

AN UNEXPECTED CHRISTMAS EVE

- Look at that bike, mum! It's amazing! I wish I had one like that! Do you think that the Three Kings will bring it to me if I ask them to?
- This year? In addition to the video game console, the tablet and the remote control helicopter? Are you going to leave something for the rest of the children in the world?
- Yes, of course. Furthermore, the Kings are magicians, they never run out of toys.
- Umm... not maybe of toys, but of patience...

Carmen García and his eight years old son Carlos continued with their lively Christmas debate while they hurried through the mall in search of some last minute purchases. It was four o'clock on the afternoon of December 24, and everything had to be prepared for the dinner that such a special day deserved. It is true that, since the moving to London two years ago, Christmas Eve was no longer as cheerful and familiar as it used to be. When the family still lived in Granada that date meant the meeting of at least twenty people at grandmother Encarni's house, whose nine grandchildren, including little Carlos, had a whale of a time playing, laughing and disturbing. Carmen and her husband Antonio were aware of how important it was for their son, and for themselves, to go on making Christmas that great party full of hope and affection despite the distance that separated them from their country. That's why they worked hard to ensure that there was no lack of details at home: the little tree full of balls and lights, the Bethlehem Village with its cheerful shepherds carrying gifts to the portal (and even some indians and cowboys of Carlos's favorite war game), the garlands hanging on the walls... and, naturally, a delicious dinner in which stood out the stuffed turkey, always accompanied with some typical products of Spain such as serrano ham or olives. What more could you want? Precisely this question was floating around Mrs. Garcia's mind when her thoughts and the endless requests of the sharp voice near her were momentarily interrupted by a resounding spot that echoed through the mall's loudspeakers:

Love, love, love... [the famous Beatles's song introduced the advert]

This Christmas take advantage of the incredible discounts that The Shopping Paradise offers in its beauty section: perfumes, creams, make-up, anti-aging treatments, and much more. The Shopping Paradise. Because All You need is love.

[the refrain of the song continued echoing]

- That's it! that's just it! – Carmen exclaimed.
- What, mum? – little Carlos inquired.
- What cannot be missed on a day like today.
- You mean anti-aging treatments, mommy? I think you don't look so old yet.

Mrs. Garcia could not help laughing at her son's observation.

- Thanks, honey, you're right about that. But I was not referring to beauty products, but to what the ad song said.
- *Love, love, love... All you need is love!* – Carlos sang with energy trying to make it clear to his mother and those present that had a great future in the musical world.

- Right. LOVE. That which makes us live together and happy – she replied with a facial expression that blended the joy with the audacity of one who has just conceived a wonderfully bold idea.
-

- What have you done? – Asked Antonio astonished.
- What you have just heard, darling. I have invited the man who begs at the door of the mall to dine with us tonight. Isn't it wonderful? – Carmen said with a quiet joy while cutting some vegetables.
- Yes, I guess it is wonderful for him, but... ¿how could you do that so suddenly, not even telling me before?
- I don't know, Antonio. I felt like if something very strong drove me to make that decision. Something hard to explain...
- No doubt. It's quite difficult to explain, at least for me. Do you realize that we don't know that man at all? I wonder how he managed to end up begging on the street.
- Do you think he is a bad guy, daddy? – asked little Charlie, who burst into the kitchen after he had secretly listened a part of the conversation.
- No son, dad doesn't mean that. Come on, stop snooping around and help me putting this cutlery on the table. And you, Antonio... why don't you light the chimney? Our guest must be about to arrive and he will probably be pretty cold.

It was six-thirty in the evening, a very appropriate time for any family in London (even if it came from Spain) to have everything ready for dinner. After the talk time, Carmen, Antonio and Carlos were struggling to finish their respective tasks, each of them with a different motivation. She was thrilled to have found a way to make love more present on a night like that by welcoming a needy person. Antonio, although feeling baffled by an idea that seemed a priori absurd, soon realized that it was really important to his wife, so that he should do everything in his power to satisfy her. Carlitos, for his part, was looking forward to the idea of having someone else at home, especially when that person was probably a dangerous guy who would have had plenty of adventures. It would be great to tell his friends when he returned to school.

- ¡Ding-dong!

The doorbell rang synchronously with the living room clock. It was seven o'clock, when the family had summoned his guest. They three hurried to the door looking at each other with noticeable nervousness.

- Your best smile, you know – Carmen furtively warned her two men as she turned the handle.
- Good night, family, and happy Christmas. My name is John.

With these cordial words and a look that was full of truth that dark-skinned man of about forty-five years introduced himself. Although he was not very tall, his complexion was strong, which made you suppose that he was a person accustomed to physical labor. So it seemed to confirm the roughness of the hand that he tightened with the members of the family.

- Came in, John. Welcome to our house – Carmen said gently.
- Thank you so much.

Antonio helped John hang his worn-out coat as this one admired the beautiful, warm room he was in. It certainly did not resemble the houses of Nigeria, where he was from.

Throughout that night our Spanish family discovered not only the country of origin of their guest, but also many other unexpected details. He was the father of three children: a girl of eighteen, a girl of sixteen, and a boy of nine. His wife, Mumbi, hardly maintained them by making typical Kenyan handkerchiefs (a task in which Abuja, the eldest daughter, helped her) and with the money that John sent them from England. When he was younger, he had worked in the countryside, especially in the cocoa plantations, but the hardening of working conditions and wage reductions led him to seek a more prosperous way of life for his family. This way, as he explained, he made the hardest decision of his life by going to Europe (first Spain, then France and finally England), a continent where he hoped to bring his wife and children sooner or later. Though for six months he had been able to work transporting goods in the port of London, he was currently unemployed, so his only income came from the charity of the people who daily entered and left one of the commercial centers of the English capital. He took lunch daily in the social dining room that supported a nearby parish. He said nothing, however, about how he managed to get through the cold London nights without a roof over his head. His current biggest worry was to get some extra money to pay for the university access of his middle-aged daughter Kainda (he was proud to explain that she was pretty smart and loved studying) and to send home a Christmas gift, especially thinking about the little Kairu, his youngest son.

But the conversation that night was not limited to the difficulties that life had brought to John and his family. In the atmosphere predominated above all a halo of confidence and serene joy that passed on everyone. The couple told John the challenge that had meant for them to leave their home country and move to England. They laughed recalling some anecdotes, mainly related to their initial confusions with the new language. Carlos contributed to the guest's entertainment by showing him his superhero comics and narrating the great adventure he had had with his friend Eric during that excursion through the forest in which they separated from the rest of their classmates.

After a long chat, a toast with Spanish cider pointed to the moment of farewell. The family accompanied John to the door. He thanked his guests and wished them a merry Christmas again before he went down the street. When they couldn't see him he stopped for a moment and looked up at the starry sky of London with a heart full of gratitude.

Meanwhile, our Spanish friends stood at the entrance of their house in an almost contemplative silence. Finally, little Carlos broke it saying:

- You know, mum and dad... I have decided to ask the Three Wise Men for the bike I saw this afternoon in the mall. I'll ask them to carry it to Nigeria, for the son of John.