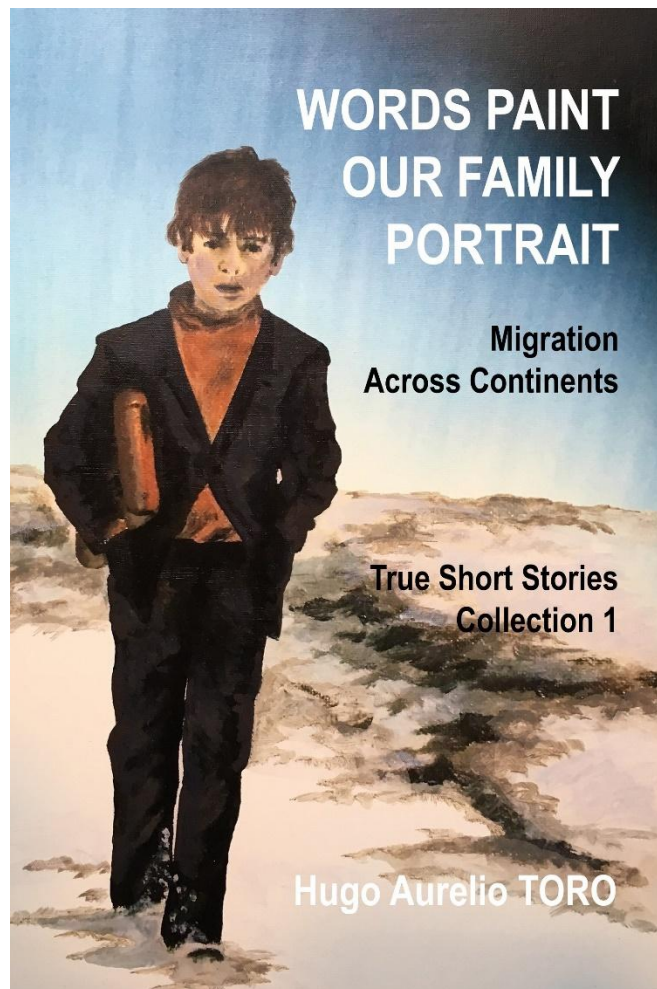


A short story from this collection.



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1.6) A Predator Is About

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



The children (Hugo, Patricia, Paulina, and David) at home in the backyard - Adelaide 1972.

Predators are silent, swoop in fast, strike and they leave just as quickly as they appeared. Yet this does not reflect the careful and patient stalking that must have occurred. One can only wonder what obsessive traits drive them to perform acts of violence with total disregards for their victims. Whether successful or not, they leave trauma behind of one kind or another.

With their work commitments, the parents establish a pattern of behaviour that leaves the children alone between 4 and 6 p.m. on workdays. The children aged four to twelve, attend nearby schools. The children make their way home from school together. It is the eldest child who has responsibility for a safe journey to and from school of all siblings. Since they are active children, they play in the street with friends after school.

To a predator lurking in the shadows, this signals an opportunity.

Children Are Home Alone

In 1973 in the city of Adelaide, the young family are well settled into their new suburban home and life. Their house is located on a quiet suburban street in a new part of Adelaide. It is their castle, a single level yellow brick and red roof tile home.

The parents, Hugo senior and Carmen, have found full time employment. Father is working on the construction of the new Modbury Hospital, and mother is working as a kitchen hand in the city at a fancy hotel. Father is home by 6 p.m. but mother arrives much later in the evening.

In the meantime, young brothers Hugo and David, and friend Mark, who are aged eleven and twelve, ride their bicycles through the reclaimed vineyard fields at the edge of the suburb. The fields are overgrown, and the bull thistle weeds stand tall and tightly packed together, but this does not deter the boys from exploring. Back at home, they stop to remove the prickles from their bare legs and arms. They then settle down to play marbles in the front garden.

Mark likes to play marbles, but despite his enthusiasm, he is bad at it. Young Hugo strips him of all his marbles by the end of the game, but he returns them. Mark's father is a policeman who owns the latest model XY Ford sedan in gloss white. The fact that Mark's father is a policeman, is not why Hugo returns the marbles; the new Ford is impressive even for youngsters who have a long wait before they can drive.

Sister's Paulina and Patricia play with Susan and Steven from across the street. Paulina watches over her little sister, but Patricia the youngest at four years of age, is not timid and climbs onto the garden shed that is fence high. She tumbles off the roof and lands heavily but is ok. The children comfort her, and the crying stops. She is a tough little child.

After play time, and triggered by the sunset, the children settle in at home to wait for their parents to come home. There is music on the radio to keep them entertained. A new English artist by the name of Leo Sayer is regularly featured on the 5KA radio station.

When father gets home, there is an urgent doctor's visit, since Patricia is wearing a shiny bump on her forehead.

On another occasion, young Hugo is struck in the face by a tall bull thistle weed when riding his bicycle in the fields. A thorn is lodged under his eyelid, and he cannot see out of that eye. Again, father must do the urgent trip to the doctor. To make things worse, David and Paulina have grazed knees from having crashed the bicycle at the end of the street where it drops steeply towards the creek. They were riding together when they lost control of the bicycle towards the intersection below.

Hugo senior and Carmen, with their limited English, frantically try to explain their children's injuries to the doctor on the various visits. The children are on their own those few hours and far too overactive. Injuries are part of playtime.

Their doctor is unimpressed and takes father aside for a lecture.

'You can be reported you know,' he says. Hugo senior is horrified, feeling that he has been blamed for his children's injuries.

The Encounters

On a non-eventful afternoon when the children are alone, shortly after 5 p.m. there is an unexpected knock at the front door.

Young Hugo partly opens the door while holding the door handle firmly. He recognises the face at the door but is not sure where from. Someone from the neighbourhood perhaps but not

a family friend. A long haired, tall young man is at the door. The fellow brushes his long light brown hair away from his eyes and glares at young Hugo. He does not introduce himself; he instead jams his foot between the door and door frame and pushes on the door.

Those seconds of unfamiliarity at the door, prepare him for a defensive action. He holds the door firmly and kicks the foot at the door out of the way. Surprised, the fellow stumbles back into the front porch, and Hugo quickly locks the door.

Young Hugo is now in full protective mode. He sees his two little sisters seating in the lounge room, and intuition tells him to lock the other doors. He rushes down the hallway to the laundry door that leads to the backyard, where his brother is playing.

‘DAVID, get inside now,’ Hugo calls out. The urgency in his voice shocks his little brother into action, who then quickly makes his way up the back steps.

At that moment, the fellow strolls into the backyard with long determined strides. He body language shows that he is agitated. The backdoor is locked safely behind David. Young Hugo then, quickly made his way around the house locking all the windows.

The four children are safe inside the house but not free from danger. They huddle together on the kitchen floor where the close walls and cabinets may offer further protection. In a dust bin in the kitchen are empty glass soft drink bottles. The large glass Fanta bottle is heavy and would make an effective club. They hold a bottle each ready to defend. The minutes pass and they watch the sunlight through the kitchen and family room windows drop and fade. They then sit in silence and in darkness as evening closes in. Their parents get home as scheduled, and the little soldiers can stand down.

Fortunately, the predator had been deterred, and he didn’t force his way into the house. Hugo a young teenager now, makes sense of life by analysing complex situations. He concludes that with people like these, if you interrupt their flow with an unexpected readiness to defend, they prefer to retreat into their own darkness.

Hugo senior, who has long shifts on the build of the new Modbury Hospital, tries to get home earlier. He is not too far away and has his own car to get to and from work. Carmen must stay back late at the fancy hotel restaurant to clean up once the chefs close the kitchen. At the end of her evening shift, the chefs let her take unsold meals and cakes home. The food treats are always a surprise for the children waiting at home – cold roast beef, shrinking vegetables and hardened gravy. Mother is enthusiastic about not having to cook, but the children agree, *the cold meals are not so delicious*.

Mother travels by bus and is dropped off at the bus stop by the nature reserve and the creek. In that reserve, Hugo has discovered an abandoned almond tree orchard. He loves to spend time there, climb the trees and pick the maturing almonds. From there it is a short walk home up the main street and then right onto their own side street.

One evening, a sexual predator accosted mother on that stretch of isolated nature reserve. She manages to fight her attacker off and she then run all the way home. Back at home, yet still in shock and frightened she tells of her ordeal. Her husband and the children gather around her wide eyed.

She explains that that evening, she was the sole traveller to step off the bus at her stop. In the dim streetlight, she was grabbed from behind by someone who came out of the shadows. A man put one hand over her mouth, and with the other, grabbed her groin. She fought hard while he wrestled her towards the bushes away from the road.

In the struggle, the top of his hand slipped into her mouth, and she bit down with force, drawing blood. He let her go and addressed his painful injury. Sobbing, she quickly ran from him and to the safety of home.

Father comforted her while the children held her hand. She sat down and took time to compose herself. She then described the man as possibly in his late twenties, tall, and with long light brown hair.

To young Hugo's surprise, he feels that he has seen this man more than once. It is the same man that was at the front door not long ago, trying to force his way into the house. He does not reveal this to his parents, since it is only a theory that he is developing.

He shuffles through faces in his memory looking for more clues. One of his skills is that he can recall images and accurate detail. Perhaps not a photographic memory but close to that.

He makes the connection with a man of that same description who often boards the public transport bus full of schoolchildren in the morning. Hugo catches the bus from Modbury to Gilles Plains where he is attending St. Paul's College. This individual boards the bus midway on Nelson Road and, with his odd behaviour has made an impression in his mind.

This fellow boards the bus and makes his way along the centre aisle. He glances down at the schoolchildren, brushing his long hair away from his eyes. His behaviour is unlike that of someone going to work. Commuters on their way to work are seated quickly and read a newspaper. There is no stare or even acknowledgement of other passengers. The journey is their focus, not others. Instead, this fellow stands at the centre of the bus and examines the passengers.

Accompanied by father, their mother reports this incident to the police. Their English is limited but the incident is explained clearly, and a report is lodged. Nothing is said to the police about the attempted home invasion or the suspicious bus behaviour because these are Hugo's memories that are loosely linked.

There is no follow up by the police and young Hugo thinks, *it is likely that the predator will continue his criminal behaviour for decades without ever attracting the attention of the police.*

Unsolved crime

Coincidentally, a major unsolved crime is committed - same dates and same city. It is one of South Australia's most notorious crimes according to the Crime Stoppers media release.

On 25 August 1973, eleven-year-old Joanne Ratcliffe and four-year-old Kiste Gordon disappeared while at a football match at the Adelaide Oval.

'What is known is that there was a substantial crowd in attendance on that day when the girls left the Edwin Smith stand to go to the toilet. A short time later when they had not returned Mr Ratcliffe went looking for them. Witnesses reported the girls may have been seen later with an unknown man near Port Road, Thebarton. The investigation identified that the girls may have been forcibly removed from the Oval by a man thought to be aged in his 40s.' www.crimestopperssa.com.au

The crime stoppers sketch of the suspect shows him with a balding head and wearing a hat. The long hair that Hugo recalls on his suspect, seems to be ill fitting and perhaps a wig disguise. Regardless, the coincidence is one thing, but even more disturbing is the thought that they could have been the victim of a similar crime. Young Hugo feels that a higher power, not just luck, is protecting the family.