

The Slippery and the Sinister

By Hasan Abdul

Opening Passage

The frog breeder crawled into the store to eliminate the competition. With a stiff frown on his face, and reddish eyes that looked at an ungrateful world around him, he slammed the counter desk with his fist, causing the till machine to shake and rattle with the impact.

‘Steady, steady,’ said the vendor.

‘I want to know why I’m not getting a good price for the frogs.’

‘Hey look mister,’ the vendor raised both hands into the air. ‘These are frogs you are breeding and trying to sell, not some kind of rare kittens or puppies.’

‘I don’t care. I spend so much time trying to sell these frogs. I work hard to breed them in a legal and ethical fashion.’

‘I’m not questioning that.’

‘Then why don’t they sell quickly?’

‘I don’t know why they are not selling good and fast,’ replied the vendor, narrowing his eyes and shouting. ‘Don’t take it out on me, okay.’

‘This is hopeless.’

‘Well then try selling some peacocks or something’ the vendor continued shouting.

‘I’ll complain to the better business bureau.’

‘You don’t stand a hell of a chance. By the way, you act again like you’re doing, and I’ll call the police.’

The frog breeder headed for the door, and within two feet of the exit, he turned around.

‘Hey look, I’m really sorry.’ His voice was now hoarse and he coughed a little.

‘That’s better. I thought for a moment you were becoming like Mr. Capone.’

‘No its not like that. By the way who is this Mr. Capone?’

‘Oh just some nasty character. Lives in Africa, was born here though.’

‘I see.’

‘Anyway. I’m busy. See you tomorrow if I do, and don’t get so worked up or else I’ll never see you again, is that clear?’

Mr. Jacks the frog breeder left quietly and his head was drooping all the way to his house near the Waterfront in Boston, Massachusetts.

Passage 1

Samuel drank his coffee out of a china mug and looked over an old newspaper as he did so. On one of the inner pages, he saw a photograph of the serial gangster famously known as Al Capone. The photograph showed the notorious gangster being arrested by the police, and taken into a car to jail.

‘Thank God it’s not the same person’ thought Samuel as he put the old newspaper away.

The silver wall clock in his geometrically patterned wallpapered bedrooms struck the hour of eleven at night. He got up from his wooden study table and changing into his bedclothes fell asleep as soon as he got into bed.

Samuel got up late the next morning. The sound of the frogs in his back shed was not enough to arouse him from his state of half consciousness, during which he kept thinking

of the name Capone. At last at nine in the morning when the milkman came, and rang his bell, he dragged himself out of bed and quickly opened the door to pay the milkman some money from a tin on the fireplace in the front room.

When the milkman had gone he looked into the biscuit tin that served as a money box. It was completely empty. Samuel's heart sank and he felt a lump of sadness in his throat. 'This can't go on.' he thought, 'I need to jumpstart the business.'

He got into his outdoor clothes of sand colored denim chinos and a red checkered shirt and headed for the same vendor he went to the day before.

On reaching the vendor's shop after a sweaty and tiring walk in the Boston summer, he opened the door to hear an argument between a customer and the shopkeeper.

'It's a fake' said the shopkeeper. 'This ivory tusk is an absolute fake.'

'I tell you its genuine.'

'Its fake.'

'Mr. Capone I presume,' said Samuel as he got close the two men.

'You mean me?' said the man in a Panama hat and a sand colored suit with leather black shoes.

'Yes. Oh there is no need to look surprised. This gentleman here told me about you.'

'Oh really?' replied Mr. Capone, looking suspiciously at both men.

'Only compliments I assure you.'

'I see. How can I help you?'

'I'm looking for a market for the frogs I sell.'

‘Oh,’ Mr. Capone replied, smiling down at him, ‘at what price?’

‘A house where I can live permanently.’

‘You demand a high price,’ was the reply, and Mr. Capone burst into laughter.

‘I’d rather you wouldn’t mock me.’

‘I’m sorry. I do believe you sound very upset.’

‘I suppose I am annoyed, but not upset. Well, looks as though I will have to try my luck somewhere else.’

‘Are you sure there is no way I can help?’

‘You don’t sound very helpful.’

Mr. Capone drew a deep breath and thought for a few seconds, while looking directly at Mr. Samuels.

‘Am I offending you?’

‘No. No. I just wondered if you have ever thought of emigrating.’

‘I’ve had enough. Goodbye.’

Samuel walked out of the store, with a cough and a face that was reddened. He closed the shop door firmly as if to lock the storekeeper and his customer in. He then walked home with a scowl on his face and eyes that were moist all the way home.

He returned home and that night he slept early. The next morning he was woken up by a telephone call from the shop owner.

‘Say Samuel, you’ve got an offer from this Mr. Capone.’

‘Tell him I’m not interested.’

‘He says it’s worth hundreds of thousands in dollars.’

‘He can keep his money.’

‘What shall I say to him?’

‘Just tell him to get lost.’

Passage 2

Samuel had a nightmare that same night. He dreamt that he had accepted the offer from that ivory trader only to find himself being killed brutally by the traders employees who were laughing as they assassinated him with rifles in a mock firing squad. He woke up with a cold sweat on his brow and his eyes were red and moist. In the early morning he went over to the shop at its opening time to find the shop locked and shuttered.

He waited for hours moving around to and fro. When at last he felt hungry with exhaustion he called the shopkeepers mobile number. There was no reply. He asked the passers by but they knew nothing of the shopowner or where he lived.

Samuel spent the whole of that day wondering if he had let down the shopowner in some way or whether the man had taken his place on that offer. He checked the news on the papers and on the radio and television for news about the business he had come to respect so well, but not a word was mentioned.

At last he wondered if he should tell the police or perhaps ask them for news about that shop. He fretted in the knowledge that the police might laugh and say that the business was temporarily closed while the owner was on holiday. At times he thought that the pet shop had gone bust and felt guilty for arguing with the owner.

Then after a weeks torment of deliberation and self criticism, he thought he would visit the airport for a short drink in the airport cafes. He hoped he would then gain some information about the pet shop owner.

Passage 3

Boston Logan airport was bustling with passengers returning home from abroad, their faces haggard and their countenance having the appearance of those who had been forced out of countries they had grown to love. The airport was also busy with passengers leaving in a mood of trepidation and nervous joy, as though they were not sure what would happen to them once they were abroad.

Samuel poured a drink of lukewarm coffee into his throat, and took it in with an air of uncertainty and some worry.

‘Was the coffee okay sir?’ the waitress asked in order to look busy.

‘Absolutely wonderful.’ He replied with a gentle smile.

‘Waiting to see someone arrive?’

‘Well actually, he,’ replied Samuel but was cut short of saying more when he suddenly saw a familiar face rush past. ‘I say buddy,’ he shouted after the man who had just rushed across the café.

‘Sorry, no.’ the shopkeeper replied, his hair dishevelled and his face unshaven, with a heavy stubble.

‘Wait, stop. Hey, don’t you remember me? Where are you going?’

‘Kenya,’ the shopkeeper mumbled aloud and ran for his departure lounge.

‘Oh my God.’ Samuel thought, with a panting breath.

The waitress who had been serving him looked at him and said without emotion: ‘Is everything okay sir?’

‘Oh my God, no. Sorry, I’m talking to myself.’

‘You know that man?’

‘Hey get back to your work, and don’t be so nosy.’ The café manager shouted at the waitress.

Samuel returned home in a mood of doubt and also some consolation. He was glad he had not taken Mr Capone’s offer. But that same night and for many others he was either unable to sleep properly or had nightmares about what might happen to the shop owner.

Passage 4

A week later, Samuel was in the same café, and hoped this time he would encounter the shop keeper arriving home from Kenya. He picked up a copy of a well known newspaper and took some coffee. He was about to finish his drink when he noticed a caption under the world news section.

It read:

An American citizen has been found dead in the game park near the Kenyan capital, Nairobi. The Kenyan police have launched an investigation and are prepared to track down the criminal gang. The deceased was believed to be a shopkeeper based in Boston Massachusetts, USA. He does not leave behind any relatives. A police spokesman said it was a brutal killing....

Samuel fell unconscious with shock, dropping his coffee on his clothes, and falling backwards onto the floor. He was later helped to recover at the local hospital.

On paying the fees for the treatment, Samuel went out and looked for employment. Within a few days he found a job as a café attendant, and decided he would forget about the shopkeeper and that Mr Capone altogether.

Passage 5

Though he tried as best he could to forget both the shopkeeper and the strange man called Mr. Capone, Samuel continued to have nightmares and an ever-present sense of guilt for not being able to save the shopkeeper from his cruel fate.

A few days of anguish were suffered by Samuel though his new job kept him from the verge of insanity.

After a week, by which time he looked haggard, with a hirsute beard and a gloomy expression, the local police chief came to pay him a visit.

On the morning of the police sergeant's arrival, Samuel was only half awake, and he forced himself out of a cold and springy bed, to open the door. His nightclothes needed washing, and he had some tea stains on his nightshirt.

'Who the heck is it?' he said aloud in an exasperated voice, while he opened the front door.

'Sorry to disturb you sir,' replied the sergeant. 'I need to ask you some questions.'

'At this time?'

'Yes. I'm afraid so.'

'Oh alright.'

Samuel hurriedly wore his gown while he let the sergeant seat himself at a dining chair.

'What can I do for you at a time like this officer?'

'Do you know anyone called Mr Capone?'

'No. I was acquainted with one though.'

'Tell me what you know about him.'

‘Seedy character if you ask me. Wears a Panama hat and a summer suit. He has a strange way of talking.’

The sergeant put his helmet on the dinner table. ‘That’s him for sure. He happens to return to Boston for a visit. I am wondering if you can help me get hold of him.’

‘I’ll do what I can.’

The sergeant gave Samuel his mobile number and taking his helmet off the table, and into the armpits, he bid Samuel good luck with his new job.

Passage 6

The winter had lingered on that year in Massachusetts, and Samuel shivered with the cold as he had his lunch at the café at Boston Logan Airport. There were new arrivals, as usual, and he looked at them with a feeling of some pity. They all appeared so haggard and tired after the flight, and some had a scowl on their face.

But one of the arriving passengers caught his attention. He held a box from which a familiar sound came. The man was smartly dressed, and had a snigger on his face.

‘That sounds like the bullfrogs I tamed, and hey that’s Mr Capone.’ Samuel took out his mobile, and dialled the sergeant’s mobile number. Then suddenly his hand froze and he went stiff.

‘Put that down,’ Mr Capone pulled out his revolver.

In the near distance, an immigration officer shouted. ‘Hey you! Put that thing away.’

Mr Capone began to run to the exit doors, and the airport guards gave chase after him. He seemed quite athletic, and almost made his way to the doors when he suddenly dropped the box he was holding. Within seconds he was drowned in a flood of noises of bullfrogs, and though he ran as fast as he could he slipped over some and fell unconscious on the airport ground.

The airport guards cleared the area with great difficulty and could be heard shouting over the sounds of the bullfrogs while they arrested Mr Capone and put him on a stretcher.

They took him to a prison hospital, and then asked Samuel, 'You know that guy?'

'Well, only slightly.'

'What does he do?'

'He is usually a ivory game hunter.'

'We would like you to help us give evidence in court as to what he does, and anything else you are aware of.'

Mr Capone did not survive the shock of the fall on the ground, let alone his injuries. The bullfrogs were later returned to the animal sanctuary. Samuel vowed he would never rear bullfrogs again.

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