



# A Christmas Present

from Tony Beckwith  
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IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE in San Miguel de Allende. We sat in the *Jardín*, the main plaza across from the church. It was about noon. Iron benches facing inwards and outwards surrounded the central gazebo that was decorated as a nativity scene. A thick, hedge-like canopy of leaves formed an archway over the outer ring of the plaza—the strolling circuit—leaving the gazebo’s roof open to the sunny, blue sky.

A man and a woman walked down the church steps, crossed the road, and strolled through the *Jardín*. They fascinated us from the moment we saw them. They looked Italian. Well, he looked Italian. She could have been from almost anywhere around the Mediterranean. They were elegantly dressed in a sharp, European style. His white hair was slicked back and his profile evoked an ancient empire. She was evidently younger than he. Her hair was black, and she was perfectly poised. They appeared to be in silent, intimate communication with each other.

Our friend Ros had invited us to a tea party that afternoon and, to our surprise, we found our fascinating couple saying hello to our hostess as we arrived. They were Virginia and Fulvio, and they were as delightful in

person as we had thought them intriguing from a distance. Some friendships—like some shipboard romances—click quickly, from the first hello. Such was this one. We drank tea and made short work of a plate of Ros’s cucumber sandwiches and told each other our life’s story. One thing led to another and we all had Christmas lunch together the following day. A hilarious, easygoing affair, not unlike the family ritual back home. The sun went down and we made plans to meet again.

A few nights later we went out for dinner with Virginia and Fulvio. Unbeknownst to us, he had called around to find a restaurant with live music. It was a chilly evening, and we strolled the few blocks to *La Bugambilia*. We stepped off the narrow sidewalks onto the cobbles and back again, weaving around other pedestrians, chatting as we walked in the damp mountain air. The waiter took us through a charming courtyard to a table beside the fire. The heat and the flickering light from the hearth were the perfect background. The room was spare in a Spanish way, with cream-colored stucco walls and a tiled floor. The doors were stone arches, leading to several different dining areas scattered around the courtyard. It felt pleasantly gracious.

We had fresh mozzarella and tomato salad, and shrimp and mushrooms in garlic-laden oil. According to Basque tradition, Christmas is the season to enjoy a dish of dried cod cooked in tomato sauce in the style

made famous in Bilbao. Our restaurant provided an excellent version. Over dinner we cemented our friendship with a free-flowing conversation that celebrated the miles we had all traveled and the stops we’d made along the way. Later in the evening, with the firelight playing against the walls, a quartet strolled into the courtyard and played a couple of lovely boleros. They came by our table and asked if we’d like to request a song. Fulvio asked for “*Nosotros*,” a wonderfully romantic ballad, and then delighted everyone by singing along in a splendid voice. He had mentioned in passing that he’d once had a career on the stage, but of course we had no idea how good he really was. The musicians loved it, and asked him to sing another song. Virginia smiled proudly and Fulvio serenaded the restaurant with the very beautiful “*Solamente una vez*” by Agustín Lara.

It was late when we left the restaurant. The streets were quiet and ghostly as we wandered home. The town seemed to have slipped into its old colonial identity, and the shadowy outlines of the rooftops looked like a skyline in southern Spain. The church bells rang out and the incredibly starry sky disappeared into the distance above us. San Miguel was bewitching by starlight. We entertained fabulous ideas about quitting our jobs and coming to settle there, to write and sing, and try our hand at freedom. We felt on top of the world.

