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## Translator's Preface

Andrea G. Labinger

I translated this short story a few years ago, as a lark. Alicia Steimberg's buoyant sense of humor and her ability to create small domestic dramas as well as ruminations on the human condition with equal ease have always intrigued me. This story attracted me because, despite its brevity, it seamlessly manages to interweave two different planes of reality—the heavenly dialogue between Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian—and the quotidian conversations between the narrator and Juanita, the hussy-cum-housekeeper, in a very natural way.

My goal here was to preserve the story's ironic humor without being too heavy-handed. Consequently, I was overly cautious the first time around. As I recall, Alicia's reaction to the first, bland and quite literal, version was a horrified, "¡No es mi cuento!" [*That's not my story!*] And it wasn't. I started again, applying a somewhat broader brush to the caricature of Juanita, emphasizing her spirited, but colloquial, way of speaking in order to identify her as an uneducated girl from the provinces, even though the original presents no such distinctive speech patterns. Admittedly, the social class distinctions evident in this story concerned me somewhat. I was aware at all times that the cultural gap between employer and domestic might prove bothersome to North American readers, who, at least in public, tend to espouse social egalitarianism. Why, for example, does Juanita have to look like a hooker? I asked Alicia, whose characteristically breezy reply was, "Juanita looked a little like a hooker, but will American readers think that all Argentine maids look like hookers because she did? I mean, any woman can look like a hooker, I expect, anywhere in the world; it's the *patrona's* fault if she's so careless choosing a woman who's going to live in the house and looks like a hooker. This lady is really absentminded." Details about Juanita's family life (she doesn't know her father, her mother beats her with a broomstick, and she can't tell her employer how many siblings she has) suggested—at least to me—an attitude toward the working classes that the U.S. reader might not find amusing in the least. Of course, the ditzy *Señora* gets her comeuppance in the end, a fact that somewhat mitigates the social disparity for those of us

who would smugly point to the dénouement as evidence that "God's in His heaven / All's right with the world."

As for the saints, I tried to preserve the humanity Alicia gives them: they come across as a pair of garrulous, slightly fussy, old busybodies who take obvious delight in the foibles of the mortals whose lost objects they are charged with retrieving. Not unlike the job of the translator herself, whose task it is to retrieve what lurks hidden between the lines of the original text, repositioning it (Juanita would surely approve!) where those who seek it will diligently take pleasure in its discovery.

### "The Conversation of the Saints" by Alicia Steimberg

*Translated by Andrea G. Labinger*

"Have you seen a big purple comb?" I asked Juanita.

"A big purple comb?" she repeated, undoubtedly having had it in her possession since the day before. "No, Señora, I haven't seen it."

I searched and searched, and Juanita searched, too, or pretended to search, along with me. Eventually, it grew late, and I left without the comb.

"When something in the house gets lost, you need to ask Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian to help you find it," Juanita said from the doorway as I waited for the elevator. "If it's anywhere in the house, it'll show up."

I hired Juanita, despite her slutty appearance, because no other candidate applied for the job. She was a bit chubby, with dark skin and dyed blond hair, vermilion-painted lips, and eyes that were invisible behind the mirrored lenses of her cat's-eye sunglasses. When she sat down in front of me, she lifted the glasses, propping them on top of her head. She had brown eyes, very shiny and curious. She was from Corrientes Province, from a place near Goya. She didn't know who her father was, and she said her mother beat her with a broomstick. She couldn't tell me how many brothers and sisters she had. Her abundant breasts threatened to burst through her white "KANSAS CITY" tee-shirt.

"If only you'd seen me when I came to Buenos Aires, Señora. Skinny as a stick and with torn shoes, and a cardboard suitcase tied up with string. But I got lucky and met Squinty, who had an agency. He told me he'd find me a job right away and brought me to his house."

"An agency?" I asked, uneasily.

"When a girl's new in town," Juanita replied, "who's gonna hire her without references?"

"And Squinty gave out references?"

"No, a girlfriend of Squinty's, who knew how to talk like a lady. Squinty paid for the references, not a lot, but she earned enough anyway from the tips they gave her in the ladies' bathroom at the Metropolitan Cinema."

I was feeling more and more uneasy, because I'd never asked Juanita for references, although I had requested them from the many others who had come before her, and who knows how many times they had been provided for me by Squinty's girlfriends.

When Juanita met Squinty the day she arrived in Buenos Aires, he bought her a banana milkshake at a little bar near the train station.

"I stayed at Squinty's house for a week, and on Saturday he took me to the dance. I heard people there say that Squinty exploited women, but it isn't true, Señora. He never gave me to another man. He fed me real good, he gave me clothes. He didn't want me to go out looking for work like that, all skinny and dressed crummy like I was when I came from Corrientes."

Juanita raised the lid of the shiny pot in which the stew was cooking, emitting a fragrant cloud of steam, then stabbed something inside with a fork and closed the lid again. She smiled, revealing her perfect teeth. How likely was it that Squinty had kept her in his house for a week, fattening her up, dressing and adorning her, only to send her out to work as a maid?

Francisco and I sat down at the impeccably laid table. He had chosen an excellent Cabernet, too refined for the stew we were about to eat.

"I couldn't find the other bottle we had," he explained. "Juanita, have you seen a bottle...?"

It was ridiculous to ask Juanita if she'd seen a bottle that couldn't possibly have stepped out of the little bar on its own and gone strolling through the house, since the only person who ever opened the bar was Francisco. I myself drink only water.

"Today she lost her wallet," Saint Cosmas said to Saint Damian.

"And the hairbrush with the silver handle," said Saint Damian.

"Yesterday she couldn't find her gold pen," Saint Cosmas said.

"And today she was looking for some lacy undergarment," Saint Damian continued.

"Where could volume two of the *Dictionary of Greek Mythology* have gone?" asked Saint Cosmas.

"It's in Juanita's room," Saint Damian replied.

"Who's Juanita?"

"The girl from Corrientes who works for her."

"Maybe she hid it as a prank."

"No. Francisco was reading it when Juanita showed up in the living room in her underwear, and he followed her to her room."

"Don't tell me you saw *that*, Damian."

"If I didn't see what goes on in people's homes, how could I find lost objects?"

"It's not right for a saint to see certain things."

"That's easy for you to say because of how we've got the work divided: you collect the petitions and I'm in charge of searching."

"And do you ever find any of the Señora's lost things?"

"Sometimes I do. A wrist watch in the silverware drawer, a bottle of French perfume in the freezer. Juanita leaves them there for a few days, and if the Señora doesn't ask for them, she steals them for good. The Señora thinks *she's* the one who puts things in strange places because she's under so much stress."

"Shouldn't someone report the girl?"

"That's not our job, Cosmas. All we have to do is find what's lost. Now I have to go see about that old lady in Temperley who's misplaced her eyeglasses again."

On Saturday nights, while Juanita was dancing with one man, there was always some other guy who flashed a knife at her. Juanita told me this in the kitchen while she was stirring the stew. And she added:

"You must have been young once, too, Señora. You must've liked to dance, too."

I was thirty-five at the time, and I'd never before heard my youth referred to in the past tense, much less had its very existence placed in doubt. Feigning indifference, I replied:

"Of course, my child, how could I possibly not remember?"

A few days after the comb disappeared, I returned home one evening earlier than usual, but Juanita wasn't in the kitchen. I found her in her room, with the door open, sitting on the unmade bed in her underwear, breathing hard. She was trying to say something when the closet door swung open. I was afraid I'd see the man with the knife, or the guy who

had danced with Juanita, also with a knife, but there, emerging laboriously from the closet, was Francisco.

I fired Juanita that same afternoon, but the incident didn't lead to a divorce. On the contrary, it briefly reignited the flames of passion between Francisco and me. Sometime later we separated, amicably. And yet, I can never think of Francisco without seeing him coming out of that closet, sad and offended, as though I were the one who owed him an apology.