

Give me a light

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GIVE ME A LIGHT

By DERMOT SHERIDAN

Enviously the soldier had watched the young man smoke two cigarettes. If in his pocket there hadn't been one cigarette, and no matches it wouldn't have mattered. As it was he had been twice on the point of asking for a light, but each time he felt shy. He had felt the same way ever since he got into the uniform. The first day he went out in it everyone had seemed to be staring at him. That was why he rarely left the Barracks; and now the first Sunday he had gone out he had no matches. The soldier looked across the grass again at the young man. Quickly he said «Could you give me a light please?»

Casually and easily the young man got up, and came and sat close beside the soldier; as he struck the match he said «I might as well have one too.»

They were both together now, smoking. The soldier hoped he wouldn't have to speak.

«A great crowd in the park this afternoon.»

«Yes» from the soldier.

«They're coming to hear the band.»

«Oh.»

«Very hot isn't it?»

«Yes.»

«I love hot weather.»

«I do.»

«Yes, there's going to be a great crowd.»

«Yes — very big.»

Already the grass was becoming coloured with people. Kids with bottles of water in their hands ran to and fro. Women walked on heels too high, and men held heads erect in the grip of starched collars. «Yes the park's grand on Sundays.» The soldier didn't answer. He didn't know what to say. He had always found it difficult to speak, but with this young man who found it so easy — but the young man was speaking — «The band are ready to start. I hate Wagner, anyway it's too hot.»

The soldier wondered who Wagner was. This young man must only be twenty four. His tie was a brilliant red, and he wore good shoes and flannel trousers. He was really quite friendly but speaking such correct English only left room for the soldier to say «Yes» again. «Will you have another cigarette then?» «No thanks» said the soldier. It would be awkward not having any to offer back. «Go on — I've got loads here, besides I'd only smoke them all myself, and they're not really good for me.»

«Aren't they?» asked the soldier taking one.

The air shook. The grass collapsed. The buds practically fell out of the trees as the first blasts from the band shattered the air. Immediately the crowd began to quicken their pace. Kids marched and did impromptu dances. Women accepted the music and men tried to look as though they couldn't hear it. The soldier was glad, he could pretend to listen to, only he wished they'd play something like «With all my heart,» or «Learnin the Blues,» songs they sang in the barracks.

The young man noted everything, knew the soldier was shy and thought that it would be interesting to find out what kind of a person he was. He loved talking to people, particularly people like this soldier. They were always afraid to talk about themselves — not like his circle of friends who couldn't listen to any conversation which didn't have their character as the drum beat. Should he ask this fellow up to his room for tea? Perhaps he had some interesting character that would be useful. How did he feel about everything? Would he be a genuine living being? This was the most important thing, he was unsure of his own existence. His whole personality had been talked away in self-revealing conversation with his friends.

And the soldier was glad about this meeting. For weeks now he had been lonely. There had been the usual pay gone by Friday and then the long wait until Wednesday. It would have been different if Dublin had been his own home town. But there was nowhere to go, and the Dublin fellows looked down on the country ones. Dublin was full of chancers. They never asked you home with them, but they came in late and talked about feeds and women. But this fellow was Dublin and decent enough, he was taking out his cigarettes again. Who'd have thought that he'd smoke as many cigarettes in such a short time. «Thanks. I've got none on me» — said the soldier. «Forget it» said the young man striking a match.

They had smoked a lot. The band was resting. People walked across the grass and human voices sounded strange after the band. «My name's Peter Doyle» said the young man, hoping the soldier would announce his. But he didn't. So Peter said «What's yours?»

«Mine» said the soldier, as though he were amazed that he should have one. Peter nodded. «Yes, yours?» and laughed, and so did the soldier. «John Hickey» the soldier said and looked away at the crowd «John Hickey, Private John Hickey» said the young man, «sounds kind of real.» «Yes,» said John and wondered why it shouldn't, after all he was real. «Now mine» said Peter, «is just a name, it doesn't take *me* into it.»

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes. John looked at his brass buttons, looked at the shine on his boots and wondered what time it was. It was nice to know the time, and anyway tea was at half past four, if he missed that he'd be hungry. The great thing would be to buy some tea and cakes at the kiosk and stay here for the evening.

Looking at the soldier, Peter felt all his jealousy come back to him. Life was so much easier if you weren't aware that it was life. And yet perhaps this soldier — Private John Hickey — was seeking something too. He had peculiar green eyes, tanned fair skin and blond hair. His hands were big, brown and clean. He was well built, good shoulders and chest. He seemed to be aware of this himself for one of his hands rested possessively there. It was the quietness though that was best. He didn't seem to have to justify being there. There was something in him that made Peter feel that he himself was alive too. There would be no discussion on Art or Literature or Music — the artist was the man who was trying to become an ordinary man, and that would happen when his work was done.

He felt an intense desire to try and keep quiet and not even think, but the band had begun to play a Gilbert and Sullivan selection. «If you're doing no-

thing special come home and have some tea with me. But don't come if you don't want to — although I'd like you to come.»

John waited before he answered. Everything came so easy to this fellow Peter Doyle. He could ask you to go and have tea with him as easily as saying «Have a cigarette.» And then he didn't know anything about him except that he was a soldier, and some of the soldiers, indeed lots of them were not very honest. Of course he was, but how did this fellow know? Some of the lads in his company would treat a decent fellow like this badly. But it would be hard to imagine them. They'd feel as nervous as he did. This Peter Doyle could say things so easily. Then looking at Peter he said. «All right, I'll come if you're sure it's no trouble.» «I wouldn't ask you if it was» said Peter and stood up. John got up, and together they walked out of the park. Walking along each was aware of the other's clothes. It was hard to get used to someone in different clothes to yourself. Peter said so and John agreed, wondering how this fellow knew just how to say what was in his mind.

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When they got to Peter's room, Peter sat down at once and seeing John awkwardly standing told him to «bloody well sit down.» John knew that he was joking and liked him. «Well» said Peter offering another cigarette, «talk all about yourself.» This frightened John and he bit his lip and said, «What shall I say?» Peter laughed «Let's get some tea anyway — here's a light.»

Peter talked all through the tea, made John eat loads of bread and jam and cake. He showed some of his published stories and poems to John. After having seen books full of unpublished poems John said «Do you copy these out of books?» «Go to hell, I write them myself.» «You mean,» fumbled John, «they're all out of your own head?» «Yes,» said Peter and stared at the soldier before him. The soldier stared at Peter's head and thought it was wonderful to be able to do poems. Peter tapped his head. «I was born with this head, it's an awful bloody nuisance, but I can do nothing about it.» «No,» said John, then realising that he had said the wrong thing went on to say, «I like it.» But he didn't mean quite that. He meant something else, something different.

After tea they both sat on the bed. It was the only comfortable place. Seeing a pile of manuscripts on the floor John felt a keen desire to tidy them up. Peter announced he was going down to the corner shop for more cigarettes. «Would you mind if I tidied that lot of papers on the floor?» asked John. «Would you like to?» asked Peter. «Yes» he was answered. «Go ahead then», and Peter left the room.

Left on his own in the room John quickly set to work on the papers. Soon they were tidied. The floor was lovely and smooth with red linoleum and would be lovely to polish. If he had a room of his own he'd make it all shine with polishing. Peter was lucky — as soon as he thought that he wondered — why should he call this stranger Peter? He hardly knew him, but he felt as though he'd know him a long time.

Back in the room Peter lit more cigarettes. Then he told John all about himself and the things he'd done. He asked John about the army, and remarked that it was lousy that the officers could buy cigarettes at cheaper rates than the privates. John said lots of the soldiers thought so, but what could they do? Anyway if he got a stripe soon it would mean double pay. He'd go to the pic-

tures every night instead of going off to bed early as he did now. Then he told Peter about having to buy polish for his boots and buttons, and pay for laundry. This made Peter offer him a tin of shoe polish. As soon as he'd done so, he went to a drawer and took out the tin.

Immediately he suggested trying it out. Together they began to polish the Army boots. Then they sat and admired the shine. It was then that John remarked. «If I had a floor like that I'd polish it as soon as I got out of bed. It would be nice to do, it would shine lovely.» Peter looked at it, then looked at this soldier — «Would you like to polish it for me sometime?»

«Oh yes — anytime.»

«All right then — that's a deal.»

«I always liked polishing.»

«You've got green eyes, they're a funny colour, aren't they?»

«Lots of people say so.»

«I hate the colour of my eyes.»

«I like them. I've a brother drives a taxi, he's got a face like yours.»

Peter listened intently to the soldier telling him all about his brothers and sisters. At last he had succeeded in making him talk.

When they had finished supper John said he'd better go, he wanted to shave and polish and get all his kit ready for tomorrow, they were doing a route march.

They had known each other seven hours. John was amazed at how much he had spoken. Peter wondered would he ever get to know this soldier? Would he ever get to know anyone? It wasn't possible to know everything about everyone!

Now they had arranged to remeet, Peter wondered would it make any difference to his life now that he knew a real life person? He thought of future meetings and talk. Would it be dead stumps of talk and all be boring, would he long for a talk on some new writer? But as he looked at the soldier adjusting his cap at the correct angle he knew that it would be better to know this person more than any «idea».

«Yes, I'll see you Wednesday,» said John. This was the first time since he'd been in the Army that he had anything to look forward to. On Wednesday he'd really talk, would tell this writer all about himself. He was easy to talk to, he didn't make you feel that you couldn't spell all the words that he used. It was good to finish at half past four and get tidied up like the others. They'd all be wanting to know where he was going on Wednesday, and he'd have cigarettes of his own. There was something different about things now.

«Good luck, Private John Hickey.»

«Good luck,» he answered and walked up the street. Then he turned around and shouted, «Wednesday five o'clock.»

Peter watched him walking away. He thought of the poems that came out of his own head, and the polish and the lino that would look lovely when polished. But after it all what was left? This soldier had talked, he had spoken of little things. Could he from those scraps know him? Did each person only know scraps of others, was there no contact with anyone? What was the soldier thinking now? What did he really feel? Was the meaning of his life to be found in the wish to polish red lino? Everything had failed, he knew no more of this soldier than he would ever know of anyone.

From the park came the scent of trees. The river was a black background for the swans. The soldier looked back along the road and wanted to tell the strange young man about how these things touched him, but it was only when you weren't with anyone that you could say these things. He supposed the young man called Peter Doyle was regretting having wasted a day with him. Some day he'd . . .

Back in his room Peter took pencil and paper and wrote «John Hickey — soldier — likes polishing floor — green eyes — will probably —» Then he stopped. He would never know anything of this man, all you knew were scraps of talk. It was terrible not to know what the soldier was thinking or saying now.

Lying awake in bed the soldier wondered whether to pray for a fine day on Wednesday or a wet one. Each would have advantages.

ROUPY

by Karl Eske

On the road leading from St. Quentin to Ham, Signal Unit, 825 was putting up the network for H. Q. They used extra thin poles with the thinnest wire so that progress could be speedy in the wake of the army.

Signalman Karl Folker pushed the poles with a big hammer into the hard crusted earth. Usually this was a boring kind of work but it was different today; he was living in the ecstasy of victory, he felt in himself the pressure of advance and all this was mixed up with and woven into his delight in the blue sky and yellow earth. However, his delight was not without shadows. The uncultivated earth around him, as far as he could see held only trenches, held by the English a couple of hours ago. Now it looked to him as though this earth was eternal, all-knowing in the middle of the war; earth thrown up and trampled down and into which blood was soaking. And there was something invisible too. Do you know the air of March blowing softly over the sunny fields; this air which you seem to drink when you breathe it too deeply, sanity, calling you back to reality?

THIS IS ROUPY, could be read in large, white block letters on a crumpled wall which was all that remained of a little house standing at the entrance to the village of Roupy.

«What cruel irony!» Karl Folker thought, «this description on ruins: THIS IS . . .!» He knew too, that his condition was psychological and that for the most part he was still under the spell of the horror which he had experienced daily during the past weeks of the battle of St. Quentin. He was unable to realise from where this preference of his for the empty ruins of war arose. All he knew or even only felt was that they meant to him, despite their apparent crazed appearance, an insistence to find his lost balance of integrity, in this, the Eternal Now. He was happy when he saw grass grow out of the ruins, or he dreamt how once mankind, relieved from the slavery of war, would rebuild all this — yet one secret the ruins kept; if it was not the symbol of death could it be the song of life and death together, with its Higher Third, Harmony, of and above them?