

## THE PARTY

My Dad pressed a good crease into the trousers that went with his navyblue suit and he put a clean collar on his white shirt.<sup>1</sup> He was taking me to the party— four o'clock to six—because the invitation stated that the child must be accompanied by an unemployed father.

**5** The day was damp and raw so, although I was too big, he held my hand to keep it warm. The other one I made into a fist and pulled up inside my sleeve. As we set out on the long walk, stores were already lit up, making the narrow city streets glow friendly in misty blurs. Inside butchers' shop windows there were pigs' heads smiling with oranges in their mouths while outside fowl hung by the  
**10** feet from high hooks ready for Christmas; ducks, pheasants, geese, turkeys, all plucked pimplly naked except for ruffs of their own special feathers left with the dead heads at the ends of their long stretched necks. Pastry shops smelled warm with hot crusty bread, custard tarts, clove-spicy mincemeat, and rich fruit cake. Sweet shops had coloured lights that turned jars of candies into caves of jewels. "**15** could just eat a caramel. I dream about having a cream caramel in my mouth," I confided to my Dad.

"Imagine it," my Dad said. "Imagination tastes better than anything." I believed him because he was my Dad.

We walked past factories whose tall fat-bellied chimneys spewed black  
**20** smoke, and from whose grimy windows came sounds of machinery, and men's and women's chatter, and laughter.

"They're lucky in there to have jobs," my Dad told me. Long before we reached the railway bridge the lamplighter was lighting the street lamps with his long pole. Boys and girls, as though called by magic, came

**25** shouting to play in the golden islands of gaslight. With the mist and the lights, and the long walk, it seemed like night-time already when we dodged the traffic under the bridge at the main street crossroads while a train rumbled and rattled above us. Ahead we saw jolly signs with arrows pointing to the Town Hall, telling us where to enter for the children's party.

**30** My Dad and I went inside, up a curving marble stairway, out of the cold, still holding hands because the building was so immensely grand, like the inside of castles in story books; and so importantly silent around the noise of the people. On the second floor my Dad told me to look down between the bulbous marble balusters to see the great crowd of children coming up the wide stairway holding  
**35** hands with their unemployed Dads. My Dad said, "It's a spectacle you'll want to remember."

I thought it was a spectacle when, at exactly four o'clock, we were let through heavy oaken doors into the biggest room I'd ever seen. Rows and rows of tables were covered in white, with thick white cups, saucers, and plates set out, and by  
**40** every setting a red Christmas cracker.<sup>2</sup> At the far end of the room the stage had TWO Christmas trees on it, heavily garlanded with loops of glistening tinsel. Underneath and around the trees were mountains of gift parcels, fat squares and thin oblongs wrapped in plain colours; green, red, blue, yellow.

<sup>1</sup> put a clean collar on his white shirt – at the time that this short story is set, dress shirts came with detachable collars to reduce the amount of laundering required

<sup>2</sup> Christmas cracker – a small paper packet containing a paper hat and other trinkets, made so as to pop open when its ends are pulled

At first only the children were let in. I left my coat for my Dad to hold and  
**45** followed where men and ladies with paper hats above their big smile showed us where to go. "Fill up the next space," they called as we edged our way with bent knees between long benches and trestle tables. Before anyone told us we might, we started pulling the crackers, shouting, and getting the paper hats on our heads, red, yellow, green, or blue crowns. Little gifts came out of the crackers but mine  
**50** got lost under the table. We had to wait until everybody had a seat and the tables were full before the party really started. A man dressed as Santa Claus made a space in front of the parcels on the stage and stood there shouting for us to be patient.

When all the children were in, our Dads were let in to stand round the sides of  
**55** the hall to watch us. I waved to my Dad. He looked very small. All the Dads looked small. They didn't have paper hats. Most of them kept their workmans' caps on.

When the Dads were all in, we passed our cups to one end of the table to be filled with milky sweet tea from big jugs while, from the other end, white paper  
**60** bags were passed down to us. "One bag per child," the men and women in the paper hats kept calling while our Dads watched. A beautiful pastry shop smell and flavour came out of my bag when I opened it. I closed it quickly to keep the glory in, but the boys on either side of me spread everything from their bags around their plates. "Everybody's got the same," the word went from child to child.

**65** "Five things."

We were supposed to eat the five things while our Dads watched. Some children ate everything but quite a lot took only one bite out of each thing and left a mess on their plates. The men and women were happy to fill up the cups as many times as we liked. They smiled when we asked for more, so I had four cups  
**70** of tea, but I ate only the bread bun because there were five—counting me—in our family.

Then it was time to go. The tables that came in last now went out first, the Dads going with the children. On the way out three Santa Clauses on each side, six altogether, gave out the gift boxes. Every age got a different colour. The  
**75** sevens got green oblongs. I was seven. I knew there was a board game inside by the way the box rattled.

The long walk home with my Dad was lovely, moonlit, starlit, lamplit and storelit. The roofs were wet and shining.

When we got home I gave my Mum the white bag I'd kept so tightly closed.

**80** One by one she took out the currant bun, the cupcake with white icing on top, the chocolate cake with the brown icing, and the red lollipop, setting each one on the table, then shaking her head sadly at them.

"Four stale cakes! Yesterday's cakes and a penny lollipop! Could they spare them!" She bit on her lip to stop herself from crying.

**85** My Mum didn't even catch a whiff of the pastry shop glory I'd saved for her.

I, however, kept very secure in the bag of my memories, the biggest party I was ever to see, with *two* Christmas trees and *six* Santas, where men and women with shining faces under paper hats had a lovely time doing something for the children of the poor.