

Time Without End

JIM THOMPSON

MR. JOSEPH MAZINKY waddled painfully along under the August sun, stepping as gingerly on the hot bricks as if they had been so many red, rectangular eggs. He was neat and slovenly at the same time, having used, apparently, all his strength and discernment in attending to a few details. His shirt was clean, but buttoned crooked. He had laced one creased trouser leg into the top of his shoe. He was clean-shaven, but there were gray blobs of soap in his ears. Each conventional thesis of attire and toilet had its antithesis: from his head, where his crisp straw sailor rode backwards, to his shoes, only one of which was shined.

At the corner near the apartment house where his son Joe lived, he pivoted one step more than was necessary and found himself facing a low terrace-wall. His heart skipped a beat. Then, his dim eyes slowly untangling the problem, he backed up and sat down from mingled weariness and relief.

He was a big man—his triangulating torso was padded with intermixed layers of fat and muscle that no diet would remove—and he was old. But at this moment he was neither big nor old; not at this moment nor at any of the similar moments which daily came over him more frequently. He had fought them off for a time, just as he had fought the tendency to call an automobile a wagon or a coat a jumper. Lately, however, he had been afraid to fight, for he could not always tell what was real and what was not.

The shabby facade of the apartment house, a half-block away, drew down to the familiar walls of the soddy. The heat-spotted pavement glistened with the yellow-black of scorching stubble. The hot wind soughed over the prairie, swaying the sheet that hung in the doorway.

He was so tired that he wanted to fall forward on the dirt floor and go to sleep; but, no, there was Ma squatted before him, holding out her work-red hands urgingly.

“Just one more step, Joey. Just one more.”

He took it and she moved back.

"That's a big boy. Now, another one."

"Hub-uh."

"Aw, Joey . . ."

"No," he said. "No, no, no."

It began to rain, and he was sure that she would pick him up and carry him to the window. Instead, she disappeared with the soddy and the swaying sheet and the scorching stubble.

Mr. Mazinky scrambled to his feet. In the yard above him, a woman smiled a sour apology as she sprayed the lawn with a hose. He did not connect her with the dampness of his shirt, and walking on, he wondered whether she was some one he knew and chided himself for not speaking to her.

He ate at Joe's place thirteen times a week, once on Sunday and twice on other days. He liked going there. Often Myra and little Myra ate in the kitchen, and he and Joe got to eat and talk by themselves. He did not feel lonely or lost for quite a while after he had been with Joe, and, then, when they were alone that way, Joe usually dropped a dime for a beer in his pocket. Only one thing bothered him, the other people at the apartment house. Sometimes he was afraid they might think he was living off of Joe.

There was a man sitting on the steps today, so he walked past a few feet, hesitated, turned around, and went back.

"Does Joe Mazinky live here?" he called.

"Mazinky?" The man considered the question. "Wasn't you lookin' for him over here this morning?"

"I guess I was," admitted Mr. Mazinky. "I guess he ain't moved, has he?"

"We-el, I wouldn't care to say. Maybe you'd better go in an' ask him. I reckon he'd know."

Joe came to the hallway door, a frown on his lean dark face. "Ain't you got anything to do but rib an old man, bud?"

"Ahh, I didn't say nothin'."

"I heard you, and I don't want to hear you again . . . Come on in, Pop. Supper's about ready."

. . . . Wearing an expression of the deepest idiocy, Mr. Mazinky ascended to the porch and entered the hall. Although he did not know how nor why, he was aware that he had erred; and since he could not account for his mistakes he did what seemed

to be the next-best thing by appearing unaccountable for them.

“Looks like it might snow,” he remarked.

“Rain, Pop.”

“Rain,” repeated Mr. Mazinky. “That’s what I meant.”

“Listen, Pop,” said Joe. “When you come here you just walk right in like you owned the joint. Don’t say nothin’ to nobody. Just walk right on in. Will you do that?”

“Sure,” said Mr. Mazinky, very ashamed. “I guess that feller out there thought I was a fool, didn’t he?”

Joe, opening the door of the apartment, made no reply.

Little Myra scampered in from the kitchen, threw her thin hard body at Mr. Mazinky’s waist. He smiled, but the impact knocked the breath from him, and he dropped so heavily into a chair that a spring burst through the upholstery. Things went black before his eyes, but still he smiled, poking at her playfully with a stubby hand.

“Candy? Now, what would I be bringing you candy for?”

“You didn’t bring me any? Not one little piece? Didn’t you, grandpa? Didn’t you bring me any candy?”

His vision returned, and he tried to pull her up on his knee.

“Grandpa’ll tell you a story——”

“I don’t want to hear a story! You said you’d bring me some candy!”

“One time back in Illinoy when granpa was a little boy——”

“Oh, pooh!”

“Myra,” said Joe.

“Well, I don’t care! He said he’d bring me some candy.”

“Forget it. I’ll get you some.”

“Oh, yeah?” mocked the child, her dark features twisting. “I’ll bet you do!”

Joe took a step toward her, and she ran out of the room screaming.

Joe’s wife came in with a large tumbler of ice water. She handed it to Mr. Mazinky, beamed determinedly upon him while he drained it.

“Would you like some more, father?”

“No more,” said Mr. Mazinky.

“Was it cold enough for you?”

“Too cold. I don’t like my water so cold.”

She took the glass from his hands. "Next time," she said, "you can drink it hot."

"I don't like it hot, neither," Mr. Mazinky explained. "Not hot or neither too cold. I like it sort of coolish, kind of in between, like it comes out of——"

He left the sentence unfinished, seeing that he was alone, and began to tug at his collar. The button flew off and in his unambulant search for it he forgot that he had said something wrong—that he had said anything. Hunger and weariness seeped through the worn cloak of his inhibitions in a hundred places. He wanted to eat and get back to the hotel.

"Well, why don't we?" he muttered. "Ain't it about time we et, or no?"

"Now, Joey."

"I don't care. I want my supper."

He shook himself and sat up, his mouth petulant. There was no sound in the kitchen. He arose from the chair by shifting his weight to the outward edge and pushing down on the arms, and waddled to the door.

Joe sat at the white-topped table, quietly puffing a hand-rolled cigarette. His wife and little Myra were gone. Mr. Mazinky's glance traveled from his son to the stove.

"I guess I been asleep," he said. "All washed up and everything, huh?"

Joe looked at him coldly. "You hit it that time. All washed up is right."

"Well"—Mr. Mazinky gulped—"I guess I better move along. It kind of looks like it was going to snow."

"Rain, Pop . . . Oh, hell!" Joe pulled his head against the caloused arbor of his hands. "Listen, Pop, sit down a minute and listen real careful. I know you don't always think how things sound, and I'm not gripin' about that. If Myra wants to go streaming down the alley just because—well, skip it. But we're going to have to go easy on the dough. There ain't been a brick laid in this town in a month, and the business agent says there won't be before fall. I'm having a damned hard time getting by. I got to watch every nickel."

"I know," said Mr. Mazinky. "I reckon I been kind of a burden."

“Now, don’t get hurt. All I want you to do is be a little more careful. That guy from the beanery was over today. He said you hadn’t paid for your lunches for three weeks.”

Mr. Mazinky dropped his eyes.

“I gave you the money every Saturday, Pop. What’d you do with it?”

“I—I guess I lost it.”

“But, Pop, you couldn’t—” Joe stopped himself, taking a deep breath. “Well, don’t lose it any more. And don’t charge anything to your hotel bill. Do you understand, Pop? I don’t want to be tight; God knows you never were with me. I just can’t make it. The kid needs her tonsils out, and Myra ain’t got a decent dress to her name, and my insurance ain’t paid, and . . . But don’t do it any more. You won’t, will you?”

“Sure not, Joe.”

“You’re sure, now? You won’t forget?”

“Of course. I won’t forget,” said Mr. Mazinky, a little stiffly. “I reckon I got a few brains yet.”

“Okay,” said Joe. “Just don’t let me down.” He stood up and dug two one-dollar bills from his watch pocket, extended them silently.

Mr. Mazinky felt that some protest was necessary. “I don’t need all that, Joe. Just for tonight.”

“It ain’t just for tonight. You’d better not try to come over here tomorrow. It’s a pretty long walk for you, and Myra’s kind of under the weather. A day’s rest will do you both good.”

“It is pretty far,” agreed Mr. Mazinky. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Not tomorrow, Pop. The day after.”

“That’s what I meant. Well, I guess I better move along.”

“Wait a minute,” said Joe. “I’ll straighten that shirt for you.”

. . . . Despite the fact that he stopped once for beer and pretzels, Mr. Mazinky’s return trip to the business district was probably the quickest he had ever made. Never, he assured himself, had he been quite so hungry. At the Chinese restaurant, the first one he came to, he ordered ham and eggs and french-fried potatoes, and consumed three slices of catsup-smearred bread while they were being prepared.

Although the check was twice as large as the one he ordinarily received at the beanery he did not argue about it, first because he had more than enough to pay it, and, second, because of his unwavering belief in his propensity for error. Daily, a dozen or more times—depending on the number of his actions and speeches—it was borne home to him that he was unfailingly fallible. The act of putting on his trousers or a simple remark about the weather burgeoned with possibilities for the ludicrous. Naturally, he did not cherish this capacity for being wrong, and, insofar as he could, he limited its manifestations.

But, unfortunately, while he could avoid an argument over the check, he could not prevent the release of his mind from the comparative safety of his stomach. He enjoyed a few moments of self-confidence and well-being on the way to the hotel. Then, like a cloud of locusts, the day's sins descended upon him.

Joe. He had lied to Joe about losing the money. He had told Myra that he didn't like the water. He hadn't taken little Myra any candy; yes, and he could have done it, too, for he had spent a dime on cigars. There were many other things, but this last defection seemed the worst of all.

His shoulders slumped in misery; his mouth hung open. He was sure that every one of these passers-by was aware of his utter despicability, and he could not meet their eyes.

Fate had stopped him directly in front of a drug store, otherwise the fit of remorse might have passed to make room for the next. As it was, it was inevitable that he should amble inside.

"I want some candy," he told the clerk.

"Yessir. What kind would you like, sir?"

"Good candy."

The clerk looked at him, looked down at the dollar bill peeping out from the stubby fingers. His reaction also was inevitable.

He gave Mr. Mazinky a pound box of chocolates—and two cents change. Mr. Mazinky dropped the latter into his pocket without looking at it.

Out of an all-dominating instinct for self-preservation, he had worked out an itinerary for his journeyings to and from meals which led down the shadiest streets and past several watering points. And, now, in the face of the compelling necessity to make amends to little Myra, he remained a creature of habit.

His first stop was at an office building, where he quenched his thirst and drenched his shirt at the lobby fountain. The elevator descended while he was dabbing at himself with his handkerchief, and a withered little man with drooping brown mustaches clanged the door open. He and Mr. Mazinky eyed each other, friskily.

"Hi, Joe. Gaddin' around pretty late, ain't you?"

"Yeah, thought I better come down and see that you was gettin' your work done."

"What you been buyin' yourself?"

"I been buyin' me some boxing gloves to whup you with."

"You couldn't whup your own shadder," declared the little man. "I guess I never told you about the time I— Say I got a signal. Come on an' ride up with me."

Mr. Mazinky teetered in indecision.

"Come on. There ain't nothing to be a-scared of. I'm bossin' this place at night."

They rode up after the passenger, and down again. They rode up and down several times by themselves. Once, for a few floors, Mr. Mazinky handled the controls, and was deceived not a whit by his friend's disparaging comments. He could handle one of them things. He could do it just as good as the next feller.

It was almost an hour before he recalled that he had an errand to perform.

"I bet you're goin' to see your girl," the little man called after him, in parting.

"I bet you wish you could go along," cried Mr. Mazinky.

He had walked all of two blocks when he felt that he had to sit down. There was nothing else convenient so he sat down on the curb. He was very tired. His eyelids drooped, and he dozed a little.

"Old codger. I can do it better'n he can."

"Yes, you can!"

". . . bet I can . . . old codger."

A policeman strolled up, stepped around in front of him.

"Having trouble, Dad?"

"Huh!" Mr. Mazinky hastily hoisted himself to his feet. "I was just resting a minute. I guess I got somethin' in my shoe, maybe. I live right here. I live right down there to the hotel, that's where I live. Right there where you see that——"

The policeman took his arm. "Well, that's a mighty good place to stay. Have you got a nice cool room?"

"Oh—it ain't so bad. I got a fan."

"A fan, eh? Now, that is something! Mind if I walk down the way with you?"

Mr. Mazinky didn't mind. It was pretty late; eight o'clock, anyway. He could take the candy over in the morning.

In front of the hotel the policeman shook hands with him, dispensing an electric current of courage in the process. Mr. Mazinky approached the desk, inside, and only a trace of his customary doubtful shuffle.

The Negro porter-clerk did not look up from the magazine he was reading.

"Yessuh. You done got your key, Mistah Mazinky. It's right theah in——"

"I know where it is." Mr. Mazinky slapped the pocket of his shirt. "Right there, ain't it? You bring me some ice water."

"Yessuh. You just wait a minute, an' you can take it with——"

"You bring it up," said Mr. Mazinky, and started for the stairs.

He was so weary, after the three flights, that he flopped down on the bed without turning on the fan. Then, prodded by his memory, he got to his feet again. He had forgot something, something very important. The porter came in without knocking, and placed the pitcher of water on the dresser. Sullenly, he started out.

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Mazinky. "I guess I ain't given you nothing in a long time, have I?"

"Nosuh. You sure hasn't."

"Well"—Mr. Mazinky produced two dimes and two pennies—"here's a little present for you."

"Thank you, Mistah Mazinky. Anything you need, now, you jus'——"

"I will. You go on."

Mr. Mazinky closed the door.

That wasn't it; it was something else. Frowning, he turned on the fan and took a long drink of ice water . . . Something about Joe, maybe. Or Joe's wife . . . He sat down.

On the box of candy.

Absent-mindedly, he shifted his weight a little and retrieved it . . . Maybe it was about buttoning his shirt straight, or looking

out for the wagons, or . . . There was chocolate on his thumb. He licked it . . . Maybe it was . . .

Staring down at the broken cover of the box, he slowly completed its destruction. He ate a piece of the candy, then another, and another. He inched forward on the bed until he was within reaching distance of the water.

The fan sang in a tone above tonelessness—*like the little wheel on the cream separator*. And in the alley below the garbage cans rattled as . . .

As Pa rinsed out the milk pails.

Firmly, the tether of the past tightened, drawing Mr. Mazinky away from the frightening crevices of the present.

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