The Prison

by Bernard Malamud

Though he tried not to think of it, at twenty-nine Tommy Castelli’s life was a *screaming bore*. It wasn’t just Rosa or the store they tended for profits counted in pennies, or the unendurably slow hours and endless *drivel* that went with selling candy, cigarettes, and soda water; it was this sick-in-the-stomach feeling of being trapped in old mistakes, even some he had made before Rosa changed Tony into Tommy. He had been as Tony a kid of many dreams and schemes, especially getting out of this *tenement-crowded, kid-squawking* neighbourhood, with its lousy poverty, but everything had fouled up against him before he could. When he was sixteen he quit the vocational school where they were making him into a shoemaker, and began to *hang out* with the gray-hatted, thick-soled-shoe boys, who had the spare time and the *mazuma*¹ and showed it in fat wonderful rolls down in the cellar clubs to all who would look, and everybody did, *popeyed*. They were the ones who had bought the silver *caffe espresso* urn and later the television, and they arranged the *pizza* parties and had the girls down; but it was *getting in with* them and their cars, leading to the *holdup* of a liquor store, that had started all the present trouble. Lucky for him the *coal-and-ice man* who was their landlord knew the leader in the district, and they arranged something so nobody bothered him after that. Then before he knew what was going on - he had been frightened sick by the whole mess - there was his father cooking up a deal with Rosa Agnello’s old man that Tony would marry her and the father-in-law would, out of his savings, open a candy store for him to make an honest living. He wouldn’t *spit on* a candy store, and Rosa was too plain and lank a *chick* for his personal taste, so he *beat it off* to Texas and *bummed* around in too much space, and when he came back everybody said it was for Rosa and the candy store, and it was all arranged again and he, without saying no, was in it.

That was how he had *landed on Prince Street* in the Village, working from eight in the morning to almost midnight every day, except for an hour off each afternoon when he went upstairs to sleep, and on Tuesdays, when the store was closed and he slept some more and went at night alone to the movies. He was too tired always for schemes now, but once he tried to make a little cash on the side by secretly taking in *punchboards*; some *syndicate* was distributing in the neighborhood, on which he collected a *nice cut* and in this way saved fifty-five bucks that Rosa didn’t know about; but then the *syndicate* was *written up* by a newspaper, and the *punchboards* all disappeared. Another time, when Rosa was at her mother’s house, he took a chance and let them put in a slot machine that could guarantee a nice piece of change if he kept it long enough. He knew of course he couldn’t hide it from her, so when she came and screamed when she saw it, he was ready and patient, for once not yelling back when she yelled, and he explained it was not the same as gambling because anybody who played it got a roll of mints every time he put in a nickel. Also the machine would supply them a few extra dollars cash they could use to buy television so he could see the fights without going to a bar; but Rosa wouldn’t *let up screaming*, and later her father came in shouting that he was a criminal and chopped the machine apart with a plumber’s hammer. The next day the *cops* raided for slot machines and gave out summons where they found them, and though Tommy’s place was practically the only candy store in the neighborhood that didn’t have one, he felt bad about the machine for a long time.

Mornings had been his best time of day because Rosa stayed upstairs cleaning, and since few people came into the store till noon, he could sit around alone, a toothpick in his teeth, looking over the *News* and *Mirror* on the *fountain counter*, or maybe *gab* with one of the old cellar-club guys who had happened to come by for a *pack of butts*, about a horse that was running that day or how the numbers were paying lately; or just sit there, drinking coffee and thinking how far away he could get on the fifty-five he had *stashed away* in the cellar.

Generally the mornings were this way, but after the slot machine, usually the whole day *stank* and he along with it. Time rotted in him, and all he could think of the whole morning, was going to sleep in the afternoon, and he would wake up with the sour remembrance of the long night in the store ahead of him, while everybody else was doing as he damn pleased. He cursed the candy store and Rosa, and cursed, from its beginning, his unhappy life.

It was on one of these bad mornings that a ten-year-old girl *from around the block* came in and asked for two rolls of colored tissue paper, one red and one yellow. He wanted to tell her to *go to hell* and stop bothering, but

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¹ *money*
instead went with bad grace to the rear, where Rosa, whose bright idea it was to keep the stuff, had put it. He went from force of habit, for the girl had been coming in every Monday since the summer for the same thing, because her rock-faced mother, who looked as if she arranged her own widowhood, took care of some small kids after school and gave them the paper to cut out dolls and such things. The girl, whose name he didn’t know, ressembled her mother, except her features were not quite so sharp and she had very light skin with dark eyes; but she was a plain kid and would be more so at twenty. He had noticed, when he went to get the paper, that she always hung back as if afraid to go where it was dark, though he kept the comics there and most of the other kids had to be slapped away from them; and that when he brought her the tissue paper her skin seemed to grow whiter and her eyes shone. She always handed him two hot dimes and went out without glancing back.

It happened that Rosa, who trusted nobody, had just hung a mirror on the back wall, and as Tommy opened the drawer to get the girl her paper this Monday morning that he felt so bad, he looked up and saw in the glass something that made it seem as if he were dreaming. The girl had disappeared, but he saw a white hand reach into the candy case for a chocolate bar and for another, then she came forth from behind the counter and stood there, innocently waiting for him. He felt at first like grabbing her by the neck and socking till she threw up, but he had been caught, as he sometimes was, by this thought of how his Uncle Dom, years ago before he went away, used to take with him Tony alone of all the kids, when he went crabbing to Sheephead Bay. Once they went at night and threw the baited wire traps into the water and after a while pulled them up and they had this green lobster in one, and just then this fat-faced cop came along and said they had to throw it back unless it was nine inches. Dom said it was nine inches, but the cop said not to be a wise guy so Dom measured it and it was ten, and they laughed about that lobster all night. Then he remembered how he had felt after Dom was gone, and tears filled his eyes. He found himself thinking about the way his life had turned out, and then about this girl, moved that she was so young and a thief. He felt he ought to do something for her, warn her to cut it out before she got trapped and fouled up her life before it got started. His urge to do this was strong, but when he went forward she looked up frightened because he had taken so long. The fear in her eyes bothered him and he didn’t say anything. She thrust out the dimes, grabbed at the tissue rolls and ran out of the store.

He had to sit down. He kept trying to make the desire to speak to her go away, but it came back stronger than ever. He asked himself what difference does it make if she swipes candy - so she swipes it; and the role of reformer was strange and distasteful to him, yet he could not convince himself that what he felt he must do was unimportant. But he worried he would not know what to say to her. Always he had trouble speaking right, stumbled over words, especially in new situations. He was afraid he would sound like a jerk and she would not take him seriously. He had to tell her in a sure way so that even if it scared her, she would understand he had done it to set her straight. He mentioned her to no one but often thought about her, always looking around whenever he went outside to raise the awning or wash the window, to see if any of the girls playing in the street was her, but they never were. The following Monday, an hour after opening the store he had smoked a full pack of butts. He thought he had found what he wanted to say but was afraid for some reason she wouldn’t come in, or if she did, this time she would be afraid to take the candy. He wasn’t sure he wanted that to happen until he had said what he had to say. But at about eleven, while he was reading the News, she appeared, asking for the tissue paper, her eyes shining so he had to look away. He knew she meant to steal. Going to the rear he slowly opened the drawer, keeping his head lowered as he sneaked a look into the glass and saw her slide behind the counter. His heart beat hard and his feet felt nailed to the floor. He tried to remember what he had intended to do, but his mind was like a dark, empty room so he let her, in the end, slip away and stood tongue-tied, the dimes burning his palm.

Afterwards, he told himself that he hadn’t spoken to her because it was while she still had the candy on her, and she would have been scared worse than he wanted. When he went upstairs, instead of sleeping, he sat at the kitchen window, looking out into the back yard. He blamed himself for being too soft, too chicken, but then he thought, no there was a better way to do it. He would do it indirectly, slip her a hint he knew, and he was pretty sure that would stop her. Sometime after, he would explain her why it was good she had stopped. So next time he cleaned out this candy platter she helped herself from, thinking she might get wise he was on to her, but she seemed not to, only hesitated with her hand before she took two candy bars from the next plate and dropped them into the black patent leather purse she always had with her. The time after that he cleaned out the whole top shelf, and still she was not suspicious, and reached down to the next and took something different. One Monday he put some loose change, nickels and dimes, on the candy plate, but she left them there, only taking the candy,
which bothered him a little. Rosa asked him what he was mooning about so much and why was he eating chocolate lately. He didn’t answer her, and she began to look suspiciously at the women who came in, not excluding the little girls; and he would have been glad to rap her in the teeth, but it didn’t matter as long as she didn’t know what he had on his mind. At the same time he figured he would have to do something sure soon, or it would get harder for the girl to stop her stealing. He had to be strong about it. Then he thought of a plan that satisfied him. He would leave two bars on the plate and put in the wrapper of one a note she could read when she was alone. He tried out on paper many messages to her, and the one that seemed best he cleanly printed on a strip of cardboard and slipped it under the wrapper of one chocolate bar. It said, “Don’t do this any more or you will suffer your whole life.” He puzzled whether to sign it A Friend or Your Friend and finally chose Your Friend.

This was Friday, and he could not hold his impatience for Monday. But on Monday she did not appear. He waited for a long time, until Rosa came down, then he had to go up and the girl still hadn’t come. He was greatly disappointed because she had never failed to come before. He lay on the bed, his shoes on, staring at the ceiling. He felt hurt, the sucker she had played him for and was now finished with because she probably had another on her hook. The more he thought about it the worse he felt. He worked up a splitting headache that kept him from sleeping, then he suddenly slept and woke without it. But he had awaked depressed, saddened. He thought about Dom getting out of jail and going away God knows where. He wondered whether he would ever meet up with him somewhere, if he took the fifty-five bucks and left. Then he remembered Dom was a pretty old guy now, and he might not know him if they did meet. He thought about life. You never really got what you wanted. No matter how hard you tried you made mistakes and couldn’t get past them. You could never see the sky outside or the ocean because you were in a prison, except nobody called it a prison, and if you did they didn’t know what you were talking about, or they said they didn’t. A pall settled on him. He lay motionless, without thought or sympathy for himself or anybody.

But when he finally went downstairs, ironically amused that Rosa had allowed him so long a time off without bitching, there were people in the store and he could hear her screeching. Shoving his way through the crowd he saw in one sickening look that she had caught the girl with the candy bars and was shaking her so hard the kid’s head bounced back and forth like a balloon on a stick. With a curse he tore her away from the girl, whose sickly face showed the depth of her fright.

“What’samatter?” he shouted at Rosa, “you want her blood?”

“She’s a thief,” cried Rosa.

“Shut your face.”

To stop her vowling he slapped her across her mouth, but it was a harder crack than he had intended. Rosa fell back with a gasp. She did not cry but looked around dazedly at everybody, and tried to smile, and everybody there could see her teeth were flecked with blood.

“Go home,” Tommy ordered the girl, but then there was a movement near the door and her mother came into the store.

“What happened?” she said.

“She stole my candy,” Rosa cried.

“I let her take it,” said Tommy.

Rosa stared at him as if she had been hit again, then with mouth distorted began to sob.

“One was for you, Mother,” said the girl.

Her mother socked her hard across the face. “You little thief, this time you’ll get your hands burned good.”

She pawed at the girl, grabbed her arm and yanked it. The girl, like a grotesque dancer, half-ran, half-fell forward, but at the door she managed to turn her white face and thrust out at him her red tongue.
1. Here is a short summary of the story. Please fill in the blanks with a suitable word:

When he was ______, ________ Castelli quit the vocational ________, and started to hang out with the neighbourhood gangsters. That led him to get involved in the ______-up of a liquor store. Before he knew what was going on, his father and ______'s father made an arrangement for his _______ and he became the owner of a ______ store. There he made some __________ dollars with punchboards and a _______ machine, which his ________________ eventually destroyed with a hammer.

One ____________, he finds a girl stealing two ___________ bars. Seeing _______ in her eyes, he does not say anything. ______ more Mondays go by and he still has not said anything to the girl. On Friday, he leaves a __________ in the wrapper of a chocolate bar that reads: “Don’t do this anymore or you will __________ your whole life.” On the 6th Monday, after _______ has caught the girl, he _______ his wife and tells the girl to go home, upon which she sticks out her ________ at him.

2. Take quick notes and be ready to report your results to the class:

   a) “Tommy is a victim of the American Dream”. Comment!

   b) How do you interpret the title of the story? Reread ll. 113-119. Can you also see anything positive in Tommy’s situation?

   c) Reread ll. 51-54. How do you explain the girl’s behaviour?

   d) Look closely at the role that _______ plays in the story, especially in ll. 1-39. Explain the expressions “two hot dimes” and “the dimes burning his palm” in ll. 54 and 86-87. Why doesn’t the girl steal the _______ too (ll. 96-98)?

   e) Why does Tommy want to help the little girl?

   f) Have a look at the style of the vocabulary used (f.ex. in ll. 35-43) and the narrative perspective of the text!

   g) What can you make of the ending?

3. In your own words quote the girl’s thoughts when she sticks out her tongue at Tommy.