

# *The Most Natural Thing*

A Short Pride & Prejudice Variation

Abigail Reynolds

Copyright © 2006, 2011, 2025 by Abigail Reynolds

All rights reserved. No generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used in creating this book, including, but not limited to, the planning, writing, or editing.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

**NO AI TRAINING:** Without in any way limiting the author's exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

# *Contents*

The Most Natural Thing	1
Also by Abigail Reynolds	12
About the author	14



# The Most Natural Thing

*A*UTHOR'S NOTE: THIS STORY was a personal writing challenge, dating from a time when 'Dark Darcy' stories were popular in the on-line Austen fan fiction community, where Darcy was given a golden opportunity to take advantage of Elizabeth Bennet's misfortunes. I don't see Darcy as a dark character, so I decided to see what would happen if I put my Mr. Darcy in the shoes of the 'Dark Darcy'. This is the original story I wrote, though I later extended it to a novella in three parts.



"Sir, there is a Miss Bennet to see you." Simms' tone expressed his dubious opinion of any young lady who would call on his master. "Shall I tell her you are out?"

It was a moment before Darcy was able to make sense of the butler's words, and even then he doubted his ears. "Did you say Miss Bennet?" He could barely bring himself to pronounce the words. "Miss *Elizabeth* Bennet?"

"She did not give her name, sir, nor did she provide a card." Simms sniffed in disapproval.

It could not be Elizabeth. What more could she possibly have to say to him after her cold words at Hunsford not a fortnight past? It would make

more sense for it to be Miss Jane Bennet, pleading for another chance with Mr. Bingley, but he could not imagine her behaving with such impropriety as to call upon a single gentleman. He could imagine Elizabeth breaking such rules, but why?

There could only be one reason. She must have told her mother of his proposal and been instructed to change her tune. Well, it was far too late for that. He would prove to her he was not a fool to be played upon. "Show her in," he said brusquely. He took a bracing gulp from the half-empty glass of port beside him and straightened his cravat, hoping the room's dim light would disguise his weary features. It would not do to have her know he had been pining over her. In truth, he had been pining over a fantasy.

Almost involuntarily he stood at the sound of her light footsteps, even before her all-too-familiar form slipped in the door. He acknowledged her with a bare nod of his head and silently gestured to a chair. He forced himself to examine her critically, noting the flaws in her complexion and the asymmetry of her form in an ill-fitting dark dress, avoiding those deep, deceptive eyes.

She sat, folding and unfolding her hands in her lap. He felt no inclination to make this easy for her, so he said nothing, though the scent of lavender that drifted across to him made him slightly dizzy.

Finally she took a deep breath. "Thank you for receiving me. I apologize for the imposition, which I would not have made were my circumstances any less desperate."

Desperate? He had not expected such melodrama from Elizabeth, but perhaps it was all part of the plan to make him compromise her and be forced to marry her. She had compromised herself enough coming here by herself; he wondered if she considered the extent to which he could ruin her reputation with a word. But even so, he felt a fleeting temptation to go along with her scheme, but then her insulting words at Hunsford rang in his ears again. She did not deserve any recognition from him. "Desperate, Miss Bennet?" he said with cold irony.

For a moment her eyes flamed, then, to his surprise, the fire was banked. Something had quelled her spirit. He wondered what punishment her

mother had inflicted upon her to make her throw herself on the last man in the world she could be prevailed upon to marry. The memory of her angry countenance as she had spat those words at him made his spine stiffen.

“I am here to beg your assistance, although I have given you no reason to grant it. I should preface my request with an apology for the unfair things I said to you owing to my foolish misapprehension of Mr. Wickham, but I doubt you are in any mood to hear it, so I will come directly to my point. I have already paid bitterly for my mistaken impression of him. My family’s circumstances have changed dramatically since we last met, owing to Mr. Wickham. My youngest sister, in her foolish ignorance, has run off with him. You know him too well to doubt the outcome. She has nothing to tempt him, and I fear she is lost forever.”

The one appeal he had not expected, and the one he could not refuse. Still, he would not weaken, nor allow her to guess anything of the power she still held over him, despite everything she had said and done. “I am sorry to hear it. What has your father done to remedy the situation?”

“My father....” Her voice caught, and her eyes dropped. “My father will never again remedy any situation, which brings me to my request. You, sir, have great influence with my cousin, Mr. Collins. He has already taken possession of Longbourn, which was left to him under entail, and once he heard of Lydia’s circumstances, he refused to allow my mother and other sisters to remain there. They are staying with relatives for the moment, but that situation cannot continue. I would ask you to use your influence to convince Mr. Collins to allow my family to return, perhaps to a cottage on the estate. Nothing can be done for my poor sister Lydia, but if you could find it in your heart to intercede on behalf of my family, I would be grateful. Beyond grateful.” She said the last words with an odd emphasis.

Good God, she could not possibly mean to offer *herself* as a bribe, could she? And with no benefit of marriage, only the knowledge that he desired her? He stared at her in disbelief.



There, she had said it. Elizabeth waited, her heart cold in her chest, for his response. He was her last hope, and she could only hope that his interest in her had not waned so much as to refuse this opportunity.

“On your own behalf as well, if you are to live with your family.”

The candle on his desk hissed and sputtered, sending off an acrid trail of smoke. She swallowed hard. He was going to make her say it. Well, she had fallen this far, and the words made no difference in any case. Mustering her courage, she met his haughty eyes. “Not on my own behalf. I will not be returning to my family. I ceded that option when I came to you.”

Not a flicker of expression crossed his face. She had expected a look of triumph, at least, at the knowledge that the proposals which she had proudly spurned only two weeks ago, would now have been gladly and gratefully received. She had hoped he would be generous in his victory. How quickly her life had changed! From refusing to be his wife, to offering him her virtue in exchange for her family’s safety. It was the only currency she had, so there was no choice. What did her dignity matter now?

Faced with his stony silence, she said, “I believe it is the mode in such circumstances for the lady to smile sweetly and flutter her eyelashes in an appealing manner, but I fear it is beyond me at the moment. However, I promise to show you respect in all ways.”

His mouth twisted. “Go home, Miss Bennet. I will see what I can do.”



Elizabeth spent the next few days in sick anticipation, unsure whether Mr. Darcy would aid her or leave her to her fate. Oh, how she wished she had been more moderate in her speech when she had refused his proposal! She would pay for the rest of her life for her prideful errors.



The waiting and not knowing was the worst. She was surprised Mr. Darcy had not availed himself of her offer immediately. From the novels she had read, she had assumed men had little self-control in these matters. But Mr. Darcy was nothing if not self-controlled, and she supposed it was in character for him to keep his part of the bargain before demanding his payment. At least he had not taken advantage of her and then dismissed her without assistance. It would have been within his power, but she thought from his letter that he was not that sort of man. If he agreed to a bargain, he would keep it.

She was frightened by what was to come. Under the circumstances, she could not ask her aunt what to expect, as she might have if this were to be a wedding, rather than a fall from grace. Soon she and Lydia would be in the same position, but at least in her case she would have the comfort of knowing her family was safe because of her actions.

A commotion in the front hall caught her attention. Could that be Lydia's voice she heard? She caught up her skirts and hurried down, only to discover the completely unanticipated sight of her sister on Wickham's arm, laughing with her aunt. Despite everything, Elizabeth felt a rush of relief at the knowledge that her sister was safe.

"Lydia!" she cried.

Lydia laughed. "No, Lizzy, now I am Mrs. Wickham! We were wed this morning!" She held out her hand, displaying a narrow gold band.

"Married?" Elizabeth's mouth was dry. She had been so certain that Lydia was lost forever, that Wickham would never marry her, but she had been wrong yet again. Why, oh, why had Lydia not been in communication with them? Had she known, she would never have had gone to Mr. Darcy and make her bargain with the devil. But now it was too late. She doubted he would release her, and her reputation was completely within his power.

Elizabeth lifted her chin. If this was to be her fate, she would meet it with courage. She would not think of what Lydia's impulsiveness had cost her. Lydia would suffer eventually in turn, as Elizabeth was certain that Wickham's smiles and charm would fade soon enough, and his true character would emerge. *He* was the true source of Elizabeth's misery.

Lydia had been wild and thoughtless, but Wickham must have known the pain this would cause the Bennet family.

Suddenly she could not stand to see Lydia flaunting her happiness. "You will have to change your wedding finery for black now. Our father is dead."

The silence this comment produced was complete. Even Lydia sounded subdued when she finally broke it and said, "I did not know."

"Now you do. It would have been appreciated if you had told us about the wedding in advance. It would have saved much grief."

Lydia's eyes filled with tears. "I wanted to tell you! I wanted to invite my aunt and uncle, but Mr. Darcy said no, that the wedding must take place immediately." She clapped her hand to her mouth. "Oh, I should not have said that! I promised faithfully not to mention him."

Cold pierced her heart. Elizabeth could not bear it. She excused herself shakily and ran back to her room. They would think her grief was for her father, and it was best to leave it so. She needed to be alone to consider what she had just learned.

Mr. Darcy would never have voluntarily involved himself with Wickham, of that much she was certain. If he was there, it was for another reason. He must have made the match, made Wickham marry Lydia. There was no other explanation. It must have cost him a fortune.

She had not even dared to think of asking him for so much. She could not understand why he would go to so much extra trouble, mortification, and expense. Did he want her even deeper in his debt?

In the end, it did not matter why. She decided to allow herself one last night among her family. She would bid them farewell the next day and go to Mr. Darcy.



She did not have the chance to put her plan into action. The next morning her uncle came out of his study accompanied by none other than Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth took an involuntary step back as Mr. Gardiner introduced

him to his wife. "And I believe you are already acquainted with my niece, Elizabeth."

Her stomach knotted, wondering what Mr. Darcy had told her uncle about her. She could not have said a word to save her life.

"I have that honour. But I must beg your pardon; I have business elsewhere that cannot wait."

Did he expect her to leave with him? Well, he had done his part, and more. Now it was her turn. She squared her shoulders and offered to see him out. He accepted with a silent bow. Once they were safely out of hearing, she said to him, "When shall I expect to see you again, sir?" She was near enough to see the pulse throbbing in his throat. His scent raised goosebumps on her arms. What would it be like to be engulfed in that smell of spice and new leather?

Something flickered in his eyes, then died, making him look old beyond his years. "I doubt we will meet again, Miss Bennet. You owe me nothing."

"But..."

He held up his hand to stop her. "Please, no more. You have already told me I am proud, disagreeable, and selfish, and that is enough. I did not think I could sink any further in your esteem, but apparently I was incorrect. You also think me such a rake as to dishonour a gentleman's daughter. If you believe I am the sort of man who would so humiliate any woman, much less one I have loved, by taking advantage of her misfortune, you do not know me at all. I will not inflict myself on you in any way."

His words seemed to hang in the air between them as he gave her a long look, then turned to depart.

Elizabeth felt the truth of them like a knife. He was, once again, right. It was like reading his letter once again, discovering the new ways she had misjudged him. Why did she always think the worst of this man? Despite his proud carriage, she had seen the wounded look in his eye. What had she done?

The sound of the front door closing roused her from her thoughts, and she hurried down the hallway and out into the street. He was still there,

about to step into his carriage, a deep frown marring his visage. When she touched his arm to gain his attention, he stiffened. "Yes?" he said brusquely.

"You are quite right. I do not know you at all, sir, only my own foolish prejudices. I wish I had known the gentleman you truly are, instead of allowing myself to be swayed by misconceptions."

He nodded jerkily, as if her words hurt him.

"I thank you for all you have done. I will never forget it, and I will remember you always in my prayers. It can never be repaid."

His look softened slightly. "I do not deserve such praise. If you wish to repay me, I have only one small request."

"Sir?"

"Though it pained me to see it, I admired your willingness to sacrifice yourself for the sake of your family. It must have taken great strength to offer yourself to a man for whom you had no respect, the last man in the world whose company you desired." He paused to take a deep breath.

"Mr. Darcy, that was based on a mistaken understanding. By that time, your letter had given me to understand that you were indeed a man I could respect, or else I could never have trusted you that far." It was oddly important to her that he understand that.

"But not a man you could trust to do the right thing. My point remains the same. What I would ask is your word that you will never turn to someone else in such an extreme. Should you require assistance, please inform *me*, and no one else."

"You have already done so much, and I have done nothing to deserve it."

His eyes seemed black as the night sky. "Promise me you will tell me if you need help. I do not wish to spend the rest of my life wondering if you are safe."

Her mouth was dry as ashes. "I could not possibly...."

"You owe me this much, Miss Bennet."

She swallowed, her breath tight in her chest. "Very well. You have my word."

He tipped his head with a sardonic air, as if mocking himself. "My thanks, Miss Bennet." With that, he swung himself up into the carriage and closed the door panel.

The coachman clicked his tongue at the horses. As the carriage wheels started to roll, Elizabeth called after him. "God bless you, sir." Then she returned to her room and cried.



If such a thing were possible, Elizabeth's encounter with Mr. Darcy threw her into even lower spirits. The mourning dresses she donned each morning seemed to symbolize more than just the loss of her father. With Lydia's marriage, her own situation was no longer as dire, but she could not help thinking of a certain dark-eyed gentleman and cringing at the remembrance of the things she had said to him through their acquaintance. How heartily she repented every saucy speech, and especially her harsh words! She could hardly bear to think of how far his opinion of her must have fallen. Even her return to Longbourn could not free her mind of him.

Longbourn was not the same, either. Even though she rested her head under its roof each night, she could not feel it was her home. Mr. Collins' frequent pointed reminders that her family's presence was tolerated only at the behest of the nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh made certain of that, most especially when he referred to Mr. Darcy as Lady Catherine's future son-in-law. It was almost amusing to realize that Mr. Collins had no idea his demeaning words would strike home so deeply.

But as spring gave way to summer, and then to autumn, Elizabeth's natural spirits began to rise once more. Her future remained uncertain, but she learned once more to take pleasure in the scent of flowers and fresh air on her long rambles through the countryside. It was on her return home from such a walk that she discovered two most unexpected callers in the sitting room with Charlotte and Jane.

At first all she could see was Mr. Darcy. Her feet were rooted to the floor as she felt the heat of mortification rise in her cheeks. It was not until Mr. Bingley spoke that she recognized his presence at Jane's side. She barely managed to stammer out a greeting and to enquire after each of their families.

Both gentlemen responded with warm civility, but Elizabeth's embarrassment was such that she could hardly register their conversation. Why had Mr. Darcy come to Longbourn? Was he simply checking whether Mr. Collins had kept his word to shelter the Bennet family, or could it be that he had another motive? Whenever she dared glance in his direction, she found his gaze firmly fixed on her.

There was no opportunity for private conversation until the gentlemen were leaving. The ladies walked with them outside, Mr. Bingley engaging Jane and Charlotte in lively discussion. The pressure of silence made Elizabeth even more aware of Darcy's scent of fresh leather, and her pulses fluttered in response.

Darcy cleared his throat. "You seemed surprised to see me today."

She gave him a startled glance. "Very much so. I had not known you planned to return to Hertfordshire."

"It was a recent decision." He tugged at his gloves, as if they did not fit properly. "I have thought about what you said, about not knowing me. I came to offer to begin our acquaintance anew, if it is agreeable to you."

It was so unexpected that it took her breath away. The realization that he did not, in fact, think ill of her made an unconscious smile curve her lips. "It would be most agreeable, sir."

His eyes darkened. "It is not unpleasant, then, to see me again?"

Her smile bloomed to cover her face, and she felt that the whole world must smile with her. "I am glad and proud to see you again, Mr. Darcy."

He began to smile as well, and Elizabeth was struck by how handsome it made him appear.

She offered him her hand, and felt an odd shock go through her as he took it in his own. He seemed dumbfounded at first, but then recovered himself to bow over her hand, his eyes never leaving hers. As he pressed his

lips against her hand more firmly than propriety would dictate, a novel heat began to move through Elizabeth. If only she could freeze the moment in time! She knew she would relive it again and again in her memory.

Her fingers tingling, she said, "I hope we will meet again soon."

Darcy released her hand with obvious reluctance, then mounted his horse and took the reins in his hand as he looked down at her. "You may depend upon it, Miss Bennet."

He spurred the horse and trotted down the drive. When he turned at the last moment and their eyes met, Elizabeth felt a new warmth deep inside her.

Still feeling his kiss on her hand, she walked back into Longbourn with a dreamy smile.

~~ The End ~~



*Author's Note: This is the entire story I originally wrote. Several years later, I decided I had more to say and added two more sections to it, making it a novelette. If you'd like to read that, it's in my anthology *A Pemberley Medley*, which is available in KU. It contains spicy scenes for mature readers – you have been warned!*

## *Also by Abigail Reynolds*

Spellbound at Pemberley  
The Magic of Pemberley  
The Guardians of Pemberley  
The Price of Pride  
A Matter of Honor  
Mr. Darcy's Enchantment  
Conceit & Concealment  
Mr. Darcy's Journey  
Alone with Mr. Darcy  
The Darcys of Derbyshire  
Mr. Darcy's Noble Connections  
To Conquer Mr. Darcy  
What Would Mr. Darcy Do?  
By Force of Instinct  
Mr. Darcy's Undoing  
Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy: The Last Man in the World  
The Man Who Loved Pride & Prejudice  
Morning Light  
Mr. Darcy's Obsession  
A Pemberley Medley



Mr. Darcy's Letter

The Darcy Brothers (co-author)

Mr. Darcy and the Enchanted Library (co-author)

## About the author

**A**BIGAIL REYNOLDS MAY BE a nationally bestselling author and a physician, but she can't follow a straight line with a ruler. Originally from upstate New York, she studied Russian and theater at Bryn Mawr College and marine biology at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole. After a stint in performing arts administration, she decided to attend medical school, and took up writing as a hobby during her years as a physician in private practice.

A life-long lover of Jane Austen's novels, Abigail began writing variations on *Pride & Prejudice* in 2001, then expanded her repertoire to include a series of novels set on her beloved Cape Cod. Her books have won multiple awards and several have been national bestsellers. Her most recent releases are *Spellbound at Pemberley*, *The Magic of Pemberley*, *The Price of Pride*, and *Mr. Darcy's Enchantment*. You can find her other books listed on her Author Page at Amazon. Her books have been translated into seven languages. She lives on Cape Cod with her family and a menagerie of animals. Her hobbies do not include sleeping or cleaning her house.

Visit Abigail's website at [Pemberley Variations](#)