

Cosmos DeSoto
and the Case of the Giant Steel TEETH

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New Territory

Cosmos DeSoto lay still as a corpse. A slight smile creased his otherwise placid expression. His crossed arms rested on his chest. His eyes were closed. He was in the rope hammock that sagged between the old gnarled trees that dropped sticky pods in late autumn. The hammock was tattered and had unraveled into a jungle of booby traps. Any unplanned movement would result in part of his body slipping through one of its many holes, which in turn would interrupt his present investigation. That's what Cosmos did in his spare time. He imagined himself a private detective who ran his imagined business out of an imagined office in an imagined city by a foggy bay. Where else would he operate except in his imagination? What did the real world need with a twelve-year old gumshoe who could track down missing persons,

recover stolen property, and generally solve mysteries that left others baffled? Nothing, that's what. But in the world he'd created for himself, the services of Cosmos DeSoto, private detective, were much in demand.

In the real world, Cosmos had read many of the great old detective stories. He'd seen the old black and white private eye movies that you could get free from the library. His hero was Benny Lemon, a shamus who had appeared in a series of six books. More had been planned, but the writer, Gomez Moxley, disappeared under questionable circumstances, never to be heard from again. Cosmos suspected foul play. Someday, when he actually could, he intended on looking into the matter. He'd read the Benny Lemon series a number of times.

Benny Lemon and the detective Cosmos had conjured himself up to be had a lot in common. They were both loners. They were fearless. They took their lumps without complaint. They stayed true to their cause. Benny was cool under pressure, fast on his feet, and sharp between the ears. So was Cosmos, who was well into his present case.

He'd been hired to find a missing heiress, the beautiful daughter of a wealthy business tycoon. Through a series of international connections, he'd tracked her to Hong Kong. He'd caught a flight in San Francisco and was now half way across the Pacific Ocean.

"Cosmos!"

His mother was calling. It was time to get going. He put a mental marker in his daydream. An old pal would be waiting for him when he landed in Hong Kong to help him rescue the heiress. He'd pick up the investigation there.

He shook himself free of his inner world, brushed his floppy brown hair away from his dark brown eyes, blinked, focused, then squinted at the afternoon sun. He stretched carefully, then slowly swung himself to the ground. He was determined to make the hammock last. He looked at his untied sneaker laces, thought to tie them, then forgot.

"Where are you when you disappear like that?" his mother asked when he came into the kitchen. Viva DeSoto was five feet tall, her son's height, with short blonde hair. She was a good looking woman who'd surrounded herself with an aura of toughness.

"I was in the hammock," he said.

"I could see you in the hammock," she said. "Where were you in your head?"

He grinned noncommittally.

She sighed. "Tie your laces," she said.

He did.

The stove was filled with pots that bubbled and steamed. Three large bowls were filled with salads. A three-tiered, vanilla-iced cake with raspberry filling was in the refrigerator. Viva was in the catering business.

She also worked the lunch shift cooking at Tillie’s Diner four days a week.

“We’re running late,” she said. She was putting on a buffet dinner for forty-five in celebration of the Hooperbart’s sixtieth wedding anniversary.

Cosmos helped his mother box the cake. He helped her pack the hot dishes and salads. Together they loaded the truck, a former package delivery vehicle Viva had purchased and converted into a traveling mini-kitchen with a serving window. She’d borrowed seventeen-thousand, five-hundred dollars from the bank to do it. The truck was white, with VIVA painted in bright red on the doors.

Inside were shelves and cabinets for storing and transporting food and supplies. There was a small hot table for soup, a half-sized grill, a refrigerator, an espresso maker, two large coffee pots, a sandwich making board, and the other miscellaneous implements required of the trade.

“It’s a new business,” she’d announced to Cosmos when the conversion was finished. “We’ll cater events. We’ll bring food to construction sites and high school football games. We’re going to be okay.”

But they weren’t okay, because it turned out that it didn’t matter how good the food produced in that small mobile kitchen was. The town of Jasper, Washington, population 3,012, couldn’t provide enough business for Viva to keep up with the loan payments. She’d missed too

many and the bank was giving her sixty days to make good or they'd repossess the truck and she'd lose everything she'd worked for.

Pulling away from their square box of a house with its drooping front porch and five small rooms, the truck kicked up swirls of dust and gravel. Cosmos and his mother lived two and a quarter miles outside town. Cosmos' father had spent their last dollar buying a hundred acres of scrub land along this unpaved stretch of road with no name. The house came with it. Their address was a rural free delivery number.

"Jasper will expand out here," his father had said. "We'll make a fortune when it does."

That was two years ago. Jasper had declined in population since then, though nobody bothered to change the number on the welcome sign. His father was among the departed. His mother kept saying it might be worth something someday, but she wasn't holding her breath.

"I got a call this morning," she said. "A job, if we want it."

"Why wouldn't we want it?" he asked.

"It involves going away for a while, working with people we don't know."

"Away where?"

"Horse Neck, Oregon."

"Where's that?"

"On the coast."

Summer vacation had just begun and Cosmos had planned on spending a good part of it in the hammock running his private detective agency. When he wasn't helping his mother.

"How long?"

"Four weeks."

"Doing what?"

"Working on a movie."

"What movie?" Cosmos was astonished. "We don't know anything about movies."

"It's not about movies," she said, "it's about food. They need a last minute replacement and somebody gave them my name. They're in a bind. It's low budget. There's not a lot of money."

"Is it enough to pay the bank?"

"It is if we're smart about it," she said. "We'd provide what's called Craft Services. That's the food the crew eats in between meals. Soup. Sandwiches. Coffee. Doughnuts. Along those lines. It includes keeping the area around where they're filming picked up and neat."

"Where would we live?" Cosmos asked.

"At the hotel with the rest of the crew."

"What would I do?"

"You'd be my general all purpose assistant," she said. "You'd help me in the truck and with the picking up, and you'd make deliveries. Mr. Winkle, he's the producer, said that certain people get special attention. You'd bring them what they order. It's hard work, Cosmos. Six long

days a week. I have to give them my answer tonight. I want you to know what we'd be getting into if we do it."

"We'd be selling food," Cosmos said.

"Giving it away," she said.

"Giving it away? How can we make any money giving it away? That's not a job."

"We get a set amount of money for the four weeks," she said. "We buy what we need out of that. What's left over is our profit. The crew gets it free because it makes them happy. Mr. Winkle said a happy crew works harder. It's a service. If we don't do it right, we won't have gas money to get home."

"What if the crew eats too much?"

"Mr. Winkle gave me a good idea of how much that would be," she said. "It's a gamble."

"What have we got to lose?" he asked. "We should do it." More than anything Cosmos wanted his mother to succeed. He wanted her to be happy again. As for his private detective agency, he figured he could run that wherever they were.

"I think so too," his mother said.

Getting it Together

While he consumed his breakfast of peanut butter on toast and a glass of milk, Cosmos was approaching the Hong Kong airport in pursuit of the missing heiress. He could see the city below. The harbor was filled with ships. His plane landed. His old pal met him and eased the way through customs and immigration, then drove him to one of the narrowest, darkest, most dangerous streets in Kowloon.

“Cosmos!”

He shifted gears and focused on his mother. “Wash up,” she said, “you’re coming to work with me.”

An hour later he was sitting at the counter of Tillie’s Diner watching and learning as his mother cooked burgers, hot dogs, melted cheese sandwiches, eggs, bacon,

sausages, hash browns, fries, and onion rings. She explained how long to keep things on one side before turning them, and when to take things off, depending on how customers wanted them.

“You have well-done, medium, medium-rare, and rare,” she said. “You can scramble eggs hard or soft. You can fry them sunny side up or over easy. Pay attention.”

He paid attention, for a while, then slipped off to Hong Kong.

He'd located the heiress. He had to rescue her, then get her out of Hong Kong before her family's enemies discovered she was gone. He'd avoid a fight if he could. That was Benny Lemon's way, and it was his. He climbed the fire escape, which was perilously close to coming loose from its moorings. He made his way slowly, carefully along the narrow ledge, fourteen stories above the street.

“Cosmos.”

Once again the call of reality.

“Keep your grill clean,” his mother said. Keep your kitchen clean.”

That night they looked up Horse Neck and discovered it was a tiny bit of land that curved out into the Pacific.

“It looks like a horse's neck,” Cosmos said.

“It's a long drive,” his mother said.

They cleaned the house so they wouldn't come back to it dirty. Cosmos pointed out that it would be dirty anyway.

"Dirt grows," he said.

Viva laughed.

"It's a known fact," he said.

They drove into town, checked the truck's tires, belts, batteries, and various fluids, then filled the tank with gas. They packed before going to bed that night.

Laying in the dark, Cosmos wondered what working on a movie would be like. It would be exotic, he thought. Some sort of magic. Then he was in Hong Kong again.

He snuck up behind the enormous man guarding the heiress. He knocked the man unconscious with a single, swift blow without making a sound. He signaled the heiress to be quiet and untied her. He helped her out the window and along the narrow ledge. She looked down, panicked and fell. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. Down the fire escape they hurried. It broke free from the building as they jumped. It crashed to the street as their car sped off for the airport.