



Back In Time

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The Best Of Both Worlds

Who hasn't dreamed of enjoying the best of both worlds? It's one of those coveted experiences, like being on cloud nine or in seventh heaven. My brother and I once caught a fleeting glimpse of just how blissful it could be, but we also learned that sometimes you can ask for too much, and then be doomed to watch that bliss slip through your fingers like sand.

In the early 1950s we became aware that, for some lucky children, there were not one but two opportunities to rake in toys and other loot during the holiday season. My British grandparents brought their Christmas traditions with them when they settled in Argentina, and passed them on to my parents who brought them with us when we moved to Uruguay. So we grew up with the story of Santa Claus and a decorated tree with presents under it, to be opened in a frenzy on Christmas morning. Most Uruguayan children enjoyed essentially the same ritual, but instead of Santa Claus they waited for *Los Reyes Magos*—the Three Kings—who delivered presents in the early hours of January 6, *Día de Reyes* [King's Day], or Epiphany in the Christian calendar. The lucky ones mentioned above were visited by both!

The *Reyes* event began in Catholic Spain and became a fixture in the countries that were once part of the Spanish Empire. Commercial establishments were naturally more interested in sales than in the precise boundaries of religious or cultural traditions, so the northern European Christmas was also celebrated everywhere in Latin America. Department stores and other retailers embraced both Santa Claus and the *Reyes Magos* in an orgy of promotion that no doubt helped the bottom line while encouraging a materialistic interpretation of the two traditions at the expense of their more exalted meanings. Not that one can blame the retailers, since they were merely responding to the demands of parents who, over the course of many generations, had been conditioned to believe that children are happiest when they get what they want. I wouldn't describe my parents as being particularly over-indulgent, but they certainly wanted their children to be happy. This was an Achilles heel that my brother and I successfully exploited for one brief, shining moment before overplaying our hand and executing the proverbial golden goose.

Our main strategies for trying to get our way involved the usual, unimaginative claims that "everyone else was doing it" or that life would be a miserable, wretched experience for all concerned if some particular thing was not done or purchased. Somehow, on this occasion, we managed to convince our parents that, as British children living in Uruguay we owed it to everyone to

celebrate both Christmas and *Reyes*. Giddy to have pulled off such a coup, we set about researching this newfound cornucopia. We learned that the Three Kings were also known as Wise Men or Magi whose knowledge of astronomy helped them to navigate by the stars and find their way to Bethlehem. Their names were Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar and they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the baby Jesus. We assumed we could probably trade the gold for something, but had no use at all for frankincense or the other one, so were greatly relieved to hear from our little Uruguayan friends that the Kings actually had a far broader range, and could deliver modern toys and even bicycles.

In all the pictures we found, the *Reyes* were always riding on camels, with what looked like a shooting star in the night sky above them. This was of some concern because they did not appear to be equipped to carry significant quantities of gifts. Santa Claus had a large sled but the camels didn't even have saddlebags, as far as we could tell. I should mention that this all happened at about the time of the Great Uncertainty. My brother, who was a little older, had heard rumours at school that Santa Claus was a fiction created by parents, and some of our friends were whispering the same thing about the Three Kings. This was a radical idea that we decided was best ignored until after the 6th of January, as there was a lot at stake in the coming weeks and we didn't want to rock the boat.

Our most alarming discovery was that, according to the tradition, children left their shoes out on the balcony to be filled with gifts by the night visitors. *Shoes?* How many gifts could possibly fit in a shoe? A penknife, maybe, and a small torch, but not much else. This was no good at all. Our friends assured us that shoes to the Kings were like stockings to Santa Claus; a symbol, nothing more. But we were new to the game and unwilling to take any chances. When we casually questioned the suitability of shoes as receptacles for the Wise Men's gifts, our parents asked what we had in mind. We replied that pillowcases seemed far more appropriate, and in that moment knew that we had pushed our luck too far. The look on their faces revealed that our parents had finally understood that their children were in the grip of Greed, one of the seven deadly sins, and that they were on the verge of failing us as stewards of our moral and spiritual development. Horrified, they said that perhaps celebrating *Reyes* wasn't such a good idea after all, and somehow my brother and I knew that it would be pointless to protest. It was over. The 6th of January came and went as just another day, and the subject was never mentioned again.