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A Tinder Date With John Willoughby

Introduction:

From the day I started reading *Sense and Sensibility*, I was confident I wanted to use it to write my fanfiction in a modern Athens universe. Throughout the book, John Willoughby is positively begging to be translated into a modern-day hipster--the type of guy who brags about voting for Bernie Sanders to support the common man's revolution, but also wears brand name Birkenstocks with zero self-awareness. Willoughby is a Regency Era example of what is known to young women today as a "sad boi." He is incredibly emotional, charmingly romanticizing his melodrama and neuroses as simply living life to the fullest. When a woman realizes a sad boi is not the genuine, sweet cherub he peddled to her, but rather someone who is emotionally immature and manipulative, he moves on to the next, continually projecting a false image of himself. Marianne Dashwood at the beginning of the novel fits the mold of a woman likely to be swayed by these tactics. Because she is naive and sensitive, Willoughby seems a cut above other men her age (in the case of this story, the stereotypical fraternity boy) because he is emotionally expressive. However, what she fails to see is that all other aspects of him are red flags that the version of himself he presents is not actually aligned with his supposed values, which in reality more highly prioritize money and his own romantic and sexual experiences with women over their feelings. Throughout the piece, I tried to create a sense of Marianne's interiority through a

rough attempt at free indirect discourse. In doing this, I lifted certain bits of phrasing from the passage in which Willoughby is introduced, such as him looking like “a hero of a favourite story.” While it certainly is not as artful as Austen’s, it felt like the best way to try and link the piece to the Austen canon since I placed it in a modern universe. I also tried to be conscious of various adaptations of the text, alluding to the 1995 film with the inclusion of Shakespeare’s sonnets and in general crafting this version of Willoughby’s personality around the 2008 BBC adaptation in which he is presented as more of a filanderer. I tried to present a modern equivalent to the discussion around Sonnet 116 by focusing the conversation during the date heavily on art, but the types of art that sad bois love, like Modernist poetry and literally anything Bob Dylan has ever made. Overall, I wanted to humanize Marianne by letting the reader inside her head. Yes, she is insufferable at the start of the original novel, but she represents a phase that plenty of young women go through. She has hope for love and relationships, and she just wants to find someone worthy of that hope.

Fanfiction:

Marianne Dashwood stepped out of her apartment building and looked up. She could see dark clouds crowding the night sky, and the winter air was cool on her cheeks. She zipped up her coat--thrifed vintage rabbit fur, dyed black with bold stripes of color--and briskly set out on foot for Walker’s. During the day, Walker’s was a busy coffee bar that attracted a hip student clientele, but at night, it largely emptied and transformed into an intimate pub. She lived only a few blocks away, but she could soon feel her calves burning as she powered uphill on North Thomas Street in her over-the-knee heeled black suede boots. “Beauty is pain,” she thought to

herself as she topped the hill and made a right onto Washington Street. Marianne had a flair for the dramatic, and that manifested itself in her personal style. Her closet was filled with the loudest prints and the brightest colors. Life was too short to dress forgettably, no?

She was headed to her first ever Tinder date, although she had plenty of doubts about the dating app. Having heard plenty of disappointing stories from friends about the seemingly attractive guys they had met up with who ended up total duds, Marianne was skeptical. In her few experiences with men, she had found them generally emotionally inarticulate. Part of her feared she would never find a man, for she required so much more than most of them seemed willing to give. However, she decided to give one potential suitor--John Willoughby--a chance. John seemed different from the other men on Tinder. His profile photos avoided the typical cliches (a shot from below in a car, a grainy shirtless reflection in a mirror, a grimace behind a freshly caught bass in the foreground) and instead showcased someone who seemed mature and sensitive. One picture showed him in Italy gazing into the distance over a glass of wine; another showed him widely grinning with a couple of stylish female friends. A third, Marianne's favorite, showed him peering over a pair of tortoiseshell frames and reading into a microphone at an open mic night. She desperately hoped that he was perhaps performing some of his own poetry and planned to ask him during the date. John listed several niche bands in the "Interests" section of his profile, a sign that he was surely plugged into the local art scene. Unlike the typical cro-magnon fraternity boys that lurked the streets of Athens, John might possess the emotional depth Marianne was seeking.

As she turned onto College Avenue, Marianne heard a crack of thunder and felt a few drops of rain begin to fall. She quickened her step and crossed the threshold of Walker's just in

time to beat a torrential downpour, thankful her coat wasn't soaked. She peered into each booth looking for John, but found no one. She eventually spied him tucked away around a corner in a small booth for two. He was reading something. She instantly felt a rush of adrenaline as she saw him in person for the first time. Taking a breath, she strode over assertively to meet him. As she closed in, he looked up and met her gaze, hopping gracefully down from his seat to greet her. Marianne, overwhelmed by his unexpected advance, lost her previously confident footing. Suddenly she felt her ankle give way beneath her, and she stumbled forward off of the high heels that had moments ago given her so much confidence. Within milliseconds, John had caught her in his arms, saving her from the embarrassment of a nasty fall in front of everyone in the bar. She felt herself crimson, mortified that her cool-girl facade had already crumbled before their introduction. When she finally forced herself to look up at John's face, though, her anxiety melted away. She was immediately struck by how uncommonly handsome he was. He was taller and stronger than she had anticipated. As she stood in his arms, it was hard not to feel like he was a hero in one of her favorite stories.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," she said frantically.

"Don't sweat it, no broken bones. You make quite an entrance," he said, grinning down at her. "You're even more gorgeous than in your pictures."

Marianne, stunned by this immediate and open display of interest, stumbled through a thank you as she sat down on one side of the booth.

"I'll go grab us some drinks," John said with a smile that made her feel instantly at ease, leaning in just inches from her face before heading over to the bar. Marianne blinked twice, briefly released from his magnetism. She smoothed her hair and took a moment to examine John from

afar. He had clearly put lots of thought into his look for the evening, another point in his favor when compared to most men her age. Underneath a suede jacket lined with sheepskin was a wine purple sweater that was tight across his chest. He wore dark wash jeans that were not too tight, but certainly rather fitted. Scanning down his legs, Marianne saw that John had cuffed them over a dark pair of lace-up boots. She glanced down at the table and saw what John had been reading when she arrived--a pocket copy of Shakespeare's sonnets. She leafed through it to see the page for Sonnet 116 was dog-eared and worn, with scribbles in the margins. Before she could glance over his notations, though, a local craft IPA suddenly appeared in front of her.

"Are you a fan of poetry?" he asked, with a slight tilt of his head. Marianne noticed his hair looked casual but polished, like he had just rolled out of bed but had run his fingers through it. John noticed her looking, hoping she didn't know what this natural look took him twenty minutes and two dollops of pomade to create.

"I definitely am," said Marianne, and the two began an exchange over their favorite poets. John clearly had excellent taste--he was a fan of Frank O'Hara, William Carlos Williams, and of course, T.S. Eliot. Over the course of their conversation, John only became more refined. Marianne learned that he was from Buckhead, an area of Atlanta far bigger and more cultured than the rural corner of Georgia where she had been raised. He had attended the Lovett School and was well-educated in the literary arts (apparently been the star of multiple theatre productions in his time there). His family had two chocolate labs, Jack and Alice.

This unexpected reveal of John's picket fence upbringing terrified Marianne; John clearly came from a family that prioritized wealth. Would he become uninterested when he learned of her own family's middle class status? John was so handsome and thoughtful; he could easily have his

pick of any of the women in Athens, including the dozens of richer artsy girls from Atlanta who cycled through the very booth they were sitting in during the day, drinking espresso and Googling showtimes for A24 films at Cine. Despite this being her first date with John, the mere thought of seeing him with one of those girls felt suffocating.

Throughout their conversation, however, Marianne's fears were assuaged. She could just sense that he was the type of person who wanted more from life than money; he was hungry for true emotional experience. She found her eyes wandering over his face. His eyes creased up at the edges when he smiled, and they were a striking blue that made her feel like he was looking into her very soul. Marianne imagined walking down the aisle to those eyes. They would certainly have to incorporate some poetry into the ceremony. She pictured the day they would sit their children down and tell them of their love at first sight--well, technically at first Tinder swipe--but what was most important was that destiny had clearly fated them to be together, in this bar, on this night.

As the evening went on, one drink became two, and two drinks became four. They talked for hours about everything from Spaghetti Westerns to the apparent political revolution that was coming. Marianne listened in awe as John gave an impassioned explanation of the Communist Manifesto and the inevitability of a mass uprising of the people. In half an hour, she went from being mostly ignorant of Marx's writings to adding *Das Kapital* to her Goodreads list. She was thrilled that she had finally found her shining knight amongst cavemen. None of the men she regularly passed in the halls of her apartment building who reeked of liquor and meaningless sex were the type to regularly consume film noir. She felt so drawn to him; she was certain he also felt they shared a special connection. After all, while he was no ordinary guy, she was also no

ordinary girl; Marianne felt things more than others her age, and she was unafraid of expressing how much. She was confident John saw this special quality in her. By the way he looked at her, so enraptured, she knew he was feeling the intensity of their connection, too. She had never trusted anyone so quickly in all her life.

“So,” he said, reaching across the table to take Marianne’s hand in his. “I hope this isn’t too forward, but would you like to come have a drink at my place? This place closes in a few minutes, but I don’t want to stop talking with you. You’re not like other girls.”

Surprised, Marianne processed a thousand thoughts running through her mind. She felt incredibly safe with John, and she was sure they would have a lovely evening. But going home with someone on the first date wasn’t really her style. Would he perceive her interest as too open and easy to get? Should she hold out to try and maintain the upper hand? But John didn’t seem to be the type to be overly concerned with social norms. What they had was a raw passion, and to sacrifice spending more time together out of a shallow sense of propriety was silly.

“I’d love to,” Marianne said, blushing bright red. John squeezed her hand and helped her out of the booth. Marianne felt her heart skip a beat as he placed his hand on the small of her back. As they stepped out of Walker’s, Marianne could hear the beginning notes of “You’re Gonna Leave Me Lonesome When You Go.”

With a wink, John said, “I love this song. Do you listen to any Bob Dylan?”