



The Best of Both Worlds

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In the early 1950s my brother and I became aware that some lucky children were enjoying the best of two worlds. We grew up, in Uruguay, with the story of Santa Claus and a decorated tree with presents under it to be opened in a frenzy on Christmas morning. 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: 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. Department stores and other retailers embraced both Santa Claus and the *Reyes Magos*, 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, exhilarating moment before overplaying our hand and executing the proverbial golden goose.

Our main strategies for trying to get our way involved the usual claims that “everyone else was doing it” or dire predictions that life would be a miserable experience if we didn’t. Somehow, on this occasion, we managed to convince our parents that, as British children living in Uruguay, we were morally obliged 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, who were also known as Wise Men or Magi, made their way across the desert to Bethlehem many years ago. Their names were Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar and they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the baby Jesus.

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 seemed ill-equipped to carry quantities of gifts. Santa Claus

had a large sled, but the camels didn’t even have saddle bags, 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 Spanish 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? This was no good at all. Our friends assured us that, to the Kings, shoes 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 wondered aloud about 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, wouldn’t they agree? In that moment we 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 themselves 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.

