

# All's Fair in Love and War and Death: A Pride and Prejudice Variation by Anne Morris

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It started when she was a little girl. Elizabeth always sat at the *end* of the Bennet pew. The Bennets had one of the most prominent pews at St. Alban's Church in Meryton because they were one of the first families.

St. Alban's was an old stone church. It had been rebuilt in the seventeenth century out of local stone, heavy and ugly, and was in want of repair. There were few windows in those thick stone walls, and yet at the end of the Bennet pew, there was a narrow window in the nave wall on the south side of the church. That window was one of only three which looked out over the graveyard. It was the only one that had yet to have some wealthy subscriber donate a great deal of money so that a stained glass window could be installed in it for the glory of God and in remembrance of some deceased family member.

Mrs. Bennet hated to sit at the far end and look over the graveyard; she sat on the inner aisle. It allowed her to keep an eye on the comings and goings of her neighbors. Not that there was much change to observe as everyone sat in the same place, and Reverend White gave the same sort of sermon, week after week after week at St. Alban's.

Mr. Bennet dutifully sat next to his wife. Jane (the oldest daughter) being equally dutiful, sat next to her parents. Mary (another daughter, the middle) never minded going to church, sitting on those hard wooden pews, and listening to sermons—at least not to ever complain about it—she came next. And once Catherine and Lydia (the last two) were old enough to leave the nursery and be brought to church, well, they needed a lot of attention, so they had to suffer sitting with Mrs. Bennet or Nanny Pickens, who was their nursemaid until she died when Lydia was seven.

Somehow, Elizabeth (the second daughter) had been left to her own devices when it came to her church attendance, and she sat at the *end* of the pew. The fact that she did not object to sitting by the window near the graveyard was welcomed by everyone.

Elizabeth discovered at a young age that there was a colony of crows which lived in the oak and yew trees out in that landscape. Uncle Philips once corrected Elizabeth about her choice of words when she mentioned that there was a '*colony*' out there in the graveyard. He said it ought to be called a '*murder*' of crows.

She thought that was too coarse of a phrase; it did not fairly describe them. Elizabeth saw them going out in twos together, *courting* almost, she believed. She imagined that she saw them as if dancing as they moved about the graveyard in pursuit of worms to eat, or seeking twigs for nests, or pursuing whatever activities suited their fancy each day.

And sitting on the end of that pew and watching the ministrations of the crows was a far better use of her time than listening to old Reverend White's sermons about sin and death and redemption.

5 October 1810

It was a cold and blustery Sunday, just after Michaelmas. Mr. Bennet set off on foot for Longbourn once church services were over. The Longbourn carriage was to meet the rest of the family at Mrs. Philips' house, for their Aunt Philips lived in town, and Mrs. Bennet wished to call upon her sister.

Mrs. Philips had, all told, an extremely fine house in Meryton. It was not an estate. Mr. Philips was a country attorney (their aunt had not done as well as Mrs. Bennet by marrying a gentleman) but *still*, having family so close was of comfort to Mrs. Bennet.

The mother of five's face was flushed and excessively red that blustery day as she led her troop of daughters down the graveyard path towards Townsend Lane where Mrs. Philips lived. Mrs. Bennet often remarked how she hated having to walk that particular pathway. She wished for a *different* way to get to her sister's house, though she would never go so far as to take the main road out of the church. That involved walking to the High Street, around to Church Lane and *then* to Townsend—a path that was twice the distance to her poor tired feet, and aching, over-taxed heart.

Mrs. Bennet thought they ought to put in a proper path in the churchyard, one which carried forward straight, over to the edge of the property (in between the graves), and that they should cut down the line of yew trees that ran along the eastern side of the churchyard as well. She argued it would lighten up the churchyard. Elizabeth was always horrified at the idea of cutting down those trees because she knew that the crows nested in their treetops.

Elizabeth followed her family, though with slower footsteps. She turned and saw that most of the crows were not in attendance in the graveyard. It was as if the colony knew that if they appeared, Mrs. Bennet would yell at them and wave her stick about.

In the last year (since the spring), Mrs. Bennet had affected to use a walking stick. While it had become a fashion accessory among the rich, her daughters weren't sure if she had purchased it because it was *fashionable*, or because she needed its assistance in walking. But Mrs. Bennet often waved the stick about when her feelings were heightened. The crows appeared to remember her; they would note she was coming and fly out of her way.

Elizabeth tarried behind her family. Catherine and Lydia ran ahead, out of sight, wishing to discover what sort of visitors Aunt Philips might have waiting for them, while Jane and Mary dutifully walked beside their mother.

A *caw* caught Elizabeth's attention, and she turned to see that there was a small group of crows in the largest of the oak trees in the graveyard, ones which had not fled, despite Mrs. Bennet's presence. Elizabeth was surprised that there was an odd number of them—there were *five* of them.

There was one odd little gentlemen crow. Elizabeth was not sure why she thought it was a *gentleman* crow, but she felt that it *must* be as she paused to look at him. She wondered *where has your mate got to?* With so many years of observation of her little friends, she knew that they stayed faithful to each other for life. She was surprised that this one did not have a companion with him. The crow cocked his head there on his perch up on the oak branch as he peered down at her.

A great cry resounded in the graveyard, and it was not the call of the crows. It was Mary calling out in a garbled fashion, and it was Jane calling “Mamma!” Elizabeth looked towards the yew fence and saw her sisters bending over a form on the ground: her mother’s form. Elizabeth ran towards that trio of figures. Jane was kneeling on the ground; Mary was bent at the waist and staring at a moving form laying on the earth.

Her mother lay on her side as though she had fallen forward; the stick had not done its job to keep her on her feet. And despite fears that Mrs. Bennet had already been taken from this earth, she was breathing though the sound coming from her lungs was odd and distorted. Mrs. Bennet was twitching, but her eyes were open.

“I’ll run for Mr. Jones,” declared Elizabeth. “Mary, can you run to the Philips’ house for help?” Mary seemed unable to answer. Lizzy moved and pulled Mary to her in a rough embrace before she dragged her to the graveyard gate. They needed to head in the same direction.

“Mary!” Elizabeth cried again. “You need to fetch Uncle Philips!” She opened the half-gate at the graveyard’s edge between that line of yew trees and pulled her sister after her.

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