



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

The Gift of Friendship

It was Christmas Eve in San Miguel de Allende. We sat in the *Jardín*, the main plaza across from the church in this small town perched high in the mountains of central Mexico. It was about noon. Iron benches facing inwards and outwards surrounded the gazebo that was decorated as a nativity scene. A dense green canopy of leaves formed an archway over the outer ring of the plaza—the promenading circuit—leaving the gazebo's roof open to the impeccably blue sky.

A man and a woman walked down the church steps, crossed the road, and strolled arm-in-arm 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 Campbell, the Australian painter, 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 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 sipped tea and made short work of a plate of Ros's cucumber sandwiches and told each other our life stories. One thing led to another and we all had Christmas lunch together the following day at a local hotel. An unhurried, thoroughly enjoyable affair, not unlike the family ritual back home. The sun was going down as we parted company, and we made plans to meet again.

A couple of nights later we rendezvoused with Virginia and Fulvio in the *Jardín* and went to dinner together. Unbeknownst to us, he had called around to find a restaurant with live music. It was a chilly evening, and we walked the few blocks to *La Bugambilia*. We stepped off the narrow sidewalks onto the cobbled streets and back again, weaving around other pedestrians, chatting comfortably in the crisp mountain air. A waiter took us through a charming courtyard to a table beside a fireplace. The warmth and flickering light from the hearth seemed to envelop us in a cocoon of refined wellbeing. Silverware sparkled on white linen napkins. The room was decorated in a spare Spanish way, with cream-coloured stucco walls and a tiled floor. Stone archways led to different dining areas around the

courtyard. The mood was one of gracious hospitality. We had fresh mozzarella and tomato salad, and shrimp and mushrooms in garlic-laden olive oil. According to Basque tradition, Christmas is the season to enjoy a dish of *bacalao*, dried cod cooked in tomato sauce in the style made famous in Bilbao. The restaurant provided an excellent version. Over dinner we cemented our friendship with a free-flowing conversation that celebrated the miles we had all travelled and the stops we had made along the way. Later in the evening, as we lingered over coffee and the last of the wine, a quartet strolled into the courtyard and played a couple of lovely boleros. They came by our table and asked if we would like to request a song. Fulvio asked for *Nosotros*, a romantic ballad, and then delighted everyone by singing along in a splendid voice. He had mentioned in passing that he had 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 as Fulvio serenaded us with the incredibly beautiful *Solamente una vez*, by Agustín Lara.

It was late when we left the restaurant. The streets were quiet and ghostly as we wandered back to our hotels. 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 the hour and the cloudless 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.

