Marianne

by 55anon (Anon)

Summary

Elinor did not understand her. She never had.

Let me not to the marriage to true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! It is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never write, nor no man loved.

Elinor did not understand her.

She never had. They loved each other dearly and Marianne knew that Elinor had done so much on her behalf, perhaps more than some thought she deserved. She knew that Elinor concealed her sensibilities within herself, and that she had the approval of society for doing so. It was how society was able to smile and survive without contradiction; how they avoided facing such unpleasant realities as the existence of girls like Eliza, as though silence and willful ignorance would erase those stories. For the most part, they had been successful.
Until Marianne has listened to her sister's account of Colonel Brandon's tale, she had truly never imagined the depths to which a woman without money and friends could fall. Certainly, she had known of the possibility and thought of it at a distance. There were even poets who glorified, in a tragic way, the predicament of such women fallen and irrevocably lost in the dark paths of dramatic passion. It had never occurred to her, however, that such circumstances were truly possible. Nor did she know what to make of the fact that Colonel Brandon would have let her marry Willoughby without breathing a word for fear of breaching his honor. She understood perfectly that he was not intimate with her family and therefore had no reason to make those details generally known upon their acquaintance. Revealing his past to Elinor had been a sign of his great esteem for her, and his great desire to alleviate Marianne's pain. Nevertheless, had she been engaged to marry Willoughby, he would have rather condemned her to a dishonest and seemingly happy marriage than risked himself and revealed the truth.

Marianne paused. She could almost hear Elinor telling her that it was unkind of her to think in such a manner. Colonel Brandon had been greatly troubled and distressed by the mere act of recounting the sequence of events, or so Elinor had related to her. Evidently the memories were not so removed as he might have hoped. Perhaps she was being unkind in faulting him with dishonesty. Whatever his reasons, Marianne still chafed against the contradictions presented by society. She would have married Willoughby. Colonel Brandon would have stood by silently, waiting for the day she made the discovery on her own accord. And Willoughby—

Marianne did not think of Willoughby, the memories too close for her to bear.

Elinor did not understand her and Marianne often felt there were few in the world who could. Her rather impetuous nature was not born out of an impulse to rebel. She did not act simply to spite the grand dames and dowagers; she had no desire to draw attention to herself. Marianne acted as she felt, sincere in everything she said and honest in all that she did. For a time, she thought she had found another who was as pure and unfettered as she longed to be. Willoughby had been a revelation. He had been an overpowering force to which she could only react, and she knew that she had been the same to him. It was a sensation that Elinor would never understand, would never let herself understand, and would never want to understand. The very idea of being swept away by one's feelings mortified her, and she always quickly changed the subject when she sensed Marianne's passion rising.

Marianne regretted many aspects of her relations, as Elinor liked to call them, with Willoughby. She regretted that she had neglected Elinor's feelings in the process of struggling with her own. She regretted that she had been headstrong to the point of obstinance. She regretted that her love had not been enough for Willoughby when economic realities became apparent. Yet she could not regret loving in the first place, and loving as fiercely and honestly as her heart had allowed. Elinor admonished her gently, bid her to reconsider her conduct and Willoughby's actions, and Marianne listened to her sister's concerns. She still could not bring herself to regret the time spent in Willoughby's company, the words exchanged and the looks shared. It was part of her—he had been part of her as though they were created from the same soul. Elinor could not understand.

Thus, when Marianne took ill, it was not out of an overflow of melancholy as Mrs. Jennings had supposed. A woman who had loved less might recover faster; a girl who had committed less than her heart might have smiled and moved on to the next suitor. Mr. Willoughby, Mr. Wimbleworth, what difference would it matter to such a woman as long as he had an ample living and was of tolerably good repute? Compatibility in character was desirable, certainly, but it was not necessary to procure the happiness of so many women she knew. Marianne would have none of it. She did not love by halves. She fell ill, she lost all interest in the world around her because the world was a darker, more desolate place without Willoughby. They had shared everything together. Music and poetry, art and letters—he had read her soul and loved what he saw there. Willoughby was enthralled by the prospect of spending a lifetime with her, of raising children with her, of walking
with her through the countryside after breakfast. He made the air thrum with all that was vibrant and beautiful, and the knowledge that she did the same for his world was enough to take her breath away.

In losing Willoughby, in learning that his actions were never as honest as she had trusted them to be, something inside Marianne had shattered. The fever burned through her resolve to continue living in a world where money was valued more than the truth of one’s feelings, where rank and title was worth more than the sincerity of one's character. She did not care to live in a society where her sister was forced to sit quietly, silently, unable to breathe a word as to her true desires and forbidden from claiming the very person upon whom her happiness depended. Her entire life, Marianne had felt the unfairness of their positions keenly and had struggled with it. When she met Willoughby, she thought she had discovered the means to her freedom. She thought she had found a man who held society's hypocrisies as cheaply as she had and would not bend to their fickle demands. That he had, and ultimately chose to retain his face in society rather than remain with her, broke her. Marianne had given everything to Willoughby. She had placed her faith in love in him.

Nevertheless, she refused to regret it. For her love had not only been devoted to Willoughby, but devoted also to herself. She felt her world grow and expand through this love. She felt she had come into herself, that she had left her sheltered and girlish habits and had stepped into womanhood. Elinor, as the eldest and naturally inclined towards pragmatism, had been forced to into that role prematurely to the point where it had choked out what little ability she had to express her emotions. In Marianne, love had come at exactly the right time it should strike a girl—at the bloom of her youth, in the spring of her beauty. She was unfortunate in that her love had been so suddenly extinguished in the height of its passion. Had it been cut off earlier, or later, she might have been spared the full force of the consequences. Nonetheless, Marianne would not regret. She could not. Scoundrel though he was, dishonest and unfortunate though he was, she had loved sincerely and she would never forget it.

Her decision made her recovery that much more difficult. For she must recover—the fever had burned through her, but she came through that fire alive. In her illness, Marianne had been plagued with terrible dreams that her mother had disappeared, unable to bear the shame of Marianne’s fall. She dreamed she had been caught in a poorhouse with a wailing child, and that Willoughby had come to see her only to snub her. She dreamed that Elinor had been searching for her, only to find her at her deathbed. Marianne made her sister promise to care for Margaret and tell Willoughby that she loved him. The name Eliza haunted her for reasons she could not, in her state, understand, but it seemed terribly important that she find the poor creature and assure her that she would be safe in Barton Cottage. When she awoke to find herself surrounded by those she loved and those she knew, and even the face of one she had grown to respect, she knew she must recover to live again. Marianne could not yet face the possibility of love again.

Everything reminded her of Willoughby. When they had been in love, there was nothing that had not been touched by his presence. Without him it was the same, only instead of the man, she was faced with her memories. Barton Cottage, her favorite walks, her favorite sonnets, her favorite music, was filled with the memory of his touch, his smile, the sound of his voice, his enthusiasm and his passion. If her character were different, if her love had not been so deep, strong, and sure, she might have hated him for leaving her with the husk of empty recollections. If she did not have the steady presence of Elinor, who was also carrying such painful memories without having known any of the advantages of an attachment, her resolve might have wavered. Watching Elinor master herself and continue forward with such poise gave Marianne the confidence to do so as well. She hoped that Elinor might have learned from her example as well and seen that whatever the costs, love, and ability to express that love, had the power to change a person profoundly.

Still, she wept. After her recovery and return to Barton Cottage, Marianne found herself
inexplicably moved to deep sadness and what Elinor would consider hysterics. She tried her best to compose herself, keeping a picture of her sister's stern countenance before her. Yet when she remembered a poem, when she touched the pianoforte, when the light filtered through grey clouds a certain way, she thought the emotion would overwhelm her. Marianne, wary of the pain she had already inflicted on Elinor's poor heart and cautious of her sister's censure, did her best to conceal these moments. She was not certain how successful she was in the endeavor, as Elinor was ever observant and Marianne had never been very good at deceiving anyone of the truth of her sentiments.

One evening while they were dining at Barton Park, she withdrew to a solitary corner, trying to master herself. Colonel Brandon happened upon her and seeing her distress, he approached her. Marianne moved to turn away, too overcome to say anything, but stopped.

There was a look in his eyes. It was not love, nor was it pity. It was a look of understanding.

For the first time in her life Marianne felt she could, with time, perhaps love this man who was almost twenty years her senior. In that look was a realization of Elinor's accounts, the words related of a man who had loved his cousin all his life, had nearly eloped with her, had been sent to the military for the sole purpose of being separated from her, a man who had been banished with the knowledge that the woman he loved would be married to his brother. A man who had kept her in his thoughts even while he was abroad, who had not forgotten her when he had returned to England, who had searched for her unceasingly and had discovered her dying. A man who had promised to raise her child and guard the child's safety and happiness, only to have it violated by another, whose carelessness and foolishness had left in his wake at least three hearts disinclined to trust society's caprice.

For the first time in her life Marianne understood that she could never truly comprehend the depth of Colonel Brandon's inner turmoil. And if she had once found it strange that he should fixate his interest on her for the fact that she reminded him of his desolate past, she could no longer blame him for doing so. What he offered in that look was compassion for the loss she had suffered, and the possibility that though love was lost, another could be built anew.

What must he have felt, returning after all those years to the same house where he had spent such happy years with Eliza, the same house where he had been divided from her, and the house that he must know had become her prison? It was no longer a surprise to her that Delaford had remained in a rather neglected state. There was no more joy that Colonel Brandon could take from it, just as Marianne had avoided singing and playing when she could. She longed to play and feel her fingers against the keys; music had always brought her such happiness and sublime feeling. Now, it was entwined with the memory of Willoughby, the music he had brought her, the duets they had shared. Yet Colonel Brandon was setting plans to improve the house for the sake of Edward. That act took on a new significance for Marianne and she looked at Colonel Brandon as though she were seeing him anew.

It produced a change in his countenance that she could not describe and was not ready to consider. She murmured her thanks and slipped away before he could say or do any more.

Perhaps it was not surprising, then, that after her sister was engaged and married to Edward, Marianne should spend so much time with Colonel Brandon. It was obvious that all those around her, particularly her mother, desired to see them married. But Marianne would not be forced into a marriage, particularly one she had misapprehensions about from the beginning of their acquaintance. He was significantly older than her and that much more mature in his feelings. He had had too much time to brood and dwell on his mistakes, and she feared that he loved her solely for her slight resemblance to his deceased cousin. Colonel Brandon was wealthy, to be sure, and the match would make her mother and sisters exceedingly happy. Nonetheless, Marianne refused
to be mistaken for someone, or something, she was not. She had always been honest with herself and with her feelings; if Colonel Brandon could not accept her on those terms, she would not have him.

He courted Marianne for eighteen months. It was by no means an easy courtship. Marianne was slow to recover from Willoughby and at times, unwilling. Colonel Brandon too, found it surprisingly difficult to leave behind the memories that had defined him for the past seventeen years. The darkness of his recollections could usually be driven away by Marianne's youthful looks and easy smile, but there were times when he withdrew from her company to brood.

Marianne, ever determined, unexpectedly followed him one day and asked him to share in his thoughts. He found her impertinence galling, she found his reticence off-putting. If they could not be open with one another during courtship, if he would not be honest with her alone, how could she know he would not be so in marriage? He was old enough that his habits had been formed, and Marianne desired to know if he was still young enough that he could change them. Colonel Brandon answered that his disinclination to relate to her some of the less savory details of his past did not imply dishonesty, and whatever honesty they had in the relationship would be useless if she did not respect him. She was old enough that she should have learned that long ago, and he wondered if she was indeed too young for a man of his age.

There were times when he grew jealous of Willoughby's hold on her memory. He caught her rereading the letters she had desperately sent him; he sometimes saw her walking familiar paths, her face pale and eyes feverish. Likewise with Marianne, there were times when she grew tired of managing around Eliza's place in his heart. She saw him pause at times in Delaford, looking out into some distance. Colonel Brandon had yet to introduce her to his ward and her child, of whom she had heard much of and was eager to make an acquaintance. It seemed, however, that he did not think it proper. In truth, he did not enjoy the manner in which she spoke of meeting his ward, as though she were a curiosity rather than a heartbroken girl. They neither of them found it easy to relinquish the claims of a previous and departed lover, and as a consequence of past devastation they both desired to be assured of the other's affection.

It was only natural, then, that Marianne and Colonel Brandon truly committed themselves to each other after Elinor and Edward had reasoned with them. Elinor, rather than offer some prudent argument based on ideas such as marital contentment or domestic felicity, bade Marianne consider less her own fears and more her natural capacity to love, and to love passionately. Though Elinor had once considered it a flaw in Marianne's character, her own happy situation with Edward had caused her to modify those views. It was true that Marianne's ability to love was the source of her continued heartache, but it was also her greatest strength. Marianne was able to somehow sustain the contradiction of loving generously and selfishly; selfishly because she demanded everything of her lover, possibly more than some men were capable of giving; generously because Marianne returned that affection in equal measure, giving everything of herself to the point of imprudence. Few could measure up to such a romance, and few could maintain it.

Elinor was persuaded that Colonel Brandon was one such man. The depth of his feeling was evidence enough, but he had also done so much on their behalf when he had no hope of winning Marianne's affections. That he was an excellent man, Elinor had no doubt. That he was a passionate man, she soon discovered upon observation. And in the unlikely event that something disagreeable were to happen between Marianne and Colonel Brandon, Elinor assured Marianne that she would always have the assurance that those who had always loved her—her mother, herself, Margaret, and Edward—would support her. When Elinor had finished speaking, Marianne hardly knew what to say. Her sister then took pleasure in rather impishly pointing out that Delaford was in need of a competent mistress, one with the energy to balance the task of reviving the estate to a create lively household and managing the somewhat austere habits of Colonel Brandon.
From that point forward, with new confidence born from her sister's favorable judgments, Marianne made a determined effort. Towards what end that effort would lead, she did not know, but Colonel Brandon noticed it almost immediately. There was an openness, a vulnerability in her behavior towards him. Yet at the same time, she smiled with the headstrong confidence he had fallen in love with at the time of their first meeting. Marianne sang and played more and more often, renewing her interest in contemporary music. She asked him his opinion on her interpretation of certain passages, and once asked him to grant her a performance on the pianoforte himself. He cautiously approached her on the subject of poetry, and read for her. Marianne found his readings more subdued than Willoughby, tempered by sorrow.

She resolved to try harder. And he too, when he saw her smile falter and grief haunt her features, resolved.

Their long and extended courtship was necessary, for them both. Neither had been ready for the larger commitment of marriage and all the duties it entailed towards the other. Despite necessity and the gradual transformation the months had produced in Marianne and Colonel Brandon, the glacial rate at which their real attachment developed was exceedingly vexing for almost everyone around them, particularly since it was well known that Colonel Brandon cared for Marianne and that Marianne had been quite carried away in her whirlwind romance with certain scoundrels who would remain nameless. Everyone expected a similarly quick engagement and satisfyingly entertaining marriage.

It puzzled and frustrated Mrs. Jennings, who subjected them both to many tactless comments and hints which never failed to infuriate Marianne, much to the amusement of Colonel Brandon. Mrs. Dashwood prodded Marianne, Margaret incessantly asked questions, even Elinor could not resist making some sly comments concerning Colonel Brandon's marriageable age. Marianne bore them as well as she could. Near the end of their courtship, she and Colonel Brandon had become such close companions that when she related all of this to him with great energy, he, smiling because it was too dangerous to laugh at her while she was in such a state, remarked that perhaps they should elope so as to dash the expectations of them all. Marianne blushed, then declared that she thought it an excellent idea. He should send for the horses immediately. When Marianne returned to Barton Cottage, Colonel Brandon found he could no longer bear the absence of her company. Soon after that, on a day Marianne least expected a proposal, Colonel Brandon knelt before her and asked in clear, honest tones, if she would do him the honor of becoming his wife.

She accepted.

Their engagement was met with great joy from all their acquaintance. Marianne withstood the overbearing felicity of Mrs. Jennings because she was too preoccupied with the prospect of her own future. Plans were made, Marianne, Elinor, Margaret, and Mrs. Dashwood all went to town to buy her wedding things, Colonel Brandon followed shortly thereafter. He called on her every day and took her to concerts and assemblies. Marianne particularly loved the Italian operas; the way they were filled with such emotions. Colonel Brandon also introduced her to his acquaintances in London. They were mildly shocked by the change that had come over him, they could hardly recognize him. Love made him a different man. He could no longer imagine life without Marianne, and it was clear to all that she felt similarly.

The wedding itself was beautiful, everything that everyone expected and hoped for. Marianne was radiant, Colonel Brandon was very nearly the picture of a dashing Romantic hero, dressed in his uniform, were it not for the fact that he was smiling, rather than brooding.

*Let me not to the marriage to true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,*
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! It is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.
Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never write, nor no man loved.

Marianne found that Shakespeare was wrong. Love was very much time's fool, for everything mortal and human must be ruled by time. Marianne was somewhat surprised to find that her perceptions of her husband were in constant flux, though they were bound to each other until death. Upon reflection, she wondered why she had believed that aspect of their relationship would change after marriage. She and her husband, despite their similar temperaments, had never been in perfect understanding in everything. Perfect sense and harmonious accord were Elinor and Edward's province. Hers and Brandon's was perfect compatibility in their emotions. It was enough for their relationship to begin, it was the basis for the strong attachment that formed in their courtship and led to their marriage. But only time would determine the success of their married life and Marianne, never one to deny her nature, embraced the way she and her husband seemed to always discover alterations in each other.

He loved her for it. He loved that she was still young enough that she changed from month to month as she learned more of her role as mistress of the house and patroness of the village, and he was surprised to learn that he was still changing too. The changes wrought in his character were subtler than those in Marianne, but they were present. They discovered too that there were matters in which they completely disagreed. Marianne's relations with Willoughby had not gone far enough for her to ever encounter anything dissonant, and Brandon's relationship with Eliza had been such that she had always been persuaded to his opinions. They both of them did not know what to make of the first dispute between them, and initially relied heavily on Edward and Elinor's direction to resolve the matter.

As for her dear sister Elinor, Marianne found that perhaps Elinor understood her after all.

She understood that Marianne could never love by halves. Her elder sister did not always understand the kind of behavior that Marianne must follow, and she still considered her far too unguarded in her conduct for a mistress of a manor such as Delaford. But whatever they thought of the other's lack of sense or sensibilities, they loved each other dearly and supported each other through all the troubles that must inevitably arise between even the most amiable of married couples. Granted, Elinor did a great deal more counseling and consoling for Marianne than Marianne would do for her sister, but it was Marianne's nature to be so. In return, Marianne was the most attentive and affectionate of aunts, boundless in her energy and surprisingly patient with Elinor's mischievous sons.

Elinor had not always understood her, but time altered that understanding. It had strengthened it, just as Marianne had come to appreciate and better understand herself and her husband. Shakespeare, she found, was correct in his way. Love did not change upon alteration. It created alteration. No one who had truly been in love could ever claim that they had emerged from that experience unchanged, the same person as when they had discovered that love. Love altered everything by its very presence, induced transformations that could sweep lovers away if they did not keep sight of each other. Yet it did not follow that those alterations must diminish love.
Both Marianne Dashwood and Colonel Brandon were born to rather extraordinary fates. If they had fallen in with each other at the time of their first meeting, the marriage would have been one characterized by sedate contentment. That they experienced what they had, and discovered loved and happiness a second time is a fortune of which few in the world have been able to boast. Marianne Dashwood was born to discover the truths and falsehoods of her former opinions, and to confirm, by her conduct, her most fundamental belief in love. Colonel Brandon was born to overcome an affection formed and lost so early in life, one that had defined his character and so many of his actions, and with a new love neither superior nor inferior to his prior attachment, marry another whom he had thought perhaps too young, and who had thought him certainly too old.

But so it was. Instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion, as once she had with Willoughby, instead of brooding the dark evening hours of his mistakes and tormenting himself with his regrets, as he had done as soon as he returned to England from the West Indies, they found themselves transformed by the presence of the other. She at nineteen, he at thirty-seven, formed new attachments, discovered new interests, and built a new home that would last them a lifetime.

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