

Miss Connors

1890: Miss Noreen Connors had perfectly curled red hair, which she kept pinned up in a tidy bun. She also had beautiful green eyes, and a dimple in each cheek. She was only twenty-two and her students believed she must be the most beautiful woman in the entire world. Every day Miss Connors greeted them at the door of the schoolhouse, with a friendly smile. She would be the picture of neatness and professionalism in her crisp white blouse, with its starched lace collar and button-down front. Her long dark colored skirt fell perfectly to her high button shoes which she polished faithfully every night.

The teacher's rules of 1890 were very strict. Besides bringing a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the daily session, they were expected to whittle the children's pens, and clean the lamps. There were personal restrictions as well. Male teachers were allowed to court a woman one day a week, and this could be increased to two days if he attended church regularly. Women teachers, however, would be dismissed if they became married or even engaged. This last rule fit Miss Connors just fine, she had decided years ago never to marry.

She grew up in the "Mother of Perpetual Peace Home for Orphaned Girls" since she was two days old. That's where her fifteen-year-old mother had left her. She was raised under the thumbs of the Sisters of Charity who ran the institution. Most of the time, Noreen stayed out of trouble. She always tried hard to avoid it because she knew the punishments from the Sisters could be quite harsh.

Of course, some things were impossible to sidestep so, she received the common slap on the face, or a rap with a ruler on the knuckles. One day, a nun swung her large rosary beads around and the crucifix landed hard on Noreen's arm. The reason for this was she forgot to bow her head at the name of Jesus. Noreen didn't believe Jesus would approve of such horrible treatment of

anyone, especially a child. She knew of other graver punishments that had happened to some other girls. There was an eight-year-old who had to kneel in one spot all day without food or water. And, of course, if you were caught not paying attention in church or class you would feel a needle pricked into your fingers. Noreen believed the most ghastly of all was when some of the worse behaved girls simply disappeared. They were just gone with no explanation, and no one ever dared to ask about them, for fear of tempting fate.

Since she was a bright girl and read whenever possible the nuns trained her as a teacher, with the hopes she would stay on at the orphanage. She had no intention of doing this, and she had devised a plan. On Fridays, when the fish was delivered for the evening meal, Noreen was ready. The fish was always wrapped in the weekly newspaper. Noreen would pull it out of the trash bin, and while holding her nose she read whatever she could salvage. That's where she saw an advertisement for a teacher in a town far away from where she was. As soon as possible she applied for it. The Sisters of Charity were reluctant to let her go, they begged her to stay. Noreen laughed at their thinking she would stay one minute longer than possible. She couldn't wait to distance herself from her past. So, at eighteen she started her new life as a teacher at The Brookstown One-Room Schoolhouse, Brookstown, Maryland, and there she stayed.

As an accomplished woman, Noreen loved her freedom, and even more she loved teaching. She never got enough of the happy faces in front of her, something she had never seen or felt as a child. So marriage was not on her agenda at all.

If Noreen had to choose someone to be with, there was only one man she believed she might care for, but circumstances forbade it. Besides the teacher rules concerning such matters, the man, John Meadows was married. His daughter, Susan, was in Miss Connor's class, so the idea of him being in her life was ridiculous. Noreen often wondered if that was why she preferred him,

because he wasn't available. She never gave any of the other men in the town a second thought. So she put her entire heart and soul into her students.

Once in a while when John entered her mind, to her own disapproval, Miss Connors slightly blushed. Mr. Meadows by all accounts was both handsome and charming. He was also one of the kindest men Noreen had ever met. She remembered how one-day last spring, there was a sudden cloudburst. She stepped out and then back in the doorway of the school. Mr. Meadows was passing by on his way home. He saw her and insisted that she share his umbrella. At first the shy teacher said no but Mr. Meadows would not accept her refusal. He walked the five blocks to her house, even though it was out of his way.

They chatted about ordinary things, but whenever she thinks back to it, and realizes how close they were, she always feels her face burn. She can still smell his cologne and feel his soft breath on her skin as he spoke about the harsh weather and at least summer was not far away. When they arrived at her house, Noreen thanked him and then he tipped his hat and left. All that night and even to this day she wished she had asked him in for tea. At the time it seemed wrong, too pushy. Anyway she knew her place. She was an unmarried woman, living and working in a small town. He was a married man, and the father of one of her students. Still, she often wondered what would have happened if she had allowed herself to follow her first instinct just one time.

The people of Brookstown loved Miss Connors and they took turns inviting her to Sunday dinner. In late October it was the Meadows home she was to go to. When she reached the house, the first thing Miss Connors noticed was how very beautiful the outside was. Its colors were vibrant in keeping with its Victorian motif. There were lovely flowers in all the window boxes and the door which was red had charming stained glass windows. She tapped the doorknocker and waited

for a response. After a few moments Mrs. Meadows opened the door. She was carrying the sweetest looking baby; his eyes sparkled as he smiled.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Meadows, I hope I have not come too early.”

“No, not at all, Miss Connors; please come in. Have a seat while I give little Johnny to his nurse.”

Miss Connors sat down on a chair in the parlor and waited. The house was certainly well kept, everything in its place and nicely decorated. The teacher’s mind wandered off to what it might be like in the evenings at The Meadows House. She imagined John sitting in one of the big overstuffed chairs, smoking his pipe, and reading; while his wife sewed or tended to the children. How very lovely it would be to feel part of a family. Noreen Connors expected she would ever experience anything similar. But at moments like this she could almost imagine it. Her daydream was interrupted when in a short time, Mrs. Meadows returned, with tea.

“Thank you, you really didn’t have to bother.”

“No bother, I usually have tea while I wait for John to come home.”

After they discussed the weather and other mundane things, and drank their tea, they heard someone coming in. It was John with Susan in tow.

Susan ran to Miss Connors and gave her a big hug,

Then she said, “Oh, Miss Connors, this is the best surprise. I didn’t know you were coming. Why didn’t you tell me, Mother?”

“Well. I wanted to be sure she came. Sometimes things come up and I didn’t want you to be disappointed.”

Susan and Miss Connors chatted a few moments. The little girl was so excited she could barely make sense. Miss Connors laughed at her enthusiasm and delight at finding her there.

John Meadows appeared equally excited to see Miss Connors. He was aware of the pretty teacher with the friendly smile from the first day he took Susan to school. He also noticed the blush on her face and he silently hoped it was because of seeing him. Yes, he always had a soft spot for Noreen Connors.

He extended his hand and when she took it he lightly kissed hers, and said, "Miss Connors, how wonderful to see you. Forget about the tea, wouldn't you rather have some wine? Jenny how about you?"

Jenny Meadows answered, "Yes, of course, dear, that would be lovely, thank you."

When he stepped away to get the drinks Noreen took the opportunity to compose herself; so that when he returned she would be in control of her emotions again.

"Here you are, Miss Connors, Jenny." John said as he handed them each a glass.

"Please call me Noreen."

"Well then we're John and Jenny."

"Of course we are," Jenny agreed.

Dinner was announced and John reached his hand out to escort Noreen to the dining room. But Susan jumped up and said, "I will help Miss Connors, father. She's my teacher not yours."

John laughed and backed away, "Of course she is, dear."

The dinner went well, and Miss Connors was able to avert her attention away from Mr. Meadows, at least most of the time. Of course when he spoke she felt she was permitted to gaze boldly at him. His dark eyes seemed to bore right through her, and she imagined him talking exclusively to her. The others at the table became invisible to her. That night and for countless more nights after, Miss Connors would dream of John Meadows. But, it would be nearly four years before they would meet again.

Susan Meadows had moved on to a private school, so there was no reason for Noreen and John's paths to cross. She just made up her mind that it was all for the best and what was she thinking anyway?

Noreen had kept in contact with only one girl from the convent school, where she grew up, Martha Hatterby. They would write each other long letters about what was happening in their lives. Martha's days were very much like Noreen's. They were both teachers and neither of them married. They would exchange recipes, and book titles, and whatever they happened to think might be of interest to the other. They had become the only sense of family that each had. Noreen had confided in Martha about John Meadows. She believed Martha was the one person who could truly understand her feelings, and not judge her.

One crisp fall morning just before another school year started, Miss Connors was sitting in the schoolhouse preparing for her new students, when the door opened and in walked Mrs. Meadows. She had come to enroll her son, Johnny.

Through the years, Noreen had heard that John Meadows had made quite a success of his Law practice, and Jenny Meadows certainly looked like the wife of a prosperous man. She had

on a white silk blouse with puffed sleeves that tapered down until they were tightly buttoned at her wrist. Miss Connors knew these were called leg of mutton sleeves, and she could only dream of owning one. Her meager salary could only stretch so far. Mrs. Meadows wore the blouse with a gored skirt made of very expensive grey wool. Her raven hair was arranged beautifully on her head and topped with a pretty red hat which she sported tipped to one side. Noreen looked down at her plain brown tweed dress which she knew was at least three years old. A pang of jealousy flew through her mind and she felt an anger that had recently become all too familiar. Why did other women have so much and she had so little?

Mrs. Meadows smiled and explained how she and Mr. Meadows wanted Johnny to be under her guidance, for his primary school years.

She said, "We really wanted him to have the same wonderful foundation in education that our sweet Susan received from you."

Miss Connors thanked her and allowed herself to feel proud she had left a good impression on the family. Noreen pushed the thought of Mr. Meadows out of her mind as quickly as it came in. Doing this made her believe she was finally free of her silly notions. After all she wasn't a child.

She had been trying to find other people to be interested in, although it had been a bit disappointing so far. This past year the Vicar of the church, Russell M. Burke had been uncharacteristically showing her quite a bit of attention. He even asked if she would stay and help him organize the hymnals after service.

Vicar Burke had said, "No one is better at getting things done than you are, Miss Connors."

Noreen had taken his compliment as a sign he might be interested in extending their relationship past services on Sunday mornings. But after a while when it had only progressed to her doing more and more to help with the clerical running of St. John's Church, she became discouraged. Then rumor had it the Vicar had taken supper with the widow Yates three times last month. Most people assumed this was a sign he was beginning to court Mrs. Yates.

"Well," thought Noreen, "maybe Mrs. Yates would like to straighten the hymnals from now on." Noreen started going to another church, even though it meant her traveling a bit farther every week, after all she had her pride.

Then she noticed Mr. Hardy, the man in charge of all the schools in the area seemed to be spending a little more time than necessary at her school. Of course he was rather old and a bit pompous, but at least he complimented her on her work and even mentioned how nicely the classroom was arranged. No she wouldn't waste time on Mr. Meadows. In fact, she was beginning to enjoy her quiet, albeit solitary life.

Life progressed the way it usually did at school for Miss Connors, she decorated her classroom with cut out apples, then she switched to pumpkins, and then to turkeys. As she was hanging up the green paper Christmas trees she heard a familiar voice at the door. It was John Meadows bringing his son to school instead of his wife.

He tipped his hat and said. "Good Morning, Miss Connors."

She smiled back, and he continued, "My wife has taken a spill on the kitchen floor."

Noreen gasped and said, "Is she alright?"

"Well, no, I'm afraid she has broken her leg, so she has to have complete bed rest for several weeks, and I will be taking John to school."

Miss Connors said, "Please give her my regards. I certainly hope she will be well soon."

"Thank you, I will tell her. Well, good day to you and I will pick John up at 3:00."

Miss Connors smiled again. Then she turned her attention to her students.

It became a matter of routine every day Mr. Meadows would stop and chat with Noreen when he dropped his son off, and then again when he picked the little boy up. One day in the first week they were talking about favorite authors and she said how she admired The Bronte Sisters. A week later he brought a copy of *Jane Ayer*, by Charlotte Bronte for her. He had written, "Jane Ayer could be you, Fondly, John."

Noreen was feeling so happy and looked forward to seeing John Meadows every day.

Then one morning he said, "Jenny has started moving around a bit, in the house. The doctor said she could venture out in two weeks' time."

Noreen told him how delighted she was that Mrs. Meadows would be up and about soon. But she was sure he could read the disappointment on her face, it was the same expression she noticed on his.

As was her routine, she stopped at the post office to pick up her mail. There was a letter from Martha. When she got home she went to her favorite spot near the window. She sat down on a large overstuffed, floral printed English country chair. She had saved for almost a year before she could buy it. It was the only piece of furniture that wasn't a hand me down. When she was settled she opened the letter and read it.

Dear Noreen,

As you can see, this is not my handwriting, but that of my landlady Mrs. Parks. I am afraid I have taken ill. The doctors say it is consumption. Since I have no family, and think of you as a sister I hope you are able to help me. If you could stay with me for a fortnight, you can

assist me in relocating to a sanatorium, where I am to be until such time, God willing, that I may recover. I know this is not an easy request, but there is no one else. I await your reply.

Gratefully, Martha

Noreen felt ashamed of her lamenting over John Meadows a man she could never have, when her dear friend was so ill, of course she would go. Immediately.

The next morning Noreen left for the schoolhouse earlier than usual. She first stopped at Mr. Hardy's office and left an application concerning her need for an emergency leave of absence. After he read her request he promptly sent a messenger around with the approval, and included a note saying he wished her a speedy return and a safe trip. Noreen having received his reply sat down at her desk and put together the lessons for the substitute teacher. When she was just finishing the children started to arrive so she stood up to greet them as she did every morning.

As they were being dropped off she mentioned to their parents that she would be gone for a few weeks, but that the children would be in excellent hands with Miss Rivers. All she told them was it was a family emergency and left it at that.

When Mr. Meadows was told his face showed the disappointment of the sudden departure of Miss Connors. He calculated that by the time she returned Jenny would be back to bringing their son to and from school.

"When will you be leaving?"

"As a matter of fact I'm taking the train this evening."

"I see, but I insist you allow me to take you to the station and see you off."

"That would be very inconvenient for you, I couldn't."

"Tell me the time and I will pick you up. It will be better, I can help with your luggage and anything else you need, please, allow me to be of assistance."

"Well if you really don't mind, that would be wonderful. Seven o'clock at my apartment. Here's the address, the train leaves at eight."

"Make it six and I will take you for a light supper before you go."

Miss Connors blushed and managed to say, “How very kind of you, I’ll see you then.”

After he left she couldn’t help but smile at the thought of spending the evening with John. She really did care for him though most of the time she tried not to think of it. He was such a dear man, and how considerate of him to offer.

Then she thought, “Oh, I’m sure he would do the same for anyone.”

At exactly six o’clock John Meadows arrived. He got out of his carriage and walked to the door where he knocked and waited. A moment later, a tired looking woman, who John assumed was the landlady answered.

He tipped his hat and said, “Good evening, I’m here to pick up Miss Connors and take her to the train.”

In a gravely, whisky soaked voice she said, “First door at the top of the stairs. And be quick, no hanky-panky. I run a respectable boarding house.”

“Of course.” John ran up the stairs and knocked on Noreen’s door. She quickly answered looking flushed with excitement and anticipation.

“Come in, John.” It still felt a bit odd calling him John, but he had insisted and after all they were friends.

As John walked into the cozy, but prudent flat, it enveloped him in a welcoming hug. It was quite small, but tastefully and simply decorated. She showed him into the little parlor where she asked him to have a seat while she got her things from the bedroom. When she walked back in she noticed he chose to sit in her favorite place, the large overstuffed, English country chair. This is the exact spot Noreen had always pictured him as she sat alone in the small flat day after day. She could hardly contain herself; there he was exactly where he belonged was all she could think of.

She said, “Excuse me, where are my manners? May I offer you some tea?”

“No thank you, Noreen, I have made reservations at the Starfish Restaurant. It is very near the station so I thought it would be convenient. Plus, if I stay a moment longer I’m afraid your landlady may set the police onto me.”

Noreen put her hand over her mouth and chuckled, "Indeed she might. Then I suppose we should go. All my things are right here."

John looked to where the young woman was pointing. He saw a single suitcase.

"Is that it?"

Noreen nodded her head and went to get her coat and hat. John examined the small well-worn suitcase and couldn't believe how little she had. He thought of trips he had taken with Jenny. She would bring at least one very large trunk, two suitcases, plus several hatboxes and that was just for her. He picked it up and brought it to his carriage where the coachman took it. Then John went back to escort Noreen. He held her arm so she wouldn't slip on the icy walkway, then he helped her as she stepped in the compartment. Her lovely perfume of soft lavender, immediately filled the interior. When they were comfortably settled they drove away.

In the restaurant the aroma of the well prepared food made Noreen's stomach rumble. She only now realized she hadn't eaten all day. Noreen had never dreamed of going to such an elite place. Dinner turned out to be very special and not just the food. John sat across from her and they could look directly at each other without anyone making them feel uncomfortable. After all that's what you do at dinner look at whom you are dining with.

At one point they both reached for the salt at the same time and their fingers touched. They were both surprised by each other's agreeable reaction; a few minutes later he extended his hand for her fingers and this time it was on purpose. She didn't pull away and so he knew she felt the same way. It seemed quite a natural thing to do. They gazed into each other's eyes and held hands as they enjoyed a final glass of wine. They barely spoke and the silence was very comfortable and not at all awkward.

By the time they left and made their way to the station they could both feel a bond growing between them. He took her single piece of luggage out of the cab of his carriage and they sat on a bench waiting for the train. John broke the silence.

“Please write to me and keep me informed on the condition of your friend. Send your letters to my office, than I will be sure to get it.” He did not say aloud that he did not want Jenny to see them; but Noreen knew what he meant and she nodded her head.

He continued. “I hope you know how very special this was for me tonight and I hope when you return we will be able to have dinner again; in fact many times.”

She lowered her head so he wouldn’t see the tears welling in her eyes and quietly spoke, “I can’t think of anything I would like more.” Then the tears came.

“Don’t cry, my dear, I will write and, I promise you, this is the first of many wonderful times.”

“Thank you, John.”

“I am a man of my word, of this you can be sure.”

A few minutes later the train came and he helped her board, but not before he gave her a tender kiss, which she returned immediately. John thought about those kisses as he drove home. He could still see her face which he had observed very closely. She had such fine features from her dark green eyes to her beautiful flawless smile.

True to her words Noreen wrote to John, upon her arrival. When he didn’t answer she wrote two more times. When there were still no answers, she decided perhaps he was busy with his work and anyway she would be home soon.

It didn’t take Martha long to settle in the sanatorium. The doctor said her prognosis looked good. Noreen made her return trip arrangements and promised to return when Martha was let out and help her settle back at home. Two days before her departure, Noreen finally received a letter. She was flushed with excitement and opened it right away.

Miss Connors;

Upon returning home from our pleasant dinner, and to my complete shock, my most respected Jenny was lying on the floor suffering from a terrible accident. It was one that I feel I could have prevented if I had only been there. My dearest Jenny, still being incapacitated and bed ridden, I should never have left her for the folly of joining you for dinner, fell out of bed hitting her head on the iron post of the bed and as a result three days later passed away. You can imagine my despair and my guilt.

The entire incident has taught me to be less selfish in pleasing my own desires and think more of others. So now, I must devote myself to my children and only them. They will be my only solace, and purpose. I will move John to another school, to help the situation. This all being said I must bid you farewell. I wish you only the most wonderful and happy life, a life I myself cannot be part of. So now I say good-bye. Sincerely,

John Meadows

After Noreen absorbed what the letter said, she wired Mr. Hardy that she would not be returning to Brookstown. How could she be expected to act as if she didn't love John should they cross paths? That would be too painful to bear?

She would stay and take a job where she was, and she would care for Martha.

Time passed and Martha lived two more years. Noreen devoted that time tending to her and accepting a teaching position nearby. She never heard from John Meadows again but she never forgot the only man she ever cared for, and his promise which he failed to keep. Every day when she came home from work she sat in the English country chair. The one John had sat in on the happiest day of her life; the chair was the only item she sent for. In the evenings as she sat thinking of him and what their life could have been; she would close her eyes and imagine their dinner together and picture a place where people kept their promises and dreams came true. But they didn't for Noreen and they never would. She would die on that chair of a broken heart not long after her friend Martha. Noreen was just twenty-nine.

In the same amount of years, John Meadows became more and more successful in his work. He married again, not even waiting the customary year of mourning, and just six months after Noreen left. The new Mrs. Meadows was a wealthy friend of a friend. John all but forgot about the girl he left at the train station.

One day several years later John was on a committee discussing which contractor to choose for the new school building being planned and someone said "talking about school reminds me, I wonder what ever happened to that teacher, Connors, or something."

No one knew, and since Mr. Hardy was transferred there was no one else to ask.

Then John shook his head and said, “Hmm, Connors, oh, yes, I remember, she was a very competent teacher. I have no idea what became of her. She just up and left, no reason I ever heard of. Quite irresponsible of her. Well, you know how it is, some people only think of themselves they have no concept of loyalty, and keeping their word.”