

The Interview

The time is six o'clock in the morning. It is quite normal for Dr. Peter Thornton to arrive at the Montreal General Hospital well before the appointed time. Today is no exception. Dr. Thornton does not expect a mere five hours of sleep to have an adverse effect on his performance. *Performance*. That's how he thinks of the Rounds. The dreary morning tour of the Wards with the usual contingent of residents and interns. An ignorant lot.

"Good morning, Dr. Thornton." The tone is coquettish. Halfway between a greeting and a giggle. Dr. Thornton turns his head.

A regular set of white teeth smiles at him. The grin seems incongruously awake below the still sleepy eyelids. A spotless white tunic accentuates the girl's hourglass figure while a crisp white cap is fighting a losing battle in an attempt to regiment the nurse's abundant blond hair. Dr. Thornton tries not to show that he finds the greeting a mite annoying. People shouldn't smile this early in the morning. Not even student nurses. Then he remembers the pixie face. Actually, not so much her face as the soft, resilient body in a darkened linen closet. Last week? Possibly.

Dr. Thornton manages a thin smile. Could it have been last Tuesday? There are so many nurses... Thank God they are all certified STD free. As he is, of course.

"Morning, Nurse."

Dr. Thornton quickens his pace. He missed the nurse's name on her lapel nameplate. Dinah or Donna or something. Peter Thornton enjoys a photographic memory for facts. Scientific facts. They do not include his sex life. Anyway, there are just too many nurses. He smiles again. This time at his own thoughts.

He enters a tiny office. As a final-year resident in Internal Medicine, Dr. Thornton rates his own private office. He takes off his trench coat and flips on the computer terminal on his desk. He scans the moving data at a rate that would leave most people gaping. Each single glance covers the whole screen littered with meticulously tabulated information. At five to seven, a white coat dangling over his shirt sleeves, a perfunctory stethoscope swinging from his neck, Dr. Thornton steps out again into the lacklustre corridor.

It is a good five-minute walk to Ward A-12. Today he must cover three wards in two hours. Hopefully not too many patients will require his personal assistance. Actually, the patients seldom do. It is the inferior, the inept, the inexperienced residents and interns who tax his time and patience. At no time had he been as ignorant as they all seem to be. Never. Not even during his own internship. Dr. Thornton walks quickly, his mind mulling over the patients' medical histories he had just scanned in his office.

There once was a time when, crossing these same passageways, Peter Thornton could sense, almost see, the sauntering shadows of those unfortunates who had come here looking for help. Their empty carcasses were already dispatched to Pathology in the basement, but their unrequited demands, hopes, emotions still persisted, wandering the corridors, unsated. There was a time when Peter could almost hear the disembodied echoes of their pleas, see their silent screams frozen in the horrified eyes gradually submitting to the inevitable. Why had those people been so afraid of dying? Had they had a foreknowledge of some unspoken horror lying ahead, or were they merely ignorant immortals still unaware of their ultimate destiny? There was a time... once...

Now the corridors are empty.

Impersonal walkways, deserted, hollow, indifferent to suffering, memories. Sequestered in silence. Even the sound of Peter's feet is absorbed by the polymeric carpet. He is the only shadow in the shadowless labyrinth.. The nurses rested in at their stations. This was no-man's space at no-man's time.

When Dr. Thornton reaches Ward A-12, the interns and residents are already waiting. There is a murmur of recognition accompanied by a nodding of heads: Peter, George, Brenda, Joan, Fred... whatever. He nods back, reciting his colleagues' names in return. Then he stops dead in his tracks.

"Dr. Brent?" Peter nods his head a little lower.

As Chief of Medicine, Dr. John B. Brent is the senior member of the teaching staff. He rarely attends the Rounds. Dr. Brent is available as a consultant for difficult, unorthodox cases only. Peter clears his throat to hide an amused smirk as he shakes Dr. Brent's bony hand. This is a Godsend. Peter Thornton never bothers to show off his knowledge in front of the interns and junior residents. This is different. He might score points for his career.

For the next two hours they greet, smile over, prod, push and pull, examine, discuss, pamper, disturb, annoy, soothe and prescribe for some three dozen patients. Three minutes per patient. By nine the Rounds are over. The patients are fed, again drained of fluids and faeces. They have already been washed, scrubbed clean since dawn, in readiness for the Rounds. After all, hospitals are not built for patients to be sick in, only for doctors to cure them.

"A spot of lunch, Peter?" Dr. Brent asks, in an offhanded manner.

"I would be honoured, Sir." Peter smiles, then adds, "I must check with the office first, though..."

"Of course. I'll see you in my office around noon."

Peter bites his tongue, but it's too late. He realizes he has overdone the zeal. One does not treat the Chief of Medicine's invitations conditionally, nor does one imply one's own indispensability. Peter swears under his breath. Lately he'd been making mistakes. He hates his own slips even more than those of his subordinates.

At twelve sharp, Dr. Thornton knocks on the Chief's door. A middle-aged secretary waves him on. He knocks again and enters Dr. Brent's office. He stops at the door, looking down at a mop of gray hair bent over a desk cluttered with stacks of paper. Whatever happened to computers, Peter wonders? The old man doesn't move.

"Sit down, Peter."

The Chief doesn't raise his head. The office is ten times bigger than Peter's. One wall is lined with Dr. Brent's private library, the other with case histories. Against the third wall is a settee wide enough for a nap. Peter chooses one of the two moulded chairs opposite the large desk. Dr. Brent pushes a button on his intercom.

"Mary? The usual. For two." He releases the button and continues working. A minute or two later Dr. Brent looks up and seems to notice Peter for the first time.

"Glad you could make it. Wanted a word with you."

Dr. Brent's voice sounds cordial enough, but Peter detects a certain hesitation in the Chief's voice. Is the man ill at ease? Why? Why am I here? Peter is more interested than worried that he may have perpetrated some medical misdemeanour. He decides to wait.

Mary comes in with two plates of raw vegetables, two large glasses of vegetable juice and a basket of rehydrated bread. She places them on the few empty spots she can find on the desk and smiles at the old physician.

"Would you like anything else, Sir?" Her warm smile reflects genuine affection for the doctor. Peter finds himself wondering what makes an attractive, blithe woman show fondness for a man known as a driving workhorse. Dr. Brent looks at his guest.

"Dr. Thornton?"

"That will be just fine, Sir."

Peter grins at his passing thoughts: 'When I was wishing to be a rabbit, I was referring to its sex life, not to its dietary preference.' Chief of Medicine and Mary take Peter's grin as grateful acquiescence.

For a few minutes they eat in silence. The vegetables are crisp and obviously fresh. Rather a step up from the subsidized cafeteria on the fifth floor. Halfway through his plate of salad, Dr. Brent leans back and lights a cigarette. Peter had heard about the Chief's smoking habit, but had never actually seen it. Dr. Brent never indulged his weakness in public.

"This morning I asked you for three diagnoses and three proposed treatments," said Dr. Brent, speaking through a cloud of smoke. Peter waits, though suddenly he feels a little uneasy. "All three of your diagnoses were correct."

Dr. Brent again draws on his cigarette, then stubs it out and returns to his salad. Peter is becoming nervous. He chews his *assiette de crudités* slowly as though having difficulty with swallowing. What the devil is the old warlock driving at?

At last his plate is empty. They finish almost simultaneously and both lean back.

"Cigarette?" Dr. Brent extends his old-fashioned cigarette case.

"I don't..."

"Of course!"

The old man again leans back in his high-backed armchair. He joins his palms together, his gaunt, long fingertips touching in silent prayer while pointing his long-stemmed cigarette at Peter like an Amazonian blowpipe. A thin line of smoke rises from its tip in a perfectly straight line, then wavers as though uncertain of its future. A little later, the host's bushy white eyebrows draw together as though arriving at a decision. As Peter stirs expectantly, Dr. Brent, incongruously, blows a perfect smoke ring. Peter wills the Chief to come to the point. He can't imagine what the devil he is doing here other than exposing himself to the noxious fumes of a filthy habit. Peter hates being nervous.

"The proposed treatments were also correct." Dr. Brent continues as if he had never stopped talking. John lets out an inaudible sigh. "What I cannot understand is, why did you recommend the biopsies in Mr. Clayton's case?"

"Ah, Mr. Clayton...?"

For a briefest instant Dr. Brent's eyes turn hard. Then he puffs another smoke ring. Peter knew of his mistake before the smoke left the Chief's lips.

"Yes, Peter, Mr. Clayton's. The third case we examined this morning."

The Chief looks at Peter over his half-moon spectacles. His tone is kind, his gaze once more fatherly. Peter thinks he must have imagined the hardness in the old man's eyes.

"Yes, of course, Sir."

"There were three other treatments you could have recommended... Could you comment on that? Rather more, shall we say, standard treatments?"

"Yes, Sir. I believe that any other preventive measure would have only delayed the operation. The symptoms were characteristic of the three cases which you had treated..." (Peter knows that he just made his third mistake) "...which I had treated this morning exactly as per your diagnoses of three, four and six years ago. Quite rare cases. Very rare indeed."

Dr. Brent seems preoccupied with a speck on a blank sheet of paper. Then, almost absentmindedly, he reaches for another cigarette. "Why have you been looking up my past medical histories?" The Chief looks the young man straight in the eye.

Peter swallows hard. He cannot, he should not try to fool the Chief. It would never work. No bloody way.

"I have made a study of the most unusual cases of all the teaching staff in this hospital," Peter answers bluntly, returning the Chief's steady gaze. He then crosses his legs. He does his best not to show his irritation.

"Why? Why specifically at the General?"

"It is the best hospital." Peter's voice carries all the confidence he can muster.

Dr. Brent lowers his penetrating eyes to his watch. He draws the last puff and puts out his cigarette.

"I'm afraid I must go. Thank you for having lunch with me."

Dr. Brent rises to his feet and puts on his jacket. They leave the office together. Peter looks small next to Dr. Brent's six-foot frame. The old man is pushing seventy and seems to have twice

Peter's energy. And twice his memory. At least of his patients' names.

Peter goes back to his office. He cannot understand the reason for the Chief's interrogation. It wasn't a lunch, it was more like a lynching. But why? Why was it necessary for the Chief of Medicine to know why Peter had made the *right* diagnoses?

At 18:00 Peter is free.

He always walks to and from the General, though he prefers early morning or late night for negotiating *Côte des Neiges'* intersection with Pine Avenue during the rush hour. The heavy traffic with its attendant pollution does little to improve his spirits. During the day Peter was much too busy, but now his thoughts return to the interview with Dr. Brent. It left him unhinged. Being unsettled is a luxury Peter cannot afford. Not with the Royal College of Physicians Fellowship exams coming up later next month.

This would be the second time in his life when, in a way, he would be making a final commitment. The first had been a failure. A fruit of inexperience. Of the irresponsibility of youth. The first time he had run away. He cannot afford another failure. Not now. This could be the reason why lately his thoughts drift to distant images, perhaps better left alone. Yet he remembers them so well. As though it all had happened yesterday.

Peter shrugs. *I was no more than an adolescent...*

Perhaps. Perhaps all boys dream, at one time or another, of becoming a priest. They do if they have been brought up by good, practising Catholics. The old, traditional variety. The type who do not question authority.

Peter questioned authority, but it wasn't even that.

He had gone through a period in his young life, apparently inherent in most boys' lives, when they think they are ready to give up all, give up life itself, for a cause. A passing phase. But not for Peter. He had gone a stage further. He had entered a seminary. The Seminary of St. Francis of Assisi. He had spent years strengthening his faith, his resolve. Anything less than

perfection, than obeisant sainthood, was not good enough. As with most things he did, Peter had tried too hard. Or his expectations had been too great. He'd never know. Not now.

Peter had been too honest to aspire to sanctity, to that exalted state which his role models had achieved throughout history. Why? He had questions. Questions which one does not ask in a seminary. He did not mind the rough cloth, the binding girdle or the sandals, but his head could not be contained within the brown, drooping cowl. It limited his vision. His inner vision.

Or maybe he just lacked the necessary humility.

On the day before Ordination he had left the heavy metal gates of his temporal prison. His confessor had given him absolution. The old priest had understood him, or else had been very wise. Or a fool?

“Come back to us when you are ready.”

“Yes, Father. I will.”

Peter has had no opportunity to keep his promise, as yet. He doubts he ever will.

There followed a long period of guilt. Peter could not even pass by a church, let alone enter one, without feeling guilty. He tried to sublimate his self-condemnation by giving large sums of money, as large as he possibly could, to the Saint Francis Seminary. For years there had been no money left for anything extra. Anything over and above the bare necessities of life. Then, one day, the guilt was gone. He was a second-year student of medicine by then. His inherent hunger for immortality had taken a strange turn. Rather than peruse the intangible, Peter Thornton applied his powerful faith to the physical body.

Later, much later, came the nurses. By today's standards, Peter was a throwback. At the age of 24, Peter was still a virgin. A male virgin. By choice. A nurse his own age, but with ten years' experience, took advantage of his innocence. Or had it been just plain ignorance? Since that day nurses had become Dr. Thornton's hobby—the various linen closets at the General his private if transient seraglios. Peter did his level best to make up for his early shortcomings.

Today, however, was not a day for frivolity.

This afternoon one intern and two nurses suffered the consequences of his mounting tension. He had practically bitten their heads off. Peter Thornton hates anyone witnessing his weaknesses. Not that he indulges himself in many. His driving ambition leaves little room for complacency. He sees himself as a man on the cutting edge of modern medicine. Being brilliant carries its own responsibilities. *Noblesse oblige*. He intends to break new professional ground. He is going to prove that the human body, when properly maintained, can last forever. Virtually for ever. It's only logical.

But the damage was done.

Still, a few well-placed words and they'll forget. They always do. He could spin the junior staff around his little finger. A smile widens Peter's narrow mouth. They call it charisma. He can turn it on and off when necessary. Ask any nurse. Any pretty nurse.

On occasion, Peter loved to give an impression of a phlegmatic country squire. Reserved, polite, elegant, detached. Affable when necessary. An *arbiter elegantiarum*. He is none of these. No time right now. First, the exams. And his five-foot-six stature does not carry an air of commanding detachment. He is too short, his hair neither dark nor truly blond; his eyes, once a fine blue, now seem faded, blurred from incessant reading, staring at the screen of his computer. Peter runs his palm over his inch-long crew cut. At least his hairstyle gives him an extra inch.

The bloody exams.

Finally Peter leaves the winding *Chemin de la Côte-des-Neiges* and enters the serenity of Upper Westmount. After his brother Andrew died, Ruth, his sister-in-law, had asked him to stay at her opulent residence. She had asked him right then, at the funeral. She seemed awfully broken up. People did not take kindly to the death of their loved ones. They didn't give a hoot about others dropping off like flies.

"The children need a role-model. Someone to balance my..."

“Surely you don’t think of me as a father image!?” He remembers having spoken too loudly next to the open grave. Ruth’s request had come as a shock.

“Peter, please help me.”

There had been enough pain in Ruth’s voice to convert him into any image she liked.

Ruth had really broken down. Even his shoulder seemed inadequate. Physically. Ruth was taller than he was. He had promised he would come and stay with her as long as she needed him. He had surprised himself. It had not been in his nature to make concessions for human weaknesses. Not even his own. But what could he have done? Ruth and Andrew had adopted the two kids some years ago. The kids had lost a father for the second time. Now there was Smith, of course. But, Peter had reasoned, it was not the same. Blood is stronger than water. Or is it?

Peter inhales deeply. Even the air is different in Upper Westmount.

What a magnificent difference! Whenever Peter walks through the upper reaches, he thanks his lucky star for being among the chosen. The superb, mature elms join their crowns into a continuous gothic arch. The living cloister fosters a sense of peace. A sense of protection from the foibles of this uncertain world. The manicured lawns, the meticulously maintained front gardens create an air of well-being, of being apart, above and beyond the masses swarming on the other side of the tracks. Upper Westmount always had ruled, and continues to rule, Montreal, Quebec and a good part of Canada. And that only twelve years after Quebec had rejoined the fold. The New Canada. Sixteen provinces with two more State applications still pending.

Dr. Thornton loves Westmount. The bastion of the mighty.

As he reaches for his key, Winston opens the door. He nearly always does. The man is psychic. And, at three in the morning, scary.

“Good evening, Sir. May I take your coat?”

Winston Smith speaks in as deep and smooth a voice as Peter has ever heard. The butler could probably sing Boris Goudonov at the Met. He could also fly a kite. Literally. He

often does, with the kids. He is also the best *major-domo* and general *factotum* Ruth could ever hope to find.

“Hi, Smith.”

Peter drops his coat on Smith’s extended arm and continues to his upstairs room without losing stride.

“Thanks...” He throws over his shoulder, waving his arm in an offhanded greeting.

Peter is the only member of the family who addresses Smith as Smith. He insists that this is the proper form of address to a servant of Smith’s stature. Particularly towards a stature exported from England. Of course, the English don’t have butlers anymore. Can’t afford them. Not since the Solidarity. All the same, Winston Smith is an enigma.

Two days after Andrew’s funeral (heart attacks are on the increase in Westmount), Winston Smith had appeared at the door of the Thornton residence. As Ruth opened the door, the tall, gaunt man handed her a sealed envelope. It had been hand-addressed to Mrs. Ruth Thornton. The writing was familiar. Then Ruth recognized the writing and broke down. Some weeks after the event, Ruth confessed to Peter that she had actually fainted. Later, she said, she had found herself lying on the settee, two pillows under her head, a glass of water at her elbow and Andrew’s unread letter on her lap. Winston Smith was standing at the door quite motionless.

“I came to,” Ruth continued her confession, “and before I even noticed Winston at the door, I again saw the envelope. It was definitely Andrew’s writing. I have no idea why I had fainted. It must have been the shock of seeing a communication from beyond the grave. That’s how it looked at the time. Or maybe it was the strain of the funeral, the poor children... Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps I am just a weak woman.”

Ruth always had a well-modulated, mezzo-contralto voice.

“Anyway, I tore open the envelope and read the letter. A note really. Andrew said simply that should anything ever happen to him, unexpectedly, I should consider making use of Winston Smith’s service. ‘You can trust him, darling,’ the note said. I broke down again, but I didn’t faint anymore...”

At the time Peter wondered if Andrew had suffered from a premonition.

“I asked Winston how he met Andrew. He gave me a roundabout answer that he had occasion to be of service to him during a mission in China when Andrew was building a number of dams across the Ch’and Chiang, or the Yangtze river. I recall Andrew had had a serious mishap there of some nature and apparently Winston had helped him out. That was about all he would say. Winston, not Andrew, of course.”

For some strange reason, as Peter passes the living room, he visualizes the scene of Ruth lying in a fainting spell on the settee. He shrugs and continues up to his room. He needs all the time he can spare for his studies. Thank heaven the kids are out at the Centre. Normally he would have to dodge them or be caught in a tumble for at least fifteen minutes. The little brats have absolutely no idea of the importance of time.

“Dinner will be at seven, Sir.”

Peter ignores the ponderous announcement as he closes the door to his room.

Smith isn’t a bad chap. A bit stiff, speaks in a stilted accent, is about three feet too tall, but he certainly has a way with the children. This last trait invariably left Peter baffled. Neither Jonathan nor Moira ever minded doing anything the black-draped beanstalk told them. There were never any long-winded arguments, as there would be with him or their mother, at bedtime. Never a pouting look or an attempt at an emotional blackmail the kids seem otherwise so good at:

“You never play with us anymore...”

“Just five more minutes, please...”

“I’ll do it first thing tomorrow...”

“Oh, please, mommy, I already read that book for hoours (meaning ten minutes) today, I’ll read for two hours tomorrow... if you let me stay a little longer...”

Whenever Winston appeared on the scene, Jo and Mo would get up, kiss their mother, sometimes his own cheek and, if so instructed, leave in a fray of joyful obedience. Smith accomplished this feat without ever raising his voice, let alone a punitive hand. In fact, the children seemed to like him. A lot.

Peter glances at his watch. With dinner at seven it's hardly worthwhile to do any cramming. Nevertheless, he clicks on the computer and sprawls on his padded armchair with his feet on the side table. His right hand toys inconsequentially with the mouse, opening a dozen windows on the computer screen, then closing them again. His mind drifts to the midday interview.

What the devil was the old goat after?

Whatever it was, it couldn't have had anything whatever to do with matters they discussed. Of that Peter was certain. He may have been weighed for a possible future addition to the permanent staff. But there are better ways of doing that. And anyway, with the workload Dr. Brent has, he would have waited till after the Fellowship exams. After all, less than 35% of the residents taking them manage to pass at the first sitting. The knowledge required is just too great. And now, with the computer simulations, those desirous of keeping down the numbers of the Illustrious Fellowship are free to make up pathological syndromes virtually *ad infinitum*. Often, there are no right or wrong answers.

Peter's twisted smile reflects his onerous thoughts. It occurs to him that medicine, in an attempt to stimulate life, succeeds only in deferring death. Marginally.

It just ain't good enough!

Peter closes his eyes. He recalls quite vividly the first years of his Medical School at McGill. Then he had felt that the scope, the range of knowledge was so overwhelming that no sane man could or should possibly aspire to it all. This feeling had never left him. It grew. Sometimes, in moments of great stress, perhaps of excessive fatigue, he tried to imagine that the information, the knowingness, was already within him; that it could manifest itself even without his conscious participation. I am a healer, he repeated often. The life force of nature works through me. Regardless of my subjective limitations.

What limitations?

After a rare good night's sleep, Peter did not recognise limitations. Not for himself. He was however becoming more and more aware of the limitations of medicine. His reading extended well beyond the standard curriculum stipulated by his

chosen profession. Peter felt compelled, urged on in his studies, almost as if he were running out of time. Yet, the more knowledge he absorbed, the more he became aware of the underlying chaos which seemed to saturate the universe around him. Peter was becoming convinced that the laws of thermodynamics were bent on restoring a state of primordial chaos. From this all-pervading random, disorderly turmoil of matter and energy, life, the Force of Life, wrenches a small degree of harmony. At times It fights a losing battle. Occasionally, only occasionally, science provided some answers as to how, where or even when this bedlam of confusion came under a semblance of order.

It never explained *why* ?

Peter discovered that life is not a natural arrangement of atoms and molecules, but that it strives to sustain an unstable, indeed, an unnatural condition. Nature seemed to defy itself as it formed random alliances from chance encounters between the countless particles of the universe. Life not only created but maintained a precarious balance between a temporary suspension of chaos and the ever demanding, debilitating, waiting in the aisles—death. Over the years, Peter had become convinced that to be a physician one could not take man out of the context of nature. Man was the first product of the Life Force that asked *why*. For that alone the phenomenon of man should be cherished in its totality. Yet the medicine practised at the General Hospital was oriented towards the symptomatic, the resultant, not the causative stimuli.

“And the General is the best!” Peter says out loud, a perverse sneer on his lips.

Yesterday he left the General at midnight. The stars were out, amused, mocking, winking at his ineptness, his primitive ineptitude. Five hours later he was up and ready to repeat the crazy cycle. The morning Rounds, two hours with the illustrious Chief of Medicine, an illustrious watchdog bent on trying to catch him on some symptomatic technicality. For crying out loud... They are all bloody ignorant!

“And so am I...” The sneer relaxes into a sardonic grin.

In all he had ever read, in all the books, tapes, disks, memory banks he had scanned, in all the information he had once treated with respect fed by his insatiable hunger for knowledge, in all the lectures he had attended, in all the countless laboratory tests, in the medical journals flaunting the purportedly greatest brains of the medical profession, in all that, Peter Thornton had never, never found *any* scientific reason why people had to live or... die.

Peter switches off the computer and leans his head against the back of the tall padded armchair. He stares into the ceiling, trying to empty his mind of despondency. He fails. Dejection, almost agony, contorts his normally relaxed features. There had been moments in his young life when he wanted to throw in the towel, when he thought he could give it all up and join Ruth at the United Nations in some capacity which carried prestige, with the attendant financial rewards. The Thorntons have all the right contacts, and this means a bright future in politics. Why not? Does he not share a sufficiently low opinion of humanity?

Peter is vaguely aware of a knock on the door. He ignores it. Probably some nurse or a moronic intern. The second knocking is louder.

“Yes, Smith, I’m coming,” Peter calls out without moving.

He glances at his watch. It is 7:05.

“Uncle Peter?” A squeaky voice precedes a pair of wide-open eyes peeping through a crack in the door.

“Hi, Jonathan. Come in.”

Jonathan’s neck seems to stretch, allowing the blond, curly head to peek farther into his uncle’s room. The place is out of bounds. This fact alone makes it fascinating. There is no tension or fear as little Jo’s eyes wander over the room. No hunger. Just curiosity.

Is that what it is? Curiosity? Is that all that motivates me?

Peter takes Jonathan’s hand and they go down together. When they reach the bottom of the stairs, Moira runs up and jumps astride just above Peter’s knees. Her eyes are filled with the wonder of youth.

“Gochya, Uncle Pether!” Last week Moira had left her two front teeth under her pillow for the tooth fairy.

Perhaps that’s enough. Perhaps the search is all that matters... Somehow the answer doesn’t satisfy him. The hunger remains.

Peter catches Mo and carries her to her chair at the table. Jonathan sits down opposite his sister. There is just a touch of jealousy in Jo’s eyes. Of course, at seven he is too old to jump on Uncle Peter’s lap. Except when they are alone.

“There are moments, Sir, when hunger seems difficult to satisfy?”

The sonorous voice comes from the direction of the butler. Winston Smith is standing behind Peter’s chair, ready to push it in once Peter sits down. The table is set for three. With Ruth in New York on UN business, Peter takes the head of the table. He’s hungry.

“You might well have a point there, Smith. All the same, we shall try.”

A delicate aroma of home-made soup reaches Peter’s nose from the tureen waiting on the dining-room sideboard. As Peter sits down, a quizzical smile parts his lips almost against his will. He stares into his plate, unable to look up.

Suddenly he is quite certain that Winston Smith was not talking about dinner.

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