

C.A. LaHines

## Cosmos

It wasn't just that he was living in his mother's basement. It wasn't just that he was sixty-nine years old. It wasn't just that his wife had left him, this time permanently, citing foreclosure on their six-bedroom house in Forest Hills and various character disturbances in her 65-page complaint seeking divorce. It wasn't just that his daughter, who grew up entranced by his tales of the courtroom and his personal acquaintanceship with some of the more colorful characters in the annals of Queens petty theft, hung up the phone and refused to let him speak to his grandchildren.

No, it was everything.

He could no longer pick through the Entenmann's donuts, Dr. Milton warned, without inciting his blood sugar. He could no longer counsel divorcées in his basement bedroom/office without inviting the scrutiny of the Queens County District Attorney, who insisted on strict compliance with his order of disbarment. He could no longer hop in his Mercedes (which fetched a mere \$ 8000 in a forfeiture proceeding), drive to La Giaconda Bakery in Corona (wiretapped pursuant to the investigatory authority of Carmine LaBrillo, assistant district attorney), returning home with a bounty of canoli, spumoni and black-and-white cookies.

No. The only bounty now was the one on his head.

Any more senseless sugar intake would spike his insulin. Any more unsolicited advice from his mother, or sister Angelina, about not ignoring conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, about making amends with his daughter, about not turning his basement quarters into a den of smoke, bitterness and gastric turmoil, and he would incite The End himself, if only he had a decent-size stairwell or a large enough rope to circumnavigate his thick neck.

Cosmo steadied himself on the bedpost, lapping at his Mylanta mustache.

"What do you like for breakfast?" shouted his ninety-nine-year-old mother down the stairs.

"Ma, it's 4:30 in the morning."

"I know. I can't sleep. I like to get started."

Cosmo's mother believed in hard-boiled eggs, crisp strips of bacon and whole milk. She believed that goodness was to be found in farina, virtue in anisette, saintliness in the boiled marrow of *osso buco*. On the other hand, corruption was to be found in frozen dinners, vice in Mamma Leone's pizza, and the worst kind of demonology in a bottle of Ragu tomato sauce. Cosmo's mother made him breakfast every day, vacuumed his crumb-infested bed with a Dirt Devil and changed his sheets. She was proud of him, still, in spite of financial setback, divorce, certain misunderstandings concerning client escrow funds—small, censored specks compared to the large, indictment-ridden blot on his character. Angelina thought it best not to reveal to their mother the extent of Cosmo's misconduct, that he had been reprimanded, censured and disbarred, that he owed over \$2 million dollars to his former clients, money that could never be repaid from his Social Security income, that his bi-weekly doctors' visits were actually trips to visit his parole officer.

"Scramble the egg, Ma. Put some milk in it."

"Milk?" his mother scuffled above. "Hard-boiled is better, no?"

Cosmo's mother opened the refrigerator. The contents thereof were decidedly stale and aged. The Arm & Hammer was powerless against the urge to save all food, the relentless bacterial advance, the wanton de- and re-frosting of a ninety-nine-year-old woman.

"Scrambled, Ma. Make sure you pick out the shells."

Cosmo took another swig of Mylanta. His surroundings were beginning to depress him. If it were his own, auctioned-off abode, Cosmo would have installed smoky mirrors, leather furnishings, and a state-of-the-art sound system. Instead he stared at off-white walls, a china cabinet turned dresser, the forever-dwindling log of an electric *faux* fireplace. The nineteen-sixties' bar reeked of a strange form of liqueur, probably *crème de menthe*, and the cantankerous memory of his father. The vintage television set was perennially tuned to Channel 2, the volume set to shatter the sturdiest hearing aid; the blue-tile bathroom, unfortunately windowless, contained the bitter ale of his pent-up aggressions.

He spent many hours in the bathroom, thinking about his life,

the unlucky turns and illegal enterprises, hoping for the Metamucil to kick in. He knew every blue tile. Those he stared down with bulging, heart-thumping strain. Those he inspected in the afterglow of superior roughage. He looked at himself in the scratched-up mirror, at the bags under his eyes and the moles that hung from his face ("skin tags," he had learned, after attempting to pull them off). He rubbed his hand over the glass, hoping to erase something.

He should have been grateful. He had a roof, albeit a leaky one, over his head, homecooked meals, an apartment with its own entrance that in better times might be appreciated for its built-in bar and antique, dust-encrusted furnishings. He still received Social Security, enough for Merits and the telephone bill, the only one his mother made him pay. Instead he sat on the toilet, simpering, thinking of his real estate investments in Kissimmee, Florida.

"If you ate prune, you no spend so long in the bathroom," his mother intoned. "Always you overdo, then system gets clogged."

Cosmo often pushed the limit. In his personal life, he ate ruinously, spent ruinously, and gambled ruinously. In his professional life he worked halfheartedly and billed feverishly, availing himself freely of whatever assets were placed in his trust. The same tendency that inspired lavish and spontaneous purchases, such as the floor-length chinchilla he had purchased for his ex-wife Rita, now inspired reprimand and disgust. The ingenuity that once garnered praise from grateful clients, now caused him to forge fraudulent mortgages on his mother's house, hoping to stave off some of his more insistent creditors.

One such creditor had called the night before. Cosmo pretended not to hear the fact that he was foreclosing and hung up the rotary phone. His legal training enabled him to elude creditors, tax collectors and disgruntled clients, often in a deluge of legalese and pure bullshit. Cosmo stated that he held an equitable mortgage on his mother's property, a status giving him an equal, though seemingly unrecognized, property right; if only said creditor waited a few more weeks, Cosmo protested, he would record his lien, and the entire misunderstanding would be cleared up. Foreclosure would only precipitate a needless proceeding to uncloud

the title, wasting everyone's time and energy, especially that of a ninety-nine-year-old woman, who ought to be at home tending to her china-bone hips and withered muscles.

Who also ought to be at home tending to her depressed and unhealthy son, serving him three meals per day and vacuuming under his crumb-infested sheets with a Dirt Devil, facts Cosmo omitted.

"Cosmo, egg is ready!" Cosmo's mother shouted once more into the dark stairwell. "You want me to come down there?"

"No, Ma. I'll manage," Cosmo said, steadying his vertiginous hand against the laminate paneling. "I'm coming."

Cosmo had suffered from vertigo since the age of seven, when he began cruising around Flushing Bay in Uncle Johnny's motorized raft. Uncle Johnny liked the boy's cunning and dapper Catholic school uniform, introducing him to Uncle Dante, to whom he later became indebted for the funds required to open his first law office, though he soon began returning the favors in the form of suppressed evidence and suspended sentences. Uncle Dante was eventually convicted of fixing races at Belmont and died in Ossining State prison, and Uncle Johnny ended up dead in his raft. Their deaths discharged Cosmo's debts, but not their respective investments in Sea Breeze Condos, Kissimmee, Florida, perhaps inaptly named, given its stifling climate and landlocked location.

"Coming," Cosmo panted, perspirant and heart aflutter.

Cosmo climbed the stairs, one hand over the other on the banister, into the blinding light. The side window, a stained glass version of the Madonna, bore the streaks of haphazard Windex application. He lifted one hand to shield his eyes, leaned heavily into the banister, slid his hand up the rail, fearful of letting go. Each step had an aluminum lip, designed for those who were prone to flop down stairs, his Aunt Grace having been the latest victim of stair-tumbling fatality. Still, it seemed next-to-impossible to lift the arthritic foot, quell the rise of vertigo, shield one's eyes against the whirling robe of the Virgin, all at once. The commotion of his heavy, arthritic limbs alarmed his mother, who pushed her walker to the head of the stairs.

"Cosmo, are you o.k.?"

"Do I look o.k., Ma? Is this someone who looks o.k.?"

Here followed the same early morning competition of ailments, the sciatica versus the bursitis, the arrhythmia versus the arteriosclerosis, the vertigo versus the sense of dislocation produced by the shaving off of years of accumulated calluses and bunions. Sometimes he thought it would be a relief to die like Johnny, one quick bullet, rather than five years of shingles, vertigo, stabbing chest pain, heartburn, rantings, misery, and abject depression. If he could lift his foot far enough off the stair to clear the aluminum lip, he might even consider an end like Aunt Grace's, but she had three flights, and he had only enough stairs to cause a concussion. Instead, he trudged around his mother's rubber-tipped Loco-Moto, and sat down at the breakfast table.

His mother still referred to this table as the "new" breakfast table, though it had been purchased in 1965. To the same fit of renovation were owed the four aqua-padded chairs, the Zenith television set in the cabinet, and a portrait of Jesus' crown of thorns hanging over the stovetop. Cosmo shifted on one such aqua-padded chair, trying to blink away the memory of a stained-glass Virgin that had superimposed itself on a charming diorama of the state of Florida, a rocket for Cape Canaveral and a three-dimensional seagull. Numerous such dioramas hung on the walls of the kitchen, including ones of Naples, Rome, and Solvang, California. Cosmo tried to blink all of them away, but only succeeded in causing a twitching reaction in his tear duct. Before his mother had even placed his hard-boiled egg on the table, in the special egg cup handpainted by Amish artisans in Pennsylvania Dutch country, the length of Cosmo's colon was in rebellion.

"I can't, Ma," Cosmo said, fighting down stomach acid.

"You gotta eat," Cosmo's mother said, beseeching heaven.

"It's got nothing to do with your egg," Cosmo belched, "it's my stomach."

Cosmo's mother implored the Virgin several more times, finally sighing and sitting uncomfortably down on her thrice-broken hip. Cosmo peeled back the shell in silence. Hanging from the walls in his mother's kitchen, nestled in and among the dioramas, were his laminated law school diploma from Jersey City College, since

accredited, his certificate of marriage, autographed by the Pope, and a decorative cup containing the first ground broken at Sea Breeze condos, before Mildred Schwartzbaum fell down a well and sued all of them, exposing several environmental hazards and unorthodox financing arrangements. A lock of his hair, circa 1939, was gummed up in ancient *mucilage* and tacked to the wallpaper. Photographs of his wedding, a lavish affair at Johnny's restaurant on Flushing Bay, showed a headier, slimmer, less emulsified Cosmo, next to a taller, less mercenary and unforgiving wife, eating layers of canoli-filled cake and dancing the tarantella.

"If you love me, you eat hard-boiled egg. Is better for you."

"It's the same egg," Cosmo said, clutching his breastbone. "Scrambled or hard-boiled. Don't blackmail me with love."

In the wake of the disintegration of Sea Breeze Ltd., a Florida limited partnership, Cosmo was especially sensitive to charges of blackmail. His partner, Darrell Conaway (the "Ltd." in "Sea Breeze Ltd.") had bribed the local zoning board for permits to build upon an environmentally suspect ten-acre lot, absconding when several of the more industrious retirees in the Sea Breeze community, browsing the E.P.A. website, uncovered the lot's history as a dumping ground for TCE, DCE and arsenic.

"You no feel good? Eat more egg." His mother thrust her coffee spoon into Cosmo's egg, offering him a bite.

"Food is not the solution," Cosmo said, pushing the spoon away, resting his head upon the jaunty plastic gingham table cloth.

"Eat this, soothes your stomach." Cosmo's mother gripped the spoon more tightly between her arthritic fingers.

"Someone has gotta clean up around here, Ma." Cosmo swiped a line of black dust off the leaf of a plastic plant. "Where is Angelina?"

Despite his mother's bed changing and resourcefulness with the Dirt Devil, the house was not clean. There were corners of the upstairs bathroom that had been forgotten for a quarter century, choking quantities of dust in the shag pilings in the living room. There were filthy knobs on the AM radio, a jungle of thick, dusty plastic plants, creaking rotary phones whose receivers were never wiped. There were Chinamen in lint-filled porcelain robes, bed-pans that had not been cleaned since Aunt Grace's visit in 1985,

crumbling ceilings, and *Maharaja* guest soaps, circa 1965, still sitting in the soap dish in the upstairs bathroom. There were marijuana seeds in the carpet, from his and Rita's headier days.

"Angelina does enough," his mother said.

"This is enough?" Cosmo said, lifting up the plastic gingham table cloth, revealing several syrupy spots.

"Your pressure, Cosmo, your pressure!"

"It's already too late for my pressure," Cosmo said, feeling a sharp pain under his breastbone.

Cosmo's mother pushed the Loco-Moto into the living room and parked at an old cabinet. Here were stored the miniature coliseums and leaning towers of Pisa she had not enough space to display, the Ellis Island plaque commemorating her naturalization, several personal effects of Aunt Grace, including a fox muff and some potentially useful arthritis medication, prescribed in 1978. Here resided the photos of her own lavish City Hall wedding, several bulky Medic-Alert bracelets, belonging to various members of the family, and a yellow corsage from a date Angelina had in 1964, when there was still hope of marriageability. Several minutes of fumbling later she managed to extract a Perugina chocolate gift box, missing only a few items, into whose empty spots she inserted some Hall's Mentholated Cough Drops.

"I have something make you feel better," she shouted.

"Stop. Get back here, Ma. You're too unsteady."

Cosmo's mother stood up, gripped the rubber-tipped handles of the Loco-Moto, tucked the box of Perugina under her trembling chin, and took a deep breath. She attempted, but failed, to clear the shag pile. The Loco-Moto thus ensnared, Cosmo's mother pitched over its rubber-tipped front.

"Ma!" Cosmo shouted.

Unable to rouse her merely by shouting and threatening to have a myocardial infarction, Cosmo stood up and attempted to walk. He felt softness underfoot. Everything was a whirling mess, the plaid curtains blending into the upholstery blending into the photo array of Cosmo at St. Michael's Academy. He fell to the floor and began crawling, eventually finding his mother's dentures, then his mother.

"Cosmo," his mother whimpered, "Call ambulance."

The whole world blurred together, past, future and purple-bruised present. Cosmo crawled to the edge of the shag, pulled himself up with the help of a long length of coiled telephone wire, at the end of which he found a phone. He dialed his sister.

"Angelina!" Cosmo shouted into the telephone, breathless. "Ma fell. Get over here."

"Did you call the ambulance? Call the ambulance, for God's sake."

"You gotta do it, Angelina. I can't handle this." Cosmo hung up the phone, fell exhausted onto the aqua-padded seat.

"Ma," Cosmo shouted in the direction of the living room, "help is coming."

Cosmo found an anti-vertigo pill lurking in his pajama pocket. If the two of them were to die now, a double funeral at McBride & Sons might be compromised by creditors clamoring for more. Any obituary or eulogy in the newspaper, or mention in the minutes of the Ethics Committee of the New York Bar Association, would only incite those to whom he owed large sums of money, jeopardizing the Roman Catholic funeral mass his mother had always wanted. Now that his mother was semi-lucid, however, she might be persuaded of the wisdom of some last-minute estate planning. The proceeds from the house itself, \$500,000 in even a dilapidated condition, would be enough to satisfy the most insistent creditors, leaving only a handful of former clients/crime victims who would not prosecute for a few hundred here or there. He had a reason to live, if only to take a final trip to the Magic Kingdom, to enjoy the sun and some arterially unfit steaks, before taking his last breaths. He could bury his mother without threat of asset seizure, in the blue-beaded dress she had worn at her fiftieth anniversary party; even Rita, should she pry herself from her divorcee's atelier in Chelsea, might attend, bringing the four granddaughters and one grandson he had been prohibited from visiting.

"Hang on," Cosmo said, searching for pen and paper. In the dining room cabinet he tore a blank piece of paper from the scorecard of an ancient game of pinochle. He also found several number two pencils, sharpened by his father with a paring knife. His father, fearing mistakes, had always used a pencil, erasing meticulously. Cosmo, on the other hand, left everywhere the

unerased, accumulated aftermath of a life of mistake and moral penury. He disliked the twitching sensation erasures produced in his nose. He could not, however, find a pen in the dining room cabinet.

"Ma, do you have a pen?" he asked, forgetting himself.

Finally, in a corner of the living room, he espied an ancient check register, propped open by a ballpoint pen. His cataracts were slowly growing and did not yet preclude such moments of brilliant penetration. He staggered around his mother and sat down on the sofa, the sudden crinkling noise of the plastic slipcover reminding him of the empty, crinkling promises of the economy pack of *Hi Life* cookies. He reached for the check register. The pen fell from its yellowed pages into the crinkling plastic abyss. Flinging the sofa cushions aside, careful not to bury his mother, he found the pen lurking in the bottom near the springs, a gleaming plastic implement emblazoned *Deerfield Beach: Ride the Wave*.

On the blank scrap of paper Cosmo shakily wrote:

*To whom it may concern:*

*I, Carmela Maçia Franchese, acknowledge a mortgage upon my property, 21-12 Cedar Pine Lane, in the amount of \$75, 000, in favor of Al Usurious, in exchange for debts owed. I affirm that I am of sound body and spirit, and acknowledge that I am under no threat of duress in so signing.*

As witness, Cosmo included the neighbor's ninety-year-old father, who would no doubt expire before the legitimacy of the document was challenged.

"Ma, you need to sign this."

His mother barely stirred.

"Here, Ma, you need to wake up." Cosmo unwrapped a mentholated cough drop from his box of chocolates and waved it under her nose.

"Let me die," his mother said, "enough of these troubles. I'm ninety-nine years old. Too long," she sighed.

"You need to sign this, Ma." Cosmo unfurled the scrap of paper for her signature, "it's for the ambulance."

"I'm not signing for no ambulance," cried his mother, exasperated. "It's my time."

Thwarted, Cosmo sank into the shag pile, leaning on his left side to minimize arterial and gastric turmoil. He didn't know what to do. It was precisely this inability to think on his feet, he thought, that caused him to be taken in by Darrell Conaway, to not see Rita's infidelities, to agree to a plea bargain that had him making reparations to his former clients/crime victims in structured payments through the year 2030. He needed to obtain his mother's signature lest he languish for the rest of his days in the hospital ward at Riker's Island, receiving no visitors, eating fake eggs and frozen pizza.

Cosmo had an inspiration: "Cousin Santo from Palermo sent you a registered letter. You need to sign here."

"Did bell ring? I didn't hear bell ring."

"Yes, the bell rung. You're in shock, Ma. You can't hear bells. Just sign here."

"Are you sure, Cosmo?"

"I'm sure, Ma."

"Oh, o.k. Tell postman we need help. Give him a nickel."

"Don't worry. I got it taken care of, Ma."