

## Carmen Lugo Filippi

*Carmen Lugo Filippi is Professor of French Language and Literature at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras. She holds a doctorate in Comparative Literature from the University of Toulouse and a Masters in French Literature from Columbia University, New York. Carmen Lugo Filippi has done extensive work in foreign language teaching, literary criticism and women's writing, particularly in Puerto Rico. She is co-author, with Ana Lydia Vega, of *Virgenes y mártires (Virgins and martyrs: Editorial Antillana, Puerto Rico, 1981)*, which won the P.E.N. Club of Puerto Rico National Literature Prize (Short Story category) in 1982. She has also published many other short stories in magazines and anthologies including the one here, 'Recetario de incautos' (Recipes for the Gullible), which won first prize in the Revista Sin Nombre short story competition.*

*Carmen Lugo Filippi is currently working on a comparative study of the modern short story as well as writing a novella. Ms Lugo Filippi's work moves freely from personal, domestic concerns to wider, more general social and cultural issues.*

### Recipes for the Gullible

'I write: more than just singing, I tell stories.'

GLORIA FUERTES

When she began to rummage through the pile of clippings, five huge cockroaches rushed frantically along the edges of the dusty shelves. How revolting! She would have to fumigate that corner of the storage room at once if she didn't want to be devoured by those proliferating armies. She would happily have started the extermination that very instant, but the urgency of the situation forced her to reconsider: she had to find a recipe that was both exotic and easy to prepare. She was sure that if she examined the clippings and the magazines calmly she would find what she was looking for, she just had to be patient and control her growing anxiety, since, after all, the guests she was expecting that evening were not so important as to warrant such a commotion . . . or were they? She did not want to deceive herself, and knew in fact that she was determined to impress them if it was the last thing she did. She couldn't bear the thought of them finding her not only recently divorced, fat, middle-aged, and, to top it off, with money problems. It was so

humiliating to have to face none other than her sister and Paco in such circumstances. She would have to pull herself together and appear happy, jolly as usual; she would conceal her flab with a Playtex girdle and cover up her most obvious wrinkles with Maybelline. She would follow the advice of *Vanidades* for drooping eyes and lids: light eye shadow dusted up towards the brow bone, then a firm line of shadow along the lash line, drawn upward and outward, the eyebrows well arched, and, of course, the magic touch of a bit of eyeliner just below the lashes.

Oh well, Paco himself would be showing some wrinkles and a paunch – eleven years don't go by without a trace – you well remember that Doris loved to cook copious pasta dishes with Parmesan cheese (the perfect diet, according to *Cosmopolitan*, to fatten up even a scarecrow).

You smile as you picture Doris, plump-cheeked and double-chinned, and the thought brings such a great feeling of relief that you return enthusiastically to the recipes you have been collecting for years, in anticipation of occasions like this, or imagining important guests to bewitch with your exquisite cuisine, your impeccably-set table and the melodies of your 'Thousand Violins of Love' softly piercing the semi-darkness of the small living-dining room lit only by two candelabra. There is Paco, smiling nostalgically, looking at you through the tiny wavering flames, softly stroking his moustache:

'I didn't know you could cook so well! How come you never told me?' At that, you would have to arch your eyebrows higher, lift your chin, lean over slightly and reply with something truly witty:

'I was, am, and always will be full of surprises.'

But no. Perhaps it would be better to smile enigmatically and avoid his gaze; this is no time for regrets over what might have been, as Moneró used to sing in his nasal twang, especially when Doris would be on her guard, like a scorpion with its poisonous sting, ready to charge at the slightest false move. No. It was Doris she would have to impress, to show her that man does not live by lasagna alone; she would have to teach Doris – who after all those years in New Jersey had not learned to prepare a meal worthy of a Hollywood film – that spaghetti and cannelloni were commonplace compared to her own dinner worthy of a twilight soap opera.

A prawn cocktail to begin with? It was easy to prepare, if she followed the recipe from that issue of *Good Housekeeping* which offered 'easy dishes for buffet dinners'. She searched avidly through the magazines: the scattered covers offered the promise of uniform variety. Faces, faces and more faces in close-up; perfect oval faces with enormous blue, blue-green, deep-green, hazel or slightly violet eyes.

ARE YOU UNFORGETTABLE?  
A MAGIC FORMULA TO LOSE WEIGHT WITHOUT DIETING  
TRIUMPH SEXUALLY WITH YOUR HUSBAND  
PRINCESS LEE RADZIWIŁŁ'S PERFECT DINING ROOM  
INSIDE THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF ALBA'S HOME

The settings of dreams began to appear in the glittering photographs. A growing sense of lassitude forced her to lie down on the drab sofa. All of a sudden she burst into that house of wonders and little by little felt a surprising transformation as the rooms grew larger, the lights brighter, as she discovered – what a wondrous thing! – the cushiony depth of an armchair, the fine carvings of a sideboard, the pure whiteness of embroidered linen draperies, the warm hues of a plush rug . . . She went from one room to the next listening in rapture to the swelling sounds of a regal waltz; she dreamed herself a duchess in this new forest of tapestries inhabited by nymphs pursued by satyrs, winged horses and unicorns; she admired herself in quicksilver mirrors, which, facing each other, multiplied to infinity the misty vases filled to overflowing with so many azaleas, lilies, hydrangeas, heliotropes and roses.

Oh! how she would have liked to prolong indefinitely her giddy wandering among the Limoges porcelain, madly piled on heavy mahogany sideboards, to continue to whirl gracefully around the dusky piano, reflected in melancholic bevelled mirrors, to stroke the velvet cushions, the crystal and the shining silverware, to admire the blackened roasting trays laden with pheasants and quails . . . Yes, she would have loved to return to the dining-room, pausing on the way in the picture gallery, where beautiful harlequins showed off their carnival clothes and timeless still-lives slept their peaceful siestas. Oh! To be able to reach the Victorian-style dining-table without disturbing that roundly perfect moment in the slightest! She would have sat down discreetly with the condescending amiability, the cool deference of a Parisian model, tinged with a sadness that was skilfully heightened by a dark dress and a seemingly careless hairstyle. She would have been wryly amused by contemplating the extravagant display of silver candelabra and sumptuous china; she would have witnessed the ceremonious procession of trays laden with fowl splendidly dressed in artfully prepared sauces; she would have feasted her eyes on the profiteroles, the pastries, the fillings of truffles and brandy.

But she never reached the table . . . The appalling ventilation forced her to get up; she came out of the dream unwillingly, gathered her bundle of magazines and clippings, and headed for the kitchen. She spread the most appealing recipes on the pink formica top, and painstakingly set

herself to read the list of ingredients for succulent sauces. It was like fishing in the troubled waters of thousands of words of all sizes and colours, exotic spices which slid like eels between her busy fingers, fragrant herbs which reminded her, she didn't know why, of the plant-life of distant shores, sensual condiments, the mere sound of which aroused sleepy caliphs and maharajas. Such a lustful profusion of names – tarragonesamifenmaniseturmerawaycardaoregano – struggling to attach themselves to her memory, overwhelmed her, leaving her with the terrible inadequate feeling she had so often felt during the thirty-six years of her life. But no. She had to overcome her foolish inhibitions and dare to explore those foreign aromas, she had to be capable of achieving the subtle nuances of taste, the magic alloy of herbs and spices, the happy delivery of meats dripping with voluptuous nectars. Resolved to take stock of her provisions, she opened the cupboard doors. Her eyes glided in a hopeless pilgrimage past the cans of symmetrically-lined Campbell's soups, past the cans of tomato sauce and beans cooked in water and salt. She turned around, quickly gathered together the magazines, and closing her eyes for an instant, she saw Doris, plump-cheeked and double-chinned, inspecting the freshly-set table with open gulle, and Paco, now leaning towards you, softly stroking his moustache – an Arturo-de-Córdoba gesture that still bewitches you – especially as he whispers to you: 'What marvellous succulent beans!'

Suddenly you burst out laughing as you throw the magazines into the bin one by one, repeating to yourself the newly discovered refrain: 'You fool, you perfect fool!'

**Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini  
From the collection Virgenes y mártires.**

## Ana Lydia Vega

*Ana Lydia Vega was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico in 1946. Currently Professor of French and Caribbean Literature at the University of Puerto Rico, Ana Lydia Vega is also one of Puerto Rico's best-known writers. Educated in Puerto Rico and in France, Vega holds a doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Provence. She has written numerous reviews, articles, essays and a foreign language*