

The wheelbarrow

To be honest, I don't remember this anecdote; I know about it because they have told me. But I find it so funny and moving at the same time, that I believe it deserves to be written. It happened on Christmas Day, so I'm going to take the opportunity to tell you a little about how my family celebrated Christmas back in the Seventies.

We used to celebrate Christmas Eve at my grandparents' house (Pepe and Haydée). My parents were divorced already, so tradition indicated that we would have lunch with Dad on Christmas Day in order to compensate. The same procedure would have to be followed for New Year's Eve. It was a mess, because we would have wanted to have dinner with our father, but there was no way. To be honest, we would have preferred that we all had dinner together, but it was clear that it wasn't going to happen, at least not in the near future.

The group that used to meet at my grandparents' house was fairly big; most of the times, we were somewhere between 15 and 20 people. There was a group of 'regulars', including my grandparents, my Mom and Daniel (her second husband), my brothers Guillermo, Martín (and later Paco), my uncle Ernesto, my aunt Nelly and my cousins Germán and Cristian (and later on José Ignacio). Most of the times, we were joined by my cousins' other grandparents (Abel and Olga) and my aunt's sister (Alicia). Other relatives would join us every second year or so, like my grandparents' siblings or my mother's cousins. Finally, we would get a few guests coming in very special occasions.

Christmas in Argentina is a very particular celebration. For starters, it's in the summer! This means that even though it normally gets cool at night in Necochea, it can also be fairly hot, and we definitely don't have any snow. But since Argentina is a country with a strong European background, we have inherited some of the European traditions. For example, we have dinner very late on the 24th, and then we wait until midnight to run to open the presents. My cousin Cristian and I would pretend we wanted to hug and kiss our uncles and grandparents, but in reality what we were doing was to change the time in their watches! But it was a worthless effort anyway, because it wouldn't be midnight until we heard the siren from the Fire Station...

Another indication of our European heritage (mostly Italian and Spanish) was the kind of food we prepared for Christmas Eve. We would fill our bellies with dishes that were ideal for the season... in Spain, where the temperature was below zero. But eating cold pork meat for appetizer in December, with 30 degrees Celsius, wasn't too smart. And the thing wouldn't end there, because we had some tuna fish roll-ups, heavy salads, and other dishes that would leave you on the floor, with your belly about to explode. The same applied to the desserts: we would eat *pannetone*, *turrón*, and things like that. Not long ago, I heard an Argentine humorist (Luis Landriscina) say that it seemed that we were only allowed to eat these desserts on December 24th, because they would spend the rest of the year in the fridge. The *turrón* is very high in calories, the least we needed was to eat that during the summer! Finally, the 'pièce de résistance': a dessert made of peanut paste, which in Argentina is called "Mantecol". You would eat half Mantecol and then hear your liver complaining!

Another tradition was that the figure of Santa Claus didn't exist back then (even now it's mostly a Shopping center attraction in Argentina). The gifts weren't brought by Santa; everybody would go and buy presents for the rest. The idea was that we were celebrating Jesus' birth, giving each other presents that in reality should have been for Him. There was no mystery, nor that fantasy and excitation that you have while you're waiting for Santa Claus to drop by; but the truth is that I felt pretty well knowing that somebody who loved me had thought about me and had bought me a present. One thing, though: how mad I would get when I got clothes instead of toys!

I would ask my parents and grandparents to give me a few pesos, and use that money to buy my own presents. I was the only one of the kids who would do that, and all the adults kept telling me that I was very good at selecting presents, especially considering my low budget. I enjoyed doing that very much, because I could show how much I cared about my family.

The preparations would begin by December 15th; we would generally help my grandmother to set up the Nativity. We would clean the fireplace at my grandparents' house, put a big brown and crinkled paper, that had some dots of other colours and when we put it against the back of the fireplace, it would make it look like a cave. We would always use the same paper! My grandmother would put it back in the box for the next year.

We would 'make' the ground using sand, little Rocks, fake grass and even a few pieces of broken mirror that would simulate small ponds. We would then put the manger and then all the figures and animals. We would place the Three Kings (Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar) very far away, and then make them move two bricks closer every day, so they would be by the baby Jesus exactly on January 6th. Finally, we would put an angel hanging above, which would complete the Nativity scene. My grandmother would take care of that part, because it was very difficult!

The Nativity has always been the most important symbol to us, because unlike the Christmas tree, it has a religious origin. So only once the Nativity was fully set up, we would start working on the 'Christmas tree'. We would go to Pepe's farm and pick a big branch from any of the pine trees he had there, which my grandfather would cut. We would put the branch in a bucket (covered in green crêpe paper). We would then put the Christmas lights and the ornaments (we would always try to put more lights than in the previous year, and I relieve our maximum was 1,500!). Finally, we would put some metallic strips that would simulate snow (very badly). The truth is that every year we would feel that 'that was the best Christmas tree ever'.

Once the Christmas tree was set up, the gifts would start to arrive. And they would accumulate pretty soon! One of my favourite tasks was to place the gifts so all the labels could be seen and –especially- they would take the most space. It wasn't strange to see half of the living room covered with those packages. It was very impressive, but it was also very complicated to walk around, so we would put them all back together until the afternoon of the 24th.

Coming back to the topic of this story (the wheelbarrow), I relieve I was about 4 years old that Christmas. My cousins were a little bigger than me (8 and 5) and my brother was 7. Martín was still a baby, so I was seen as the 'littlest' of the cousins. We would always be together, but the older ones would have little patience for me when it was time to play. Some times, however, we would split in groups of two, and I would go with my oldest cousin. We would play on the street a lot (my cousins were just two houses apart from my grandparents, so we would always go there); we would also play in the Basement of my grandparents' house or at my cousins' place, who had a big Collection of toy cars and some Lego-like building blocks called "Rasti" which we all loved. But we would mostly play on the street or go to Pepe's farm.

That Christmas Eve, we noticed that there were very few presents for the kids under the tree. It wasn't something new for my brother Guillermo and me: his birthday is on December 30th, and mine on January 9th, so it wouldn't be unusual to get just one big fat present and then be told "This one is valid for Christmas, Three Kings and your birthday". How mad would we get!!!

But this wasn't the case, because this time everybody but me was affected, and my cousins' birthdays were in February and April. So we didn't know what to think... The evening seemed very long; we couldn't wait for midnight and once again, all our tricks to accelerate things failed miserably (changing the time, saying that we had heard the siren, etc).

We finally made it to midnight, and we ran as fast as we could to open the presents. The deception was huge, because there were few gifts and they were mostly clothes (except me, as I got more toys, maybe because I was younger). We were very angry. But then my mother and my uncle told us that we had to go downstairs (to the Basement) because there was an extra present we had to go see. We went down not knowing what to expect, and to our surprise we found three brand new "Aurorita" bicycles. A big one for Germán, another for Guillermo, a smaller one for Cristian... and nothing for me. I was stupefied. They told me that I was too little to get a new bike yet, and in any case I could use the one that Guillermo had before, which was a mustard coloured, smaller "Aurorita". But that bike was at home!

Of course, once my cousins and my brother recovered from the surprise, they wanted to go for a ride on them. And I had nothing! Desperate for joining the kids and then feel bigger, I grabbed the first thing with wheels I found: a wooden wheelbarrow that I had gotten. And away they were in their brand new bikes (struggling a little), while I was following pushing my wheelbarrow. I don't know how long this went for, as I don't remember having done it, but it produces me a mix of self-pity and tenderness, just imagining myself running like crazy, while pushing a wheelbarrow, trying to follow the pace of the bigger kids, who would surely be flying on their new bikes... Even today, the mere mention of this anecdote makes Gaby and my sister in law (Analía) to roll on the floor with laughter.

Years later, it was finally my turn to go down the stairs to get his special Christmas gift. For some reason that I can't remember, my father was with us that Christmas Eve, and he even covered my eyes to take me to the basement with Mom. Once we got there, they removed the blindfold and I found a brand new green bicycle (also "Aurorita"). It was beautiful. And much faster than my wheelbarrow!