

The Consequences of Half-Eaten Cigarettes

by Katie Pennington

For Bennie and Mack, ordering a pizza wasn't the problem. It was *getting* it that had them in a bind.

"Mack, Mack, listen to me. Do not," Bennie said, drawing a panicked breath, "do *not* eat that cigarette. Just give him the watch. I'll get you a new one."

Mack inspected the smoldering nub while the Rolex gleamed on his wrist. "When we're in front of a group of criminals, Bernard," he said, taking as much time as possible, "we do what they say, because if we don't," he braced himself, "we get sent straight to our graves, understand?"

"Mack, he has *smoked* that thing! You *will* contract something!"

Bennie looked for a crack in the wall of men surrounding them, his mind shuffling through possible ways out. A pistol pushed against his temple.

"You're not movin' 'til he eats or gives up the watch."

Locking eyes with the man standing in front of him, Mack put the cigarette on his tongue, then flipped the rest to the back of his mouth. The ash seared his throat and he gagged, shooting the nub and a glob of spit into the man's face.

Terror pushed Bennie's heart down to his stomach.

"I'm... I'm sorry," Mack sputtered, spit dangling from his lip as another man moved the pistol from Bennie's head to his. "I meant to swallow it—"

Before the man could nail Mack with the iron fist of North America, Bennie yanked him by his flannel and wedged through the empty space the gunman had left. They darted to the back

of the alley and took a left, searching for someplace safe, or at the very least, trying to throw the men off.

“Just...” Bennie pumped his arms as he fought off exhaustion, “give ‘em the stupid watch, Mack!”

Mack looked straight ahead, his flannel ribboning behind him like a flag. “Bennie... this watch... is a *fake!* When they find that out... we’re both dead!”