

Darcy's POV #1

At the Public Ball

Darcy dragged himself over the threshold of the public ballroom full of strangers, to please his friend.

He had begged to be excused from the event, since such occasions increased his social discomfort, but the gentle exhortation of his exuberant friend had succeeded in persuading him he should attend. He now watched with envy as Bingley broke into an easy smile before the dauntingly unfamiliar crowd. He himself, had never been at ease around people he did not know. He had hoped over the years that by observing Bingley's innate skills of socializing, he might learn the art, but alas, to date, he had not.

He felt his shoulders stiffen and a sharp pulse hammered his temple. Perhaps he could convince Bingley not to stay long.

Bingley's sister, Mrs. Hurst, could scarcely hide her disdain for the locals and Darcy had to bite back a smile. She was hideously over-dressed for a country ball and her husband had already partaken liberally of the whiskey before they left. He would no doubt end up in some corner to sleep it off.

Darcy cast a sly glance at Miss Bingley. Her nose twitched as though the smell of people having fun was offensive. She was an angular, intense girl who like to stand too close to him when she spoke. He spent most of his time sliding away from her.

"Uggh," she murmured. "Brother, why must you make us mingle?"

"Because I plan to live in the community. Come, let us circulate lest they think us too proud!"

As they entered the room, the people of the county parted as if the fashionable dress of the Bingley ladies was the rod of Moses.

Darcy felt eyes upon him, attempting to pierce his reserve like javelins and he shrank under their observation. Closing his eyes as he took a deep breath, his gaze collided with a local girl upon opening them. Her bright eyes were alive with interest as she examined him, whispering unheard words to a young lady who could only be her sister. The feeling of being a public curiosity on display, increased.

As his glance swept forward, he heard the young woman giggle and wondered if his tie were crooked or a smudge of dinner lay upon his shirt front. The inhibitions and anxieties he had tried to control burst out of their box and he clenched his fists, yearning for an excuse to leave.

The whole party swept to the front of the room where Bingley ably juggled enthusiastic introductions of eager mothers with the flirtatious glances of their daughters. He chatted and conversed expertly as if these people were not strangers but intimate acquaintances.

Darcy bristled with uneasiness, searching for words of small talk to share with individuals amongst this throng but the trivial, hollow words died in his throat. Instead, he clasped his hands and surveyed the room as Bingley threw himself into the dancing masses.

The minutes crept by as Darcy crawled out of his skin, absorbing courage from the proximity of the stiff figures of Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley who had nothing but bitter criticism for the people of Meryton.

As a consequence of standing too long in one position, his legs ached and Darcy felt the need to walk, but hardly dared leave the protection of his own party. To avoid locking gazes with

curious strangers, he kept his eyes above the crowd until he needed to drop his sights to see where he was going. Fate had placed the young women from earlier in his path whom he knew to be a Miss Elizabeth Bennet from her ludicrously tactless mother's earlier introduction.

The easy smile dropped from Miss Elizabeth's unusually pretty face and intelligent eyes seemed to ask why he was so staid and sober at a ball, without uttering a word.

He nodded and she curtsied as they passed. He turned to see her pick up her skirts and flee to the side of another young woman with whom she laughed with great energy. As usual he had succeeded in ostracizing the only young woman who had piqued his interest.

Darcy finished his awkward, lonely turn about the room to find that the Bingley sisters were dancing. He was adjusting the cuffs of his jacket when Bingley arrived at his side radiating vigor and the heat of pleasure.

"Come, Darcy," said he, "I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had much better dance."

"I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. At such an assembly as this, it would be insupportable. Your sisters are engaged, and there is not another woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with." He regretted the last words as soon as they were out of his mouth but the awkwardness he felt in this unfamiliar situation had created a shower of irritation.

"I would not be so fastidious as you are," cried Bingley, "for a kingdom! Upon my honour, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening; and there are several of them you see uncommonly pretty."

"*You* are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room," said Mr. Darcy, looking at the eldest Miss Bennet.

"Oh! she is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld! But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I dare say very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you."

Darcy's stomach dropped.

"Which do you mean?" and turning round, he was horrified to see Miss Elizabeth, now seated in a chair just behind him. A sense of defeat that he had already made an enemy of the young lady washed over him, coupled with a prickly resentment that she had ridiculed him to her friend.

To cover the gaggle of emotions crowding his chest and to convince Miss Bennett that her attempt to humiliate him had not found its target, he lashed out. "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me."

The offensive words had tumbled out of his mouth without restraint. If Georgiana were here she would frown with disappointment and chide him, but it was done. He could not take back the spiteful words.

He chanced a glance at Miss Bennett to see that her jaw was tight and her eyes aflame. He had not been here five minutes and he had already torched his bridges.