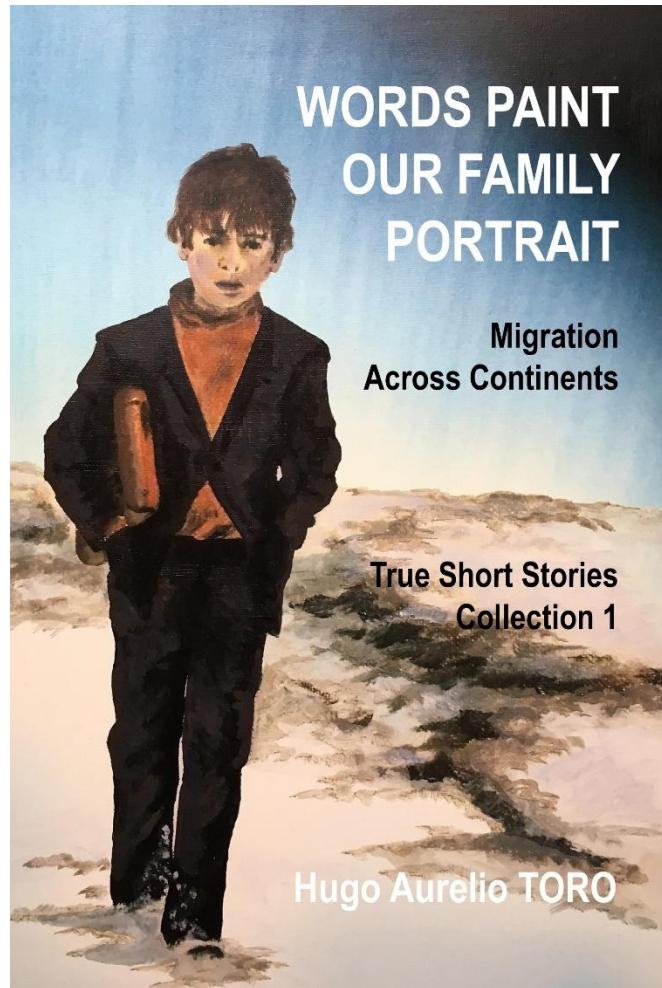


# A short story from this collection.



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# 1.5) Bullying Wakens The Centurion

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro

Aged eleven, he is adopting a complex survival strategy: first understand the bully and his motivation; then call out the behaviour as wrong; and lastly show no fear in doing so. He is not an aggressive child nor is he submissive.

For the young brothers, primary school days in Sydney in 1971 are wondrous and challenging all at once. They are new migrants to Australia, and in the Sydney streets, they first encounter racially based bullying.

While walking home after school one afternoon, a group of Australian boys follow them. The brothers pick up the pace along the quiet suburban streets, but the boys soon catch up to them.

With fists clenched, young Hugo places himself between his brother and the threat. He knows that they have come to torment David.

‘Let us bash your brother, and you can go free,’ the leader addresses Hugo in a casual tone. At that moment, he is awash with disgust at the proposal.

It wasn’t fear; he is just horrified at the thought of idiotic aggression. He stays silent, and it is clear from his stern body language that the proposal is absurd. He fixed his stare on the leader and waits for him to make the first move.

The brothers keep an eye on the others, making sure they don’t walk behind them, which is the way pack mentality tends to work. The bullies search for signs of fear in the brothers but did not see it, so eventually they move on.

David held his ground, and Hugo is proud of his brother.

## New City, New Challenges

In 1972, after the migrant hostel days in Sydney and a year integrating into Australian society, their parents, Hugo, and Carmen, in their fearless way, move the young family to Adelaide. Father secured a job on the construction of the new Modbury Hospital. With a big grin on his face, he announces that they have purchased a new house, in the same suburb.

Father drives his treasured blue 1963 Ford Falcon sedan across the Hay Plains at a gentle pace, with mother as co-pilot and four children in the back seat. Drought had been relentless in the 1960s, and the region is still dry and inhospitable. Father stops the car by the side of the highway to let the children contemplate the power of nature. The skeletons from domestic animals’ rest on the red dust where they had died from lack of water and feed.

They reach Mildura and visit a friend from the migrant hostel days who settled there to manage a fruit farm and produce dry fruits. The family is Western European and experienced in this field. They stay the night in the farmhouse. The two fathers with vastly different backgrounds (yet, with a shared migration experience), talk until late.

The next afternoon, the family arrive in Adelaide safe and well-rested. Their house is a typical single level four-bedroom dwelling, in a new suburb. The fresh red roof tiles look smart, and the brick work is creamy and bright – it is the perfect dream home.

From the backyard, there is a clear view of a distant nature reserve and creek. The children felt their curiosity bubbling up.

They slumbered the first night in blankets on the floor. Even a hard timber floor softens when it is your own shelter. The next morning, father goes into town to get beds from the furniture store.

When they return home, one of the neighbours welcomes them with a basket of fruit. That kind gesture is appreciated by the young family and instantly they felt at home.

## Settling In

In Adelaide, the four children (Hugo, David, Paulina, and Patricia) make friends quickly in their street. They attend the local primary school that is close to home. The parents are working full time. They have their commitments and are happily earning an income.

With parents busy with work, young Hugo's role as older brother is to get the children to and from school safely. The youngest sister, Patricia is four years old and in preschool. She sits on the bicycle handlebars on their new red dragster and knows to hold on tight as they zoom along the streets to her pre-school. Paulina makes friends with Susan and Steven from the street. She attends primary school with her brothers.

Their teacher observes that young Hugo is running late for class because of his morning duties. At the next parent teacher meeting, his parents are questioned on this matter. With their work commitments, they have no other option but to give the eldest boy the school run responsibilities.

Time at the Modbury West Primary School is thoroughly enjoyable. Their communication skills are improving fast. They are getting better at understanding the boys and girls at the school. Hugo has also taken an interest in the mobile bus library that comes by the school on a weekly basis. He borrows books rich in English culture, in contrast to the Spanish children's tales. The books by Alf Proysen about Mrs Pepperpot are most amusing.

He concludes that languages are windows into different cultures and expand the mind. He then sets himself a challenge, to maintain and improve comprehension in his two languages, Spanish and English.

## A Refuge In Art

In his 12th year, he still finds lessons difficult in primary school. English is his second language, and he is learning as fast as he can. His teacher took an interest and wanted to include him somehow.

‘What do you enjoy doing the most?’ she asks with a genuine interest in her voice.

‘I like drawing,’ is his eager reply. In fact, he is exceptionally good at drawing.

During class, she set aside a section of the blackboard for him and provided a set of new colour chalks. He drew an eagle for the class. She then persuaded him to lead a class art exercise. Their drawings from that class were particularly good and they were displayed in the school library.

That kind and astute act from young Hugo's teacher, found a permanent place in his heart. It was as if she had looked into his soul and shone a light on his creative skills.

His comprehension improves quickly, books become more complex in his selection. He even develops an interest in ancient history. He thinks, *how wonderful it is that age and time extends far beyond his twelve years.*

Positivity is all around him and Hugo is a happy child.

Yet, he soon discovers that boys can be cruel and insensitive, and it is a behaviour that he heartily rejects. One of his female classmates could not wait for the break and sadly, wet herself in class. This trigger the boys in the class to laugh and humiliate her. Hugo decides to stand by her desk to put a stop to the bullying. They become friends after that, and she looks for him in the school grounds.

## His Roman Centurion

The older boys in the next grade, however, have taken a real dislike to Hugo. After school, he is on his bicycle at his street corner and three boys set upon him. There is no provocation, and they pounce.

The punches ring out in his head like distant explosions from a 21-gun salute. His brain is not registering pain, only the echoing sound. He is a strong boy, so his attackers weren't going to knock him over easily.

Hugo raised his eyes and saw a boy within reach, and struck him in the face, hard, sending the boy stumbling backwards. But three on one is not a fair fight.

As the blows come in, he holds onto his treasured red dragster bicycle firmly in case it was taken from him. The bicycle with its raised handlebar, three gears on the centre bar, and whitewall tyres was a birthday gift from his father - that made his fondness for this bicycle even greater.

At that moment, his father turns the corner in his car, returning home. The boys recognise him, and they disperse quickly.

The hurt and confusion is internalised by Hugo, and he isn't ready to speak of this at home. His father wants to find out more. It disturbed him to see his son set upon by bullies. Yet, for a migrant boy growing up in Adelaide in the 1970s, this was the norm.

Hugo told himself, *next time things will be different*, but he is unsure how. He only knows that being submissive is not his way. Perhaps history and battle strategies has the answer.

By the end of the school year in 1973, the librarian had got to know the children well, and she wrote a lovely letter to the parents. She has a complementary comment about all the children, which pleases the parents no end. Hugo cherishes that important glowing note and stores it safely in a shoe box, amongst valued letters and birthday cards. Kind words are important to Hugo.

The local older boys are now determined to make Hugo's life a misery. He is constantly on his guard for unexpected bouts of bullying in the streets.

On a sunny afternoon, Hugo is riding his bicycle past the creek and nature reserve near their house. Five boys, plus their girlfriends, block his path with malice in mind. He had already decided that a beating like the last time was not going to happen again. So, at that moment, he chose to firmly stand his ground. Fear dissolves and is replaced with a heightened sense of awareness and calm.

He steps off his bicycle and gently set it aside. The boys then walk him off the road into a quiet area in the reserve, away from the view of cars and people passing by. They stop at a clearing amongst the trees and next to the creek. Heavy rain had cut the creek edge, exposing sheer drops with large rocks below as the creek dried up. Hugo surveys the risky eroded edge to avoid a nasty fall, in the heat of a fight.

He knows this area well. Almond trees grow here, as part of an abandoned orchard. The sad trees are uncared for and covered in spider webs. Mid-summer, the fruit begins to dry on the trees, and the inner shell is partly revealed announcing a crunchy interior. With the agility of a young teenager, Hugo climbs high on the branches with a bag, to pick the almonds. He is not frightened by the abundant spiders in their own habitat. They are harmless and he works around them.

He is brought back to the present by a voice.

‘Italian boy, you are going to get a beating,’ the leading boy delivered the news. Hugo was not Italian, but he can understand the confusion with his olive Latin skin, but it isn’t the time to clarify this point.

At that moment, he begun to visualise an ancient warrior – he felt the presence of a Roman Centurion by his side. Weird, yes, but how else does an imaginative thirteen-year-old boy deal with this situation? With calmness in his voice, he agrees to fight them. However, it will be on his terms.

‘I’ll fight you one at a time,’ Hugo replies with confidence. The boys, with a look of surprise on their faces, agree to the request.

‘Which one first?’ the lead boy asks, amused and curious at the same time. The centurion is now coaching Hugo, and as per his advice, he points to the biggest boy.

Laughter echoes out from the group. The big boy is a head taller and rather bulky. Tactically, his choice is well calculated, because taking on the smallest boy would mean that each fight gets harder.

The big boy comes forward with his arms casually by his side. Towards his friends, he made a snide joke and then, with sudden ferocity, rushes forward. With quick reactions, Hugo steps aside, and the big boy stumbles past. The boy returns to take swings at his opponent’s head. Hugo ducks under his fist each time.

Frustrated, the big boy charges head down and angry, like a bull aiming for a matador. Hugo lets him advance, he clutches the front of the opponent’s shirt, then throws himself backwards. In a fluid action, he kicks his legs upwards, and the big boy is in flight over him, in a somersault. There is a loud thud, and dust rose as his opponent lands heavily on his back on hard soil.

On his feet again, the big boy, sends a flurry of punches, but none connect. With his right foot, Hugo feels the loose edge of the creek bank behind him, and he heard something drop into the water below. He moves away from the loose dirt on the creek edge.

The big boy lowers his arms for a moment, tired from all the effort. It is what Hugo was waiting for - a weakness. He clenches his fist and strikes upwards with force. Unintentionally, due to being much shorter than his opponent, he connects with the

boy's Adams apple, who drops to the ground gasping for air with his face rapidly turning blue.

The group erupts with cheers and congratulates the migrant boy on his success. Hugo savours the moment, and it feels nice to be slapped on the back by the boys and girls, however, there was still a blue-faced boy lying on the ground. Concerned, he rushes to help him breathe again. The big boy eventually sucks in air and isn't bitter or angry at all. They all leave the nature reserve as friends, chivalry triumphant at their age.

At home, father deduces that something untoward has happened. Hugo is late for dinner, covered in dirt, and missing a shoe. That is what that splash was, his shoe had dropped into the creek. Father is furious.

'Who are those boys? I want to talk with the parents,' he demands. There is no longer an issue with the boys, yet as the head of the family, his father speaks with the parents.

Life is good now. Hugo is just a migrant boy growing up in an Anglo-Saxon dominated city. He is at peace with the challenges and rewards that it brings. He has also made an interesting observation beyond his years. That is that children do not bully on their own accord; it is a learned behaviour passed on from their influencers and parents. He doesn't blame the children.

His centurion coached him well, yet Hugo finds it peculiar that, growing up in Adelaide as a migrant boy, he would channel a Roman Centurion in times of need. In fact, an interest in the Roman Empire (and war strategies) had morphed itself into a subconscious protector.

He wonders what other strategies children use to manage their colosseum moments.