

All Your Christmases

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www.tonybeckwith.com



“CHRISTMAS IS COMING, the geese are getting fat, please put a penny in the old man’s hat.” I used to sing that as a child. Like so many facets of my childhood in Uruguay, this song was undoubtedly imported from England. The lyrics use an increasingly smaller unit of British currency to finish the verse: “If you haven’t got a penny, a half-penny will do. If you haven’t got a ha’penny, a farthing will do. If you haven’t got a farthing, God bless you.” The underlying message here seems to allude to the traditional idea that it’s the thought that counts. I would imagine that’s a fairly universal idea, but my friend Keith was the first one to show me how it could be put into practice.

When he was about eleven years old his father gave him and his brother some money to buy a Christmas present for their mother. “Get her something she likes,” he said. On Christmas morning when Keith’s mother unwrapped his present she found her

own bedroom slippers. As she had done with her other gifts, she held them up for everybody to see and comment on, but this time the room was silent. “Keith,” she said, looking puzzled, “these are *my* slippers.” By this time his father was glaring at him, realizing that his son had pulled a fast one and pocketed the money. Shrugging, Keith looked back and

said, “You told me to get something she likes. She *loves* those slippers!”

Keith now has children of his own and lives in Sydney where, as in Uruguay, Christmas happens in summer. The Australians have an exuberance that even the British grudgingly admire, and when something wonderful happens to them they say, “All my Christmases have come at once!” In a politically correct world the word “Christmases” can be replaced with any other equivalent traditional event and the meaning remains unchanged.

Christmas at my parents’ house was a vivid example of the strange disconnect that existed between what we did and where we lived. We were in the southern hemisphere, where the seasons are reversed, but when Yuletide rolled around you’d never know it. The rituals, which were originally northern European, were brought over from Britain by people like my grandparents who came to the coun-

tries of the River Plate region just before the First World War, seeking their fortune on a new frontier. Some worked on the railroads, some with cattle, some in the new business of hides and leather, others worked in banks. They had children, who had children, and when these second and third generation immigrants celebrated Christmas, they did it just as their families had always done back home, in that mythical land that many of us had never seen.

The Christmas tree, at least, was real—cut down in one of the many stands of pine trees that bordered an endless string of beaches on the way to Brazil. Then we hung it with twinkly things and cotton wool that was supposed to look like snow. We sent and received cards that were illustrated with variations on the theme of dashing through the snow. I had never seen snow, and had only a theoretical idea of what it felt like to make and throw a snowball, something I keenly wanted to do. On Christmas day family and friends, in shorts and summer dresses, stood outside in the garden drinking gin and tonics under the shade of my father’s grape vine arbor. The children scampered around in bathing suits, playing with the hose. At lunch time we all went inside and consumed a huge, heavy meal that would have been appropriate in the depths of winter somewhere in northern Scotland – or in our own southern winter in July, for that matter. As with many a ritual, none of this made any sense at all. Yet the ritual is important; it’s who we are. Anyway, whatever hemisphere you inhabit and calendar you follow, I hope all your (fill in this blank) will come at once this year. ★