

THE CITY IS FULL OF BODIES

by

Greg Smith

New York City, 1972. The pool was rich. I had a box. My partner Jimmy did too. I needed the money; he didn't. By mid-October the count was one thousand, eight hundred and ninety-five. *It could happen.*

I put the thought out of my head and answered the phone. Stu Magilla was calling in for a meeting. Partner Jimmy and I took the twenty-block run north to Germantown. At a fake hofbrau called *The Rhineland* on 88th and 2nd Avenue we saw him. He was a hulking goon with a long rap sheet.

“Kiterring’s back,” he said.

A gasket blew in my head. Memories exploded in Technicolor. Adrenaline gorged my veins.

“He’s at 402 East 91st. It’s a flop. Two per room. Name of Mueller.”

Magilla held out a big hand. I stuffed it with a crumbled bill. Then I burst out into the cool fall air. Jimmy caught my arm.

“There’s nothing on him.”

I pulled loose and started walking east. My partner got in front of me.

“He’ll fuck up and we’ll be there.”

I pulled away; he grabbed me with vise-grip hands.

“We got right cases to work.”

Kittering was a free man. No charges, no warrants. He was all right as far as the law saw.

“We said, ‘no moonlighting.’”

Since Frank Serpico had squawked in front of live TV cameras we'd walked the line. We were truer than blue. We worked overtime for no pay and made three felony arrests in just six weeks. "Righteous," is what Deputy Chief Devlin wrote in his letter of commendation. We'd become good cops. I relented.

And the bodies kept coming. The City of New York was forced to rent refrigeration in New Jersey. By month's end the number was one thousand, nine hundred and eighty-eight. I had hope and baby needed new shoes. *Baby* is what I called my bookie when he was hounding for collection.

But Killer Kittering walking the streets nagged my conscience. Two women were dead because I fucked up. Before my shift, after my shift, whenever I could get away from Max, I minded Kittering/Mueller's flop, a three-story brownstone that had seen better days. Its facade was filthy, soft stone steps to the first-floor entry were crumbled, and garbage overflowed the row of trash cans behind a bent iron fence.

Through the vertical windows on the side of the front door I noted a fat man seated at a card table. He chewed cigars and worked racing forms. He was always there and he never looked up as residents came and went. They were motley, down-and-out drifters and rummies. Some hard time cons for sure. I saw Kittering twice and made sure he didn't see me. He projected softness; I knew better.

Finally, a strangulation was found in Central Park, and Joe 'the Schmoe' Bandolini popped out of the Gowanus Canal. They were one thousand, ninety-eight and ninety-nine. Every man at the five-five talked it up. Tomorrow was my box. I looked good. But there'd been six days in 1972 with nothing.

At midnight, under a big, low autumn moon, wearing a tattered long coat, a fedora two sizes too large, and gloves, I walked up the steps to the flophouse. The door resisted. I put my shoulder to it and a cheap lock popped.

The fat man at the card table woke with a snort. I put my finger to my lips, "Shh." He laid back passive. The registry told me Kittering/Mueller was in 106. It figured first floor, rear. I crept along with softly in the gloom. 104..105. No-number had to be 106.

The door tested unlocked. I pulled out the throwaway Luger and entered the room. Lit by reflected moonlight were two beds, each holding a man. I felt a switch by the door and pointed the gun midway between the sleepers. The light glared on. Kittering was on the right on his side. He twisted suddenly and sat upright, pointing his .38. I fired twice and blew his brains all over the place.

Morning, I logged into the precinct. The desk sergeant handed me the incidents summary. Kittering was reported dead at 12:12. But at 11:56 night before, a hooker named Emerald had been sliced outside the Lincoln Tunnel. She was murder victim number two thousand. I missed the jackpot by that much.