

SLAUGHTERED KALE

by Greg Smith

Autumn, 1979. There are, in New York City, maybe two dozen of these and I'm thinking, *they're all bent*. This one, on Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village, is the third I've worked third since relocating from Ohio. It's like all the others, wheatgrass and alfalfa in the front, herbal remedies on the side, a baked goods display and juicing station by checkout, and a locked room/office behind the pantry. The owner, Joey, likes me; I know my way around his stock.

After two months, and no excitement, I make up my mind to quit. That very night after locking up, two men manhandle me into the back of their car. They flash badges, NYPD, but I'm taking their word they're the law. Maybe they're after the day's receipts in the bank drop pouch. We ride south and park in a desolate industrial area. I wrench the door handle but it stays locked.

Both men turn to face me. I offer up the money bag. The driver takes it, unzips it, re-zips it, and tosses it back. Maybe they are cops. That'd be good. Easier to work with than hardcore thugs.

The driver croaks, "That store. What do you do there?"

I went for righteousness. "You have no right..."

“Shut up! Nobody gives a shit they find you dead here.”

Quivering, I recite my duties: “I run the juicer, make tea, sell bran muffins, do check out.”

“What about that back room?”

“The office? It’s locked. Only Joey goes there.”

The other one speaks. His voice is gentle. “What does Joey do back there?”

“Like what store owners do, I guess. He has meetings sometimes. With his partners, he says.”

“How often does he have these meetings?”

“Dunno. I’m not there all the time.”

“What do you think?”

Have to keep these guys going. “Three or four times a week.”

“Regular?”

I shrug and Croaker leans into the back seat. “You’re our guy on the inside. We need a sketch of the layout, and a schedule for these meetings.”

I protest to make it look good. “No way, I’m quitting tomorrow.”

“No, you’re not.” He reaches out a big hand, grabbed a fistful of my jacket, and yanks me forward. Gentle extracts my wallet.

“Robert Kellogg, 123 Cyprus Avenue Cincinnati. Robert, there are some very illegal things going on at your workplace; we expect cooperation.”

“Oh, God.”

Gentle turns to Croaker, “We can reach out to Cincinnati?”

Croaker says, “I got a friend on the force. He’ll find who you left behind.”

I retrieve my wallet, then lay it on them. “What’s in it for me?”

Give the guys credit; they time it perfectly. The fourth Tuesday later I tip them to a meeting,. They enter Joey’s Health Foods and Herbal Remedies, scarves over their faces and shotguns at the ready, just as Joey greets one of his partners and approaches his office, key in hand. Croaker

explodes the kale display with a load of shot to scare the shit out of everyone; shredded green leaves fly all over. Then he crowds the half-dozen customers into a corner by the tofu. Gentle rounds up me, Joey, and his partner, forcing us into the office. There, on a raised counter, is a plastic-wrapped brick of cocaine and a big pile of bundled cash. With the shotgun muzzle in my ear I load the drugs and money into Gentle's bag, praying the cop won't think the best way to tie up a loose end is to blow my brains out.

Later, back in their car, after tossing me my twenty percent of the cash and a taste of the coke, a smiling Croaker asks for my plans. I reply with .38 slugs into his head and Gentle's. Their gore blankets the windshield. I toss them back their coke to tie up the loose end and say since the health food stores in New York City work just like the ones in Cincinnati, I'll try LA's for winter.