

Connie's Concern

(Should she or shouldn't she?)

Connie replaced her flowered china tea cup on its saucer, and leaning over with a sigh, put it back on the little table beside her chair. She looked up and gazed absently through the French windows of the lounge onto the snow covered back garden. It had snowed at Christmas, but this was March for goodness' sake. When she was a little girl in Yorkshire's West Riding during the war she remembered, it snowed every winter, and its stayed for weeks. But the snow in the towns was covered in black smuts from the factory chimneys. There was only heating from the kitchen range, which was never allowed to go out, night or day. Bedrooms were freezing. The beds damp, until the stone hot-water bottle had warmed a patch. The fingers of frost crept slowly up the window panes. When the siren sounded, she would get out of bed more than half asleep, and creep downstairs, where blankets were spread out under the dining room table; she was soon fast asleep again. No-one bothered her after the 'all-clear' sounded.

She'd met Peter when he had come into the drapers where she worked, and asked for a packet of pretty white lacy handkerchiefs with an M embroidered in the corner. He told her it was to be a Christmas present for his mother. He was wearing a dark grey overcoat and a felt trilby. Connie thought he was the most handsome lad she'd ever seen, even at the 'flicks'. She was only sixteen. He was much older, probably eighteen she thought. His smile made her quiver inside, as he watched her put the handkerchiefs into a brown paper bag. The coins he gave her, were sent winging their way along the overhead lines to the cashier in her glass cubicle at the end of the store. When it came back, she handed him his change, smiling.

"Thank you," he said with confidence, "What's your name?"

"Connie," she blushed and looked down demurely.

"Connie, I like that. Where do you live Connie?" Without looking up, she just said,

"Up Victoria Road."

"Hey, that's near me. Perhaps I'll see you again. Bye," and he was gone, nonchalantly touching the brim of his hat.

"Bye," she wondered if he would.

He did see her again; and again. Soon they were walking out together; walking in the park, down by the river or along the canal, picnicking on the moors, going to the pictures; afternoon tea on a Sunday afternoon with his Mum one week and her Mum the next. Both their dads had died in action fighting for their Country.

Connie picked up their wedding photograph in its gilt frame, which she always kept next to her on the chairside table. He was so handsome in his Burton's bespoke charcoal grey striped suit, with the red rose in his lapel. She closed her eyes and sighed again, as she crossed her arms clasping the frame to her. They'd never had children. Well they just never got around to it. They were always going somewhere, doing something, seeing someone. Peter worked at the local council offices in 'Planning'. Connie continued to work at the drapers, even when it was taken over and had 'diversified'. He was her life. He made all the suggestions about what they might do, or where they might go. She was more than happy to just go along with everything. She just enjoyed looking after the house for him, and sitting with him some evenings watching television, and knitting or crocheting as her mother had taught her. It was he who had bought the little green second-hand Austin seven. It was a surprise for her. They'd had so much fun with it. Over the moors, to Harrogate and Scarborough and Whitby. Connie had never been to the seaside before; she was a little girl all over again. He was so self-assured, confident, gregarious and self-reliant. She was happy in his shadow. They'd talked about going on a cruise, but decided to take the car,

the red Ford Capri, on a continental tour. Connie was apprehensive, but she needn't have been. Peter, despite his lack of languages, would smile and gesticulate and even draw pictures; everyone loved him, so they had no problems with 'the natives', as he called them.

Connie replaced the photograph, got up, and went to the bookcase, taking down a large faux leather album. She laid it on the dining room table amongst the paper, and letters, and cards. She sat down and opened the pages at random. Stretched out on the secluded beach on the north coast of Ibiza. Mary and Geoff, the couple they'd met at Brighton on 'that' weekend. The little train chugging up Snowden in the mist; they hadn't seen anything of the views, just photographs of each other in woollies and cagoules. The sequence of photographs of their new house being built, which Peter had designed. His sixtieth birthday 'bash' at The Weavers, where all his work colleagues had given him a twelve bottle selection of wines. His retirement 'do' was attended by the same crowd; they'd hired the village hall. For their silver wedding, Peter had booked the honeymoon suite at a five star hotel on the cliffs overlooking the sea at Bournemouth. The rooms had been filled with flowers. They had dined lavishly; watched a farce in the theatre at the end of the pier, and exchanged 'special' presents. Ah! Christmas. Connie felt the tears welling up, as they often did. The album wasn't complete; Christmas just passed had not yet been added to the record. Every year Peter would say,

"We're really going to push the boat out this year. What do you say, my dear?"

"Of course Peter, whatever you want." She knew he would anyway, whatever she said, and she always enjoyed the ideas he came up with.

"How about we take a table at The Club on Christmas Day, get the gang involved, except those who'll be with their families. I'll book a taxi both ways, so we can let our hair down. Yes?"

"Yes, if you can get the others to come along too."

"Well I thought it'd save you all the hassle of cooking and so on. Good. Leave it to me," which she always did. She hadn't asked about the cost, she never did, that was his department.

In the event it was wonderful. They had been to the local parish church for the midnight service. Only two other couples could manage Christmas Day at The Club, but it was sumptuously decorated, warm, cosy and inviting, against the fierce freezing wind, which promised snow. The four course meal was beautifully cooked and presented; the drinks flowed and the conversation and laughter never flagged. There was a first rate pianist accompanying the meal; Peter, ever the showman, asked him to play their song, 'Smoke gets in your eyes',

"I didn't know we *had* a song," quizzed Connie as the applause died away.

"Well I don't suppose we do my dear, not really. But do you remember the first time we went to The Gaumont? We saw *Some Like It Hot*. It was so smoky, you said 'Smoke gets in your eyes.' Don't you remember?" Peter was holding her hand and looking into her eyes. "I remember everything about you." He gave her hand a squeeze and let go.

"I remember the picture, and it was always smoky at the cinema, but I don't remember saying it. *You're* so clever." She adored her man, even after all these years. Reluctantly she danced a waltz with, first Trevor and then with Bob, as Peter steered their wives around the floor. As the six exchanged presents, Peter gave Connie a fine gold chain with a plain gold cross, which he gently hung round her neck. She gave him a pair of gold cuff links in the shape of a P, which he immediately insisted on swapping for those he was wearing. They both voiced their genuine thanks and pleasure, sealing their love with a special Christmas kiss. The others were doing the same.

As they tumbled into bed later, happily exhausted from enjoying having 'pushed the boat out', Peter said,

"Thank you for today. Thank you for everything. I love you my Connie. 'Bye.'" And he turned over. Connie thought, 'Bye? Not good night? Nevertheless, she responded,

"Night, night, Peter. Thank you. I've had a lovely time. I love you too."

Connie woke late. She could tell by the light on the ceiling above the curtains that it had snowed during the night. Peter hadn't stirred, so donning her dressing gown and slipping her feet into her mules, she went down to the kitchen and put the kettle on. She found she was humming, Smoke gets in your eyes, and she smiled contently to herself. Boxing Day. What would it bring? Peter hadn't mentioned pushing it out! She made the tea, and prepared the tray with cups and saucers, and a little jug of milk, no sugar. She carefully carried the things upstairs, and putting the tray down on the dresser, she quietly drew back the curtains and looked out onto the white fairyland. She turned, and whispered,

"Peter, it's snowed." He was not to be disturbed. Connie went round to his side of the bed, and placing a hand on his bare shoulder, gave it a little shake.

"Peter, wake up. It's snowed." He didn't stir. She shook him more firmly. Still nothing. She bent down to see if he was breathing. He wasn't. He had said his 'Good bye'.

Connie closed the album, and surveyed the paperwork on the table before her. Where to start? Peter had always dealt with the paperwork. Now *she* had to do it; in fact she had to do everything herself now. She felt the familiar feeling of panic welling up inside her. But she took herself in hand, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly as she dropped her shoulders.

"Relax. 'Keep calm, and Carry on.'" She told herself. How many times had she seen that, but now she *heeded* it. She thought how amazingly helpful and supportive people are in an emergency. After all, it had been Boxing Day. No-one was about on Boxing Day. Who should she tell? Who *could* she tell. Would there be a duty doctor? Ring 999? Ring 111? In the end she rang Trevor and Cynthia, who had been with them the night before. They came round immediately and took charge, Cynthia looking after Connie with tea and sympathy, whilst Trevor sorted out what needed to be done and by whom. The doctor came, and after an examination and questions, issued the Death Certificate, no doubt about it, a massive heart attack, and for no accountable reason, in all other respects a very fit man.

Bob and Fran had called in and invited her back to their house, but she wanted to be on her own. Fran did ask the local Methodist minister to call in. Connie and Peter had never been regular church-goers, Christmas and Easter. As a child, Connie had gone with her mother to the Methodist chapel every Sunday morning and evening, and been sent to Sunday School in the afternoons. She'd enjoyed the singing, but a lot of the rest she didn't understand and found boring. There was a Youth Club for older children, but nothing for her age group. Mother seemed to spend a lot of time knitting and crocheting and baking, for the many Bring-and-Buy sales and other events to raise money for the forces. Peter said he had been a boat-boy at a Roman Catholic church, something to do with incense. He'd also sung in the choir; and in the shower Connie remembered, but she'd never heard him sing Smoke Gets in Your Eyes. It was Bob and Trevor that had been great friends with Peter; although she knew Francis and Cynthia through their outings together, she wouldn't say they were her friends. But now they were becoming closer.

The Reverend Colin Shuttleworth was wonderfully understanding and empathetic,

"Please call me Colin, that's what Christian names are for. Would you mind if I called you Connie?" Connie said she didn't mind. Somehow she found herself telling Colin everything about Peter and their life together. She even told him how frightened she was, because Peter had done everything and she suddenly realised how dependent she had been on him, and how alone and vulnerable she was now. He asked about funeral arrangements. She didn't know.

"Would you like me to contact the undertaker for you and arrange the funeral at my church?"

"Oh yes please would you? I wouldn't know where to start," Connie said with relief. Colin said he'd come back, and they'd agree dates and hymns and readings and prayers. He would help her draw up

an Order of Service and the undertaker would get them printed, if that's what she wanted. She was so grateful, she felt she had gained yet another friend.

When everyone had gone, she felt strangely at peace. It was getting dark outside despite the reflection from the snow, but she didn't want to switch the light on. She just sat motionless, idly fingering the cross at her throat, drifting in her solitude. She was alone, but not lonely, she could feel Peter's comforting presence with her even now. She suddenly experienced an all-enveloping sense of love taking hold of her whole being. She was being held as if in the arms of an Other. She gave in to it. She gave herself up to it. It was like when, as a little girl, she was standing on a high cliff or hill somewhere, she couldn't remember, and looking around her at the vast distance, the open spaces, the scudding white clouds against the deep blue sky, the diminutive cattle in the tiny fields below. Her inside felt turned over. Mum said it was what we call awe. Connie found herself thinking about being a child again in Sunday School. She was thinking about Colin and his calm support. Was this what *God* was all about? She realised she was still fingering the cross.

As soon as the Register Office opened again, Fran took Connie to register the death with the Births, Marriages and Deaths people. She was given a list of Government services which would be automatically informed. She was given a list of the other people and organisations she would need to contact; top of the list was the solicitor and the bank. Fortunately Peter, as a planner, had always been meticulous in his filing. Connie had no difficulty locating all the legal papers which she had been asked for. When Colin saw her again, and they went through everything for the funeral service, Connie suddenly realised that she didn't have anyone to invite to say 'Good bye'. There were no family members, and the only friends she had were Trevor and Cynthia, and Bob and Francis. But when she had mentioned it to them, they laughed, Bob said,

"I think you'll find half the Council will be there. Perhaps you didn't realise what a popular and highly respected colleague Peter was. He also had dealings with lots of organisations, and links with other professionals."

"You'll want an organist, won't you Connie?" suggested Colin.

"Oh yes please," she agreed.

"And the choir? It's always good to have a lead for the singing."

"Yes if you think it'll help."

"Fine I'll organise that for you."

The funeral was indeed a splendid affair. Cynthia and Francis had taken over the catering in the church hall. The minister gave a truly inspired eulogy, which appeared with her blessing in the local paper the following weekend, the choir sang a setting of the *Nunc Dimittis* as the coffin was carried out. The brief ceremony at the crematorium was followed by a splendid 'wake'. All of which astounded Connie. She met so many people she had never seen or even heard of before. They all said how highly Peter was regarded, and how much he was envied as a truly happily married man, who talked of her often. Although Connie was constantly on the verge of tears, she continued to be upheld by the power of collective love and support.

Colin invited her to come to a service and to meet some people. At first she declined. But then Mrs Alice Johnson called, and explained she was from the church and was herself a widow, and just wondered if Connie wanted someone to chat with. Connie liked Alice. She found she could talk openly with her. She was not under any pressure. Alice and she had a lot in common. As a result, she went to a service with Alice, and was welcomed by Colin and other members of the congregation. She even started to go to the Women's Bright Hour meetings on Monday afternoons, which met in different people's houses each week. Everyone was so friendly and natural and easy to get on with. Connie was daily growing in confidence. She realised for the first time that she was her own person and although she

missed Peter being around to make the decisions, she was quite capable of making them herself now that she had to.

As she didn't drive, and was 'too old to start learning new tricks', she'd asked Trevor to arrange the sale of Peter's black BMW. She had finally tackled the disposal of Peter's clothes. She did the sorting and Oxfam came and gratefully took them away, having tagged the bags. She'd even used the excuse to sort out her own wardrobe and gone on a shopping spree with Cynthia and Francis, changing her image slightly to reflect her new found confidence, without 'going overboard'.

She had written notes of grateful thanks in response to all the cards she had received, expressing words of sympathy. Most had been stamped and posted. She was left with just half a dozen or so, which she was looking at now on the dining room table beside the album. When she had finished answering them, she felt a sense of achievement, in the modern jargon, of 'closure'. However, it left her with a concern. She got up and went to make herself another cup of tea, whilst she mulled over in her mind what she was going to do. She brought the little tray back with her, and placing it beside the album, she sat down and thought. She had originally stopped writing the notes, because she had run out of stamps. So she had gone to the post box at the end of the road and posted those that she had written. The problem was, the snow had changed everything. She was not apportioning blame in any way, it wasn't their fault, but the local Council no longer gritted the side roads, let alone the pavements; like clearing the gutters, she thought, or filling in the potholes. She decided she could manage to get to the post box, but there was no way she was going to be able to go shopping to buy the stamps.

As she sipped her tea, slowly an idea grew in her mind. It became a distinct possibility. She smiled to herself. Could she? Dare she? Well why not? She wasn't sure. Peter had always meticulously cut off the stamps from their post and collected them together in a tin, ready for passing on to the charity which took them. As Christmas approached, and the cards began to arrive, he kept remarking,

"Here's another unfranked stamp. That's five so far. No wonder the Royal Mail is in difficulties." What if she soaked them off and used them again? Is that illegal, or is it their own fault for not franking them in the first place? Well what if she went to the post office later when the snow had gone, and given them the money? No they'd think she was more than a little eccentric; this pleased her; like wearing purple. I could give it to Colin for the Organ Fund.

As she struggled to the post box, with her little bundle of stamped and addressed envelopes, she felt excitedly wicked. She had done something quite alien to her old way of behaving, but she had done it on her own ... and Colin was delighted to receive her donation.

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