ONE

Tinsel

The swing-doors of the steamie had windows in them but even when he stood on tiptoe he couldn't reach up to see out. If he held the doors open, the people queuing complained about the cold and anyway the strain would make his arms ache. So he had to be content to peer out through the narrow slit between the doors, pressing his forehead against the brass handplate. He could see part of the street and the grey buildings opposite, everything covered in snow. He tried to see more by moving a little sideways, but the gap wasn't wide enough. He could smell the woodandpaint of the door and the clean bleachy smell from the washhouse. His eye began to sting from the draught so he closed it tight and put his other eye to the slit, but he had to jump back quickly as a woman with a pramful of washing crashed open the doors. When the doors had stopped swinging and settled back into place he noticed that the brass plate was covered with finger-marks. He wanted to see it smooth and shiny so he breathed up on it, clouding it with his breath, and rubbed it with his sleeve. But he only managed to smear the greasy marks across the plate, leaving it streaky and there was still a cluster of prints near the top that he couldn't reach at all.

He went over and sat down on the long wooden bench against the wall. His feet didn't quite reach the ground and he sat swinging his legs. It felt as if his mother had been in the washhouse for hours.

Waiting.

People passed in and out. The queue was just opposite the bench. They queued to come in and wash their clothes or to have a hot bath or a swim. The way to the swimming baths was through an iron turnstile, like the ones at Ibrox Park. When his father took him to the match he lifted him over the turnstile so he didn't have to pay.

Unfastening his trenchcoat, he rummaged about in his trouser pocket and brought out a toy Red Indian without a head, a pencil rubber, a badge with a racing car, a yellow wax crayon and a foreign coin. He pinned the badge on to his lapel and spread the other things out on the bench. The crayon was broken in the middle but because the paper cover wasn't torn the two ends hadn't come apart. It felt wobbly. He bent it in half, tearing the paper. Now he had two short crayons instead of one long one. There was nothing to draw on except the green-tiled wall so he put the pieces back in his pocket.

The coin was an old one, from Palestine, and it had a hole in the middle. He'd been given it by his uncle Andy who had been a soldier there. Now he was a policeman in Malaya. He would be home next week for Christmas. Jesus's birthday. Everybody gave presents then so that Jesus would come one day and take them to Heaven. That was where he lived now, but he came from Palestine. Uncle Andy had been to see his house in Bethlehem. At school they sang hymns about it. 'Come all ye faithful'. 'Little star of Bethlehem'.

He scraped at the surface of the bench with his coin,

watching the brown paint flake and powder, blowing the flakings away to see the mark he'd made.

The woman at the pay-desk shouted at him.

'Heh! Is that how ye treat the furniture at hame? Jist chuck it!'

He sat down again.

Two boys and two girls aged about fifteen came laughing and jostling out of the baths, red faced, their hair still damp. One of the boys was flicking his wet towel at the girls who skipped clear, just out of reach. They clattered out into the street, leaving the doors swinging behind them. He heard their laughter fade, out of his hearing. For the moment again he was alone.

He stood his headless Indian on the bench. If he could find the head he'd be able to fix it back on again with a matchstick. He pushed the Indian's upraised arm through the hole in the coin, thinking it would make a good shield, but it was too heavy and made the Indian fall over.

He shoved his things back into his pocket and went over to the doorway of the washhouse. The place was painted a grubby cream and lightgreen and the stone floor was wet.

Clouds of steam swishing up from faraway metaltub machines. Lids banging shut. Women shouting above the throbbing noise.

He couldn't see his mother.

He went back and climbed on to the bench, teetering, almost falling as he stood carefully up.

A woman came in with a little girl about his own age. He was glad he was standing on the bench and he knew she was watching him.

He ignored her and pretended to fight his way along the bench, hacking aside an army of unseen cut-throats,

hurling them over the immense drop from the perilous bench-top ridge. He kept looking round to make sure she was still watching him, not looking directly at her but just glancing in her direction then looking past her to the pay-box and staring at that with fixed interest and without seeing it at all.

The woman had taken her bundle into the washhouse and the little girl sat down on the far end of the bench, away from him.

His mother came out of the washhouse pushing her pram. He jumped down noisily and ran to her. As they left he turned and over his shoulder stuck out his tongue at the girl.

Once outside, his mother started fussing over him, buttoning his coat, straightening his belt, tucking in his scarf.

'There yar then, ah wasn't long, was ah?' Gentle voice. Her breath was wheezy.

She was wearing the turban she wore to work in the bakery. Today was Saturday and she only worked in the morning, coming home at dinnertime with cakes and pies. He'd gone with her to the steamie because his father was out at the doctor's and he couldn't find any of his friends. They'd probably gone to the pictures.

He had to walk very quickly, sometimes trotting, to keep up with the pram. The snow under his feet made noises like a catspurr at every step. The pramwheels creaked. In the pram was a tin tub full of damp washing which was already starting to stiffen in the cold. It was the same pram he'd been carried in when he was a baby. His mother's two other babies had been carried in it too. They would have been his big brothers but they'd both died. They would be in Heaven. He wondered if they were

older than him now or if they were still babies. He was six years and two weeks old. His Wellington boots were folded down at the top like pirate boots. His socks didn't reach up quite far enough and the rims of the boots had rubbed red stinging chafemarks round his legs.

They rounded the corner into their own street and stopped outside the Dairy.

'You wait here son. Ah'll no be a minnit.'

Waiting again.

Out of a close came a big loping longhaired dog. The hair on its legs looked like a cowboy's baggy trousers. Some boys were chasing it and laughing. All its fur was clogged with dirt and mud.

His mother came out of the shop with a bottle of milk.

There was a picture of the same kind of dog in his *Wonder Book of the World*. It was called an Afghan Hound. But the one in the book looked different. Again the steady creak of the pram. The trampled snow underfoot was already grey and slushy.

They reached their close and he ran on up ahead. They lived on the top landing and he was out of breath when he reached the door. He leaned over the banister. Down below he could hear his mother bumping the pram up the stairs. Maybe his father was home from the doctor's.

He kicked the door.

'O-pen. O-pen.'

His father opened the door and picked him up.

'H'hey! Where's yer mammy?'

'She's jist comin up.'

His father put him down and went to help her with the pram.

He went into the kitchen and sat down by the fire.

Dusty, their cat, jumped down from the sink and slid

quietly under the bed. The bed was in a recess opposite the window and the three of them slept there in winter. Although they had a room, the kitchen was easier to keep warm. The room was bigger and was very cold and damp. His father said it would cost too much to keep both the room and the kitchen heated.

He warmed his hands till they almost hurt. He heard his mother and father coming in. They left the pram in the lobby. His father was talking about the doctor.

'Aye, e gave me a prescription fur another jar a that ointment.' He had to put the ointment all over his body because his skin was red and flaky and he had scabby patches on his arms and legs. That was why he didn't have a job. He'd had to give up his trade in the shipyards because it was a dirty job and made his skin disease worse.

'An ah got your pills as well, when ah wis in the chemist's.'

His mother had to take pills to help her breathing. At night she had to lie on her back, propped up with pillows.

'Never mind hen. When ah win the pools . . .'

'Whit'll ye get ME daddy?' This was one of their favourite conversations.

'Anythin ye like sun.'

'Wull ye get me a pony daddy? Lik an Indian.'

'Ah'll get ye TWO ponies.' Laughing. 'An a wigwam as well!'

He could see it. He'd ride up to school, right up the stairs and into the classroom and he'd scalp Miss Heather before she could reach for her belt.

He'd keep the other pony for Annie. She was his friend. She wasn't his girlfriend. That was soft. She was three weeks older than him and she lived just round the corner. They were in the same class at school. She had long shiny

black hair and she always wore bright clean colours. (One night in her back close – showing bums – giggling – they didn't hear the leerie coming in to light the gas-lamp – deep loud voice somewhere above them – sneering laugh – Annie pulling up her knickers and pulling down her dress in the same movement – scramble into the back – both frightened to go home in case the leerie had told, but he hadn't.)

The memory of it made him blush. He ripped off a piece of newspaper and reached up for the toilet key from the nail behind the door where it hung.

'Jist goin t' the lavvy.'

From the lobby he heard the toilet being flushed so he waited in the dark until he heard the slam of the toilet door then the flop of Mrs Dolan's feet on the stairs. The Dolans lived in the single end, the middle door of the three on their landing. The third house, another room and kitchen, was empty for the moment because the Andersons had emigrated to Canada.

When he heard Mrs Dolan closing the door he stepped out on to the landing and slid down the banister to the stairhead. In the toilet there was only one small window very high up, and he left the door slightly open to let light seep in from the stairhead.

A pigeon landed on the window-ledge and sat there gurgling and hooing, its feathers ruffled up into a ball. To pull the plug he climbed up on to the seat and swung on the chain, squawking out a Tarzan-call. The pigeon flurried off, scared by the noise, and he dropped from his creeper-chain, six inches to the floor.

He looked out through the stairhead window. Late afternoon. Out across the back and a patch of wasteground, over factory roofs and across a railway line stood Ibrox

Stadium. He could see a patch of terracing and the roof of the stand. The pressbox on top looked like a little castle. When Rangers were playing at home you could count the goals and near misses just by listening to the roars. Today there was only a reserve game and the noise could hardly be heard. Soon it would be dark and they'd have to put on the floodlights.

For tea they had sausages and egg and fried bread. After they'd eaten he sat down in his own chair at the fire with his *Wonder Book of the World*. The chair was wooden and painted bright blue.

His father switched on the wireless to listen to the football results and check his pools.

The picture of the Afghan Hound had been taken in a garden on a sunny day. The dog was running and its coat shone in the sun.

'Four draws,' said his father. 'Ach well, maybe next week . . .'

'There's that dog mammy.' He held up the book.

'So it is.'

'Funny tae find a dog lik that in Govan,' said his father.

'Right enough,' said his mother. 'Expect some'dy knocked it.'

Nothing in the book looked like anything he had ever seen. There were pictures of cats but none of them looked like Dusty. They were either black and white or striped and they all looked clean and sleek. Dusty was a grubby grey colour and he spat and scratched if anyone tried to pet him. His mother said he'd been kept too long in the house. There was a section of the book about the weather with pictures of snow crystals that looked like flowers and stars. He thought he'd like to

go out and play in the snow and he asked his mother if he could.

'Oh well, jist for a wee while then. Ah'll tell ye what. If ye come up early enough we kin put up the decorations before ye go tae bed.'

He'd forgotten about the decorations. It was good to have something special like that to come home for. It was the kind of thing he'd forget about while he was actually playing, then there would be moments when he'd remember, and feel warm and comforted by the thought.

He decided he'd get Joe and Jim and Annie and they'd build a snowman as big as a midden.

Joe was having his tea and Jim felt like staying in and Annie's mother wouldn't let her out.

He stood on the pavement outside the paper-shop, peering in through the lighted window at the Christmas annuals and selection boxes. The queue for the evening papers reached right to the door of the shop. The snow on the pavement was packed hard and greybrown, yellow in places under the streetlamps. He scraped at the snow with the inside of his boot, trying to rake up enough to make a snowball, but it was too powdery and it clung to the fingers of his woollen gloves, making his hands feel clogged and uncomfortable. He took off his gloves and scooped up some slush from the side of the road but the cold made his bare fingers sting, red. It felt as if he'd just been belted by Miss Heather.

Annie's big brother Tommy was clattering his way across the road, trailing behind him a sack full of empty bottles. He'd gathered them on the terracing at Ibrox and he was heading for the Family Department of the pub to cash in as many as he could. Every time the pub door

opened the noise and light seeped out. It was a bit like pressing your hands over your ears then easing off then pressing again. If you did that again and again people's voices sounded like mwah . . . mwah . . . mwah . . . mwah . . .

He looked closely at the snow still clogging his gloves. It didn't look at all like the crystals in his book. Disgusted, he slouched towards his close.

Going up the stairs at night he always scurried or charged past each closet for fear of what might be lurking there ready to leap out at him. Keeping up his boldness, he whistled loudly. 'Little Star of Bethlehem'. He was almost at the top when he remembered the decorations.

The kitchen was very bright after the dimness of the landing with its sputtering gas light.

'Nob'dy wis comin out tae play,' he explained.

His mother wiped her hands. 'Right! What about these decorations!'

The decorations left over from last year were in a cardboard box under the bed. He didn't like it under there. It was dark and dirty, piled with old rubbish – books, clothes, boxes, tins. Once he'd crawled under looking for a comic, dust choking him, and he'd scuttled back in horror from bugs and darting silverfish. Since then he'd had bad dreams about the bed swarming with insects that got into his mouth when he tried to breathe.

His father rummaged in the sideboard drawer for a packet of tin tacks and his mother brought out the box.

Streamers and a few balloons and miracles of coloured paper that opened out into balls or long concertina snakes. On the table his mother spread out some empty cake boxes she'd brought home from work and cut them into shapes

like Christmas trees and bells, and he got out his painting box and a saucerful of water and he coloured each one and left it to dry – green for the trees and yellow for the bells, the nearest he could get to gold.

His father had bought something special.

'Jist a wee surprise. It wis only a coupla coppers in Woollies.'

From a cellophane bag he brought out a length of shimmering rustling silver.

'What dis that say, daddy?' He pointed at the label.

'It says UNTARNISHABLE TINSEL GARLAND.'

'What dis that mean?'

'Well that's what it is. It's a tinsel garland. Tinsel's the silvery stuff it's made a. An a garland's jist a big long sorta decoration, for hangin up. An untarnishable means . . . well . . . how wid ye explain it hen?'

'Well,' said his mother, 'it jist means it canny get wasted. It always steys nice an shiny.'

'Aw Jesus!' said his father. 'Ther's only three tacks left!'

'Maybe the paper-shop'll be open.'

'It wis open a wee minnit ago!'

'Ah'll go an see,' said his father, putting on his coat and scarf. 'Shouldnae be very long.'

The painted cut-out trees and bells had long since dried and still his father hadn't come back. His mother had blown up the balloons and she'd used the three tacks to put up some streamers. Then she remembered they had a roll of sticky tape. It was more awkward to use than the tacks so the job took a little longer. But gradually the room was transformed, brightened; magical colours strung across the ceiling. A game he liked to play was lying on his back looking up at the ceiling and trying to imagine

it was actually the floor and the whole room was upside down. When he did it now it looked like a toy garden full of swaying paper plants.

Round the lampshade in the centre of the room his mother was hanging the tinsel coil, standing on a chair to reach up. When she'd fixed it in place she climbed down and stood back and they watched the swinging lamp come slowly to rest. Then they looked at each other and laughed.

When they heard his father's key in the door his mother shooshed and put out the light. They were going to surprise him. He came in and fumbled for the switch. They were laughing and when he saw the decorations he smiled but he looked bewildered and a bit sad.

He put the box of tacks on the table.

'So ye managed, eh,' he said. He smiled again, his eyes still sad. 'Ah'm sorry ah wis so long. The paper-shop wis shut an ah had tae go down nearly tae Govan Road.'

Then they understood. He was sad because they'd done it all without him. Because they hadn't waited. They said nothing. His mother filled the kettle. His father took off his coat.

'Time you were in bed malad!' he said.

'Aw bit daddy, themorra's Sunday!'

'Bed!'

'Och!'

He could see it was useless to argue so he washed his hands and face and put on the old shirt he slept in.

'Mammy, ah need a pee.'

Rather than make him get dressed again to go out and down the stairs, she said he could use the sink. She turned on the tap and lifted him up to kneel on the ledge.

When he pressed his face up close to the window he could see the back court lit here and there by the light

from a window, shining out on to the yellow snow from the dark bulk of the tenements. There were even one or two Christmas trees and, up above, columns of palegrey smoke, rising from chimneys. When he leaned back he could see the reflection of their own kitchen. He imagined it was another room jutting out beyond the window, out into the dark. He could see the furniture, the curtain across the bed, his mother and father, the decorations and through it all, vaguely, the buildings, the night. And hung there, shimmering, in that room he could never enter, the tinsel garland that would never ever tarnish.