A Cup of Tea

His daily routine was to wake up, walk seven city blocks to the corner café, sit there for a few hours, walk back home, type on his antique typewriter, and go to bed only to do the same ritual again the next day. Tomorrow was not to go as planned.

Dennis King, a retired veteran, woke up, as he did every day, at six a.m. He put on his usual khakis and a button-up plaid shirt. After brushing his teeth in a relaxed manner, combing his thinning, blonde hair to the side, eating some bland, tasteless oatmeal, and reading the newspaper, Dennis left his flat and walked through the city to Rochelle’s, a tiny corner café. Thoughts rippled through his mind as he paid no attention to his surroundings; everything he had passed by daily for the past four years was nothing out of the ordinary to him. “What a horrible thing to do. Kill your kids and wife by burning down the house for insurance money? The news gets worse every day it arrives at my door. But the Queen seems to be enjoying herself.” His ideas fluctuated from subject to subject as he finally came upon the quaint, hole-in-the-wall café.

Once there, he sat in his regular spot. A table for one that sat in the front corner of the place. His chair faced towards the large window that displayed the name *Rochelle’s* in big, canary-yellow, cursive letters. Dennis made light talk with the young waitress, Ellie, who would bring him his usual cup of black tea with a level spoon of honey. He would sip as the cars drove by, the minutes clicked, and people came in and out of Rochelle’s. After a raspberry scone and a third cup of tea for lunch, Dennis would finish up and stop at the bank before going home for the night.

The bank stood with strong, white granite pillars and gave the sense of lawfulness. Dennis made his way up the large steps into the bank to the teller window. About to make a deposit of a check his grandson mailed him a week earlier, Dennis was abruptly interrupted by the sound of gunshots and yelling. In the nearly empty bank, Dennis was fear-stricken, not really sure what was going on. Within seconds of the initial shot, a man with a black mask, large trench coat, black denim jeans, and steel-toe boots came up and grabbed the back of Dennis’s arms and threw a drawstring bag over his head. Dennis was guided in a policeman’s hold, like a prisoner, and led to a get-away car as three other men dressed in black jumped in behind them with gym bags full of money.

The man to the right of him harshly whispered into his ear, “You are a hostage. If you think you are going to escape, or try to, you’re going to die. We keep witnesses and we keep them shut.”

Dennis shook inside with fear and anxiety. Thoughts ran wild in his head, “Where am I going? Am I going to die?” Afraid to say anything, he kept his head low, his mouth shut, and kept a calm, steady breath. The stuffiness of the cloth bag, the muffled sounds of the car clanking and the wheels speeding down the highway, and the dizziness of the moments passing by struck fear and terror tremored through Dennis. A sharp whack to the temple from the butt of a gun put him out in an instant.

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Dennis lay stiff on a hardwood floor. The wind howled in the empty room. The only other sound was Dennis’s deep and heavy breathing. The bag still wrapped around his head; his hands tied behind his back. Dennis curled into a ball in the corner. Loud thumping footsteps climbed up a set of hollow stairs coming towards Dennis. The sack flew off his face as he came into eye contact with his holder.

A gruff man with a scratchy black beard and dark circles around his eyes stood above Dennis in a proud, authoritative stance like a Nazi soldier in a concentration camp. With a quick smirk the dirty, hostile man kicked Dennis over and held his dirty black boot on Dennis’s rib cage. “You are going to rot here. We are going to starve you, push you to do our commands, and use you until you are as dry as the dust that sits around you.” With that statement the criminal pushed his foot off of Dennis and retreated down stairs.

Dennis, in serious pain, sat up and looked around. With the bareness of the dusty room, crooked and rancid, he felt the presence of his holders but couldn’t locate where they were. The wooden boards he laid on were creaky and nails poked out of the floor. He felt like he was back in World War II Nazi Germany, only this time he was a prisoner, not a soldier.

A gangly man dirty blonde hair, maybe in his mid-thirties, came up to him and stuck his nose in Dennis’s face. Observing him with a close view and gritty breath, he gave a hot, airy laugh. Dennis, pushing out what he could, asked, “What are you going to do with me?”

Shocked Dennis said anything to him, the ugly, grim man sneered at Dennis, “You are going to work for us,” he took a pause and looked straight into Dennis’s eyes and said, “until you turn into dust; you stupid, fucking maggot!”

Pulling Dennis with a tight grip, the blonde-haired man yanked him down to the cellar of the torn-up shack. Going to the door atop the stairs leading down, Dennis noted a large amount of locks on the door. Scummy gray bricks lined the walls of the basement, cobwebs gracefully clouded the ceiling, and giant dust bunnies inhabited the corners of the open room. The only furniture present in the room: one poorly made table. The only other item was an antique, cherry-wood armoire decorated with chains and locks keeping out unwanted visitors. Below the lopsided table was the wondrous loot that the perpetrators gathered at the bank. The dismal lighting from one lone light bulb glowed eerily in the center of the ceiling; no windows were apparent.

Shoving Dennis into the table, the man in black went to the wardrobe, took out a set of handcuffs, and shackled Dennis to the lame table. Lifting the heavy, money-filled bag, the man spoke, “Count this money! Stack it neatly into piles of thousands! Do anything stupid, I’m gonna shoot you!” Leaving him and the money in the bleak, uninviting room, Dennis closed his eyes and listened as the footsteps faded to the top of the stairs in a huff and the door slammed. Hearing the metal clanks and shifts, as the locks were set on the door above the stairs, Dennis stood stiff and felt the cool air chew at his paper-thin skin and nipped at his bones. Breathing deeply, he imagined this feeling that he had felt before. It was chilly autumn’s day about four years ago. The feelings of hurt and upset filled his heart, for on that day his wife was finally at rest; a marriage lasting nearly fifty years, but to live forever in his heart. This was the beginning of the rest of his normality. Getting up to an empty house, going to the café, having his spot of tea, and returning home to write a memoir in dedication to her and his undying love he bestowed to her every day. This lifestyle became a simple way to go about existence for the rest of his life: no surprises, no fear, no pain, and no heartache. Dennis relived the life-changing day in his head as the rustling of dust clouds passed on the ground of the basement like leaves, and the crisp, dense air calmly circulated around him. Dennis opened his eyes as a tear escaped them. He was determined to get out of his dreadful situation and get home to where he was safe and at peace.

Lifting the table off the floor, Dennis pulled the handcuff off the leg of the table. Knowing that the stupid criminal wasn’t smarter than a decorated veteran, Dennis had his escape plan set. Thinking back to his days of soldiery in Germany, infiltrating some of Hitler’s smaller concentration camps, most of which were burnt down by the time of their arrival. The images had stuck with Dennis for all these years, but they were as fresh as yesterday. Imagining the feeling of the few Jews who survived the burnings of the concentration camps and gathering the courage they must have possessed, Dennis felt that if he could fight an army of Nazi rule, he was still strong enough to power through four young men in coats and boots and escape his hostage predicament.

He dug through the bag, hoping he would find something he could use to pick the locks off the armoire. Feeling around the pile of pounds, he felt a bit of cold metal and pulled out a small pistol one of the robbers had left in the duffle bag. Dennis took a deep breath; he hadn’t held a gun since the 1970s when he used to go pheasant hunting. Slowly tiptoeing up the stairs, trying to keep the creaking to a minimum, Dennis reached a safe distance between him and the door and blasted multiple shots into the door where the locks resided. He kicked the door with the little strength his old war-worn body managed to stir up. Knocking the door open, Dennis heard the footsteps of the criminals approach him with a quickening pace.

The first man to appear was the scruffy, black-bearded man who kicked Dennis upstairs. A quick two shots out of Dennis’s pistol and the pool of blood gushed out of the man. As his black coat became damp, he fell to the floor in a huge thump of dead weight. The blonde man came running and another group of bullets popped out of the handheld pistol. Blood splattered, popped, and oozed onto the dry floor, soaking it up. Dennis waited as he listened for the last two guys. A small murmur of two voices around the corner led Dennis to prepare himself for his next encounter. A bullet bounced off the wall as one of the perpetrators fired around the corner towards Dennis. Shooting repeatedly, Dennis eventually shot both of them, but not before getting a bullet in his leg by one of the two assailants. The men, in blood-soaked black garb, laid baring no movement. Dennis limped to one of the dead robbers and grabbed their cell phone.

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The headstones laid perfectly in unified rows, some had flowers next to them, and some had nothing, but next to Marcy’s gravestone sat an old man on a bench. With watery eyes, he sat still looking at the ground, which below held his wife with the hands of God. His small typewriter sat upon his lap and he typed the memories he held with her. The love letters they wrote, the events he experienced in the line of duty, and the experiences here at home waiting for his return all were relived through his memory and put onto paper. His life, he knew, was closing, but not too soon. He sipped his cup of tea and put his typewriter and paper back in the leather case. He finished his tea, collected his things, and headed home only to do the same thing tomorrow.