

## Mr. Ramugossy Is Dead

“Mr. Ramugossy’s dead!” All of the store owners were buzzing about it. Dead was one thing, but the talk around town was Ramugossy was murdered! Some smiled and whistled under their breath, happy and relieved he was gone. Plenty others wondered if that niggling back rent problem would go away now.

Armand Ramugossy, a parsimonious man, came to America from some indeterminate Eastern European country. Nobody had ever heard such a strange name or as odd an accent, but everybody knew he was Jewish. He was not a kind man. He didn’t care about anybody’s kids or families. He kept to himself, barely greeting people.

He seemed to be friends with Bill Tate who sold T-shirts and trinkets from his shop on the busy boardwalk. Story goes that Bill got over-extended and borrowed real money from Ramugossy and was having trouble paying it back. This death might be a blessing in disguise for Bill and many others. Needless to say, nobody shed a tear.

The Ramugossy family moved to Wildwood, New Jersey after the war. There was potential in this shore town, so Ramugossy started buying up property. The locals eagerly sold their homes by the beach and retreated to their family farms just to the northwest, or stayed and rented back their houses. They took their profits, bought soft custard machines, pizza ovens, or an inventory of beach paraphernalia and rented a store on the boardwalk. Seemed like Ramugossy, their landlord, was giving them the American Dream, except the storekeepers were always playing catch up on the rent because of the overrides the leases demanded if they did well

Yes, he was dead but life went on in this seashore town. The vacationers in from Philadelphia crammed umbrella to umbrella, blanket to towel on every inch of the deep beach. Lifeguards hawkishly watched the swimmers, wave surfers, and toddlers splashing at tide's edge. Transistor radios blasted competing tunes from the Beatles, *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, rocking loudly over Frank Sinatra's, *Come Blow Your Horn*, and the gyrating Elvis hit, *Viva Las Vegas*. Smells of Coppertone floated on the air, and the newspaper boy shouted out, "Elizabeth Taylor Marries Richard Burton! Read all about it!" This idyllic life passed just as it always had, except today, he was gone. And now, the latest gossip swept like a sandstorm, Mr. Ramugossy didn't just die- he was murdered. And Bill's two mischievous brats, Tommy and Jake, found him.

The first time the brothers met Mr. Ramugossy he was schooling their father. "Listen Bill, I'm not saying I know everything, but what I know, I know."

"I don't think it's a good idea," Bill said. "We only get three months to make our nut, that's it. I have to make my prices higher. My T-shirts are cheaper than everybody's already. I'm leaving money on the table."

"In my experience, a fast nickel is better than a slow dime," Ramugossy said. Bill was having trouble making his rent so he agreed and lowered his prices even more praying for all those fast nickels. He put up big posters that said, 'Sale Everything Must Go!' Customers flocked to his store. He should have been happy, but he knew his low prices were stealing sales from the other stores on the block and he felt bad.

Ramugossy was a shrewd businessman and everybody assumed, correctly, that he had a hand in it.

Tommy and Jake were in the store that day and pulled up stools listening closely to the conversation. They personalized what the old man said to mean: If they kept their petty thievery small, they could skate under the noses of the shop owners and steal lots more stash capturing their own fast nickels. It spelled open season for the twelve and thirteen-year-old pre-juvenile delinquents. And they smirked. Their uncut, sun-bleached hair hung over their eyes hiding their true intentions: Have fun, take what they wanted, and do as they pleased. They had heard enough so they ran outside to pull wings off green flies and catch a smoke in their spot under the boardwalk.

Doesn't Mr. Ramugossy look like a runt next to Dad?" Tommy asked, exhaling smoke in little rings. "His face is almost as yellow as his teeth ." The man did look slight, sickly-insignificant next to their brawny, open-faced dad. However, there was a piece of steel about him that left them fearful and guarded.

The next time the boys met him, he caught them at their mischief. While walking the boardwalk going to church one Sunday morning in June, Tommy suggested they find out what's in those grab-bags. Slyly, skulking around Mary Cross Gifts and Novelties, they each slipped two twenty-five-cent grab-bags down their pants. They left the store, crossed over to the benches on the beachside of the boardwalk and spilled out their bounty.

"Damn, this is junk," Tommy told his younger brother. "Who needs these Chinese finger stickers? The handcuffs are stupid, they don't even close." Jake looked dejected. He thought they should have taken some candy or gum, too. Church, if they went, lasted forever and he was already hungry.

Both of their heads swiveled hard as Mr. Ramugossy pinched tightly on the backs of their necks. Craning up, the boys wondered how that little man with the faded looking, green tattooed numbers on his wrist could be so fierce. "Pack up those bags exactly as they were and then you'll put them back," Mr. Ramugossy ordered. "First, apologize to Mrs. Cross, then we'll go tell your father." Instead, Tommy and Jake threw the junk down and sped away, with Tommy yelling for anyone to hear, "You're going to die, you stupid old man."

Mr. Ramugossy owned most of the buildings on the boardwalk and the pier with the amusement park. He charged a fair rent, what the market could bear, yet several businesses didn't do well and got behind. A small grace period was given, but the rent had to be paid, even before buying food for the family. Many stores changed ownership early in the season. The stock was confiscated to pay back rent. Those shopkeepers slinked away angry and disillusioned. They lost everything to a man who knew what it meant to lose it all, he'd been in a concentration camp, for goodness sake. But he still took all that was owed without compunction or remorse. If any debt remained, they were pulled into small claims court to lose a car or other essential possession to square the outstanding monies due.

The amusement pier had potential to make fortunes. The revelers were out every night. Kids cried and shrieked in excitement and exhaustion. The lines to buy tickets snaked around the huts which were spaced out, one in the front of the pier and one in the back. Mr. Ramugossy suggested this. He explained his philosophy to anybody with half an ear to listen.

“By only having two ticket huts with long lines, the parents with whining kids will buy two books so they don’t have to stand in line for the tickets again. And best of all, they still run out and reload at the back hut.”

The old man was right. Ridership was up. The owners benefited, but so did Ramugossy. He owned the huts, printed the ticket books and took a small percentage on every ticket book sold.

This system worked well, especially for the operators at the far end of the pier, the Szabo family, two generations of Eastern European Gypsies. They owned the Tilted Cups ride and the Merry-Go-Round. They negotiated a lease with Mr. Ramugossy to take over The WildCat, the roller coaster that ran on metal tracks swinging perilously out over the ocean. To monopolize their end, they built The House of Horrors. They were set up right next to the ticket hut, tapping a captured audience going from ride to ride.

Even though business was solid between the two families, Fred Szabo Sr. and Ramugossy never spoke. The relationship was fraught with an undercurrent of unarticulated issues. Freddie Szabo Jr. negotiated all of the deals because his father wouldn’t even look at the man, his contempt so ingrained. Freddie never understood the problem. “Look Poppi, he’s not big and strong like you are. He’s a weak old man with no joy in his soul. You don’t need to hate him. Life hates him.”

For his part, Ramugossy was taken aback each time he came across Mr. Szabo. He couldn’t understand the intense, unexplained animosity. Both men had lived long enough to understand hate, but the old Gypsy’s seemed to be directed right at him.

Tommy and Jake threw bang snaps at the crowds' feet outside of the Horror House, but had no significant problems with the Szabos. They weren't really bad kids. They stayed out later than curfew, stole cigarettes and toys, and often played pranks on unsuspecting vacationers.

That evening in late June, when they found Mr. Ramugossy, they had dragged a lifeguard stand right up to the boardwalk. They had been working on their own version of a *Candid Camera* stunt and were ready to execute it. Tommy stood on the tall lifeguard stand, eye level with the boardwalk. Under cover of darkness, he held the end of a long thin string. On the boardwalk, Jake set the trap. He looped the string through the fold of his father's wallet and let a purloined five-dollar bill stick out. The throngs on the boardwalk passed by unseeing until an enterprising man reached down to grab the wallet and claim his prize. At that second, Tommy yanked the string and the wallet flew out of reach. As the boardwalk was loaded with flip-flop, T-shirt clad hordes, the man thought someone had kicked it, so he tried again. Tommy, one more time, pulled on the string and laughed derisively. The duped man saw the trick and connected it to the kid on the stand. "Hey, you think you're funny dontcha," he hollered. "You won't think it's so funny when I catch ya."

The cop across the way, idly leaning against the public bathroom building, could barely tell what happened. He saw a commotion and heard a man yelling. He blew his whistle and took off to stop the angry man about to take chase after a couple of kids. He easily intercepted the man who could hardly run with that beer belly in the way and told him, "You, wait right here." The cop jumped over the rail and lowered himself onto the

lifeguard stand, now abandoned by Tommy, clambered down and sped off after him.

Jake jumped down to the beach and ran to catch up with his brother at their hiding spot in the deep recesses of the dark world under the boardwalk. They ran like chased cats.

Their speed bode well for them, they had lost that stupid policeman.

Tommy fell first. Jake stumbled on top of him. The coppery smell of blood hit them right away. They both jumped up, confused and shocked. Shakily, Jake lit a match and saw Mr. Ramugossy's eyes staring, lifeless. He had a bloody hole in his chest. Tommy saw the gun first, not two feet away and picked it up. "He looks dead. I bet this is the gun that killed him."

Jake looked pale and clammy. He was scared. "Put it down, Tommy. Let's go." Tommy held the heavy gun practicing his quick draw as if seeing dead people was an everyday event. The gun was still in his hands when the cop found them moments later, aimed his flashlight, surveyed the scene, and called for backup. Tommy and Jake were in it up to their eyeballs. Those boys would surely get the beating they deserved for being under the boardwalk at the wrong place and the wrong time. Their very presence shone a light on their father putting him under suspicion.

Over the next few days, the cops interviewed countless potential murderers. Ramugossy's beef with current and previous renters provided a steady stream of possible suspects, including the brothers who lead them to the body and incidentally, the one who had been caught holding the gun.

The unsolved killing remained on everybody's lips for the rest of the summer. Mr. Ramugossy's son, Arnie, showed up after the Fourth of July and half heartedly took

over his father's business. His easy manner allowed the renters to believe that all the rules had changed in their favor. Mr. Ramugossy had often bragged that he kept his records in his head. Maybe the shopkeepers would catch a break. Instead, without Mr. Ramugossy's stewardship, the properties began to decline, the scrubby lawns grew into reedy lots, light bulbs and rotting sections of the boardwalk weren't replaced, and come to find out, the debts had been written down in ledgers and were woefully up to date.

Quietly, over the next two months, the Szabos bought a substantial share of Ramugossy's real estate from Arnie and began planning a better amusement park, one that would be without rival on the Jersey shore.

As the summer wore on, Mr. Szabo's health declined. This once strong man became stooped over. He was jumpy and irritable with his family, and his son Freddie feared his encroaching senility would finish his mind. Each morning he positioned his weakened father on a bench at the end of the pier looking out upon the ocean. The summer sun began to wane but the days were still warm. Freddie rolled up his father's sleeves, saw the dull, little green numbers and shivered anew. His father had gone through hell in Ravensbrück, surviving the intended extermination of all of the Gypsies and Jews.

In one of his moments of total clarity, Mr. Szabo caught his son's arm. "Freddie, I knew that man in hell. He worked for them so they wouldn't kill him. He took food from your mother's mouth and would have done worse, if they said so. He was their dog choosing Gypsies to go to their deaths."

"What are you saying Poppi? Who are you talking about?"



Mr. Szabo only repeated,

“I knew that man in hell. He worked for them so they wouldn’t kill him. So, I did.”