

A short story from this collection.



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1.4) Loss And Hope Shadow Migration

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



The young family ready for a new life. Unfinished opera house in the background - Sydney 1970.

Deep sleep repeatedly calls up dreams of a distant land. These are sad dreams, projecting in vivid colour a longing to reconnect with the past.

Young Hugo is ten years old, and his dream commences with a heightened sense of anticipation, as he approaches his grandparent's home. He is riding high above the street, perhaps aboard a bus. Through the glass window, the streets in Santiago Chile, where he felt their love and where he played with cousins and friends, are looking more familiar.

The city streets are narrow, and family businesses press against the footpath. Past the shops, houses of a post war era, are tightly packed together. Small cottage gardens peer through the heavily fenced front yards. The paved footpath curves around the welcoming corner shop with its weathered double doors and timber steps.

His grandparent's house will appear soon, land marked by a lush garden with broadleaf semi-tropical plants by the footpath. These mature plants meet the children at eye level and provide places to hide. The driveway, courtyard garden and house are secure behind a quarter masonry wall and a solid timber fence on top. Peering through the gaps in the fence, his grandfather may be seen in his gardening overalls, tending to his plants.

In the dream, something holds young Hugo back like the polarities of a powerful magnet. Then, an elastic like force pulls him away. Despite all his efforts to get there he cannot reach the house. A sense of anxiety then dominates, and grandparents' house slips away.

It is 1971, and he wakes up startled in Sydney, Australia. Migrating across the seas with his parents has created a permanent divide between him and his much-loved extended family.

Looking To The Past

Awake now and in a daydream, with his mind's eye, he can reach into that childhood world at will. Like an invisible ghost, he drifts through the hallways and rooms of his grandparent's house. He sees a collage of images and activities, and re-lives treasured memories.

In the lounge there is a piano where his mother likes to practice tunes while her brothers and sisters gather around and sing a song. Carmen is the eldest of five children. She has two sisters (Christina and Mireya) and two brothers (Sergio and Patricio) who look up to her and are in constant contact.

The youngest boy Patricio is only five years older than his nephew Hugo, and they have a special bond. Patricio sleeps in the far-right bedroom where his nephew also sleeps when he is staying over.

Lying on his stomach, Patricio's toes dangle over the end of the bed since he has outgrown his childhood bed. Young Hugo lines up the toes and gives them a good swift kick, then bolts out of the house and down the street. When he returns after hiding for a while, Patricio looks bewildered at the mischievous child with a mean streak. Still, he shows an abundance of love towards his nephew.

Grandfather Sergio retreats to his study in the evening. It is busy with books, trinkets, writing pens and paper. He likes to pass the time there and the magic of the room draws in the youngsters. The smell of sweet-scented tobacco emanates from his pipe and fills his study.

Grandmother Luisa likes to read in bed in the far-left bedroom down the hallway. She has a box of lollies under the bed and shares them with young Hugo.

Through the rear door of the house and past the pergola covered with real grapes, grandfather has set up a home office. He is an accountant.

Looking over his shoulder, but without disturbing him, young Hugo sees the handwritten account books with the corners of the pages turned up at critical points. Grandfather fastens his white shirt sleeves with sleeve holders so that they don't brush the wet ink from his fountain pen.

Past the rear home office is a magical shed, full of bicycles, tools, and old toys in storage. It is enough to stand at the door, let your eyes adjust to the dim light, and scan all the dated items on display.

The aunties (Carmen's sisters) are independent now and no longer live at home. However, they still seem part of the house since they retain close contact with their parents and siblings. Grandchildren Mireya and Cecilia join the children at play in that special house.

Playtime calls and on the opposite side of the road from Mario's and adjacent grandparents' house, is a large factory occupying the whole city block. It has large external windowsills where children from the neighbourhood sit and watch the people and vehicles go past.

Young Hugo sees grandfather preparing to go out in his newly purchased car. He acquired a used Citroen, possibly in exchange for bookkeeping work. It is one of those that you must crank up at the front to fire up the engine. It is difficult to start, and the children watch with amusement, the repeated cranking and cursing. Grandfather is easily agitated and impatient with the stubborn mechanical thing.

On that same street, Patricio teaches seven-year-old Hugo to ride a bicycle. Grandfather's 1950s bicycle is wheeled out to the street when the traffic is light. Only a boy, he learns to ride the big bicycle confidently, with his feet firmly on the pedals and the middle bar under his armpit.

On a hot day, Patricio makes iced chocolates for the children. His ever-growing group of nephews and nieces watch intently as he added chocolate powder, milk, and ice cubes to their tall glass. He then gives it a good stir with a fork. It is a real treat.

Memories are a wonderful thing, playing out in your mind in full colour. The grandchildren are excited when an expedition to grandfather's seaside cottage is announced.

It is a two-hour bus trip to the coastal town of San Sebastian. It is then an uphill walk along a sandy road that led to the cottage. Large pine trees line the street creating a mixed scent of pine and sea salt.

The cottage is on a sloping block surrounded by mature plants. Inside it is fully furnished ready for visitors. There are many places to explore and hide, in and out of the cottage.

Once settled in, it is time to explore the beach and bade in the ocean. In a group they walk on sandy paths down to the beach. Child cousins Mireya and Cecilia have not seen the ocean before, so in a moment of excitement they quickly drop their clothes and run at full speed into the waves. This surprises the adults who must make a quick rescue.

Patricio, Hugo, and brother David follow them into the water. They enjoy a cool swim before appetite wakens. Fortunately, the pastry vendor is walking the length of the beach with a tray of freshly baked cakes and rolls. The yellow rock cake is a favourite and fills the spot.

The Last Days

In 1970, the young family applied to migrate to Australia. Mother was the driving force behind this change. Carmen was courageous and had a vision of a better life. Hugo senior supported her intuition despite being neutral on the idea. The application was approved, to the surprise of extended family and the young family of six – mother, father and four children.

A large farewell party held at grandparent's house where the youngsters discover potato crisps for the first time. This is a good party they decide, because of the potato crisps, but the goodbyes are sad, with a sense of permanency.

The young family confirm their flights to Australia on PAN AM airlines. It is on their famous 747 at the dawn of the jumbo jet.

On departure, at the airport tarmac, after turning back for a final wave at relatives, young Hugo is astounded at the size and shape of the airplane up close. He stares up at it in disbelief, it is a giant steel bird. A tall metal staircase on wheels is placed up to the door just behind the cockpit.

Stepping into the airplane, they are welcomed by the smartly dressed air hostess. The smell of pre-prepared packaged meals wafts from the small kitchen behind the curtains. Hundreds of people board the aeroplane and located their seats along two long passageways.

During the extra-long night stretch, flying directly westward over the South Pacific Ocean, the projector screen rolled down at the front of the economy section, and movies were played for the passengers. The little headphones plugged into the side of the armrest, and it required fiddling with the station dial before the sound of the movie was heard through small crackly-sounding speakers.

New City, New Continent

On arrival in Sydney, the warm sun shines bright like it does over Santiago. Both cities are in fact almost in parallel in the southern hemisphere.

The young family and other migrants are taken by bus to a migrant hostel at East Hills in Canterbury-Bankstown. It is an army camp that has been converted into a hostel. Awaiting the new migrants, are rows of corrugated iron Nissen huts forming small streets. The huts are oddly shaped in their half circle form, yet they are warm and cosy inside. Through the eyes of a child, they complement a great adventure to a faraway land.

The children and adults alike form strong and lasting friendships at the migrant hostel. The Kindley family from Chile (Peter, Teresa, and children Marly, and Margot), are truly kind and gentle people facing the same migration challenges. Peter and Hugo senior, become great friends and the families are in contact throughout life.

The communal kitchen is a good place to catch up with friends in the morning and evening. Residents pick up a tray and slide it along the display glass pointing at various dishes to the person serving.

The smell of hot meals reaches their noses with a tasty promise. The ingredients are familiar, but the meals prepared by the army chefs are Australian. Generally, meat, vegetables and rice or mashed potatoes are served. On special days they see a potato bake, and for dessert, bread and butter pudding. What a terrific introduction to Australian delights.

The migrant children are enrolled in the local schools while their parents go out looking for work. The children collect a packed lunch from the kitchen, consisting of a sandwich, a piece of fruit and a slice of fruit cake. Hugo treasures his little packed lunch and feels spoiled. Primary school is a joy with the 2 p.m. ABC radio sing along including the song Lemon Tree, by The Seekers and all those entertaining children's favourites.

There is also serious study time in English. The Spanish language is useless to young Hugo now; there is just silence in his head. Eventually, English words fill the silence. He discovers that the key to learning a new language is to avoid translating. It is best to learn English fresh, as if you are a newborn. Other migrants are translating word-for-word and that is a fruitless exercise because the expressions don't translate well or form clear sentences.

Father knew that work options improved with better English, and to this end, he asked his children to speak with him in English at home.

This is a remarkably unusual request in a migrant home. Normally, migrant families speak in their first language at home. By changing to English at home the young family all learn together and integrate with ease into Australian society.

Wider Horizons

The young family moves from the migrant hostel to a government rental apartment in North Ryde. Their apartment is newly built, clean, and fresh.

Father has secured a job working on the road gangs. Manual unskilled work is all that is available to him despite his building skills. He is not one to complain and around the children he makes light of his wacker plate days by demonstrating the constant shaking. The children laugh. Yet, Carmen feels bad for him. The transition from professional worker to a road gang is a ‘character building’ change, and it is a common path for new migrants.

What cheers father up immensely, is that he can eventually afford to purchase his first car. He has his heart set on a used 1963 blue Ford Falcon sedan. While the family is on a bus going past the Parramatta car yards, he points it out. The handsome vehicle sits proudly, looking at passing cars, waiting to be adopted and to be on the road again.

With his license to drive and his blue Ford, father with the family have the freedom to explore the city and even venture further out. A drive in the Blue Mountains takes them on a steep winding road with forested areas on either side, and there is a glimpse at the valley below around every turn. The children want to hang out the window to get a better view, but father commands that, *‘arms and heads be in the car, at all times.’*

The horizons widen for the young family and integration into society is smooth. Intuitively, they know that it is not about assimilation or abandoning their cultural heritage. The aim is to value equally their new Australian culture and land through good integration. A big concept but the young family is open minded and appreciative.

In time, young Hugo’s dreams of loss and grieving for his grandparents and the safety of their home fade over time, but the memories remain clear. The people, experiences, and images of another land are sharp in his mind. The joyful and rewarding experiences in this unique multicultural land of Australia counteract the feelings of loss.