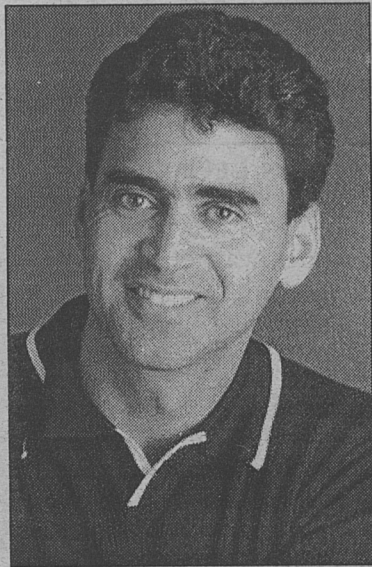


# The Christmas that Comes to the Door

BY MICHAEL ALVEAR



I was 9 years old when I experienced my first American Christmas. I was at a loss to describe my reaction because my English wasn't very good. When I became completely fluent I realized the word I was looking for was "bummer."

That's because I had the disadvantage of experiencing eight Latino Christmases before celebrating my ninth with an Anglo one.

A Latino Christmas is a wonder to behold. If American families are nuclear then Latino families are electro-magnetic, pulling every relative, no matter how distant, into their orbit.

Latin children are constantly surrounded by explosively extended families — grandparents who live downstairs, cousins who live across the street, uncles who live to see you. It's a cauldron of love and excitement that few American children experience. Especially at Christmas.

My father is South American, my mother American. His side of the family outnumbered my mother's side by a factor of 10 to one.

For the first eight years of my life we lived in Quito, Ecuador, a country with inflation rates so high banks routinely advertise 33% interest rates on passbook savings accounts.

But what Quito lacked in financial stability it made up for in familial warmth. My Ecuadorian family was big, loud, and boisterous. It seemed like there wasn't a grandparent or aunt who lived more than a few blocks away. Cousins were best friends and meals were at least a twelve-seat affair, with someone always yapping at me for drinking up all the Coca Cola.

In America, my family was small and spread out on both coasts. I saw my cousins every couple of years, and my Mom always had to remind me of their names.

I experienced my first American Christmas the year my parents divorced. Mom packed us up and we moved from Ecuador for good, settling smack dab in the middle of the international Mason-Dixon Line: Miami.

**If American families are nuclear then Latino families are electro-magnetic, pulling every relative, no matter how distant, into their orbit.**

It was odd sitting around the tree with just my immediate family. In Ecuador, the doorbell would constantly ring with this part of the family or that, with this cousin's friend or that uncle's uncle. When it rang my sisters shrieked with excitement while my brother and I rubbed our hands together.

The doorbell meant only one thing: More presents.

In America, nobody rang our doorbell. Confused, my brother turned to me and said "¿Dónde está toda la gente?" ("Where is everyone?"). That year "Feliz Navidad" turned into "Merry Christmas." The sentiment was the same, but the volume on the stereo wasn't.

I missed my Latin family terribly and wanted to go back. I remember thinking "¿Y para que valen todos estos regalos si no se los podemos mostrar a nadie?" ("What good are all these presents if there isn't anybody to show them to?")

I was thirty years old before I set foot in Ecuador again. When I passed through customs and saw what was waiting for me, I couldn't help but think of all the Christmases I celebrated as an Ecuadorian kid.

There by the gate, waiting for me, wasn't just the uncle who was supposed to pick me up, but eight other cousins, aunts and nephews.

I laughed out loud at the sight of such a huge welcome. In America, my family would have helpfully suggested I take a cab.

I am part American and part Ecuadorian. I guess I'm bi-countried. Meaning, I'm attracted to presents from both continents.

The ones under American trees are better. They're bigger, shinier and the brag factor is higher. "What'd you get me?" is the most important question in a child's life, and no one answers it better than this country.

But every January my American friends and family suffer from Post Traumatic Mall Syndrome, a condition caused by the profound belief that shopping for the right gift is more important than sharing yourself with the right people.

I can't recall a single gift I received as a child, from either continent. What I remember is every uncle and aunt and cousin who showed up at the door.

# QUEER KARMA?

karma \Kar'ma\, n. [Skr.] (Buddhism) One's acts considered as fixing one's lot in the future existence.

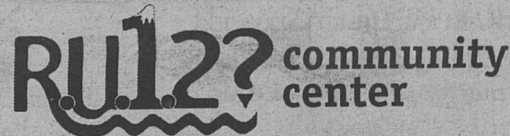
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