of myself for remembering how to stand.

Will cleared his throat again. "I don't regret saying it," he said, though his expression showed he regretted it very much. "One of us was going to have to say it eventually. It might as well be me."

Slowly, my thoughts transitioned from surprise, to dismay, to annoyance. Not only did Will subject me to this embarrassing situation because he couldn't keep his big mouth shut, but the pompous narcissist assumed *I* was in love with *him*!

I said, "What do you mean, 'one of us'?"

Will paced back and forth on the dirt, growing more agitated with each step. "I promised myself I would never do this," he muttered. "Dad must be rolling around in his grave right now, laughing at me."

He threw up his hands and burst out, "You're nothing like you're supposed to be!"

"Excuse me?"

"Your career is a disaster. You have no savings and no long-term goals. You use humor as a coping mechanism to ignore your problems. You're hopelessly idealistic, and irrational, and I can't stay away from you, no matter how much I wish I could."

He closed his eyes and grimaced. "Every day I tell myself I'm not going to meet you. I have important work to do. I don't have the time to sit around at a coffee shop, flirting like a lovesick teenager. But every day I drop everything I'm doing to rush to that coffee shop, because nothing feels as important as...you."

Will choked on the last word and inhaled sharply, as if he'd forgotten to breathe while speaking. I remembered I should be doing that too.

He said, "You're all wrong for me, but I've come to accept that I don't have any choice. It has to be you."

Will moved close enough to embrace me, but he didn't. He repeated hoarsely, "It has to be you. You're the only woman I've ever met...whose flaws I can overlook."

I wanted to hit him. I wanted to laugh at him. I wanted to run away and hide.

I wanted to grab him by the collar of that stupid blue polo shirt and kiss him senseless.

Will's gaze dropped to my lips. Hesitantly, he lowered his head. My hand shot out to his chest to stop him.

I stepped back, keeping him at arm's length. "I don't know where you got the idea that we have something going on between us, but I've never thought of you that way. Ever."

Will stiffened. He searched my eyes as if he hoped to find a different answer in them. "You mean, you don't..."

"No, I don't." I folded my arms and spun away, pretending to look out over the vista.

I'm sure the view of the city was breathtaking in the warm glow of the afternoon sun, but I can't remember what it looked like at all, and it's Will's fault. Why does he have to ruin everything good and beautiful?

Will should have understood that turning my back on him was a signal for him to leave. But he didn't move. I was tempted to shout at him to go away, but I didn't want to look at him or speak to him. I just wanted him to disappear, and then all of the contradictory emotions warring inside me would disappear too.

After an excruciating minute of silence, Will asked, "That's it? That's all you have to say to me?"

"What else do you want me to say? I'm simply not interested in dating you. That's all there is to it."

"If you were simply not interested, you wouldn't be angry. I don't understand why you're upset with me."

"You really don't understand?" I whirled around. "You tell me what a mess I am, and how many flaws I have, and how much you wish you didn't like me, and you don't understand why I'm upset with you?!"

Will blanched, but he set his jaw stubbornly. "You know it's not in my character to sugarcoat the truth. Did you expect me to act like Charles, and rave about how perfect and angelic you are?"

"Funny you should bring up Charles. Did you expect me jump for joy to be asked out by the man who broke my sister's heart?"

"What are you talking about?"

"As if you don't know! You sent Charles away to California! You told him to rent out his house, so he would never see Jane again!"

Will frowned at me, incredulous. "Is *that* why you're pushing me away? You're upset that Charles broke up with Jane, so you're taking it out on me?"

He spoke as if Jane's heartbreak were some frivolous matter, and I was acting immature by making a big deal out of it.

I said, "They liked each other so much, but you tore them apart. Don't you feel bad about it at all?"

"No, I don't. Why would I? Charles made his decision, and I support him in it. I'm glad he extricated himself from that relationship before it ended badly for both of them."

I was disappointed in Will for talking as if he had nothing to do with Charles' decision, but I should have expected it. A narcissist like him would never admit responsibility for ruining the happiness of his best friend. He would certainly never apologize for it. Will Darcy never apologizes for anything. He believes everything he does is rational and just, no matter how many people get hurt.

I asked, “And what about George? I bet you don’t feel bad about what you did to him, either.”

A dark cloud passed over Will’s face. “What does George have to do with anything?” He stepped towards me again. “You’re not dating him, are you?”

Though the idea of me dating George is ridiculous, I didn’t deny it. To be honest, seeing Will enraged gave me a wicked sense of satisfaction. After he acted so indifferent about Jane, he deserved to suffer a bit.

I said, “You ruined the poor guy’s life. You destroyed his dreams of going to Yale. George had to give up on becoming a writer, and throw his talents away on a dead-end job because of you.”

Will snorted. It was an ugly, contemptuous sound. “Poor, poor George. He’s suffered so much, he ought to be sainted as a holy martyr.”

I didn’t hate Will even when he insulted me. I didn’t hate him even when he defended his abominable treatment of Jane and Charles. But when he mocked George—the hardworking little brother who adored him and only wanted to be accepted by him—finally, I did hate him. I was angry at myself for believing Will might be a good man. I was too naive. Will Darcy is nothing but a cruel and unfeeling bully.

I hated him so much, I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to inflict a wound on his soul so deep, it would leave a scar that would never heal.

I spat, “George is ten times the man you are. And he could have achieved a lot more than you have, too, if you hadn’t been so greedy for your dead father’s money!”

Will stared at me like I'd just slapped him across the face, and he couldn't believe it. My desire to hurt him dissipated as soon as I succeeded. I knew I'd gone too far. I knew I should say I was sorry.

I opened my mouth, but Will held up a hand to silence me. The shock on his face was gone. So was the innocent embarrassment, and hope, and any trace of the love he had declared so fervently only minutes before.

He looked at me as if he had been under an enchantment that made him believe I was a beautiful princess, but now the spell had worn off and he saw me for the hideous monster I really was.

"So that's the kind of person you think I am. I had no idea you disliked me so much. I thought we...Clearly, I was mistaken."

Will spun on his heel and took a few steps, then halted. Without looking back he said, "I apologize for interrupting your walk. Good luck with the move tomorrow."

He strode away down the side of the butte, vanishing into the trees as suddenly as he had appeared.

You know, Diary, I didn't say anything incorrect. I only told the unvarnished truth, like Will does all the time. I have no reason to feel guilty about it.

How many times has he said insensitive things to me and excused them as being "honest"? I gave him a taste of his own medicine, that's all. I treated him the same way he treats everyone else, and now he thinks I'm a monster.

But that's not a problem, really. It's a good thing he thinks I'm a monster. Since I don't feel the same way about him as he does about me, it's best if we don't see each other anymore. It's impossible for

two people to remain real friends when one of them wants more than that.

His so-called “love” for me was awfully flimsy, anyway, if he’s already over it because I said one mean sentence. The whole sentence wasn’t even mean—just the second half of it, and the dependent clause at that! Though couples should treat each other with respect, of course, true love could withstand a single mean dependent clause.

Like Will said about Jane and Charles, I’m glad our relationship ended before it began. If Will were a close friend, if I had loved him even a little bit, the inevitable explosion would have been too painful to bear.

Luckily we hardly know each other, so losing his friendship doesn’t hurt at all...despite what Jane thinks. I wish she’d stop asking me what’s wrong, because nothing is wrong. I’m stressed out about moving, that’s all. I’m worried about finding health insurance. But for the thousandth time, nothing is wrong! And I’m not using humor to ignore my problems, either!

Anyway, it’s all over, so there’s nothing to ignore. Guilt and regrets are pointless, not that I regret anything. Why would I regret cutting ties with an arrogant, obtuse jerk who thinks it’s romantic to tell a woman he’s willing to overlook her many flaws?

For my future health and happiness, I’m going to wipe the entire incident from my mind. I’m not going to waste the storage space in my brain on such a horrible memory. How much time have I wasted ranting about Will’s stupidity already? I sat down to vent briefly when Jane went to bed around ten, and now it’s...

Five in the morning? Why didn’t you tell me, Diary?! You know I have an important day tomorrow—I mean, *today!*

I am now putting the pen down and setting an alarm on my phone for nine o'clock. I'm going to sleep, and then I'm moving into my new digs, and then I'm starting my fresh new life as a modern independent woman. I will not allow myself to be distracted by anything else.

...Oh my God. Who sends emails at 4:30 a.m.? What is *wrong* with Will Darcy?!



August 28, 2016

The Day I Read a Ridiculously Long Email

I

Dear Diary,

I just scrolled to the bottom of Will's email to see how long it is, and the thing is practically a dissertation. He must have stayed up all night to write it. The man is certifiably insane. Who *does* that?

(Don't you dare answer that, Diary. I'm different. Artists have a special license to go into frenzied fits of writing until dawn to express their feelings. Lawyers don't.)

I haven't read the email yet, but I'm sure every word of it is nonsense. I don't have the time to waste on nonsense today, so... here, Diary. I'll print it all out for you. You can read it and give me the Cliff's Notes version.

Now I'm going to get some sleep before I head over to my new place. I've already lost a night because of Will Darcy. He is *not* going to ruin my day, too.

Dear Ms. Bennet:

As my beliefs about your feelings towards me were so far off base, I will not now presume to foresee your reaction to the sight of this email.

However, I will presume to guess that both you and I would be happy to forget our encounter tonight as soon as possible. I assure you that the temporary insanity that drove me to broach the subject of a romantic relationship between us has passed, and I have no intention of debasing myself further by renewing that discussion.

Therefore, the purpose of this email is not to continue my pursuit of you, nor to seek your approbation through an insincere apology. I cannot and will not apologize for falling in love, no matter how disgusting and laughable those feelings may be to you.

My purpose in writing is only this: to defend myself against the unjustified accusations you laid against me tonight. Though I respect your decision to reject me as a romantic partner, I cannot allow you to malign my character as a man.

First, you accused me of "breaking Jane's heart" by "sending Charles away to California." You seem to believe that I schemed to separate them, and that I'm the sort of person who enjoys sabotaging the happiness of my friends.

This could not be further from the truth. When Charles first told me about his feelings for Jane, I wanted to support him. After watching him suffer through many short, toxic relationships in his twenties, I wanted to believe he had found a good woman at last.

But as I observed Jane, I found it impossible to ignore the mounting evidence of her ulterior motives. Like many beautiful women before her, Jane was clearly taking advantage of Charles for his money and connections.

From the moment Charles and I met your family, your mother made no secret of her obsession with Hollywood fame and fortune. On July 4 she introduced Jane as an actress and arranged for her to take a walk alone with Charles. On July 9 she persuaded Jane to gain entry to Charles' house by collapsing on his driveway in revealing attire. On July 16 she spread rumors at Charles' housewarming party that Jane would soon star in a movie he produced.

I do not fault children for the actions of their parents. However, not once did Jane prove, or even profess, that her intentions were different from her mother's.

Jane was complicit in every one of your mother's schemes. She showed no remorse for participating in the calculated ruse that resulted in her heatstroke. She turned a blind eye to your mother's shameful behavior at the housewarming party. She never once assured Charles that she liked him for himself, not for his friends in the film industry.

In fact, she showed no indications that she liked Charles at all. While Charles showered Jane with affection, her attitude towards him was amicable, at best. During their brief relationship Charles confessed to me, distraught, that Jane never called him, or invited him out, or told him she missed him when he was at home in California. More than once, he drank himself into a crying fit because he suspected Jane saw him only as a friend.

During his housewarming party, Charles came to the conclusion that Jane was stringing him along. After the other guests had left, he asked me if he should give up on her. As any good friend would, I told Charles the truth: that Jane appeared to be dating him only to further her acting career. Charles said he'd always known deep down that she was using him, but he didn't think he could bear to stop seeing her. I advised him to create some distance between them by visiting Bend less often. I suggested he turn the vacation home into an investment property, so he wouldn't be tempted come back to meet Jane every weekend.

This is the full and complete extent of my involvement in their relationship, such as it was. I did not persuade Charles to break up with Jane, but I was relieved when he did. By then it was clear to me that your sister was taking advantage of my friend's love for her, with no intention of returning it.

If I was wrong, and Jane genuinely liked Charles, then I pity her, but it was a heartbreak of her own making. With her looks and charm, I'm sure she'll soon find a partner who better understands her.

Second, you accused me of "ruining the life" of my former stepbrother, George Wickham. Because I don't know what stories George has concocted about me, I will tell you the history of my association with him and let you judge the truth for yourself.

To give you a complete picture of the relationship between George and me, I must first tell you about the people who bound us together: my father, Robert Darcy, and George's mother, Annie Wickham.

My father was a good man, well known for his charitable donations to homeless shelters and animal rescue organizations. His worst

fault was that he was too good. He had an insatiable need to save everyone, particularly weak and damaged women.

My mother was a painter with an opioid addiction and an “artistic temper,” as Dad called it. She ran off when I was five years old. I don’t know or care where she is now.

When I was thirteen, Dad became enamored with a dance instructor named Willow, who was in a relationship with a violent man. Dad helped Willow to escape from her boyfriend and proposed marriage to her.

Soon after Willow moved in, she gave birth to a girl. Dad signed the birth certificate and named the baby Gianna, after his late mother. Then Willow decided Dad was too kind to be interesting, and she abandoned Gianna with us to return to her abusive true love.

Two years later, Dad married Annie Wickham, a single mother of the seven-year-old George.

Annie was a magnetic woman: vivacious, witty, and passionate about her lifelong dreams. Unfortunately, her lifelong dreams changed every year.

In the first year, Annie said her lifelong dream was to be a fashion designer with her own boutique. At her request, Dad built a new wing of the house for her workshop. After making a few ill-fitting dresses, Annie complained that sewing was too complicated and gave up.

In the second year, Annie said she’d always wanted to run a small bakery. She cajoled Dad into renovating the kitchen with industrial appliances and paying eight hundred dollars per day for a month

of private lessons with a famous pastry chef. In her first week of lessons, Annie learned that commercial baking is messy and tiring work, and she abandoned the idea.

Annie wanted to be a wellness blogger, and Dad bought her exercise equipment she never used. She wanted to be a musician, and Dad bought her instruments she never played. Every time she concocted a grandiose new plan for the rest of her life, Dad was eager to give Annie everything she claimed she needed.

In gratitude, Annie began a three-year affair with the personal trainer she hired during her “wellness” phase.

Dad discovered Annie’s betrayal while I was at Stanford. They divorced, and Annie and George moved in with the personal trainer. It seems that marriage, as well, was too much work for Annie Wickham.

A few months after I graduated from law school, Dad passed away. As the executor of his estate, I learned that before the divorce, Dad had funded Annie’s latest “dream”: an independent bookstore. Her passion for bookselling lasted just long enough for her to rent a space downtown, fill the rooms with overpriced vintage furniture, and paint her name on the windows.

Running the actual business wasn’t as fun as painting her name, so for that Annie hired a manager: the personal trainer’s twenty-year-old cousin, who boasted an impressive one year of experience working ten hours a week as a cashier at the community college bookstore.

Three days after Dad's death, Annie called me. After cursory condolences, she inquired how much money Dad had left for her and George. She needed half a million dollars, she said, or she would have to sell her store.

I told her she was not named in the will, and you can imagine my tone of voice when I expressed my astonishment she had the nerve to ask.

This is the first of the imagined wrongs George has frequently accused me of committing. He calls me cruel for refusing to save his poor mother's beloved bookshop. If there is a man on this earth who would gift half a million dollars to his late father's adulterous ex-wife, I would like to meet him and help him to the nearest psychiatric facility for a proper diagnosis.

The second imagined wrong in George's mind followed soon after. This disagreement was also related to my father's estate.

George was eighteen years old at the time of Dad's death. At the funeral, he approached me with tears in his eyes and said that of the three men he had called his father, Robert Darcy was the only man he would remember as Dad. Despite the divorce, Dad still considered George his son, and he had promised to send George to college.

Though my father's will did not provide an inheritance for George, I decided to honor his verbal promise. I gave George eighty thousand dollars to cover tuition and living expenses while he studied for a bachelor's degree.

But George wasn't interested in studying for a bachelor's degree.

The university system, George said, is an outdated machine that spits out useless pieces of paper with pretentious logos stamped on them. He didn't need a piece of paper because he was going to be a world-famous author.

Instead of enrolling in school, George used the money to fund an extravagant lifestyle. Following Annie's example, he bought state-of-the-art computers and cameras because he "needed them" to write. He took sightseeing tours of Europe and Asia and claimed they were "research" for his work. He paid a vanity publisher ten thousand dollars to produce copies of his first and only book: a long and tedious poem about a teenage boy who travels the globe, having repetitive sexual encounters with voluptuous women.

When the money ran out, George appeared on my doorstep. He had suddenly developed an appreciation for higher education, and he demanded another eighty thousand to cover tuition and fees at Yale.

The first eighty thousand, he argued, did not fulfill Dad's promise to him, because Dad specifically said he would send George to college. In George's mind, since he hadn't used the money for college, he hadn't received his "rightful inheritance."

I told him that was utter nonsense. If George wanted to go back to school, he would have to pay for it himself. He could enroll at an affordable public college, apply for financial aid, and work part-time like everyone else his age.

Furthermore, the first eighty thousand was a gift from me, not his "inheritance." George was not named in Dad's will. I cautioned him that even if Dad's will were to be challenged in court and declared

invalid, George was not a legally adopted child and would not be an heir under the rules of intestate succession. I was not, and never could be, under any obligation to give him anything at all.

If the matter had ended there, we might have salvaged our relationship as brothers over time. Many young men undervalue education and spend their money unwisely. With a self-centered and irresponsible mother like Annie, it was no surprise that George had grown up to exhibit the same faults.

I believed George was merely immature and entitled, and with life experience he would soon grow into a better person.

That was an enormous error in judgment on my part.

You once asked me if I had ever made a decision I regretted. I told you I trusted someone I shouldn't have, and he hurt someone important to me. The person I trusted was George Wickham, and the person he hurt—with irreversible consequences—was our little sister, Gianna.

In early adolescence, Gianna was diagnosed with social anxiety disorder. She panics in crowds and suffers from a debilitating shyness around strangers.

Her symptoms were manageable at first. She couldn't participate in school sports or dances, but she could attend classes with the other children. She loved hiking and playing the piano, and she had a small but close group of friends.

All of that changed on Gianna's sixteenth birthday, when George revealed his true colors.

It was a Friday, and I was at work. During lunch Gianna called me, excited, to ask for permission to go hiking with George after school. I was surprised he had contacted her, but I was glad he was mature enough to put his resentments aside for the sake of our sister. I gave my permission and promised to buy pizza from Gianna's favorite restaurant for dinner.

When I arrived home that night, the house was empty. I called Gianna, but she had left her phone in her bedroom. I called George and asked if they were still hiking.

George said no, he was at a bar with his friends. He didn't know where Gianna was.

"We got separated downtown," he said. "There were so many people, you know?"

I lost my temper with him. I ordered him to find Gianna and bring her home that instant.

I will never forget what George did then.

He laughed.

He laughed, and he said, "Now you know how it feels when someone takes something important away from you."

I rushed downtown. The streets were packed with tourists. It was dark by the time I found Gianna. She was hiding behind a dumpster in an alley, terrified and nearly faint from crying.

She has been unable to go out in public ever since.

I will never again consider George Wickham my brother. I don't know what lies he's told you to gain your sympathy, but I can't blame you for believing them. George inherited his mother's charisma, and her talent for using the appearance of openness and naiveté to manipulate others for personal gain.

You once said to me, in teasing, that everything I say is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Regardless of your feelings towards me—or lack thereof—you surely understand me well enough to know that this email does not contain a single falsehood or misrepresentation.

In closing, I cannot say “Love” or “Forever yours,” as I once hoped I could. So I will instead say, with sincerity...

Best wishes for your future happiness and success,

Will

II

9 a.m.

I shouldn't have read that email. I said I wasn't going to. I promised myself I would get at least four hours of sleep to power me through the day.

Unfortunately I inherited the compulsive reading gene from Dad. If there are words in front of me, I must read them. And then I must turn them over in my mind for hours, composing a scathing response in my head that I know I'll never send. So now I have to power through the day on *zero* hours of sleep.

I bet Will did it on purpose. He knew today would be stressful for me, yet he sent that email before dawn, knowing it would upset me. I wounded his ego by rejecting him, so he's getting his revenge by making me as miserable as possible. He tried to play up his misfortunes for sympathy, and I bet it worked on *you*, Diary, but *I* can see right through him. Will is a vindictive and petty man, and I was right to turn him down.

The way he talked about Jane was just so...ugh! "A heartbreak of her own making"?! Just because she's not as demonstrative as other women, it's all her fault Charles thought she was using him? That is so unfair and backwards. If Jane were out to seduce Charles for his money, she would flirt with him brazenly and gush that he's the prince of her dreams. In fact, her shyness proves she *isn't* a gold-digger.

As for George, I'm sure if I were to think about it more, I could find the holes in Will's assumptions about him too. He's not the two-faced sociopath Will paints him to be. But I'm not going to think about it more, because frankly their problems aren't any of my business.

My business is to load up Dad's car with my things and get them over to my new place. But first, coffee. Lots of it.

12 p.m.

The bright side of being an utter failure as an adult is that I own very few things. Dad and I were able to move them all in a single car trip.

I wish I hadn't turned down Dad's offer to take me to lunch. I should have known sitting here all alone, doing the boring manual

labor of organizing my new room, would send my thoughts back to upsetting places.

Okay, so maybe Mom's behavior was a little over the top, and Jane shouldn't have gone along with her schemes. But resisting Mom when she gets a harebrained idea is nearly impossible, especially for a people-pleaser like Jane.

It's true that *I* didn't have a problem rebuffing Mom when she tried to force me to date Winston, but Jane isn't me. I've been mouthing off since I learned the word "no" at ten months of age. Jane has always been Mom's favorite, the dutiful eldest daughter. She didn't have any choice but to stay silent when Mom pushed her to flirt with Charles, and when Mom handed her that hot pink sports bra...

Alright, alright. So maybe Jane did have a choice. Maybe she's thirty years old, and she should have learned the word "no" by now. Maybe Charlotte did warn me that Jane needed to stop with the "just friends nonsense" and tell Charles how she felt about him. And maybe Jane should have learned from Tony in high school, and Brian in college, and Joel in her twenties that men can't read minds.

But still...still...even if the breakup was partially Jane's fault, it's not fair of Will to give her *all* the blame. He and Charles did their part by assuming the worst about her. Did Charles even ask Jane how she felt about him? Probably not. He probably cried all alone and took off for the airport without a word, like a heartbroken heroine in a nineties romcom.

And when Charles asked Will if he should give up on Jane, did Will even consider answering, "Why don't you sit down with Jane and talk it out?" No, he didn't. He decided on Jane's guilt and handed down her sentence without giving her a chance to raise a

defense. If elected in November he'll make a great addition to the circuit court, with all the practice he's had judging people.

Dang it, I didn't mean to write to you, Diary. I meant to put you away in the drawer, and that's what I'm going to do now. My head is killing me, but I don't want to sleep until this room looks somewhat respectable.

4 p.m.

I've been awake for thirty-two hours, but I'm not tired at all. In fact, I feel more alert than I've ever been before. My reflexes are super fast and my brain is super sharp.

Not only have I organized all of my worldly belongings, I have achieved a state of perfect clarity. Everything makes sense now. Like...

Why steak is more expensive than chicken. (Cows are harder to grow.)

Why women's clothing comes with useless itty-bitty pockets. (Corporations think we adore useless itty-bitty things, like Precious Moments figurines and cotton-scented tea candles. "Aw, look at the pointless wee pockets on these jeans! So tiny and adorable!")

Why hotdogs come in packs of ten, but buns come in packs of eight. (Then you have to buy more buns for the remaining hotdogs, and then you have to buy more hotdogs for the remaining buns, and the cycle never ends!)

(Or does it? You start with eight buns and ten hotdogs, then you eat all the buns and have zero buns and two hotdogs, then eight and two and six and ten...)

...What was I talking about? Right, why Will Darcy has a bizarre obsession with women's credit scores.

So, like...Annie. In Will's mind, I'm Annie. Creative, vivacious, and greedy. But I'm not greedy. I'm quite responsible with money, when I have it, and my career isn't a total mess. It's just on hold temporarily. I'll never give up on writing the way Annie gave up on her many dreams. But Will is a big meanie with trust issues, so he doesn't know that. He thinks he's like his dad, and he's fallen for a fickle damaged beauty who will ruin his life.

Poor Will's dad. Being nice sucks when the rest of the world is mean. I bet that's why Will became Mr. Grumpy Pants instead. But he's not very good at it. He talks coldly, but he's still a big softie inside. He reads my stories, and he gives me Ocean Rolls and carrot cupcakes. I like cupcakes. I hate Will. I hate him so much. I wish he were here with me, so I could tell him how much I hate him.

You know what I should do, Diary? I should stop sleeping. Writing is super easy right now. Usually I have to think hard about which words to write, but now they're flowing onto the page, easy peasy.

Yep, I've decided: sleep is for suckers. E. Bennet does not require sleep. Blue ink looks pretty on white paper. I've never noticed before that the color blue is so...*blue*.

11 p.m.

Ow. Ow ow ow. For future reference, Diary, you make a terrible pillow.

I feel awful. My body is stiff and my head is fuzzy. My mouth is terribly dry, and my blood sugar is dangerously low. I meant to go

to the grocery store after I finished unpacking. Luckily Jane insisted I take the leftover pizza from last night and stash it in the freezer here. As soon as I can bend my neck again, I'll heat it up.

I wish I hadn't fallen asleep for so long. Now my daily rhythm is out of whack. I'm going to be exhausted and touchy during my afternoon shift at the Writing Center tomorrow. Once again, I will have a miserable day because of Will Darcy.

You know, even if Will wasn't *entirely* responsible for Jane's heartbreak, he's still responsible for what he did to poor George. I don't believe anything he said about George, because I heard George's side of the story first. And what Will said is totally and utterly...

...Identical.

Actually, everything Will wrote about George aligns with what George told me himself: that Will told him to pay his own way through school, that Will refused to help Annie when her bookstore was failing, that Will severed ties with him after Robert died.

Only...Will's version has a few pieces that George left out. Like Will's eighty-thousand-dollar gift, Annie's infidelity and the divorce, and the incident with Gianna.

However, Will's version was missing crucial pieces, too. Like how much he resented George for commandeering Robert's attention and love. Like his jealousy over those camping trips and...

...And...for some reason, Diary, I have the niggling feeling that something isn't right about that part, either. But I'll think about it later, because I need to eat that pizza before I pass out on you again.

12 a.m.

George was seven years old.

George was *seven years old*.

When Annie Wickham married Robert Darcy, George must have been in first grade. George said Will was sixteen at the time, so he was likely a high school junior.

Would a high school junior be jealous of a first grader? Teenage Will might have been annoyed to have a hyper little boy running around the house, but jealous?

I remember my stressful junior year, stuffed full of AP classes and SATs and college visits. Will was aiming for Stanford, so of course he stayed home on weekends to study. Surely he would have understood that his dad wasn't leaving him behind to take George camping because George was more lovable, but because George was a young child.

Was it all a misunderstanding on George's part? Maybe he thinks Will hated him when they were kids, but in reality Will was simply much older and naturally reserved. He didn't have the time or inclination to play with a seven-year-old stepbrother.

George doesn't misunderstand Will now, though. Will does hate him, with good reason from his perspective.

But...but...maybe that's a misunderstanding too. I'm sure George didn't intend to bring Gianna to a crowded place on her birthday and abandon her there. It must have been an accident, not some twisted plot for revenge. George isn't a villain on a daytime soap opera, for heaven's sake.

And the eighty-thousand-dollar gift...maybe George didn't intend to quit school and squander the money on luxuries. I've read that gap years are trendy nowadays. Maybe George wanted to take

a year off between high school and college to travel and write. Then he was going to start his BA in Creative Writing at Yale, like he said.

George couldn't have been lying about Yale. I saw the sadness in his eyes, his grief for his stepfather and his lost dreams. I heard it in his voice when he told me about the moment he shared his Yale acceptance letter with Robert. "I'll never forget the look of pride on his face, and the way he hugged me. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a dad."

...Wait. The "first time in his life"?

George moved in with Robert at age seven. He applied to Yale around age seventeen. After ten years of bonding on camping and fishing trips, that was the *first time* he felt like Robert was his dad?

Did George embellish the moment in his memory? Was he playing up the touching scene to impress me?

Or...did it even happen?

I don't...I can't...Nothing makes sense anymore. George couldn't have lied to me. My very first student wouldn't do that. But Will isn't lying either, because Will can't lie. He could never let go of his righteous devotion to absolute honesty. That's precisely why our friendship ended.

Will's brain is remarkable in every other way, so why could it not grasp that a confession of love is not sworn testimony? He didn't need to tell me the *whole* truth. Just the pretty half would have been fine. "I'm in love with you. I look forward to seeing you every day. I think you feel the same way, and I want to be more than friends." Is that really so hard?

If Will could have resisted being a jerk for a measly five minutes at that overlook, maybe I wouldn't have lied that I've never thought of him as more than a friend. If he hadn't acted so high and mighty,

maybe I wouldn't have said something that would break our relationship beyond repair. Not that I admit sole responsibility for that. After Will hurt my feelings, it's only natural that I wanted to hurt his disproportionately more.

Alright, alright. You win, Diary. I was wrong, okay? *I was wrong.*

Dependent clause or not, accusing Will of being greedy for his dead father's money was too cruel. I shouldn't have given in to the impulse to lash out at him, no matter how angry I was. If someone said that to me, I'd never speak to them again, either.

But what's the point of acknowledging it now? Regret is a useless emotion. If you're angry, you can punch a pillow to cool off. If you're sad, you can eat chocolate cake and binge-watch the *Anne of Green Gables* miniseries to raise your spirits. But if you regret doing something that can't be undone, there's no action you can take to make the feeling go away.

The best I can do is ignore the regrets, bury them, and forget about them. I have twelve hours to go until my shift. I'm not likely to fall asleep again, so...work. I need work. I need to lose myself in an all-consuming task, like when I was writing my first novel and could work for sixteen hours straight without feeling hunger or fatigue.

This is a good time to take a stab at rewriting my last manuscript. Facing the shortcomings of my work is scary, but not nearly as unpleasant as facing my regrets. Unlike reality, fiction can be fixed.



August 29, 2016

The Day Reality Took Off the Gloves

I

Dear Diary,

I think I've figured it out. The reason why I keep pressing the self-destruct button when happiness is within my grasp, over and over again. Why I set fire to a publishing deal most other writers would kill to have. Why I took a machete to my cushy life with my affluent parents. Why I angrily chased away the man who might or might not have been my soulmate.

The reason is: I'm a masochist.

I must secretly thrive on humiliation. It explains everything: how I behaved in the past, what I did today, and what I intend to do this weekend.

You already know everything about my past, Diary, and thinking about what I intend to do this weekend turns my limbs to jelly, so let's start with the humiliation I subjected myself to today.

Polishing up my last manuscript didn't work out so well. I skimmed through the draft, re-reading Will's comments. I brainstormed about the changes required to bring the story up to snuff.

Then I curled up in a tight ball on the bed and screamed into my pillow.

In the terms of the HGTV shows that play in my dentist's waiting room, this book is a total gut job. I can't simply fix it up with a fresh coat of paint and some crown molding. I need to take a sledgehammer to the walls, redo the eighty-year-old electrical wiring and rusty pipes, rip up the rotted floors and lay down new ones. All by myself.

Do I really want to sink another year into gutting and rewriting this story? Increasingly, I'm thinking "no." I didn't love the premise or the characters to begin with. I wrote the first draft fueled by fear of commercial failure, not by passion for the story. Painful as it is, I might just have to think of that manuscript as a seventy-thousand-word writing exercise and walk away.

After my muffled screaming session, I sat back down with my laptop and dug through my email archive. I have one other manuscript on my hands that I've never considered rewriting: the book that got me blackballed from the publishing industry. Maybe I could salvage that one instead.

I found the feedback from that Big Name Editor and, because I'm a masochist, I read it.

I mean, I *really* read it. I shut down all of my defensive reflexes and forced my mind wide open. I read past the claptrap about "the market" this and "the industry" that to understand what the editor was really saying about the novel.

And you know what, Diary? That editor was right...just for all the wrong reasons.

For example, she demanded that I rewrite the novel using first-person point of view. She said, "The first thing I always ask is

whether a book can be rewritten in first person, because that's what readers today prefer."

At the time, I reacted by thinking, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." First, it's an awful idea to choose a POV based on what's popular, instead of considering the needs of the story. Second, half of the hot bestsellers today are written in third person: the *Harry Potter* books, the *Jack Reacher* thrillers, Nora Roberts romances and Liane Moriarty novels. I decided the editor is an idiot who's clueless about the real world, and I flatly dismissed her feedback.

But if I had been able to ignore the bad reasoning, I would have seen that changing to first person could greatly improve the novel. My choice of third-person POV stifled my voice and my ability to connect readers to the characters. I have a bad habit of keeping my characters at arm's length, distancing myself from their painful feelings. Writing in first person, I'd be forced to identify closely with them, inhabit their skins and channel their rawest thoughts.

Also, the editor claimed the novel had a "muddy middle" and demanded more cliffhangers that "*compel* the reader to turn the pages." At the time, I railed at the twenty-first-century expectation that every story must be "unputdownable." Every book and TV show must be so *enthralling* and *important* and *transformative* that it keeps audiences glued to their smartphones, unblinking, for days on end. Heaven forbid they take a break between chapters to get a healthy seven hours of sleep!

Thinking beyond modern binge-everything culture, though, the middle of the novel does drag. I can now think of many ways I could have increased the narrative tension without resorting to cheap cliffhangers. I could have intensified the characters' internal conflicts.

I could have forced them to confront simmering relationship issues and resolve them properly.

Even with these realizations, I don't know if I want to tackle this rewrite, either. I loved the story to pieces when I wrote it, but I don't feel that passion when I read it now. It's like looking at Facebook photos of my middle-school crush. I smile at the memory of heart-fluttery feelings, but my heart doesn't flutter anymore.

I've held on tight to my resentment of that Big Name Editor for killing such a wonderful book. But now that a couple of years have passed and I see that the book isn't quite so wonderful, it might be time to let it go.

After spending the night in my dark and cramped new room, alone with these distressing self-reflections, I felt an overwhelming need to talk to someone. I missed Jane. At dawn I threw on my windbreaker, hopped on my bike, and rode to my parents' house to see her.

As I turned into the cul-de-sac, Jane jogged down our parents' driveway in her workout gear. I rang the bell on my handlebar in greeting.

"Lizzie!" Jane smiled and waved. "What are you doing out at this time?"

"I was dead tired from moving yesterday and went to bed early." I didn't specify that "early" meant four o'clock in the afternoon. "Want some company?"

While Jane jogged on the sidewalk, I rode beside her in the street. After we exchanged a few pleasantries, I steeled myself and said, "I wanted to talk to you about something."

“What’s up?” Jane asked, as serenely as if she were sitting in a rose garden sipping Darjeeling, not running an eight-minute mile up a steep hill.

“The thing is...Will asked me out.”

The casual phrase “asked me out” felt strange in my mouth, as if it were a lie. Will’s heated confession wasn’t some banal invitation to a movie. But what really happened between us was too messy and intense for me to share with anyone, even Jane.

Jane said, “Really? What did you say?”

“I said no. How could I go out with him, after what he did to you?”

Jane slowed her pace. “Huh? Will didn’t do anything to me.”

“You know, the thing with Charles. Will sent him away to California.”

Jane stopped running, and I hit the brakes. She leaned down with her hands on her knees, suddenly breathing hard. I regretted bringing up a topic I knew would upset her.

I asked, “Are you okay?”

She replied, “If you like Will, you should go out with him. Don’t worry about me.”

“No, I mean, I didn’t turn him down because I was worried about upsetting you. I turned him down because what he did made me so mad. He and Charles made all these unfair assumptions about you. Charles didn’t even talk to you and...”

“He did.” Jane interrupted me. Jane never interrupts. “Charles did talk to me. *I’m* the one who sent him away. Not Will.”

I planted both feet on the ground to keep my balance. “What?”

Jane breathed in deeply and stood up straight. “Before Charles left, he took me to dinner. He brought up the idea of renting out

his vacation home. He kept saying, ‘Will says I’m wasting too much money,’ and ‘Will told me to rent out my place.’ He asked me if I agreed with Will.”

Now everything made sense. Charles is a genuinely nice guy, and the problem with genuinely nice guys is they’re allergic to confrontation. He didn’t have the courage to discuss his own doubts with Jane, so he used Will’s advice as a shield. Will was telling me the truth—he didn’t convince Charles to do anything. Charles made his own decision and shifted the blame to his best friend because he’s a coward.

Jane said, “I knew Charles was testing me. He was asking me to tell him to stay. He wanted me to say I would miss him too much. I knew, but I said, ‘That’s a great idea. You should do it.’”

Now *nothing* made sense. Jane went all melty and googly-eyed at the very sound of Charles’ name. Why would she tell him to leave?

I said, “I thought you liked him.”

“I do. I did. But I don’t have any right to like him. Not when I’m trying to use him to land acting jobs.”

“You aren’t really...”

“Yes, I *am*, Lizzie!”

Jane rubbed her bare arms. “I know you think I’m some kind of saint, and I don’t care about worldly things like fame and fortune. But...do you remember that time I forwarded you an interview with an author who said she ‘never dreamed’ her book would be such a big hit? You said that was nonsense, because every writer in the world secretly dreams of becoming the next J. K. Rowling. Well, that’s true of every actress in the world, too. I love the stage, but I also fantasize about becoming the next Scarlett Johansson.”

I didn't know Jane wanted to be a movie star. I thought Mom was forcing her own disappointed dreams of celebrity on her eldest daughter.

Jane continued, "I can't be with Charles. I feel bad enough hanging out with him as a neighbor, when I'm eying the contacts on his phone and wondering if any of them are directors or producers. We're not even real friends. Wanting more than that is too unethical."

How little I've understood my own sister. Not only did I assume Jane had no interest in Hollywood, I thought she was just acting shy and reserved with Charles. I had no idea she was holding herself back because she felt guilty for harboring ulterior motives.

Now Jane was upset, and I wasn't sure how to handle it because I've never seen Jane seriously upset before. I said, "There's nothing wrong with wanting more. You can hope for Charles to help with your career, and you can also like Charles for real. They're not two mutually exclusive things. I'm sure if you told him that, he'd understand. He likes you so much."

Jane exploded, "No, he doesn't! He doesn't like *me*. He likes his 'angel.' He likes the pretty ingénue who smiles and says nice things. Charles doesn't even know me. If he did, he would have dumped me sooner. Men always do. When they believe I'm all sunshine and sweetness, they say they'll love me forever. As soon as I show them who I really am, that I have selfish and dirty thoughts like everyone else, they don't want me anymore."

Jane's face crumpled. She quickly turned it away from me. With forced lightness, she said, "I'm going to listen to this musical number we're rehearsing while I finish my run, okay? It's great to see you, Lizzie."

Without waiting for a response, Jane took off running and disappeared over the crest of the hill.

I turned around and coasted slowly back to my parents' house. In the twenty-eight years we've been sisters, I've never heard Jane talk so much in her own words. I've heard her deliver plenty of speeches from other people's scripts, and sing songs with other people's lyrics, but she's never before shared her own thoughts and feelings with me like that.

I can't believe all this time, Jane has been thinking her relationships with men failed because she shared too much of herself and scared them away. She doesn't even suspect that her boyfriends grew insecure and frustrated because she didn't share *enough*. Guys say they love her because she's so nice, so she clams up to meet their expectations. They feel unloved and pull away, so she clams up tighter to keep them... What a sad cycle.

Am I any better than those guys, Diary? Maybe all this time, I too have been projecting my "angelic" image of Jane onto the real Jane. Maybe she's never spoken to me like that before because she didn't feel she could trust me with her real self. Let's add "bad sister" to my ever growing list of failures.

When I entered my parents' kitchen, Dad looked up from his iPad and said, "Ah, the prodigal daughter returns. Lucy, where did we put that fattened calf?"

Mom shouted over the Vitamix, "Lizzie, tell that man at the table I want nothing to do with him until he weeds the yard like he promised five days ago!"

I said, "Dad, Mom says she wants nothing to do with you until you weed the yard like you promised five days ago, exclamation point."

Dad rolled his eyes and winked at me.

Lydia took the smoothie Mom poured for her. "Didn't you move out yesterday? What are you doing here?"

"I forgot a few things. Are you going to work now?"

Kitty elbowed Lydia out of the way to grab her own smoothie. "Yeah. George asked me to help him open the store today. I think he has a crush on me."

"Aw, it's cute you think that," Lydia said, "because George asked *me* to inventory the stock with him this morning, while you're opening the store *aaall* alone."

I said, "Do you guys need a ride? Because actually, I want a piece of George, too."

II

I drove the twins to Annie's Bookstore & Cafe in Dad's car. On the way I asked, "When are you guys going back to school?"

Kitty said, "In three weeks."

Lydia said, "I'm not."

I rose my eyebrows at Lydia in the rear-view mirror. "Why not?"

"College is a waste of time. The professors are all clueless, and they don't teach me anything worth knowing. I've learned more in a month working at the store than I did in six years taking classes about stupid stuff."

I was tempted to ask Lydia why she registered for those expensive classes about "stupid stuff," but she would certainly win that squabble because she has a much greater talent for being childish than I do. I tried to speak like a wise older sister instead. "You need only a few more classes to graduate, don't you? Why don't you stick it out for another term and get your diploma?"

Lydia snorted. “What’s the point? A fat lot of good a diploma did for you, and Jane and Mary. You’re all dirt poor anyway. I’m not gonna be like you guys and go into a ton of debt for some piece of paper with a pretentious stamp on it.”

We arrived at the bookstore then, so I didn’t have time to respond. I silently hoped Lydia was just mouthing off, and she would still go back to OSU with Kitty to finish her degree. She might think a bachelor’s is useless because she sees her older sisters underemployed, but at least we’re not *unemployed*, and we have options. That piece of paper with a pretentious stamp on it opens many doors that are locked tight against people without one.

I parallel parked in front of the store. The twins hopped out of the car to race each other inside. Kitty yelled, “Thanks, Lizzie!” Lydia shouldered Kitty out of the way to unlock the front door.

I sat in the car for a moment, plucking up the courage to go inside. I disparaged Charles for shying away from confrontation, but it’s difficult for me, too. I can speak my mind easily in the heat of an argument, but starting one is frightening.

I inhaled deeply and exhaled sharply, grabbed my purse, and headed inside.

George knelt by the shelves with a barcode reader in his hand. His big blue eyes flicked towards me at the sound of the bell. He exclaimed my name in surprise. “What brings a lady like you to a place like this?”

He looked so delighted to see me, I instinctively felt a surge of maternal affection for him. My brain couldn’t reconcile the sight of the curly-haired boy in front of me with the facts Will had told me about him. It’s like, even though nature documentaries tell you

polar bears are capable of gutting a grown man in seconds, they look so pure and cuddly you can't help but to feel they must be harmless.

I asked, "Do you have a few minutes to talk?"

"Oh, sure!"

George said to Lydia, "Just do it like I showed you last time, okay?" Lydia winked at him coquettishly.

While George made me a coffee, I sat on a high stool at the counter. How should I begin? Ease into the conversation, or attack right out of the gate?

George handed me a frothy concoction on a saucer. He asked, "Have you had a chance to read my book, or are you still crazy busy?"

I answered his question with one of my own. "Have you always wanted to go to Yale, George?"

George leaned on the counter and gushed, "Absolutely! It's been my dream since I was a kid. I was so stoked when I got in. I'd have a BA in Creative Writing right now if Will hadn't...you know."

His expression of wistful longing was so convincing, I almost believed the emotion was genuine. This boy would make a great addition to Jane's acting troupe.

I studied the pattern of cocoa sprinkled over the whipped cream topping my coffee. "Yale doesn't offer a BA in Creative Writing."

The wistful expression vanished. Nervousness flashed over George's face before he laughed, as if I were pulling his leg. "Yeah, they do."

"They offer a BA in English with a concentration in writing, but there is no undergraduate or graduate degree in Creative Writing at Yale."

George stared at me blankly. Then he grinned coyly. “Ah, they must have changed the way it works. It’s been like six years since I applied to go there.”

No, actually, the mythical BA in Creative Writing never existed. In fact, Yale introduced the Creative Writing program within the English department only three years ago, long after George applied for admission.

That is, after he *supposedly* applied for admission. If going to Yale were really George’s dream, he would know all about the degrees they offer. He would be the one explaining the structure of the university to me in great detail. When I was a high school senior, I spent hours combing the websites of my dream schools, watching virtual tours and discussing them endlessly with other hopeful applicants on Internet forums. I read every scrap of information about the schools that I could get my skinny adolescent paws on. Even if teenage George wasn’t as obsessive as teenage me, he would at least take five minutes to Google “Yale creative writing.”

George said, “Um, about my book?”

“Yes, about your book. When did you write it?”

“Um...I guess I started it when I was in high school, and I finished it about a year after graduation. Why?”

“Have you written anything else since?”

George blinked, as if he didn’t understand the simple question. “What does that have to do with...?”

“It’s been several years since then. Have you written *anything* else in the meantime? Short stories. Outlines of novels. Poems scribbled on the backs of greasy fast food receipts.”

George shifted his weight irritably. “No, this book is my life’s work. Again, what does that have to do with anything?”

In other words, Diary, George wrote one draft of an immature epic poem many years ago, and he hasn't felt the urge to write a single word since. Not only did he lie about Yale, he lied about his love for writing. He has no interest in mastering the craft. He has no interest in creating great works that touch hearts, or change the world, or even provide some light entertainment to readers looking for a few hours of relief from their stressful lives.

George never wanted to be a writer. He wanted to be an **author**. A celebrity who sits around in a mansion wearing a red velvet robe, sipping Chardonnay and reaping endless royalties from a single bestseller he dashed off in his youth. George's real dream is to be lazy deadbeat who wallows in luxury without lifting a finger to earn it.

Sensing he had given me the wrong answer, George hurried to say, "I wish I could write other things, but I just don't have the time. I spend all day at the store, and then I'm too tired to do anything. If Will had kept Robert's promise, I could have devoted my life to writing. I could have gone to college..."

"I heard you weren't always so eager to go to college."

George balked. Then a look of realization spread over his face, and he smirked. "Oh, I see how it is now. Will's been talking smack about me again, hasn't he?"

I let out an incredulous sound, a cross between a gasp and a laugh. Not five minutes after I met George, he was "talking smack" about Will...and I swallowed it all because he seemed so pitiful and sincere. Will never said a word against George before this weekend, when I pushed him over the edge. He didn't even crack when I goaded him at Charles' housewarming party, meddling in his family

affairs like a presumptuous busybody. Oh my goodness, I was so rude to him.

As if to himself, George said, "I knew this was going to happen the moment I saw you guys together."

"What do you mean?"

George flashed me his trademark dimples. "Come on, you were so obvious. I was worried you two were gonna start bumping uglies right there on the floor."

His vulgarity shocked me. How could he demean me and Will in such a cheerful way, as if he were saying something funny?

Then I realized I shouldn't be shocked, because George has been a crude boor since the day we met. When Will walked into the store to talk to me, George attacked him with vicious sarcasm cloaked in cuteness. The cuteness dazzled me, and I was blind to how mean-spirited his "teasing" really was.

Have I always been this shallow, Diary? I assumed George was a good person because he gave me compliments and chocolate. I assumed Annie was a good person because she strung up some pretty fairy lights. I assumed Will was a lemon-sucking jerk because he's lousy at small talk and he cracked an inside joke at an unfortunate time. Charlotte said I have a bad habit of judging people based on what I see on the surface. She was totally right.

As I was reeling from these thoughts, George continued, "Women are all the same. They say they want to find a nice guy, but they always fall for the douche bags instead. I think you all secretly enjoy being treated like dirt."

He pouted, putting on an expert show of feeling hurt and confused. "Even though you know what kind of guy Will is, even though you know how he treated me..."

“I do know,” I cut him off. I was furious now, my heart pounding. “I know he gave you an obscene amount of money to use for your education, and you squandered it all on trips and toys. I know he gave you a second chance to redeem yourself, for Gianna’s sake. And I know how you treated her on her birthday.”

George flushed. “Oh, come on! Is he still going on about that? Will has always coddled Gianna like she’s some fragile doll. She was *sixteen*, for God’s sake. What sixteen-year-old can’t handle going shopping by herself? I let her off the leash for a few hours, and Will went ballistic as if I committed some big crime.” He stood and crossed his arms defensively. “Look, I was *helping* her. Gianna is never going to get over her shyness if she stays in her comfort zone all the time. Shaking her up now and then is good for her.”

I didn’t bother to hide my dismay. “Helping” a child with social anxiety by abandoning her on a crowded street is like “helping” a child with a peanut allergy by forcing Nutter Butters down her throat.

I said, “Gianna isn’t merely shy. She has social anxiety disorder.”

George laughed. “Oh right, her ‘disorder.’ They’ve got disorders for everything these days. A kid messes around like a normal kid, they say he has ADHD and put him on Ritalin. A chick is a little self-conscious, they say she has ‘anxiety disorder’ and put her on Xanax. It’s all made up by the pharmaceutical companies, you know? I thought you were too smart to fall for that nonsense. But then, you fell for Will too, so...”

I fought back tears, but not because George’s malicious jibes struck a nerve. I felt like crying in shame for trusting George. He flattered me for my writing talent at a time when I was questioning whether I had any, so I built him up in my head as my cherubic “first

student.” I was eager to believe George is a blameless victim and Will a terrible bully, so I ignored the mountains of evidence that it’s the other way around.

George sighed impatiently. “Unlike some people who can yap the whole morning away if they want, I have to earn a living, so...are you done editing my book, or not?”

With difficulty, I smothered the urge to throw my hot coffee into George’s pretty face. “I never offered to edit your book for free. I offered to read it and give you feedback. If you want to work with an editor, you can find many freelancers advertising their services online.”

An ugly snarl contorted that pretty face. “Forget it. I guess you value promises as much as Will does. You two deserve each other.”

George snatched up my coffee and turned his back on me. He emptied the cup into the sink and made a big show of rinsing it out.

Feeling sick from anger and disappointment, I rose to leave. On second thought, I turned back. “I do have one suggestion to give you. It’s not something you’ll find in any writing advice book, or taught in any Creative Writing course. But it’s something every aspiring writer needs to know to be successful.”

George turned off the faucet. “What?”

“In order to become a good writer, you must first become a good person.”

Without waiting for a reaction, I exited the store for the last time.

As the door shut behind me, the bell on the handle jingled merrily. Such a cheerful sound. Such a pretty morning. The streets were calm, the air crisp, the sky that perfect sapphire blue of summer. Pedestrians strolled by with fluffy little dogs, calling out

“good mornings” to the business owners sweeping up storefronts and setting out colorful sandwich boards.

Isn't it strange when the darkest emotions roil inside you, but the world around you is bright and happy? I felt as if I were acting out a soapy *flim noir* on the set of a chipper Hallmark movie.

Ridiculous. All this drama was ridiculous. George was a ridiculous man-child. *I* was acting ridiculous. E. Bennet does not fret and mope. E. Bennet is the fearless heroine of her own story, not some side character who tags along while others drive the plot.

I dug through my purse and found the crumpled business card at the bottom. I smoothed it out to read the contact information: website URL, email address, phone number. I dialed the number on my cell.

“Bingley Bridal Consulting! This is Caroline! How may I be of service to you today?”

“Hi, Caroline. It's Lizzie. Uh, Elizabeth. Bennet. From Bend?”

“Oh!” Caroline paused, as if deciding which tone she should take. Was I a potential client? A friend? A mortal enemy of the Bingley clan, seductress of the man of her dreams and sister of the traitorous wench who broke her brother's heart?

She settled on speaking politely, but not warmly. “What can I do for you, Elizabeth?”

I swallowed my pride. It went down painfully because I have a lot of it.

I said, “I need your help with Will.”



September 3, 2016

The Day I Apologized and Lived to Tell the Tale

I

Dear Diary,

The summer between fifth and sixth grade, Dad decided his five daughters' childhoods would be incomplete without a miserable summer road trip to a national park. I don't remember which park we went to, or what we did there. I remember only the following.

1) I wanted to listen to the *Harry Potter* audiobooks during the drive, but Lydia wouldn't stop screaming until Mom played the *Sesame Street: Sing the Alphabet* cassette on an endless loop. To this day, every time I see an outdated kitchen, I reflexively sing, "La la la, linoleum!"

2) The hotel we stayed in had a swimming pool. This swimming pool had a diving board, and this diving board traumatized me for life.

Mary jumped off the diving board first. After resurfacing, she smugly bet I couldn't do the same. As you might have guessed, Diary, Mary has always had a deep-seated need to prove herself

better than her sisters, and better than me in particular. What you might not have guessed is that when we were kids, I was nearly as competitive as Mary. Eleven-year-old Lizzie Bennet would never back down from a challenge.

The diving board was, in retrospect, not particularly high or dangerous. But to my prepubescent self, standing on the edge of that thing was like looking down the side of the Grand Canyon. Plus, the board had *springs*. Imagine standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, and the ground beneath you wobbles as if it's about to launch you over the cliff to certain death.

I knew this was the stupidest thing I'd ever done, and if I wanted to make it to middle school, I should admit defeat and climb back down the ladder. But I also knew that if I didn't jump, I couldn't live with myself. What was the point in surviving to see the sixth grade if I was a "bock bock bock, chicken," as Mary so eloquently called out from the water below?

And so, dizzy with fear but afire with stubborn pride, I jumped... into a magnificent belly flop that knocked the wind out of me.

You don't have lungs, Diary, so you can't know what it feels like when they stop working. My brain stopped thinking; my heart stopped beating. The universe blinked out of existence, and I was left suspended in a crushing nothingness.

The nothingness trapped me even after the hotel's lifeguard hauled me out of the water. I lay on the cold cement and stared up at the sky forever and ever. Then forever ended, and air rushed into the vacuum of my empty chest. That breath filled me with unbearable pain, but also exquisite relief. I was *alive*.

Today, I lived through the whole diving board experience again, metaphorically, when I went to Will Darcy's house to apologize.

I had a dozen valid excuses to avoid apologizing. Too much time has passed since our big fight. Dragging it up now will only hurt Will again. He said himself that he wants to forget about that conversation, and me, as soon as possible. He'll be irritated to see me on his doorstep. He might be furious. He could call the cops and report me for stalking.

Plus, his house is so far away: one hour by bike, according to Google Maps. I'll ride all the way over there in this heat, and Will might not even be home. It's Saturday. He's probably out grocery shopping or hiking with Gianna. The trip will be futile. I should call first, but what would I say? "Hey, it's me. The girl who stole your heart, smashed it with a verbal hammer, and threw it back in your face. I'm thinking of coming to your house today. Are you free?"

No, calling Will is a terrible idea. Showing up unannounced is also a terrible idea. Why do I want to apologize, anyway? To make Will feel better, or to make myself feel better? After I make one of us feel better, then what? We go back to being friends? Is that even possible? What if Will wants more than that? What if *I* start to want more than that, but he's already over me?

Becoming friends in the first place was unwise. We're like oil and water. Peppermint and orange juice. Cello and kazoo. We simply do not belong together. For Will's sake and mine, I should say nothing and let him go. It's for the best.

All of these excuses ran through my mind as I put on sunscreen, filled my backpack, and set off on my bike towards the farmlands on the southeast side of town. I was still coming up with fresh excuses as I turned off the road onto the long asphalt drive that winds through the Darcy family's thirty-acre property. I passed herds of cows, bales of hay, and vast green pastures surrounded by pine

trees, all the while thinking, "I should not be here. This is a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad idea."

But, like jumping off that diving board, apologizing to Will was something I had to do, even though it was terrifying. Maybe I had to do it *because* it was terrifying. If I said nothing, I would never know whether my silence was truly "for the best," or whether I'd convinced myself it was "for the best" because I'm a coward.

E. Bennet is not a coward. E. Bennet does what must be done, even if she knows she will belly-flop spectacularly.

With a burst of steely resolve, I pedaled faster towards the house at the end of the drive. It looked like a normal house from the distance, but as I drew closer it looked less and less like a normal house and more and more like a royal villa.

I refused to be cowed by the towering gables, the grand wraparound porch, or the three (yes, three) garage doors. I would not be intimidated by the profusion of flowering plants I could not name, the huge glassy koi pond, or the honest-to-goodness waterfall. Not even a hundred honest-to-goodness waterfalls would stop me from completing my mission.

Then I ran into the gate.

A tall arched gate blocked the entrance to Chez Darcy, and a shorter white picket fence surrounded the perimeter. The fence was only about three feet tall, and it was presumably meant to deter stray sheep from wandering into the flowerbeds. It also happened to be quite effective in deterring uninvited guests from ringing the doorbell.

The front gate was locked tight. I parked my bike and walked along the fence, looking for a smaller side gate I could open from the outside. At this point, I should have taken out my phone to call

Will. But, though it sounds insane in retrospect, the idea of calling to confess that I was prowling around his house felt more embarrassing than the idea of simply breaking in.

I finished a full circle of the fence without finding a way past it. The front door was so close, yet so very far away. I felt I had only one option remaining. I planted one foot on the bottom board of the fence to climb over it.

A familiar thought entered my head then. *This is the stupidest thing I've ever done.*

As I hoisted myself up and threw my other leg over the top of the fence, the front door opened.

A fluffy chihuahua scampered out of the house and darted towards the trees. Will Darcy emerged after the dog, carrying a full garbage bag. He wore pajama bottoms with the Superman logo printed on them. He did not wear a matching top. Or any top. At all.

The sight of Will knocked the breath out of me like the cold water of that hotel pool in 1999. Brain, heart, and time all stopped for an excruciating eternity.

After dropping the bag in the garbage can, Will turned and spotted me. He froze and stared at me straddling his fence, staring at *him* half-clothed in Superman pajama pants.

Then eternity ended in a burst of pain, as I topped off the fence into a bed of flowers.

I suppressed my whimpers and lay very still, as if I might blend into the foliage and Will would forget I was there. It didn't work. Will approached and stood over me with his arms folded.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

I squeaked, "Present."

“May I inquire why you climbed over my fence with the apparent intention of vandalizing my coneflowers?”

I thought, *Ah, so that's what these are called. Also, Dear God, please kill me now.*

Contrite, I scooted off the plants and surveyed the damage. The flowers were crushed beyond saving. I picked up the pitiful broken stalks and, kneeling with my head bowed, I offered them up to Will.

“I’m sorry!”

All of my courage went into those words, so I didn’t have enough left to look up at Will’s face. I squeezed my eyes shut and barreled ahead.

“I’m sorry I said terrible things to you. George is a sociopathic poser, and I was an idiot to believe him. You’re a thousand times better than he is in every way. You gave me cupcakes and read my stories, and I never even thanked you. I’m sorry I lashed out at you because I was embarrassed. I’m sorry I climbed over your fence to ambush you because I was too chicken to call first.”

A lump of shame formed in my throat. I pushed my voice past it and wailed, “And I’m so, so sorry I crushed your coneflowers!”

Will said nothing. I still couldn’t bring myself to open my eyes. I continued to kneel, immobile, my arms extended and quivering. I probably looked like a character in one of Mary’s period K-dramas: a terrified peasant pleading an offended king for mercy.

Will made a strange sound. He choked it back, but then he made the same sound again.

My eyes snapped open. “Are you...laughing at me?”

“No,” Will said with his usual stony expression. He covered his mouth and turned his face away. He made the sound again.

“You are! You’re laughing at me!”

“I am not.”

A smile peeked out from behind Will’s hand. Then he gave up all pretense and threw his head back, laughing like I was the funniest thing he’d seen in his life.

I dropped the ruined flowers, incredulous. I’d never heard Will laugh like that before: genuine and unfettered. I didn’t know he was capable of it. And of all the things that might have triggered such laughter, all of my witty lines and hilarious anecdotes, my heartfelt apology was the one that did it?!

I said, “You never laugh at my jokes, but you’re laughing *now*? The *one* time I’m being vulnerable and sincere with you?”

Will calmed down and said, “I laugh at your jokes all the time.”

“No, you don’t. Raising the right side of your mouth and crinkling your eyes a teensy bit is not ‘laughing.’”

The right side of his mouth rose, and Will forced it back down. “If you prefer, I’ll make an effort to laugh at you more often.”

The chihuahua I’d glimpsed earlier scampered up to us, yipping. It planted two dusty paws on my lap and sniffed my face. A pink tongue shot out and tried to lick my mouth. I dodged.

Will said, “Down, Yoda.”

The chihuahua—which did bear an uncanny resemblance to Yoda—obediently climbed down and ran towards the house. He sat by the door and looked back at Will, wagging his tail.

Will offered me his hand. I took it, and he hauled me up. I felt suddenly shy holding his hand, standing so close to him when he had no shirt on.

I had no reason to feel shy. I see shirtless guys at the fitness center all the time, and I think nothing of it. Athletic guys with

muscular arms and sculpted abs. Will is fit, but he's a lawyer, not a lifter. His best features are above his neck.

Since I have no reaction to those hot guys at the pool, it was nonsensical to avert my eyes bashfully from sight of arms that are not muscular and abs that are not sculpted. And to wonder if that pale skin would feel as smooth as it looked. And to be painfully aware of the fact that if I took one step forward, my cheek would be resting on Will's bare chest.

I busied myself brushing dirt and leaves off of my clothes. "Um, nice pants."

"Thank you. Gianna sewed them for me last Christmas."

"Oh, she sews? That's cool. I don't sew. The last time I sewed something was in Home Ec. I tried to make a pair of cotton shorts, but I cut the pieces too small and they turned into underwear."

Aren't I brilliant, Diary? By babbling about underwear, I was able to turn that awkward situation into a *horribly* awkward situation.

I rushed to say, "I'm really sorry about the coneflowers. I'll replace them."

"Don't worry about it. They would have died back soon. I've been thinking about putting delphiniums here next year."

"Oh. Good idea." I nodded in approval as if I had the faintest idea what delphiniums look like.

Will ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry too."

"Why? You don't have anything to be sorry about."

"Yes, I do. I projected my feelings onto you, when you never gave me any reason to suppose...It was my own wishful thinking."

I was prepared for the embarrassment of giving my own apology, but not for the embarrassment of hearing one from Will. I

was dangerously close to finding out if it's possible to get heatstroke from blushing alone.

Will continued, "I shouldn't have sent you that email. At the time I thought I was only defending myself, but I wasn't. My real motive was to make you feel guilty for turning me down, because I felt like you'd led me on. After I cleared my head, I had to admit you never led me on. You just have a playful personality, and I misunderstood you. I thought you were flirting with me, and I got carried away. My behavior was deplorable. I'm sorry."

The thing is, Diary, Will did misunderstand...and he didn't. I really wasn't flirting with him. I joke around like that with everybody. (Come to think of it, Winston Collins made the same assumption about me. Have I been unknowingly leaving a trail of broken hearts in my wake all this time?)

But if Will picked up on signals that I was crushing on him, he didn't imagine them. I was attracted to him from the moment we met. I still am, as evidenced by the fact that my animal brain was still stuck on the proximity of my cheek to his chest. That doesn't mean I intend to date Will, or that I was "leading him on," but it does mean he wasn't *entirely* wrong like Winston was.

Saying all that now would make things hopelessly complicated. I didn't know what to say instead, so I stood there saying nothing and feeling stupid.

Will cleared his throat. "Would you like to come inside?"

I should have said, "Thanks for the invitation, but I have to get going." Or more honestly, "You're half naked and I'm confused, so that's probably a bad idea."

Instead I said, "Sure."

II

I followed Will into the house. As expected, the interior looked like a feature spread in *House Beautiful* magazine. The elegant foyer led into an opulent living room decorated with luxurious furniture, trendy wallpaper, landscape paintings on the walls and marble statues on the display shelves. A baby grand piano gleamed in a sunny corner.

The room was beautiful...objectively. Though I appreciated the aesthetics the same way I'd admire a historic church or metropolitan museum, I didn't feel the house was a *home*. Maybe other people can live happily in a museum, but I'm more of a "shabby chic" type of girl. Rather than an opulent mansion with three garage doors buffered by thirty acres of trees and crops, I'd prefer to live in a cozy three-bedroom within biking distance of downtown. And waterfalls are impressive and all, but I'd feel more comfortable in a low-maintenance back garden where I can sip coffee in my pink pajamas.

(Yes, I *know* I'll never be able to afford even a cramped one-bedroom condo on my salary. Thank you for reminding me how poor I am, Diary.)

"Your home is lovely," I said out of obligation.

"Thank you, on my father's behalf," Will said. "He put a lot of work into it. I haven't done much since he passed away. When my sister is ready to move out on her own, I plan to sell everything and move closer to work."

"Really?" Though the home wasn't to my personal taste, I was surprised Will was so eager to let it go.

Will invited me to put down my bag and hat. He grabbed a light-weight cotton robe off the back of a chair and put it on. “I don’t use half of the rooms, and managing the land is a big time sink. In summer all of my free time goes into the yard, and in winter it all goes into plowing snow off that blasted driveway.”

I nodded in sympathy. That asphalt road through Will’s property is *really* long. Shoveling my parents’ average suburban driveway is onerous enough; half the time Dad doesn’t even bother. He just guns the engine to slide up the icy cement and hopes he doesn’t slam into the back of the garage.

Will said, “Ideally I’ll find a place close to downtown. I don’t need more than three bedrooms, and I’ll be happy if I never see another water feature in my life. Never again do I want to spend two vacation days crawling around in mud, trying to unclog a waterfall pump. I just want a small, manageable garden where I can have my coffee in the morning.”

Hearing Will talk about life dreams that happened to match up perfectly with mine made me feel weird and anxious. I interjected, “I’m sorry for showing up unannounced. I hope I didn’t ruin your plans for the day.”

Will said it was no problem, and he didn’t have any plans. I should have stopped there, but I felt compelled to follow up with, “And I swear I’m not a stalker.”

As I realized after I spoke, there’s no better way to convince people you’re a stalker than to insist you aren’t one.

To dispel the disturbing impression I’d just created by babbling, I babbled even more. “I mean, I didn’t follow you home or anything.”

There. All better.

Will’s mouth quirked. “I assumed you looked me up on DIAL.”

I have since learned, Diary, that DIAL is the Deschutes County property information database. You would think, with the all-capital letters and whatnot, that it is an acronym for “Deschutes” something or other. But “DIAL” is, in fact, a meaningless name the government made up.

At the time I had never heard of DIAL. Seeing my confusion, Will said, “Property ownership is a matter of public record. Anyone can look up my address on the Internet, so I didn’t think to ask how you found mine.”

Indeed, when I later typed “Darcy” into DIAL, I found not only Will’s address, but the exact acreage and assessed value of his land, his property tax payment history, and scans of all building permits granted for the initial construction of and later additions to the house.

Hearing the phrase “public record,” I silently kicked myself for letting Caroline yank my chain. Ooh, she had so much fun toying with me on the phone.

“Oh, but I thought you had no intention of dating Will. Didn’t you say he was a ‘total jerk’? What was that? You were wrong about him? My, what a surprising turn of events. Yes, I think I do have his address around here somewhere, but I’m not sure I should give it out to just anyone. How badly do you want to see him, I wonder?”

And to think, I could have simply typed his name into a search bar. I should have asked Mary first. I bet she knows all about DIAL, and she wouldn’t have asked any prodding questions about Will and me because she couldn’t care less.

I said, “You caught me. That’s exactly what I did: I used DIAL. Because I’m an educated adult and I know these things. I was trying to freak you out as a joke. Looks like it didn’t work. Darn.”

Will moved into the kitchen. I’d never before seen two double ovens in one home kitchen. Annie’s doing, I presume.

He asked, “Would you like a drink? I have fruit juice and iced tea.”

“No, thanks.” I refused reflexively, though I was a bit thirsty.

Will said, “I saw your bike out there. I don’t want you to end up like Jane.”

I nearly cracked that I wouldn’t mind ending up in his bathtub, but fortunately I realized in time that the joke would sound sexier than I intended. I only meant that Will’s bathroom is probably luxurious and spa-like, not that I want to get naked in his house... and I’m so glad none of that came out of my mouth.

Will’s apology earlier made me hyper-aware that my jokes can sound flirtatious, and I didn’t want to send him any more mixed messages. I was extra careful to avoid touching Will’s fingers when he handed me a glass of iced tea. And I was extra-extra careful not to notice that the front of his flimsy cotton robe gaped wide open, and I could still see his bare chest.

A pretty teenage girl bounded into the kitchen, calling Will’s name. She stopped short at the sight of me and blushed in surprise. This, I figured, was Gianna.

Now, all teenagers are pretty. When I was eighteen I didn’t think I was pretty, but when I look at photos of myself now I’m like, “Dang it, I was so *cute*! Why did I waste so much time worrying about my thighs?” Working at the college, I see countless pretty young people slinking around with low self-confidence. I wish I could broadcast

a daily announcement through the library: "Listen up! You're all gorgeous! Enjoy it while you can!"

But Gianna, being a Darcy, is a step up from "everyone that age is pretty" pretty. She's homecoming queen pretty. Rory Gilmore pretty. Neutrogena commercial pretty. I can imagine her splashing water on her face in slow motion with a blissful smile, successfully convincing millions that cleansing with Oil-Free Acne Wash is delightful fun.

Will said, "Gianna, this is my friend, Elizabeth."

With Gianna, Will uses a voice I hadn't heard him use before with anyone else. I've heard his angry prosecutor voice, his deadpan wise-guy voice, his upset fighting-with-someone-I-love voice, and his apologetic trying-hard-to-be-friendly voice. But I'd never heard him use the paternal, affectionate voice reserved for his little sister... and maybe his future children. It caught me off guard and made me feel fuzzy and weird again.

"Hey," Gianna mumbled. She crossed her arms and avoided my eyes.

If I didn't know Gianna has social anxiety disorder, from her unfriendly attitude I might have thought my presence bored or irritated her. I might have judged her to be an arrogant girl, smug in her own beauty and wealth. But because I'd read up on SAD, I knew she was acting that way because she was silently freaking out. She was terrified of saying the wrong thing, or making the wrong expression, and embarrassing herself in front of her brother's friend.

The Internet gave me tips on how to make a person with SAD feel comfortable, but of course I couldn't remember any of them

when I needed to. I tried engaging Gianna the same way I would anyone else.

“Hello, Gianna. Will says you’re really good at playing the piano.”

Gianna blushed brighter. “Not really.”

Ack, putting her on the spot was the wrong thing to do. Maybe I should just talk a lot without asking questions.

I pointed to the baby grand in the living room. “I was admiring your instrument earlier. It’s huge! My parents have an ancient upright. My sisters and I all took lessons when we were kids. Mary still plays sometimes, but she sounds awful. It’s not totally her fault, though. I think the last time that piano was tuned, Bill Clinton was president.”

I moved towards the piano. I looked at the sheet music on the stand and gasped. “That is a lot of notes. There’s no way I could play a crazy piece like this. But I kind of feel like trying anyway, because it would be hilarious.”

Will said, “You can.”

“Really? Ooh.” I tentatively pressed one of the keys a couple of times. The pure sound soared through the room. “Wow, it’s like I’m in a concert hall.”

I sat down on the bench and made a big show of stretching my hands, limbering up my shoulders and wiggling my fingers. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gianna edge towards the piano tentatively.

With a dramatic flourish, I struck the first chord...with half of the notes wrong. “Oops. That’s not it. Let’s see here. F, C, F...I’m good on the left hand. On the right, the bottom note is, uh...”

“A.” Gianna said beside me. She pointed shyly at the correct key.

“Like this?” I moved my hand down to the proper position.

Gianna nodded. “It’s just an F major chord, but it’s not in the root position.”

“I see,” I said, though I didn’t really because I don’t understand the first thing about chords. I played the first few bars tortuously slowly, then struck another chord that was clearly wrong. “Eek. What about this one?”

“That’s a C dominant seventh chord. The B is flat.”

The color of Gianna’s cheeks returned to normal as she answered my questions about the score. She smiled for the first time when I gushed about how helpful she was. When I gave up after the first eight measures and started to play “Chopsticks” instead, she even laughed.

I was having a pretty good time myself...until I glanced at Will. He was sitting on one of the couches, watching us. When my eyes met his, a sad expression flickered through his eyes. Then it was gone, replaced by his usual stony mask.

Will never lies with his words, but he lies habitually with his face. Stone-cold, distant, unfeeling—is there a human in existence who’s like that on the inside?

I broke his heart last week, and today I climb over his fence, make myself comfortable in his living room, and get chummy with his little sister. Of course he was in pain. I shouldn’t have come. I knew I shouldn’t have come. I told myself over and over that it was a terrible idea and I’d only hurt Will. I should have listened to myself.

I pretended to check the time on my phone. “Oh my gosh, I have to get going. I’m meeting Charlotte for lunch.”

(Yes, Diary, that was a lie. Charlotte spends all of her free time with Winston now. They're officially engaged, and she's renovating his house for the baby with gusto.)

I stood up. Gianna's face fell. I felt as if I had invited a shy kitten into my lap, and as soon as I gained its trust and it settled down purring, I abruptly dumped it on the floor.

Will stood too. "I'll give you a ride."

"No! Uh, thanks. I want to work up an appetite so I can eat a lot. Thanks for letting me see your home and play your piano. I had fun."

As I gathered my backpack and hat, Gianna joined Will and touched his arm. He bent down slightly to listen to her.

Will asked me, "Do you have plans on Monday?"

"No," I responded without thinking. "The college is closed for Labor Day."

"I'm hosting a barbecue at noon. Would you like to come?"

"*You're* having a barbecue?" I said, also without thinking. I couldn't help it. Will is not a barbecue-hosting kind of man. He's the kind of man who goes to other people's barbecues and hides indoors with his laptop.

"To be more accurate, Aunt Cathy is hosting a barbecue at my house. She wants to introduce me to her friends."

"Ah, I see."

And I did see. I'd forgotten Will was campaigning for election in two months. Naturally he would make use of his connections through the infamous Catherine de Bourgh. In this case, the word "barbecue" really meant "political networking function."

He said, "I believe one of them is your friend's fiancée. Aunt Cathy says he's 'the potential future board treasurer of the DBBA, but probably nothing more.'"

I laughed. "Winston would be thrilled to hear that. I can imagine him dropping it into every conversation. 'The mayor *pro tempore*, Catherine de Bourgh, has been so gracious as to bestow upon me the title of Potential Future Board Treasurer of the Downtown Bend Business Association but Probably Nothing More.'"

Will smiled. The warm look in his eyes sent another stab of guilt through me.

Gianna piped up, "So, will you come?"

She reddened and crossed her arms again, doing her best to look as if she didn't care one way or the other.

How could I say no? Of course I responded, "Sure. I'm looking forward to it!"



September 5, 2016

The Day I Stopped Lying to Myself

I

Dear Diary,

The truth is a terrible thing.

Lies are beautiful, because we get to make them. Just like we build lovely houses to protect ourselves from Mother Nature, we cocoon ourselves in pretty lies to survive reality.

“My life might be miserable now, but it will get better with time. As long as I work hard and treat others well, I’ll be rewarded. One day I won’t have to worry about the bills. I’ll have the power to change the world for the better. I’ll meet my soulmate, and I’ll live happily ever after.”

These are lies because, when we tell them to ourselves, we don’t know whether they’re true or not. We insist they’re true because we need to believe them, or we’ll give up on life. Believing these lies, and living as if they’re not lies, is the only chance we have of turning them into truth.

For some people, the lies do become truth. They succeed professionally. They rise up the ranks. They meet their ideal partners and have effortlessly peaceful marriages.

But for others, the lies get exposed for what they are. Truth—being a terrible, apathetic, amoral thing—pounds relentlessly on our precious cocoons until they break.

“Meritocracy is an illusion. The world is too big for one person to change. Life isn’t fair and perfect soulmates don’t exist. There is no ‘happily ever after’ because you *will* die, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Depressing, huh? I told you, truth is a terrible thing.

For the past couple of months, I have protected myself with a very particular lie. I know you know which one I’m referring to, Diary, because you’ve gotten on my case about it time and time again. Therefore, I refuse to give you the satisfaction of spelling it out just yet. I will only say that today was the day I stopped lying to myself, and you’ll have to listen to the whole story to hear me admit the truth.

Charlotte and Winston drove me to Will’s house for his Labor Day barbecue. When I called Charlotte and asked if I could catch a ride, I thought it was a beautifully convenient and stress-free arrangement. Unfortunately, I’d forgotten the soon-to-be Mrs. Collins has developed a habit of amusing herself by meddling in her single friends’ relationships.

You see, Diary, we humans have an endearing universal trait. When we find something that makes us happy, we are compelled to spread that happiness to everyone we care about...whether they want it or not.

When we eat a delicious dish at a restaurant: “Mm, this is amazing! Do you want a bite? No? Here, have a bite. You *have* to taste it.”

When we find a binge-worthy show on Netflix: “It’s *so* good. You would love it. Yeah, I know you don’t like zombie apocalypse shows, but this one is different. Just watch the first episode—you’ll be hooked!”

And when we get married and settle down in the two-story house with the white picket fence and backyard playset: “So how’s your boyfriend doing? Has he proposed yet? Your babies are going to be so cute. Oh, everyone says they don’t want kids at first. You’ll change your mind, believe me.”

So even Charlotte Lucas, the definition of the modern independent woman, greeted me on the driveway by saying, “Look at you, sexy! You and Will are making some progress, huh?”

Okay, I *did* put in some effort to dress up, but is that really so strange? I was about to go to a party full of local celebrities. Of course I would dig out my best fit-and-flare dress and put on a little eyeliner and lipstick. It had nothing to do with Will...as I told myself at the time.

I climbed into the back seat of Charlotte’s new family-friendly minivan. “We worked some things out. We’re cool now.”

Charlotte backed out into the street. “Cool,’ huh? So tell me more about that dream.”

“What dream?”

“The one you had about Will. You brought it up during dinner with your folks, remember? Winston was there too. Right, honey?”

Winston nodded. “I distinctly recall Elizabeth’s words. ‘He’s super handsome and super smart. I don’t know anyone more perfect. I even dreamed about him last night.’”

Hearing Winston gush girlishly about Will in that robotic baritone would have been hilarious, if it wasn’t so personally mortifying.

fyng. Yes, those were my words, but I only said them to suck up to Winston because Will is his idol's nephew...and I couldn't admit any of that to defend myself.

I pulled at my sheer tights. "I mean, yes, I had a dream and Will was in it, but he wasn't Will. He was Edward Cullen."

Charlotte merged onto the parkway. "What, the sparkly vampire from *Twilight*?"

"Exactly. It was that scene from the first movie when Edward breaks into Bella's room and watches her sleep. You know, the one that seemed romantic when we were in college but is totally creepy now."

"Yeah, I know the one. You mean the scene where they have a hot make-out session and end up horizontal on the bed. You had *that* kind of dream about Will."

"No!" I glanced at the back of Winston's head. I swear Charlotte was embarrassing me on purpose. "It was just the dialogue..."

Charlotte laughed. She *was* embarrassing me on purpose. "But seriously, you guys would make a great couple. I'm surprised Will hasn't made a move by now."

I said, "Hey, Winston. I've never met Catherine de Bourgh before. Is there anything I should know about her?"

For the next ten minutes, Winston delivered a comprehensive lecture about the personal and professional history, family tree, hobbies, and health conditions of our mayor *pro tempore*. None of these details were particularly remarkable, though Winston spoke as if Catherine were the first woman on earth to be born to wealthy parents, earn a degree in political science, take up tennis, and develop an allergy to cats late in life.

As soon as we arrived at Will's house, I met the illustrious personage herself. I've seen Catherine de Bourgh's photograph in newspapers and campaign mailers, so I recognized her face immediately. However, I didn't expect her to be so...*tiny*.

With her famously outsize personality and influence in Central Oregonian society, I'd imagined Catherine de Bourgh as a stately queen with a body proportionate to her reputation. But the seventy-something woman bustling around Will's kitchen stood a full head shorter than I do. She was so wispy, the massive jewelry around her neck and bony wrists probably weighed as much as the rest of her combined.

I wondered how such a petite, stooping body could contain so much energy. When Charlotte, Winston, and I walked in through the doors, Will's "Aunt Cathy" managed to simultaneously greet us, relieve us of our outerwear, dispense unnecessary advice, interrogate and belittle me all in one fell swoop.

"I have directed my nephew to keep your Gardenburger separate from the meats," she said to Charlotte, who is not vegetarian. "You must stay away from the sandwich platters as well. Women who are expecting cannot eat cold cuts or ground meats of any kind."

As Charlotte is more than capable of monitoring her own diet, "expecting" or no, Catherine's attempt to control her ruffled my feathers. I said, "As long as the meat is thoroughly cooked, it's fine. I'm sure Will isn't going to poison any of his guests."

Catherine narrowed her tiny eyes at me. "You must be Elizabeth Bennet."

She didn't say it in the excited and friendly way most people say, "You must be Elizabeth! I've heard so much about you!" She said it

in a way that sounded more like, “You must be *that* Elizabeth. They warned me about you.”

I said, “Must I? But it would be so much more fun to be Scarlett Johansson.”

My joke seemed to catch Catherine off-guard, and she didn’t like being off-guard. “Do you have children of your own? You can’t be much older than my teenage niece.”

I nearly shot back with, “You can’t be much older than my octogenarian grandmother,” but I couldn’t be mean to Will’s aunt in his home.

I said, “No, I haven’t had any children yet. But I do have four sisters. The youngest two are in college, and they’re basically still kids.”

“*Four* sisters?” Miss Three-Is-Too-Much looked scandalized. “Your parents must have spent a fortune on childcare. What do they do?”

“Well, with so many adult daughters in the house, they spend quite a bit of time picking up bobby pins off the floor.”

“You *live* with them? Five children, all adults, and still at home?” Catherine spoke with dismay, as if the fabric of American society were unraveling before her very eyes. “Don’t you feel sorry for your poor parents?”

I didn’t feel like explaining to Catherine that we all have jobs, my sisters pay Dad “rent,” and I moved out on my own last month. In fact, I didn’t feel like talking to her at all. How is that people so rude can be so successful in politics?

I smiled and said, “None of us showed up on the planet uninvited. So where is Will hiding?”

Charles and Caroline Bingley arrived then, and Catherine conspicuously ignored my question to greet them. After making brief small talk, Catherine glided regally through the French doors to the yard without a glance in my direction. Winston trailed after her like a well-trained pet, and Charlotte followed after her fiancée.

Charles greeted me enthusiastically, as if we were still the closest of neighbors. With a sunny smile, he chattered about how wonderful it was to be back in Bend again.

His cheerfulness faltered when he asked, "How is...everyone?"

We both knew whom he meant by "everyone," but I pretended I didn't. "Mom and Dad are doing well. Kitty and Lydia are going back to college in a couple of weeks."

"And...your other sister? Sisters? Are they...Did they come with you?" Charles looked around the house, nervous and hopeful that he would see "them" there.

"No," I said. "I grabbed a ride with Charlotte."

"Oh, right, Charlotte. And how's she doing?"

I knew Charles wasn't paying attention to the answer, because he was too disappointed that he wouldn't see the person he specifically left Bend to avoid. I was tempted to say outright, "You have Jane's number. You know where she lives. If you miss her so much, for goodness' sake, reach out to her and talk things out like adults." But that wasn't my place.

Caroline jumped in to say, "I see you're getting along with Will again. How did that apology go?"

I flushed at the memory of my humiliating grand entrance on Saturday. "It went well. Thanks for your help."

"I'm so glad to hear it. Life is much more fun with a little competition."

Will entered the house through the French doors. Maybe it was the sunlight streaming in behind him, or the slightly messy state of his hair, but somehow he looked even more handsome than usual. I was unprepared for the happiness that bloomed inside me at the sight of him, and I'm afraid I didn't fully extinguish it before it showed on my face.

Caroline noticed. I know she noticed, because she gave me an impish grin before launching herself at Will to give him a hug and two cheek kisses. Will looked concerned for a moment before he determined Caroline wasn't drunk.

(You know, Diary, I believe Caroline isn't even interested in Will. She just enjoys flirting with him to provoke me. Which, I told myself, totally did not work.)

Will said he'd come in to get a tray of hamburgers. I jumped in front of Caroline to help him by holding the freezer door. Caroline smirked her way out the door to the yard, and Charles called out that we should catch up later.

Will thanked me for my help. When he looked straight at me and smiled, my warm-and-fuzzy reaction stirred the first conscious thought in my brain: *Uh oh. I might be in trouble.* I squashed that thought down as hard as I could and said breezily, "No problem."

I should have followed Will back out to the yard to meet his guests, but I was suddenly reluctant. Out there was a world I didn't know, a Will Darcy I didn't know. A Will campaigning for election to the circuit court, rubbing shoulders with city council members and police commissioners and Aunt Cathy's other "friends." For some reason, I feared seeing *that* Will would ruin the one who made happiness blossom in my chest, who abandoned his work every day

at 11:30 to feed me Ocean Rolls and sat around on Saturdays in Superman pajamas.

So I stayed in the kitchen and busied myself by being helpful. I opened a bag of organic veggie chips and refilled a bowl. I rearranged the dishes on the island to group savory appetizers on one side and desserts on the other.

Then a guest told me he'd taken the last of the iced tea, so I found the box of Lipton's in the cupboard and made a fresh pitcher. As I set out the tea, another guest asked me where the bathroom was, so I helped him find it. When I came back, an older couple came over to introduce themselves and shake my hand.

"This is a *beautiful* home," the woman gushed.

"It's very spacious," I agreed.

"When was it built, do you know?"

I puzzled over why she thought I would know such a thing. Come to think of it, why did those other guests come to me for tea and directions? How did I become the presumed the expert on Chez Darcy?

I said, "I don't know exactly, but Will's dad did most of the work on it. Will would prefer to live somewhere more low-maintenance. He once spent two vacation days crawling around in the mud, trying to unclog the waterfall pump."

The couple laughed heartily at that, which confused me because I wasn't telling a joke.

Will came back inside then to fetch another pack of hotdogs. The older couple caught him along the way. The man shook his hand, and the woman said, "Your home is beautiful, and your wife is absolutely charming!"

For a split second, I thought, *Will has a wife? Are they separated or something?* Only when Will's eyes met mine did I realize, *Oh my word, they mean me!*

I hurried to correct the misunderstanding. But instead of saying, "Oh, I'm just a friend," in my flustered state I said, "Oh, we're not married yet."

Yet? YET?! Where did the **yet** come from?! I scrambled to correct myself by saying, "No, not *yet*," but that didn't clarify matters at all.

Will quirked his mouth in that infuriating way, and the older couple seemed to think I was being adorably bashful. I wanted to throw myself into that muddy waterfall and drown.

Because Will really is a lemon-sucking jerk sometimes, he thought it was funny to repeat, "No, not *yet*."

The couple ambled off, still believing I'm the future Mrs. Darcy. I couldn't look at Will. I knew he thought I'd just made some kind of Freudian slip, but I hadn't! I just panicked on the spot! (So I thought.)

Fussing with a plate of cookies, I said, "I haven't seen Gianna around. Or Yoda."

Will dug through the fridge for the hotdogs. "They're upstairs in her room. Crowds are stressful for both of them."

I felt bad for Gianna, because I've read that people with anxiety aren't like people who avoid socializing by choice. Mary, for example, locks herself up in her room to watch K-dramas because she doesn't like real people. Gianna might wish she could go out and make friends, but the thought of meeting new people is too overwhelming.

I imagined Gianna sitting at the window of her room, lonely and isolated, watching the revelries below and wishing she could go down for a hamburger, if only she had the courage.

I said, "Can I go up to say hi?"

I made the mistake of glancing at Will's face, and the way he was looking at me made my heart stutter and twist up painfully for a second.

He said, "She'd like that."

Will led me up the grand staircase in the foyer, up to the door of Gianna's room. I tried very hard not to wonder which of the doors led to Will's room.

He knocked and called out, "Gianna, Elizabeth is here to see you."

After a gasp and a flurry of muffled activity, Gianna opened the door. Though her cheeks were red and her hair hastily brushed, she leaned on the frame with her arms crossed in a brave imitation of adolescent bravado.

"What's up?" Gianna mumbled.

"Hello, Gianna. I was wondering if you'd like to take Yoda out for a walk with me. He must be getting antsy, cooped up in here all day."

Gianna's eyes shined with excitement, but the sparkle dimmed under a cloud of doubt. She might have thought I was taking pity on her. "No, he's okay."

"To be honest, Yoda is just an excuse. You and Will and a couple of others are the only people I know here. It's awkward being around so many strangers. I've just been puttering around in the kitchen the whole time. It would be a lot more interesting to hang out with you and play with Yoda."

Will said, "I think Yoda would like a walk."

At the sound of Will's voice saying his name and the word "walk," Yoda wriggled past Gianna and tried to jump up into Will's arms. When he failed, he was not dispirited in the least. He happily stood with his front paws on Will's shins, wagging his curly puff of a tail.

"I can't take you," Will informed the chihuahua. "I left Charles to watch the grill, so that batch is most likely burnt by now. Gianna can take you."

Yoda obediently turned to Gianna to beg for his walk. She smiled and said, "Okay, okay. I'll get your leash."

I bumped into Will while turning around in the hall, and a hot jolt shot through me where his arm touched mine. I told myself over and over that I was not thinking about where his bedroom might be.

As we all headed downstairs, Yoda straining on his leash to run to the front door, Caroline Bingley found us.

"I'm so sorry, Will," Caroline said. "Charles ruined your hamburgers. I knew I shouldn't have left him alone. Oh, Gianna!"

Caroline rushed at Gianna and enveloped her in a hug, then stepped back to appraise her. "You're positively gorgeous now! If you lived in Beverly Hills, talent agents would be falling over themselves to recruit you everywhere you went." She spotted the leash in Gianna's hand. "Are you heading out to walk the dog? What fun! Would you mind if I join you? I haven't seen the grounds here in forever."

From the way Gianna's face stiffened into the Darcy Mask, I guessed that she did mind. But possibly out of a fear of offending Caroline, Gianna mumbled, "Okay."

I could tell from the awkward vibes as we set off that this little adventure might not end well. But I didn't suspect it would be a catastrophe.

II

Gianna and Yoda led the way through the front yard, to the head of a walking path that wound through the woods and fields on the Darcy property. I tried to keep in step with Gianna and engage her in conversation, but Caroline held me back. She hooked her arm through mine as if we were suddenly besties.

"I don't think we've ever had a *tête-à-tête* before," Caroline said. "You're a writer, aren't you? Have you published anything recently?"

I didn't remind her that we have talked one-on-one before, at Charles' housewarming party. But that was less of a conversation than it was a one-sided sales pitch for Caroline's for bridal consulting services.

I said, "Well, I actually decided not to make a living from publishing anymore. I got a job teaching at the community college here."

"Oh, how interesting! Do you enjoy it? Teaching?"

I glanced at Caroline sideways, trying to figure out what her "angle" was. Did she really just want to have a pleasant chat about our lives? No business cards? No subtle schemes to shove me and Will in front of an altar?

I said, "Yes, it's a lot more fun than I thought it would be."

"Do you think you'll keep it up after you're married, or will you go back to writing? Oh, look at these fields! All that lovely green and those adorable little flowers. This would make a *gorgeous* backdrop for engagement photos, don't you think?"

Aaand there it was: the admirably smooth segue into weddings weddings weddings.

I called out, "Hey, Gianna! How are your studies going?"

Gianna glanced back shyly. "Okay, I guess. There's a better place for taking photos on the other side of the house, by the pond. It's my brother's favorite spot. I can show it to you, if you want."

So much for changing the topic. I should have known a pretty eighteen-year-old girl would be just as interested in photo shoots and weddings weddings weddings as Caroline.

A small group of women walked towards us on the path. Their voices were loud, and their laughter boisterous. Gianna froze at the sight of them. Yoda began to yip.

I touched Gianna's arm. "I'd love to see Will's favorite spot. It was back towards the house, right?"

But Caroline, unaware of Gianna's social anxiety disorder, was excited to speak to the other guests. "Oh look, there's Deborah! We just met. She works with Will at the DA's office. You should meet her, Elizabeth."

Caroline seized my arm and pulled me towards the women. Gianna followed us reluctantly.

Caroline hailed Deborah and her companions, who seemed like nice ladies. Caroline introduced Gianna as Will's sister and me as Will's "friend," with heavily implied air quotes. The women exclaimed over Gianna's beauty and cooed over the fluffy chihuahua. Gianna shifted her weight awkwardly, mumbling responses to their questions. I could tell she wanted nothing more than to escape from their interrogation and go back home.

Deborah said to Gianna, “You have another brother, don’t you? I met him a few years ago at one of your Aunt Catherine’s parties. What was his name? Oh, I can’t remember.”

Caroline said, “You mean George?”

“Yes, George! That was it! He was such a nice boy. What’s he doing with himself now?”

Gianna tried to force herself to answer, but she couldn’t speak. Her pupils dilated and her breathing quickened.

I’ve witnessed many of my mother’s “panic attacks” over the years. She screams, she cries, she collapses dramatically on furniture and wails that her poor old heart will give out if she doesn’t get her way.

Gianna’s attack was nothing like that. It was swift and silent. Her slim body trembled. Her face stiffened into the bored Darcy Mask. Only the tears forming in her eyes betrayed that she was completely unraveling inside.

Caroline noticed the tears. “What’s wrong, Gianna?”

In the spotlight, Gianna shook more visibly. The women looked at each other with concern. Deborah asked, “Are you okay, dear?”

I wrapped my arm around Gianna’s shoulders. “Oh gosh, are your allergies acting up again? It’s all these *plants* everywhere.”

One of the women said, “Allergies are the worst! Do you need Benedryl? I have some in my purse.”

I said, “Thanks, but she has her own prescription meds. Caroline, we’re going to head back. No, no, stay and talk awhile. It was so nice to meet you all!”

Waving a hasty goodbye, I steered Gianna back along the path to the house. Yoda could tell something was wrong and whined,

so I picked him up and carried him in one arm, keeping my other around Gianna.

Gianna couldn't calm down. I didn't know if I was helping or making things worse by touching her. I didn't know what to say. The best I could think of was, "It's okay. It's okay. You did great!"

We walked briskly and soon reached the front door. Will stood in the driveway, sending off a couple of guests in an expensive car. He spotted us and waved. When he saw Gianna's posture, he quickly bade goodbye to the guests and joined us inside.

"What happened?" he asked.

In the safety of her home, Gianna started to cry. She pushed passed Will and ran up the stairs. The door to her room slammed behind her.

Will looked to me, and I briefly explained our encounter with the women. Will jogged up to Gianna's room and coaxed her through the door until she let him in.

I followed them upstairs. Though Gianna's health is none of my business, and I should have politely faded away to give her and Will privacy, I couldn't bring myself to go back to the party as if nothing had happened.

I paced outside Gianna's room, listening to her sobs and feeling useless. I should have stepped in to protect her sooner. I should have insisted on turning around as soon as I saw those women headed our way, instead of going along with Caroline. I should have studied up on the appropriate response to an anxiety attack before this happened. I *knew* Gianna had a condition. Why did I stupidly invite her out without preparing first?

Will came out into the hall. His shoulders slumped, and his defeated expression made him look older than he is. I felt the urge

to wrap my arms around his neck and guide him down to lean on me, to stroke his head and murmur soothing words until he felt better.

I took a step back. "How is she?"

"Not well." Will rubbed his tired eyes. "She thinks she embarrassed you and Caroline. She says you both must hate her now, and you'll never come over again."

"What? No! I don't...I mean, I understand..."

"I know." Will gave me a weak smile. "She needs to be alone for a while to calm down. It could take an hour or two."

I imagined Gianna locked in her room, crying her heart out because she believes everyone is angry with her and ashamed of her. I can't claim to know what it's like to have an anxiety disorder, but I do know the pain of humiliation. I know the despair of being a teenage girl and believing you're unlovable. I know what it's like to work yourself up into a wretched self-hatred that feels like it will swallow you up for eternity.

My eyes stung. Before I could stop them, hot tears gathered and fell down my face.

Will reached out and wiped the tears off my cheek with his thumb. I flinched. He quickly withdrew his hand. "Sorry."

"No, wait!"

Without thinking, I took Will's hand and put it back on my cheek. "It's not that I didn't like it. I was just startled."

I knew I was confusing Will with mixed signals again. I knew I didn't have a right to cry for Gianna, when I was responsible for her awful experience. But Will's warm palm felt nice. Being touched by him felt nice. I wished he would touch me more.

Taken aback, Will searched my eyes to understand what I wanted from him. As I stared into his, I thought, *Ah. I get it now. I know why these eyes are so beautiful.*

They belong to Will.

I lied when I told Will I've never thought of him as more than a friend. I lied when I told Charlotte Will and I were just "cool."

I've been lying to you, Diary, since the day of the Lucas' Independence Day barbecue, when I wrote that I fell in and out of love in ten minutes flat. I didn't fall out. I fell in and stayed there.

It hurt so much when I thought Will had rejected me, I lied that I didn't feel anything. I made myself believe Will is a terrible person. I deliberately blinded myself to his intelligence, his kindness, his unexpected sense of humor...because if I opened my eyes to the real Will Darcy, I'd fall deeper and deeper in love, and get stuck there forever.

There. There's the truth you've been bugging me about for ages, Diary, because you have no sense of tact. You and Will are two peas in a pod—sticklers for the truth, no matter how unpleasant it is. The truth is terrible, and terrifying.

As Will looked at me with those totally unexceptional, incomparably beautiful eyes, I felt naked before him. The bullying truth had stolen my favorite comfy lies out of my gym locker and tore them into shreds, leaving me exposed and defenseless. Now Will could see everything about me—every ugly flaw, every secret fantasy, every powerful emotion I'd struggled desperately to hide from him.

I was frightened, and I was embarrassed, but at the same time...I was tired of hiding. It's exhausting, pretending not to love a man. Fighting off your feelings as they grow stronger and stronger,

stubbornly lying to yourself and to him, when all you really want to do is snuggle into his arms. I didn't have the energy to fight anymore.

And so, I decided to be brave. I opened up my heart, and I let Will see what was in it.

Will did see. I know he did, because I could see everything in his eyes, too: from confusion and doubt, to hope, and then elation.

He cupped my cheek in his palm. I covered his hand with my own.

"Lizzie," he said softly.

My phone rang.

Will stopped speaking as the hateful device in my pocket rang, and rang, and rang. I didn't move. I refused to let go of Will's hand. I vowed to hunt down and murder the spam caller who ruined our moment.

The phone stopped ringing. After a brief silence, it rang again.

Despite my murmur of protest, Will pulled his hand away. "Are you going to answer that?"

Pouting, I checked the screen of my phone. It was Jane. Jane wouldn't call me repeatedly unless she had something important to say.

I answered. "Hey, Jane."

"Lizzie, can you come home right now?"

I knew by "home" Jane meant our parents' house. Worried by the strain in her voice, I said, "Is something wrong?"

"It's Lydia. That boy she works with. George. They...Oh, I can't... Can you just come home, please?"

"George? What did he do?"

Will tensed at the sound of George's name. I remembered what that charming sociopath had done to Gianna. Starting to panic, I asked, "Did he hurt Lydia?"

"No, no, she's not hurt. She's in *jail*."



September 13, 2016

The Day I Learned What Real Heartbreak Feels Like

Couple arrested for theft of \$14K from Bend bookstore

September 6, 2016

A Bend couple was arrested Monday on suspicion of stealing at least \$14,250 from a downtown bookstore.

Sandy Police arrested George Wickham, 23, and Lydia Bennet, 24, as they allegedly attempted to flee north to the Canadian border. The suspects were returned to Central Oregon and booked into Deschutes County Jail on charges of first-degree aggravated theft, first-degree forgery, felony fraud, and evading arrest.

Wickham and Bennet are employees of Annie's Bookstore & Cafe, on Nebraska Avenue. According to Bend Police, Wickham pocketed cash payments from customers over a period of four years, falsifying sales receipts to cover his tracks. Bennet allegedly assisted in the scheme by manipulating electronic inventory records.

On Monday, the owner of the bookstore called police to report he had uncovered discrepancies in financial records the previous

weekend. He said he confronted Wickham, who denied knowledge of the theft. The next morning, the owner noticed Wickham's and Bennet's belongings missing from the staff room and found the front register emptied of \$250 in cash.

Wickham and Bennet were apprehended on US-26 in Sandy, driving a red Subaru Impreza owned by Bennet's mother. Wickham reportedly sped away from police before losing control of the vehicle and hitting a light pole. No one was injured in the crash.

That *stupid* girl. That stupid, selfish, short-sighted girl.

I should have seen it coming. I knew Lydia is a spoiled brat with no impulse control. I knew George is a sociopath with a history of deceiving and destroying young women.

Though I think myself oh so smart—a great literary genius with brilliant insights into the human condition—I'm laughably ignorant about the real world. I thought the worst Lydia would ever do is drop out of college. I thought the worst George would ever do, he'd already done in the past.

George didn't only bamboozle me into believing his lies about Will. He conned me. He *literally* conned me, and I was too naive to notice.

Do you remember the day I met George? I went into Annie's and picked up a book about mortgages. George blinded me with flattery and big blue eyes, and then he claimed the credit card reader was on the fritz and asked for cash instead. I handed some over, feeling smug and virtuous for supporting the adorable local bookstore.

Not a single dollar of that cash reached the store's bank account. I know now that the bills went straight into George's pocket, and I walked off with the book, unknowingly stealing it from the struggling small business. How many customers did George pull the same trick on over the years? Enough to rob Annie's of \$14,000 worth of merchandise.

"I should have told you about George from the start," Will said last week at his house, when I repeated what Jane had said on the phone.

"Why didn't you? Isn't that why you came into the store? To warn me?" I remembered the weight of Will's hand on my shoulder that day, and the way he stared into my eyes as if he were trying to tell me something telepathically. But I'm not like him; I can't read minds.

"I thought I was overreacting. You were just buying a book from him, not dating him. I was afraid you'd think poorly of me for bad-mouthing some cashier you'd never see again."

Will was right, Diary. I was so prejudiced against him back then, even if he had told me the truth about George, I wouldn't have believed him. I would have thought Will was a bully spreading nasty gossip about his own brother. Of course, I happily swallowed George's nasty gossip about Will without question.

Part of me believes Lydia's stupidity is my fault. I introduced Kitty and Lydia to George when I believed he was a nice boy. Later I saw them both making googly eyes at George, and though I knew by then that he's a toxic person, I said nothing. If I'd said something, could I have prevented this mess?

But most of me knows there's nothing I could have done to stop Lydia from being stupid. She chose to be stupid. She helped George

cover up the theft of her own free will. She messed with the store's inventory to make it look like the books that "walked off" never existed. She stole Mom's Subaru for their big criminal getaway to Canada.

Mom has been...quiet. She doesn't talk about Lydia. She doesn't put on the waterworks. She doesn't go out with her friends.

She might not have friends anymore, after Beverly Lucas and Susan Long appeared on the evening news last week. The clip showed the facade and interior of Annie's while a reporter detailed the crime in a voice-over. Then the scene cut to Beverly and Susan standing on the sidewalk in our neighborhood.

Beverly said, "No, honestly, I wasn't surprised at all. Lydia was always a wild one."

Susan nodded. "She ran around with a bad crowd. There were loud parties, drugs..."

"It's the parents," Beverly said. "They let her do whatever she wanted."

Dad turned off the TV then. He doesn't want to hear or read anything about the case. In fact, he seems determined to pretend Lydia doesn't exist.

He's also furious with Kitty. She admitted to the police that she knew what Lydia and George were up to, but she was too loyal and scared to tell anyone. When Dad found out, he blew up and threatened to turn her out of the house. He didn't follow through on that, but he did refuse to even look at Kitty for two days.

Unsurprisingly, Dad did not assist Lydia with posting bail. "She got herself behind bars, so she can get herself back out," he said, and the subject was forever closed.

Today Kitty asked me to go with her to visit Lydia at the Deschutes County Jail. We took the bus because we knew it would be pointless to ask Dad to borrow his car. (“Why?” I imagine him responding. “So Kitty can crash our only remaining vehicle into a tree?”)

The county jail is located directly across Hwy 20 from the Cascade Village shopping center. The JCPenney, where Mom and the twins spent many a Saturday morning, is clearly visible from the entrance...but there’s no way to get to it. The highway is a bleak, uncrossable barrier between the lively playground of Lydia’s past and the lonely prison of her future. How’s that for cosmic poetry?

Though Kitty was the one who wanted to see Lydia, she wasn’t allowed inside because the jail has a strict dress code. The neckline of Kitty’s top was too low, and the hemline of her shorts was too high. I said we should come back tomorrow, but Kitty begged me to talk to Lydia for her.

And so, I went in alone.

I imagined the visit would happen a certain way, based on what I’ve seen on TV shows about improbably handsome detectives battling impossibly smart criminals. I imagined the visiting center would be a row of booths with thick glass windows. A stoic officer would escort Lydia out of her cell and sit her down. We would stare at each other meaningfully through the glass—she sullen, I disappointed—and then pick up big black telephones to talk.

Obviously I haven’t watched TV in a long time, because jail visits are nothing like that now. There was a big black telephone, but it was attached to a “Telmate” video terminal. There were no glass booths, no poignant stare-downs. I didn’t get to see Lydia at all—only a washed-out digital image of her on a touchscreen monitor.

I also imagined that Lydia's attitude would improve after her arrest. I was wrong about that, too.

"Yeah, right," Lydia spat, when I said Kitty was upset that she couldn't come in to visit. "I know she's the one who ratted us out. She's jealous because George chose me."

"Kitty didn't 'rat out' anyone. Maybe if she had, you wouldn't be in here now. What were you thinking? Seriously, how could you do something so stupid?"

Lydia rolled her eyes. "Spare me the self-righteous lecture. Is that why you came? To tell me how stupid I am and show off how much better you are?"

"Believe it or not, I came because you're my sister. I worry about you."

"Could've fooled me. You don't even care that I'm stuck in this hellhole and all these guys are bullying me. I didn't even do anything that bad. Like, everyone is acting like I'm some criminal mastermind. It was just money, and not even that much. It's not like we hurt anyone."

Mom and Dad did a decent job with their first three daughters and a middling job with their fourth, but Beverly Lucas was right: they royally messed up with this one. We were all privileged growing up, but how much must our parents have coddled Baby Lydia for her to believe that fourteen thousand dollars is "not even that much"?

"You hurt a lot of people, Lydia. You hurt your boss at the store, and Mom and Dad."

"Good," Lydia said. "Mom and Dad have been really crappy to me lately."

She giggled. "They're gonna *freak out* when they hear I'm marrying George."

In a moment of clarity, I understood the root cause of every recent disaster in the Bennet clan. We are all masters of denial.

Dad puts foreclosure notices in a filing cabinet and lopes off to play golf. Jane wrecks her relationships by letting doubts and fears simmer unspoken. I convince myself it's not my fault my writing career imploded, I can undo the damage I inflicted on my parents' finances if only I bake enough cherry pies, and I'm definitely not in love with Will Darcy.

Lydia isn't any different from the rest of us. She's only the most extreme. Even after spending a week in freaking *jail*, Lydia remained blithely oblivious to reality.

I said, "You're not marrying anybody."

"Oh yeah? How are you gonna stop me?"

"I don't have to stop you. It just won't happen. For one thing, George won't marry you. He's an antisocial lowlife, and he's using you. He's too selfish to love anyone but himself. For another..."

Lydia angrily talked over me, but I talked louder. "*For another*, it's awfully hard to Say Yes to the Dress from behind bars. Did they not give you a lawyer? Do you not understand the punishment for stealing over ten thousand dollars?"

I gripped the phone so hard, my hand shook. "Up to ten years imprisonment. *Ten years*. The forgery and fraud? Up to five years each. You could be in prison until your forties. You won't get your dream wedding with George or anyone else. You won't get to finish college, or start a career, or have kids. Your life is over, Lydia. It's *over*."

Lydia started crying and cursing at me. I was the worst sister ever, and everyone was being mean to her for no reason. I ended the

call because I couldn't stand to look at Lydia's petulant, self-pitying face any longer.

I brushed away my tears of disappointment and frustration before meeting Kitty at the entrance.

"Did she look okay? What did she say?" Kitty asked anxiously.

"I'll tell you at home. Let's go."

I lead Kitty down the front walkway, and my heart leapt to see Will walking towards us from the parking lot. He wore a suit and tie and carried a black briefcase. A female colleague walked beside him, equally well dressed.

Our eyes met, and my heart sank back down.

Will acknowledged me with a nod. He didn't smile, and he didn't greet me. With a stony expression, he walked past me and held the door open for his colleague.

"Who's that?" the woman asked.

"She's related to one of the accused in the bookstore theft," Will said, and the door closed behind them.

That's what I am to Will now. A "relative of the accused."

I thought I was prepared for this. Will tried to prepare me for it, that day at his house. "I won't be able to call or meet you for a while," he said, taking my hand and squeezing it.

He didn't have to explain why. I knew Will wouldn't risk tainting the DA's case against Lydia by fraternizing with her family members. No matter the outcome of the trial, people would assume Will abused his powers as a prosecutor to let Lydia off easy, at my request.

Plus, election day is less than a month away. Imagine the scandal if the media caught wind that a judge on the ballot was dating a woman mixed up with Bend's own Bonnie & Clyde. *Local News:*

Judge candidate's romantic texts to suspect's sister spur outrage, prompt calls for ethics probe.

I wanted to call out Will's name, to run after him and throw my arms around his neck. I wanted to nuzzle into his chest as he stroked my hair and told me everything would be okay.

But I didn't budge. I wouldn't force Will to choose between his commitment to justice and his feelings for me. He's incapable of lying to me, anyway. Everything *wouldn't* be okay.

Will and I can never go back to that moment before the phone call. Lydia's trial might end after a few months, but the crimes she committed with George can't be undone. I might cease to be a "suspect's sister," but I'll only become a "felon's sister" instead.

I have no choice but to accept the terrible truth: I might see Judge Darcy on the news, but I'll never see Will again.



October 28, 2016

The Day I Learned My Vampire is the Biggest Idiot in the World

Dear Diary,

I know I've neglected you for the past month and a half, but it was for a good reason. I've been busy doing what I always talked about doing, but rarely did before: *writing*.

After you last heard from me in September, my life outside of work was consumed by one and only one thing: finishing a novella. As soon as I woke up in the mornings, I chugged down a smoothie and opened my laptop to work on the story. As soon as I came home from my shifts, I stuffed a sandwich in my mouth and went back to the story again.

The story is not a happy one. Writing it was not fun. It was miserable. It was draining, and depressing, and more than once I made myself so sad I ended up crying on the floor. (The upside of living with crazy artists: when they heard me sobbing and I explained it wasn't an existential crisis, I'd just broken my own heart with the story I was writing, they congratulated me and left me to it.)

But no matter how unpleasant and unhealthy my process was, I couldn't stop working on that story until it was done. I had to get it out of my head and into the world.

The novella takes place in 1890s San Francisco. The heroine's father is a Chinatown gang leader, and her mother is one of the enslaved prostitutes he bought from kidnappers in Asia. The heroine falls in love with a new gang initiate, whom she learns is a detective working undercover to investigate her father for sex trafficking. In the end her father kills the detective, her mother kills her father, and the heroine escapes to Oregon to raise her son alone.

The story is not "literary" like my previous works. It is not the slightest bit intellectual or original. It's a sentimental tragic romance we've all seen a hundred times before in movies and books...from the perspective of the gallant detective. I wrote it from the perspective I know: the perspective of a woman who can't be with the man she loves because she's related to a criminal.

I published the eBook on Amazon five days ago, on Sunday. Accomplishing my goal made me feel briefly victorious, but since then I've felt disoriented and adrift. I hate these empty days between projects, when I'm restless and bored after finishing a story, but I don't have the energy to start a new one.

Four people have purchased the novella, and I know them all personally. Dad bought one. One of the relatives he mass-emailed the link to must have bought another. The third went to Charlotte, and the fourth to Jane in California.

Yep, California. After the curtain went down on Jane's last play, she packed up and moved to Los Angeles. She said after her messy breakup with Charles, she realized she shouldn't be waiting around for Mr. Moneybags to appear and settle her future for her. If she

wants to star in the movies, it's on her to get on a plane to LAX and start knocking on doors.

I miss Jane a lot, and frankly I'm scared for her because she's so nice and Hollywood isn't. But I'm proud of her for taking the leap, and I expect in a couple of years I'll be seeing her face on the big screen at the Regal.

Kitty has gone back to school, which was a relief to us all. With Lydia awaiting trial, we worried Kitty would insist on staying home until next year. But after visiting Lydia in jail a second time, Kitty's attachment to Lydia waned suddenly and not-so-mysteriously. She said she wasn't going to let Lydia's dumb choices ruin her life, and she left for OSU in late September as scheduled. She even said something about studying abroad. I guess we can't call them The Twins anymore.

With most of the Bennet daughters embarking on new adventures, only Mary is left at our parents' house. When I meet her for lunch, she complains that Mom and Dad have no one left to pester but her. Mom criticizes everything she wears and drags her to JCPenney sales every week, and Dad interrogates her about her job and pushes her to read the books he's into. In short, I've never seen Mary so happy.

And finally, there's Lydia. Lydia, who thoughtlessly turned all of our lives upside down. Lydia, who aided and abetted in the commission of a felony and then giggled that she was going to marry the felon.

Today, *that* Lydia wrote to us with an announcement. She will plead guilty to a misdemeanor charge for theft in the second degree, for taking cash from the bookstore register on the day she and George fled for the border.

The DA has dropped all other charges against her...in exchange for her testimony against George.

I should have been relieved that Lydia wised up. Rather than spending the rest of her youth in prison, she'll spend a few years on probation doing community service. But the news made me suspicious. Six weeks ago Lydia was gushing about her supposed engagement to George. How did she magically obtain a moral compass and a brain?

As soon as I read Lydia's note, I hired an Uber to take me to the county jail.

"I'm gonna kill that a-hole," Lydia growled, when I asked why she changed her mind about George.

It probably wasn't wise to threaten someone's life in a supervised video call from jail, but Lydia was too incensed to care.

"George totally ruined my life. He made me drop out of school. He framed me, you know? He taught me how to do the inventory wrong on purpose so he could frame me for stealing. He's the one who took all the money, not me! He said he was saving it to pay for our wedding and buy a house, so it was really for the both of us. Yeah friggin' right. He spent it all on stuff for himself!"

Since I'd said my bit on the previous visit, I didn't point out to Lydia that she chose to become George's partner in crime and ruin her own life. I let her vent.

"Do you know what that a-hole *said* about me? He said I was easy to fool. He said it was hilarious watching me get all excited about marrying him. He was all, 'As if I'd tie myself down to a chick who's boring in the sack.' That's literally what he said, 'boring in the sack.' Like he's some amazing sex god! Well now he isn't gonna get any for twenty years, is he? I'll make sure of that."

I was surprised the jail staff allowed Lydia and George to speak to each other. I was also confused because George is a manipulative sneak, not an idiot. I couldn't believe he would say such nasty things to Lydia and send her running to the DA to spill all the beans.

Lydia's lip quivered, and she looked away from the camera. Then she wrinkled her nose, as if she were forcing herself to do something gross. "I'm still mad at you. But also, you know, thanks."

"For what?" I asked.

"I know you put him up to it. I'm not stupid."

I had no idea what Lydia could be talking about. "Who did I put up to what?"

"Oh, come on. Your Mr. Darcy. You asked him to give that video to my lawyer, 'cause I wouldn't believe you when you tried to tell me what George is really like."

"Will did *what?!?*"

But it was a rhetorical question, because I understood exactly what Will had done. He visited George in jail and goaded him into revealing his true colors on tape, and then he handed the recording to Lydia's public defender. Lydia heard George talking smack about her, and she changed her mind right quick about that engagement.

In other words, Will is the sorcerer responsible for Lydia's magical transformation.

I was relieved. I was grateful. I was afraid and angry. What was Will thinking, meddling in a case that wasn't his?

Lydia said, "So you didn't ask him to help me? He did it all by himself, like, as a knight in shining armor thing? Psh, never mind then. I take back my thanks."

"He shouldn't have done that. He wasn't even on the case."

"Whatever. They do stuff like that all the time."

No, they don't. A real DA's office isn't the set of a gritty legal show. There are rules, and there are consequences for breaking them. No prosecutor would be allowed anywhere near a case against his own stepbrother, former or otherwise.

Will might have put his career on the line by making that recording. He would never do anything illegal, so his "knight in shining armor thing" must have been in a technically safe gray area for prosecutors. But that doesn't mean it wasn't dangerous.

What if Will gets reprimanded by the DA? What if word gets around and there's a scandal in the newspapers? What if Will just destroyed his dream of becoming a judge?

For what? To make sure George goes to prison? No, the case against George was rock solid even without Lydia's testimony. To save Lydia? No, she's a selfish, immature, witless girl Will barely knows.

I know why Will did it. I know, and I hate him for it. Here I am, diligently writing through my feelings and staying away from Will for *his* sake, and he goes and wrecks his life for *my* sake.

For all of Will's brains, he's the biggest idiot in the world.



November 1, 2016

The Day I Became a Local Legend

I

Dear Diary,

Well, I did it. After toiling for many fruitless years, today I finally managed to become famous. Strangers will recognize me on the street. My name will fall from the lips of gossips in every staff break room in Bend. I will be remembered in local history for years to come.

But not for my writing.

This morning, as I set off on my bike for the Deschutes County Courthouse, I didn't imagine what I was about to do would make me famous. No reasonable person would.

I was only bringing Will a basket of homemade croissants. That's all. I planned to give him the croissants, quietly thank him for helping Lydia cease to be stupid, and maybe invite him for lunch at our spot by Mirror Pond.

At first I didn't even know I'd be entering the courthouse. The District Attorney's Office appears to be a separate building on Google Maps. In reality, the two are annexed together. A sign on

the front door instructs members of the public to enter through the courthouse.

As you can tell from my ignorance of the setup, I'd never been to the courthouse before. I'd seen the imposing face of it countless times, driving or biking past it on Greenwood, but I've never had a reason to go inside. I thought visiting Will would be no big deal, like visiting Dad at his insurance company when I was little. I supposed I'd simply go inside, find Will's office number listed on a directory by the elevator, show up and knock.

The sight of the fully uniformed security guard, metal detector, and X-ray machine behind the front door quickly corrected my naive assumptions. The government was not going to make this easy for me.

The guard was a solid young man whose jolly disposition seemed incongruent with his job. He cheerfully rattled off a list of items I couldn't bring inside, including cameras. I asked if I had to forfeit my phone, because it has a camera in it. The guard said no, that wasn't necessary.

I felt the need to clarify, "So...there's a rule against bringing cameras inside, but no rules against taking photos with another device that's not technically a camera?"

The guard chuckled and said, "It's an old rule."

As he fed my purse and basket through the X-ray machine, I fidgeted and said, "I'm actually here to find my...um, friend. He works in the DA's office. Will Darcy?"

I worried the guard would think I was some suspicious person who came to the courthouse to resolve a grudge against Will, with homemade croissants as my weapon of choice. I then worried that

my worrying made me look really suspicious. I made myself so nervous, my voice cracked and my palms sweated.

Luckily the guard didn't think anything amiss. People must melt into puddles of nerves before him daily. He gave me directions to the District Attorney's Office.

I crept through the narrow halls of the courthouse, feeling small and out of place. I wasn't cowed by the building itself. Just the opposite, actually. The exterior is regal, but the interior is underwhelming. It's bland and worn out, like an underfunded high school built mid-twentieth-century and barely touched up since.

The people aren't scary, either. They're the same people they were outside on the streets. The key difference is: inside the courthouse, these people have the authority to decide the fates of lives. They can grant freedom, or they can take it away. I felt how Harry Potter must have felt walking through Diagon Alley for the first time, as an ordinary child suddenly surrounded by people with extraordinary power.

I found the entrance to the DA's office at the end of a corridor, but a heavy door with a card reader prevented unauthorized entry. Courthouse employees bustled behind a glass window by the door.

"May I help you?" a woman asked from behind the glass.

I stepped up to the window and said, "Is Will Darcy in, please?"

The woman checked a computer. "He's scheduled to be in court this morning. Would you like to leave him a message?"

"No, thanks," I said. "It's nothing."

My courage failing, I backed away from the window. I wandered through the courthouse, up the stairs to the second floor. I paced in front of the double doors of the courtrooms, wondering which one Will was in.

Feeling defeated and incompetent, I sat down in a cluster of chairs near the ancient elevator. I placed my basket of croissants on a low side table and sighed. Maybe Will would come out soon and see me.

On the wall to my left hung a framed collage featuring historic Oregon women in law. Confident women in elegant Victorian dresses, billowing judicial robes, and smart skirt suits smiled at me in black and white. The text beside their pictures detailed their fantastic accomplishments.

I bet none of *them* would be daunted by a door with a card reader on it. They weren't wimps who would sigh in defeat and wait for men to notice them. If they wanted to give a man croissants, they would hunt him down and boldly place the buttery pastries in his hands.

I dug out my phone and typed a text to Will.

"Elizabeth Bennet!"

Catherine de Bourgh strode towards me like a general marching to war. I stood to greet her with a forced smile. She didn't return it.

"Are you here to see my nephew?"

Catherine threw that question at me with repugnance, as if she were asking whether I was there to bomb the courthouse and launch Deschutes County into anarchy.

I said, "Yes, I'm here to meet Will."

Catherine leaned uncomfortably close. She whispered harshly, "Haven't you done enough damage already?"

"Excuse me?"

"My nephew had the potential to be a great judge. A senator even. It's been my...his dream since he was young to enter public service and make a positive difference. Yet you forced him to remove

himself from the ballot. You've doomed him to obscurity. Isn't that enough for you?"

I struggled to keep up with Catherine's rapid-fire grievances. Will took himself off the ballot?

I said, "I didn't know Will dropped out of the election. I honestly had nothing to do with it."

Catherine scoffed. "I wasn't born yesterday."

"*Anyone can tell that by looking,*" I was tempted to say. I bit my tongue.

"I know that little thief who was let off scot-free is your sister. And I know what kind of...*relationship* you have with my nephew."

Catherine de Bourgh has a rare talent for turning ordinary words into insults with her tone alone. She made my...*relationship* with Will sound like something dirty, something conducted in shady motels and paid for in cash.

Her small, stooping body quivered. "You...you've *changed* him. My nephew has never broken a rule before in his life. You poisoned his mind. You led him to abandon his principles and endanger his future."

I couldn't hold my tongue any longer. "You mean I challenged his black-and-white views and turned him into a man who can think flexibly, instead of following the rules blindly? I'll take that as a compliment."

Catherine twitched as if she were about to slap me, but she remembered where she was and restrained herself. "Don't you understand what you've done? Don't you realize what the media could do to Will? If they start asking questions... All it takes is one filthy hit piece to destroy a man forever. Because of you, my nephew

had no choice but to remove himself from the public eye to preserve the Darcy name.”

When I first heard from Lydia what Will had done, I too was terrified of the potential scandal and the effect on his career. But coming out of Catherine’s mouth, those fears now seemed melodramatic and silly. “Destroy a man forever”? “Preserve the Darcy name”?

Will didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not unethical to convince a witness to tell the truth. Lydia will get the punishment she deserves for the crimes she committed, no more or less.

If some journalists did make filthy insinuations, so what? Everyone knows Will has an unshakable dedication to justice. His colleagues and bosses would stand up for him. If anything, people would praise Will for stepping in to protect an impressionable young woman who was being manipulated by a sleazy con artist.

Besides, Will would never make a decision based on what other people might say about him. If he dropped out of the election, it’s because he decided he didn’t want to be elected, not because he was worried about the precious “Darcy name.”

Catherine seized my basket of croissants from the side table. “If you have a conscience, you’ll leave my nephew in peace. And take these...*baked goods* with you.”

With Catherine’s magic touch, my “baked goods” turned into vile contraband.

I grabbed the basket back and declared, “I will not leave. I did nothing wrong. Will did nothing wrong. He’s a grown man. He can decide for himself what he wants to do with his career, and who he hangs out with, and whether he wants to eat *baked goods* or not.”

Purple veins bulged in Catherine's pale, wrinkled forehead. "I've seen many girls like you in my time. Selfish and deceitful. Don't think I'm unaware of your...*circumstances*. I know you're using my nephew for his money."

The accusation was so unexpected and malicious, I couldn't think of anything to say in response. Every option whirling through the cloud of rage in my head was woefully inadequate.

Catherine's lip curled in smug disgust. "There, you see. You have nothing to say for yourself. Don't worry, I won't tell my nephew. I assume I won't have to. You're smart enough to break up with him on your own."

I found my voice and shot back, "It would be quite difficult for me to break up with Will, seeing as I'm not dating him."

The satisfaction of seeing Catherine embarrassed by her mistake was too quickly erased by the bitterness of seeing her relief.

Catherine said, "Since you aren't dating him, I hope you'll respect his position and keep your distance."

"I will not keep my distance, Aunt Cathy," I said in the most syrupy voice I could muster.

Catherine sputtered, "You selfish..."

"Yes, I am selfish. Will makes me happy, so I selfishly want to keep him all to myself. I want to put a ring on his finger so no other woman can have him. I love him."

I was terrified of those words once. I tried to lock them away and deny they existed. Now that they were liberated into the world, I expected to feel panic and embarrassment. Instead, I felt triumphant. Jubilant. I felt like by loving someone so openly and honestly, I *won*.

I said the words again, even louder. “I love him. I’m not ashamed of loving him. I have no reason to be. He deserves love more than anyone I know. I *will* see him, and I *will* love him, and I’ll feed him a million *baked goods* if I want to!”

I shook the basket of croissants for emphasis. Then I noticed my throat was hoarse from shouting, and my words were still ringing through the courthouse, and a small crowd had formed around us.

Most people ignored Catherine and me and went about their business. Some cast us irritated glances for making a ruckus. But a few held up their smartphones, recording the argument for social media.

And behind them, staring at me blankly, stood Will Darcy.

II

Now the panic and embarrassment caught up with me.

Bravely declaring “I love him” to Will’s unpleasant aunt is one thing. Declaring it to Will himself—plus a roomful of strangers recording me with smartphones—is quite another.

Robotically, I smiled at Will. “Hey, there you are. I brought croissants.”

I shuffled over to him and shoved the basket in his hands. “Well, nice to see you!”

The elevator opened, and two passengers stepped out. I made a beeline for the doors, ducking my head and walking as fast as I could without breaking into a run.

That was exactly the wrong thing for me to do.

As it turns out, the Deschutes County Courthouse has the **slowest** elevator in the state of Oregon. Though I jammed the button for the first floor repeatedly, the doors didn’t close. They

took an excruciating minute to gather up the energy necessary to do their job.

Will had more than ample time to place the basket down on a chair, saunter over, and stand beside me. The doors finally creaked closed, leaving us alone in the small space.

“Lizzie...”

“Don’t look at me!”

I covered my red-hot face with my hands. Why, oh why did I not take the stairs? At this moment I could have been on my bike, pedaling frantically away from this wretched place.

As the ancient elevator took a century to go down one floor, Will said, “I know how embarrassing it is to declare your love for someone unintentionally. I did it myself just two months ago.”

I wailed, “But you did it on a hiking trail in the woods, not in the middle of the courthouse!”

It’s not fair! I was the only one who heard Will’s impromptu confession on the butte, but a bunch of Will’s colleagues heard mine just now. And who knows how many people would later watch the video posted on Reddit and write clever puns about it in the comments. Now I’ll be forever known as “the girl who got into a public fight with the mayor *pro tempore* and basically proposed to a guy by accident.”

Will patted my shoulder. “If it helps, you didn’t say anything I didn’t already know.”

I peeked through my fingers to glare at him. “What, you know you’re that lovable?”

Will grinned. “I read your novella. The mafia romance. The hero was so rigid and tactless, I knew he must be me in fictional form.”

“Wait, wait. How did you know about my novella?” So the fourth person to buy my book wasn’t one of the extended relatives Dad plagued with mass emails? It was Will?

“Charles sent me the link. Jane showed it to him, I assume.”

Will dropped this information casually, as if it weren’t mind-exploding news that Jane and Charles were together again. Jane didn’t tell me anything! Who called whom first? Were they still “just friends” or did they stop dragging their feet? What did the famous five-million-dollar house in Beverly Hills look like? I’d have to grill Jane about the details later. When she said she was taking charge of her life, I guess she meant it.

The rickety elevator shuddered to a stop, and the doors mustered their strength to open. I hurried out, simultaneously trying to look nonchalant and escape from the building as fast as I could.

Will kept up with me easily. In a warm, husky voice he said, “You did a great job. This time, you made me feel a lot of things.”

Out of context, Will’s compliment sounded suggestive...and I swear he was doing that on purpose. I couldn’t believe Will was flirting so boldly in the middle of his workplace.

He said, “I shouldn’t have pushed you away because of your sister’s crime, even if it was only temporary. I didn’t realize you were pining for me so much.”

I wanted to shriek in dismay. Will was definitely doing this on purpose. I forced myself to whisper. “Is that why you meddled with Lydia’s case and dropped out of the election? Because you read my novella and thought I was pining for you?”

“Partially. I was ambivalent about becoming a judge to begin with, and I decided I shouldn’t run when I lacked the conviction for it. But I also couldn’t sit back and do nothing when you were so

heartbroken. I was especially touched by my fictional counterpart's death scene. "The desolation of living on without him overwhelmed me. I choked back my tears with a smile, so our final moments together on this pitiless earth would be happy ones..."

A squeak of embarrassment escaped from my throat. I picked up my pace and sped towards the courthouse entrance.

The jolly security guard waved. "Good, you found him!" He remarked to Will, "I wish my girlfriend would bring me snacks at work."

I stopped to protest that I wasn't Will's girlfriend. Will beat me to it. "Oh, she's not my girlfriend yet."

If we weren't standing in front of a security guard with a taser, I would have strangled that man. "Yet?"

Will put his arm around my shoulders. "No, not *yet*. But she will be in about two minutes."

Why do I love this guy, again? Seriously, do you know the answer, Diary? Because I don't.

The guard said, "Oh, congratulations!" He shook Will's hand, and I huffed out the front door. Will came out after me.

On the front steps of the courthouse, I rounded on him. "Will Darcy, you are an arrogant, insensitive, lemon-sucking jerk."

Will repeated, "Lemon sucking?"

"You don't know when to keep your big mouth shut. You have major trust issues. And you're terrible at telling jokes."

I sighed and put my hands on Will's shoulders. "But...you're probably the only man in the world whose flaws I'm willing to overlook." Will's face broke into the most dazzling smile I've ever seen. I stood on tiptoe to kiss him, and he met me halfway. He put

his hands on my waist and pulled me close, and I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

I'm glad now that I didn't kiss Will when we first met at the Lucas' Fourth of July barbecue and I wanted to jump his bones. I'm glad I didn't kiss him when we were at the top of the butte and I wanted to throttle him. I'm even glad that Jane's phone call interrupted our romantic moment at Will's house, when I was a blubbering mess.

Though making out on the courthouse steps was tricky because we were smiling and laughing so much, I'm glad I kissed my Mr. Darcy for the first time when we were both completely, perfectly, incandescently happy.



June 23, 2018

The Day I Wrote My Last Entry

Dear Diary,

I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. But I'm going to have to burn you.

It's not your fault, I know. It's not your fault Will found you in the closet while looking for his swim trunks. It's not your fault he had the audacity to open you up and read a dozen entries before Gianna caught him and tattled to me.

(That girl looks innocent, but she's quite a useful little spy. She's going to end up in the CIA one day, mark my words.)

You're a victim, really. But the world isn't fair, and often victims pay the price for their aggressors' misdeeds. I can't risk Will finding you again and reading any more.

For one thing, you've made Will even more insufferable than he already was. After he read that I had sexy fantasies about him the moment we met, he was strutting around like a peacock for days.

For another, you've exposed weaknesses that undermine my power over him. Now every time we get into an argument, Will pretends to bite my neck like a vampire to make me laugh, and I lose.

This is not acceptable. E. Bennet does not lose, especially to her husband.

I still feel strange saying that word: *husband*. I don't feel like I'm old enough to have a "husband" yet. Yes, I know I already celebrated The Big 3-0. Thank you for reminding me. Still, saying "husband" instead of "boyfriend" or "fiancée" feels like a lie, as if I'm pretending to be more grown up than I am.

I've had a husband for only one month, of course. Will and I married on Saturday, May 19, in a small civil ceremony at the courthouse. (Did you expect anything less from the famous Courthouse Confession Couple?) Then we moved to Dad's golf club for the reception dinner, which was the opposite of small.

The event was so stressful, right now I'd be in a psychiatric ward if I didn't have Caroline to plan it all. It's fun flipping through bridal magazines and talking idly about "dream weddings," but oh my goodness, planning a real one is more complex and exhausting than writing and publishing a whole novel. No wonder you hear so many wedding meltdown horror stories.

Caroline is a gem. Honestly. Thanks to her there were no meltdowns and everything went smoothly.

Mom didn't drink too much champagne, like she did that one time at Charles' vacation house. She's calmed down a bit since Lydia's debacle two years ago. To make new friends, Mom signed up for salsa dancing classes. Now she spends her days sewing elaborate dresses to wear to Latin dance socials.

Dad didn't tell any inappropriate jokes, at least while he was holding the microphone. He's taken up writing his memoirs, so maybe he gets the sarcasm out of his system in print now.

Lydia didn't act up, though she did sulk through the ceremony and skipped the reception. She's working as a line cook at a diner, which is not the glamorous life she'd envisioned for herself. I wasn't surprised she didn't want to stick around and see me happy, when she isn't.

Mary didn't fight with any crotchety old men. She's much less touchy and cynical than she used to be, back before she landed her full-time job with benefits at the public library.

And Kitty didn't run out of the reception crying after a text-message argument with her boyfriend, like she did at Jane's wedding.

Jane and Charles tied the knot in California last August. I finally got to see the five-million-dollar house in person, and I have to say: it's shocking how *little* five million dollars gets you in Beverly Hills.

Charles has a very nice house, to be sure. It's in that iconic Spanish Colonial style, with a desert rock garden in the front and a swimming pool in the back. But it's about the same size as my parents' place in Bend, on an even smaller parcel of land. Apparently, Charles' parents didn't want to spoil him too much, so they gifted him that five-million-dollar house as a modest starter home.

Jane is living it up in Los Angeles. Away from Mom's overbearing affection and expectations, she complains more and smiles less. For Jane, that's a good thing.

Her career is taking off, too. She's moved up from yogurt commercials to guest appearances on TV series. Last year she was a patient with a mysterious rare disease on a medical drama. She even got to have a life-threatening seizure while ominous music swelled and extras in scrubs shouted, "She's going into cardiac arrest!" And

she recently landed a contract as a tragic murder victim on a cop show.

My own career has been advancing more slowly, but surely. I enjoyed tutoring at the college so much, last fall I registered for an online master's degree program in English so I can teach full-time. Remember how excited I was when I met George and thought I had my "very first student"? Well, soon enough I'll have real students I can help to learn and grow as writers. It's going to be awesome.

I'm very privileged to be married to a man who makes enough for the both of us while I pursue my studies. I didn't have to take out loans for graduate school, like Mary did. I could reduce my hours at the Writing Center to fit my class schedule. Most of my classmates don't have that luxury.

Being wealthy is...weird. My habits didn't change much after I "married money." I wear the same clothes and eat the same foods. The weirdness is that my everyday life feels the same as it did before, but with all fear removed from it.

For example, I took Yoda in for a checkup last week. The vet said he needed a minor dental procedure. I was shocked when I saw the list of charges for anesthesia, surgery, lab tests, and antibiotics totaling over \$1,000. But Will merely glanced at the printout and said, "Don't worry about it." Don't worry about it? Who doesn't worry about an unexpected thousand-dollar vet bill?! The Darcys of the world, apparently.

Will and I have never fought about money, like most couples do. We sometimes have little fights about silly things, like chores. On rare occasions, we have bigger fights that appear to be about concrete issues but are really about our polar opposite communication styles, like in our first argument after Will proposed.

It all started when I announced I wasn't going to change my legal name to Darcy...and Will didn't care *at all*.

I agonized over the decision so much. Rude busybodies, like a certain aunt-in-law who shall not be named, accuse wives who don't take their husbands' names of being "radical extremists." But if you think about it, the convention itself is bizarre, not the women who choose not to follow it.

It's as if by putting on a sparkly white dress, a woman stops being a human and becomes a pet adopted from a shelter. "Fido is a lame name. You belong to me now, so your name is Spot, okay? *Spot.*"

The custom arose many centuries ago, when bossy aristocrats in Europe treated women like property, not people. It's a relic of our predominantly British origins, like the label "New England" for the northeastern states and the nonsensical spellings of words like "night" and "receipt."

We rebelled against monarchy and state religion, so why not this? Why haven't we thrown tea in the ocean yelling, "Take your doctrine of coverture and stuff it! Americaaa!"

Anyway, after fretting and reading articles and polling friends, I decided I would not bow to social pressure to change my name. With much gravitas, I sat down with Will to announce my decision. I explained my reasons and asked Will what he thought.

Will said, "It's up to you. What you call yourself has nothing to do with me." And he pulled out his phone to check his messages.

Concerned that Will's non-reaction was a front for anger, I asked, "Are you upset?"

"No. Why would I be?" he said, still reading his phone.

So Will wasn't angry, he was just totally disinterested in the conversation. For days I'd lain awake at night, worrying whether Will would be okay with my choice and what I would do if he wasn't. Now he couldn't even be bothered to discuss the subject for five minutes.

Miffed, I said, "If you're not upset, why are you taking that tone?"

"I'm not taking any tone. It's your name. I don't care either way."

"You don't have to say it like *that*. You could tell me you support my choice, and you'll love me no matter what my name is."

"That's what I meant."

"But it's not what you said!"

And so, somehow Will agreeing with me turned into a ferocious battle of wits that ended with us giving each other the cold shoulder for twenty minutes.

Then I came back and sat in Will's lap. He kissed my head and said, "I really will love you no matter what."

This "happily ever after" thing is going to take some patience. I know the man I married, and I can't expect Will to turn into a sensitive Romeo overnight. But Will also knows the woman he married, and he can't expect me to take it quietly when he speaks thoughtlessly.

We'll work it out over time. We're both very stubborn about getting what we want, and what we both want is a long and stable marriage full of mutual love and respect.

E. Bennet and W. Darcy do not fail. If they want to live happily ever after, then by golly, they will.

Lizzie Bennet

Thank You

Thank you for reading *Lizzie Bennet's Diary*! I hope you had as much fun reading it as I did writing it.

This novel was originally serialized on Wattpad from September 2018 through March 2019. I admire the patience of all who read along as I posted the chapters. I'm a slow writer even when I have plenty of time to write, which I usually don't. Mother Nature helped me out by dumping thirty inches of snow on Central Oregon the last week of February 2019. Since I literally couldn't leave my house for five days, I had nothing to stop me from writing like the wind to finish this novel!

Bend is a real resort town, and I can't describe in words how beautiful the Central Oregon area is (when it's not buried under thirty inches of snow, though some people enjoy that sort of thing). If you're into hiking, skiing, kayaking and/or sightseeing, give us a visit sometime!

To contact me or subscribe to my author newsletter, visit **tkmarnell.com**.

T. K. Marnell