

A short story from this collection.



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1.2) The Adventures of Alex and Lelo – Part 1

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Alex (left) and Lelo (right) – Santiago 1964.

In 1966, Chile experienced nineteen earthquakes with a magnitude of four and beyond. The biggest of these was a magnitude of 7.75 on 28 December. Three people lost their lives and there was property destruction from the violent tremors and tsunami like waves.

The little brothers (with their fun nicknames of Lelo and Alex) are playing in their home driveway by a tall boundary brick wall, when the first of the earthquakes suddenly shakes their house. The solid brick wall sways like a blanket in the breeze. It is bending over their heads.

Father expressed sheer horror at the sight and calls out to them. He tries to reach his boys while the trembling concrete driveway jumps up to meet him, causing him to fall. Eventually, he reaches the boys and takes them inside the house to a safe area.

When the earthquakes pass, he shares an urgent lesson on earthquake survival with the family.

‘It is important to stay under a door frame. This is where the house construction is the strongest,’ he explains, and he looks for signs that Lelo and Alex understand.

The more modern houses, like their own, have steel reinforced concrete pillars at each corner of the house and steel door frames. These can resist large earthquakes. The older mud brick houses collapse in a heap, causing damage to people and property.

The Baby Brothers

Their family home is strong, built under new earthquake resistant codes. It is in the outskirts of Santiago Chile in La Florida district. Carmen and Hugo built it soon after they married in 1960, with the help of Hugo’s brothers who are skilled builders. The beautiful Andes mountains tower at the horizon creating a commanding presence.

For now, baby Hugo (nicknamed Lelo), is crawling about in nappies, studying the world around him. He is using all his senses to understand new life. In his early childhood, he can taste life, like biting into a sun ripened tomato sprinkled with salt. He holds it tight with both hands and the juice runs down his bib.

Once Lelo can stand on two legs, he invents chair-travel with a sense of pride. Pushing on the back of a wooden chair, he travels from one room to another along the tiled floor at a good pace. The chair takes all the bumps and crashes. It is such fun, but it annoys his parents intensely. He graduates from the chair to his own two feet. He rushes around the house at full speed and unaided, straight under the dining table. On a growth spurt, his head strikes the underside of that table and sends him crashing to the ground.

Undeterred by accidents, with strong arms and legs, he is now climbing obstacles with ease. The steel front security fence with the top row of sharp spikes grabs his attention. The other side promises adventure: after all, his father escapes every morning and disappears down the street. Why not him? One afternoon, he decides to escape by pulling himself up on the steel bars. At the top, the steel spikes are difficult to negotiate, and under his weight, one lodges itself between two ribs.

Father arrives home and is horrified to see his baby son spiked at the top of the fence. Lelo is pleased to see his father and would have waved hello, but his hands are busy holding his weight.

Not much past his own second birthday, his baby brother David (nick named Alex), is born and they are introduced when his parents arrive home from hospital. Love did not fill Lelo’s heart at first sight; the feeling was more of nonchalance, and protection. Without saying anything, he went outside, picked up a handful of rocks, and returned indoors. Naturally, his parents are alarmed when rocks are launched at the baby in the cot. Sufficiently chastised, he ignores the baby and entertains himself around the house.

It is at this point in his life that Lelo discovers art. He uses crayons in his small hands without breaking them. All children scribble, instead he focuses on real shapes. From his sunny bedroom window, a cow is visible across the road. He observes it for a long time: studying the shape and slow movement while it grazes along the farmyard fence. An accurate looking cow appears rendered on the hallway wall just above the skirting board.

Father is so impressed with the sketch that he refuses to clean or paint the wall. Lelo finds a connection to others through art. Visitors point at the child in disbelief, and father reassures them that the sketch did come from Lelo.

When his little brother starts to communicate and play games, they bond and become inseparable. Alex's favourite game is sitting on his brothers' knees, and without warning, legs straighten, and he plummets to earth. They both laugh uncontrollably.

The years pass quickly: three, four, and the boys become more adventurous. At age of five, Lelo discovers that the streets are not safe and that all people are not nice.

They are playing on their side of the street when Alex is temporarily out of sight. Lelo spots him in the fields across the road, where cows graze. A man leads his little brother away by the hand. Danger warnings flash in his head, and he sprints to him. Grabbing the free hand, he pulls hard on it, freeing Alex from the stranger, and trots him back home.

It challenges him to think what may have happened if he had hesitated at that moment.

New City, New Home

In 1967, father accepts a transfer with his government work from Santiago to Gomes Carreño, just up from the coastal city of Viña del Mar. He is working for the housing department on a major development. It is a new housing estate that takes the name of a naval officer and director of the naval school, Luis Gomes Carreño (born 1865, died 1930). It is built for the widows of a naval shipping accident.

Lelo and Alex make friends in the new housing estate and explore their surroundings in groups. Ulises, a kind boy with a protective instinct, becomes best friends with the brothers. Lelo met him in class at the local primary school, where upon seeing a new student at the door, Ulises waved him towards the spare seat next to him. This is a kind gesture that even children don't forget and is the foundation for a lasting friendship.

The new estate sits high on the hills. Surrounding it are forested areas, partly in use by the military for training exercises. The forest is a magnet for the children, it is full of mystery. At the far end of the estate, the landscape changes from suburban homes and streets to open fields where families fly their kites on a sunny weekend. The boys, including new friend Ulises, stop to watch the paper kites battle in the sky. The kites hum as they sway left and right in the wind. They also watch and learn the art of on-the-spot kite maintenance and repairs. The torn tissue paper is repaired, and bamboo frames are glued back in place. The organic smell of old brown glue wafts up their nostrils and cements a lasting memory.

These are fighting kites with the string section near the kite coated with ground glass. There is a huge cheer when one kite cuts the other loose. Children are released through the fields like hounds after a fox, to claim the fallen kite that is drifting towards the horizon.

Further along the ridge, mature and tall eucalyptus trees tower over the fire trail, following the barbed wire fence. At this point, the children turn back towards home. Lelo wants to explore further. On a solo adventure, he ducks under the barb wire and follows a dusty track into the pine forest. The track begins to descend and eventually, pine needles crunch underfoot as the trail leads into a cool and shady pine forest. Feet slide over the oily pine needles, and the sharp and refreshing minty smells drift up.

It has been a long walk, and coming out of the pine forest, sandy soils reveal the seaside village of Reñaca. The beauty of the sea and village leaves young Lelo breathless. The beach is empty of swimmers, and the deep blue sea is agitated that day. The scene is as beautiful as it is scary. The ocean waves roll towards the shore in long rows with force and thundering noise. He observes that the waves have a never-ending mechanical precision, one wave after the other. It is late in the afternoon, so a short visit to the village satisfies, and it is time to head back home.

He climbs back up the sandy path and into the pine forest the way he came. Instead of joining up with the fire trail, he takes a shortcut through the wooded area. A clearing is before him. Underfoot, the soil sounds hollow. He brushes the loose dirt away and reveals a large timber barn door flat on the ground. The door is not secured or heavy, so he lifts it open. His eyes adjust to the darkness in the hole. Daylight reveals an underground storage area with military hardware; there are rifles and ammunition in open boxes. Lelo is not tempted to jump in since it is getting dark with sunset approaching, and he must get home. He closes the timber door and kicks soil over it to disguise its location once again.

Baby Paulina

The brothers now have a baby sister. Paulina is two years old and walking strong. On a sunny Saturday, the three leave early in the morning on an adventure. Since this is their first adventure together, they take small steps and regular breaks. The three cross the suburb to the edge of the estate and stop to watch the kites. They then move along the fire trail, along the barbed wire fence, but don't go far.

Midday passes and baby Paulina has fallen asleep, and she is no longer stepping forward. Her feet in the little white leather shoes are dragging behind her, so her brothers take it in turns to carry her. The large baby is not heavy; she is their sister.

On the outskirts of the estate, a policeman on horseback approaches. He sits high on his horse, and they strain to see his silhouette from the sun in their eyes.

‘Your parents have been worried sick about you three. You better go straight home,’ he instructs firmly. They did exactly that and arrive home mid-afternoon.

Parents are relieved that they haven't been kidnapped. There is discussion among the adults that children have in fact gone missing in the forest. Lelo thinks, *surely the nice hermit man living in the forest could not be a danger to children.* Well-hidden and away from the main paths, the forest man has built a shelter in the woods from branches to keep out the rain. Lelo had stopped to say hello to him while exploring the area.

Play And Mischief

With adventure in mind, the brothers get up to mischief after school. Instead of catching the bus home as their parents expect, they start catching a train in the opposite direction towards the city centre. There they discover the market vendor with the warm freshly roasted peanuts packed in a paper bag. There is nothing in the world better than that and it rivals a salted ripened tomato. They save their lunch money especially for these occasions.

Lelo and Alex didn't have extra money for train tickets, so they became friends with the train driver of a service steam engine. His job is to shift empty carriages from location to location. The train driver lets the brothers ride in the engine car with him. They stand outside the cab on a narrow steel platform, holding onto the metal handrail. The driver's offsider shovels coal into the firebox with intense focus, so they must stay out of his way. It isn't a fast ride, yet the hypnotic noise of the engine, with the steam belting out the top and the wind blowing in their hair, makes the ride an exhilarating experience.

At their destination, they jump off and wave goodbye to their train driver friend. The brothers run through the city streets in anticipation of finding the peanut vendor. They purchase a bag of freshly roasted peanuts to share. Sitting on a park bench and with child fingers only just strong enough to crack the shells, they fill their hungry mouths.

With the sun going down, they run to the bus stop. The early evening bus will take them up the hills and all the way home.

Fire In The Hills

Nature delivers another lesson for the young boys. On 22 January 1968, bushfires are consuming the forest in Viña del Mar and burning up the hills towards the houses on the ridge. Mother, her two young boys and a baby daughter are at home. Being in the path of the fire, she is in a high state of panic. Father, who rushed home from work, is stuck on the outskirts of the estate on the roadblocks. The firemen will not let anyone through at this stage.

The boys see the smoke cover the midday sun and cinders drift over the district's homes, fanned by an erratic wind. The sweet yet threatening smell of burning pine and eucalyptus trees is in the air.

Taking suggestion from the neighbours, mother disconnects and lifts with a bear hug, nineteen-kilogram gas bottles and puts them outside on the footpath. This is a wise call, because as the fire starts to consume homes, you can hear the gas bottles exploding in the distance.

Men drive past in trucks, picking up the gas bottles, taking advantage of this new free resource. The boys discuss whether the men will become victims of their own greed, as they picture the gas bottles exploding in the back of the truck. This is a powerful lesson for the boys regarding the latent opportunism in human nature.

In the crest of an adrenaline rush, mother lifts all their furniture and white goods to safer areas in the house. The boys follow her every move, but they are redundant since she is too strong.

By late afternoon, the fire is under control on the outskirts of the suburb. Father can get home to size up the situation and is incredibly relieved to see that his family is safe.

The boys are concerned about their friends and want to see how they have coped. With father home, they walk to the streets that the fire has affected. They reach the blackened streets and meet friends outside their homes, who are watching in despair at the smouldering ruins. People are exhausted with blackened hands and faces after fighting fiercely to protect their homes.

The newspaper reports that the fire destroyed six hundred hectares of forest and more than two hundred homes that day. The homes are rebuilt and the forest recovers, still the threat of fire lingers in the children's memories.

To Finish Days On A High

Alex and Lelo walk the suburban streets with eagerness and excitement, in search of a television. In 1969, television is a new and rare technology in the suburbs. The estate terrace houses have a small front garden that is normally just a dust strip. The large living room window looks out over the garden strip and onto the footpath. If the residents have a television and are welcoming people, they leave the front window and curtains open. Children gather at their front garden strip to watch the shows on television.

Even better, if children become friends with the house owner, they may get invited in. The brothers are polite boys and are invited in at one house. Looking about, it feels a bit odd sitting on a couch with strangers, yet it is good to be included. They are heartily grateful. One entrepreneurial family cleared out their furniture in the lounge room and set up rows of chairs like a cinema. At this house, you must make a coin donation to sit and watch television. There is an economic lesson here for the boys – find a way to provide a service and meet a demand.

Most people make a strong connection to the emergence of broadcast television. What is memorable about television that year? Of course, it is Neil Armstrong's first steps taken by

man on the moon. The boys see it happen in black and white on a flickering screen, through a terrace house window.

They also see Tom Jones do his thing on television. The boys discuss, *how odd that women toss their bras at him when he performs on stage*. They are too young to get it. Mother is a fan, so it is more her thing.