

# A short story from this collection.



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Cover artwork by Hugo Aurelio Toro, based on a calendar image by Marko Gajardo 1983.

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The full collection is located using:

ISBN 978-1-7635105-3-1 eBook

ISBN 978-1-7635105-6-2 paperback

## 1.7) Students Rattle The Institution

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro

The strap that awaits the boys is a punishment tool made from woven leather that is a half inch thick and eight inches long. It creaks menacingly in its threatening language when flexed. The Christian Brothers take pleasure in displaying it in front of the students.

The schoolboys, mostly aged thirteen, pivot from their jovial and competitive selves to outrage at what was unfolding in front of them.

On a clear afternoon, the boys from St Paul's College of Gilles Plains in Adelaide gather for their sports day. Adorning their school colours, they dress in t-shirts, shorts, and sneakers. The running grass track, around the perimeter of the playing field is freshly mowed. It is soft underfoot, with fresh grass smells drifting up. Bright white lines in chalk mark the way.

The boys complete their warmup lap of the oval as instructed by the college Christian Brothers, and mostly to satisfaction - except for one boy. He is overweight, and fatigues easily from the exercise. Half a lap is all he can muster before dropping to his knees, exhausted. The Brother in charge loses his cool and shouts across the oval at the boy left on the running track.

‘GET UP AND GET MOVING,’ is the command piercing the afternoon tranquillity. He then rushes across the oval to reach the boy.

He kicks the boy repeatedly along the running track to get him to move faster. The boy sobs and trots forward in small bursts. The boot connects every time he stops.

No one on the oval that day sought confirmation, and there was no attempt at a group coordinated response. The boys stand confronted as individuals and look on in disbelief.

In unison, they went to the aid of the fat boy. Five or six boys jump on the Brother's back and take him to the ground under their weight. Once on the ground, they punch and kick him repeatedly. The Brother surrenders quickly, and others come to defuse the aggression.

This is a strict school with high discipline standards. It is surprising that nothing is said that day or during the week about the incident. The boys, prepare for the punishment. It is to be the leather strap across their hands, for sure.

There is a special and heated meeting with parents, where opinions differ. Some parents want the boys punished. In 1974, there was a willingness to completely hand over the discipline of the boys to the Christian Brothers as has been done historically. Fortunately, a group of parents, express disappointment with the treatment of the unfit boy and comprehend the students' actions.

The defence of a classmate has shaken-up the establishment at a time when the ways of the past are under increasing scrutiny. Times are changing and the Catholic School corporal punishment system is under pressure to reform.

## Discipline Or Barbarism

On arriving at the school and attending his first class, Hugo instantly focuses on the mean device hanging to the side of the blackboard in a long footy sock. It looks down on the boys peering through the cotton weave.

When class starts, it is a practice to lock the door. Outside, any latecomers wait for their fate. Ten minutes into the class, the teacher in charge takes the strap down from the wall and goes to the door. When he opens the classroom door, there are pale, frightened faces on the other side. One by one, the boys enter the classroom and put out a hand. The strap swings fast, and it strikes the teenage palm with force. The pain is blinding and unbearable. Daylight and the passing of time is zapped from their senses as they embrace the pain. Within seconds, an angry red stripe swells across their palm and blood rushes to protect the damaged tissue.

If it is possible to have a preference, the boys prefer a clean strike across the palm to a miss-hit across the fingertips. There are no words to describe a miss-hit and the shocking pain that follows. Your brain sparks in confusion at the assault on the nerve endings. Instantly, the fingertips distort out of shape and glow red. After the punishment, it will take days before that child hand can hold a pencil again with comfort.

There is a further lesson on what *not* to do. A late to class boy, under a protective impulse, pulls his hand away as the strap whistles past. It continues through with speed and strikes the Brother on his own inside leg, who flinches from the pain and lets out a squeal. The whole class buzzes with a chorus of soft cheers. The teacher is now hurting, insulted and angry. When he recovers, the class then witnesses a double dose for that boy - a furious strike on each hand.

Hugo's brother David also attends the college, in the grade below. His health is deteriorating despite being on prescribed medication. One recess, a student friend comes running with urgency to alert Hugo that his brother is unwell in the toilet block. Hugo rushes to assist him, and when he gets there, he is relieved that David is unhurt. He remains disoriented for a while, so Hugo stays back to help him recover. This emergency makes them late for class.

The teacher locks them out of class. Staying calm, Hugo waits for ten minutes to pass before the classroom door re-opens. They have done nothing wrong, so he fears nothing. He has faith in human nature, and that reason will be heard. When the door opens, he explains where he was, but the teacher is dismissive. To his surprise, the teacher even seems pleased to see him on the wrong side of the door.

‘I knew I would get you sometime,’ he whispers as Hugo steps into the classroom. He reluctantly puts out his hand to receive the punishment.

Those words echoed in Hugo's mind for a long time as an example of how judgement can sometimes be so wrong. That evening at home, the boys show their red palms. Their parents are shocked and outraged and go to the school first thing in the morning to lodge a complaint with the principal. They reject the view that the Christian Brothers have a right to discipline children as they see fit.

The boys are wiser and play by the rules as much as they can. In the school playground, the two brothers only have a conflict with one boy. This boy is related to someone senior in the school board, and therefore he throws his weight around. His body language displays a superior attitude in the school playground.

From a distance across the playground, Hugo can see that his brother and the boy with the attitude, are about to fight during recess. He runs to them and intervenes by grabbing the boy by the arms from behind and holding him steady. David takes the opportunity to unleash a

flurry of punches on his body. Hugo has no time to stop him. It is not a good look that he is holding a boy in the lower grade while his brother beats on him. Without fail, they are to cross the strap again.

Despite the evil strap, fond memories are made of schooling at St Paul's College. Hugo appreciates the learning techniques, and he enjoys genuine friendships. He is a good student, punctual and attentive in class. Having recently migrated from a non-English speaking country, he started with a limited English vocabulary, so he is assigned a study buddy. Because the buddyng partnership is about learning, there is no shame or objection from either party.

Halfway through class, they are permitted to leave for their own one to one learning session. The study buddies sit on a bench somewhere on the school grounds, and Hugo reads aloud from a book. His words are projected into open space to mingle with the sound of the wind, birds, and distant traffic. At first, he is reading a string of syllables only. They focus on the sound and the pronunciation rather than the meaning. Eventually, comprehension improves, and Hugo finds himself enjoying the stories. The college must be commended for the study buddy approach using syllables to learn language.

The college must also be commended for controlling bullying and discrimination. Hugo finds it impressive that the boys all get along despite their diverse backgrounds. The neutral attitude towards his olive skin is refreshing and calming. Hugo is uncertain whether the students are intimidated into behaving well or are just well-educated boys. A bit of both, he concludes. Overall, he is relieved to be free of discrimination based on race or social status. He has experienced them both in the past.

It comes as an even bigger surprise each day, to find his red dragster bicycle hanging on the bicycle rack from the front wheel, where he left it in the morning. In a public school or public space, he is certain that it would be stolen.

## A Hard-nosed Teenager

The distance from Hugo's home to school is four kilometres. He often rides his bicycle to clear his head, and it is a peaceful ride. He is beginning to need the quiet because his head has become a noisy place, crowded with ideas that are leading him into uncertain territory. Puberty has arrived, and it is a surprise to him. Like builders expanding foam fills a wall cavity, so is his head filling with thoughts.

A significant issue is that his parents were raised in the 1940s and 1950s. They did not discuss sex with the children. It is a no-go zone at home, so all his knowledge comes from other boys and outsiders. He can also see his siblings struggle as they mature in a vacuum.

On a humorous note, when mother purchases a television, and they are enjoying evening viewing, father is poised to turn it off at any sign of amorous behaviour. The children are amused by sudden bursts of censorship, pre the TV remote days.

In those early teenage years, Hugo discovers that the transition from obliging boy to hard-nosed teenager is fast and dangerous. He feels a disconnect happening, and a loss of care. On a Saturday, a good school friend arranges a trip into the city centre. The boy's parents trust Hugo to look after their boy who hasn't been to the city on his own before. The friend is the same age, but unlike Hugo, he is a gentle and timid boy. They have a fun day exploring the Adelaide Zoo. There are fascinating animals from all continents there, ones that you only see in books. An ice-cream break in the shade is a treat, and they discuss their favourite animal so far.

At the end of the day, the two boys walk to the bus terminal. A single bus will get Hugo home, or two if he takes his friend home first. A coldness comes over him.

‘That is your bus over there,’ Hugo said and points to a bus. ‘I’m taking this one home.’ Without another word, he boards his bus.

From his seat and out of the corner of his eye, Hugo can see that his friend looks gutted. He is standing on the footpath, glued to the spot while he stares at the bus pulling away. Hugo knows it is wrong to abandon a friend, and this act will break trust with the boy’s parents.

A year passes, and the schoolboys become increasingly interested in females. A group of boys start to meet by the girl’s college next door to see if they can talk to the nice girls there. Suzi Quatro is on the charts in 1974. Conflicted, the boys are far more drawn to Suzi’s album poster that year – the one with Suzy in the leather suit unzipped to the belly button. They didn’t know what a ‘Devil Gate Drive’ was or a ‘Can The Can’, but hard rock sure sounds liberating.

To Hugo, the thought of a young lady leading a rock band is even more remarkable. Suzi is challenging norms in the male dominated rock music scene. He ignores the disrespect that she attracts and instead admires her strength of character. Overall, he finds determination and drive in people appealing and not something to criticize. This sexual awakening and new maturity, gives him further insight into human behaviour. He becomes aware of the playful, caring, and healthy desires. But there is a darker side, that strikes like a snake in flight.

## **Snake In Flight**

Pedalling his bicycle home after school and already halfway there, he recalls that he left a book in class. He will need it for his homework.

He turns his bicycle around and returns to a quiet school that seems eerie without the activity and noise of the daytime hours. The students have already left. Hugo moves quickly into the courtyard, leading to a line of classrooms, and steps straight into his classroom which is still unlocked. It is then that the ‘startled snake’ makes itself known. The hairs in the back of his neck stand up, and he takes a quick step back.

On the floor, and partly obscured by the schoolteacher’s desk, are two people who appear to be wrestling. It is his teacher and a school friend in a hold. His friend is a handsome blonde boy, and his teacher is a middle-aged Brother. Seeing Hugo at the door, his teacher jumps up and pretends to be going about other business. His friend lies frozen on the floor. Hugo deliberately searches his eyes for a call for help, but there is just a vacant stare across the room.

Time passes and the incident is never raised with the boy. Hugo wonders if the sexualised play is a one off or repeated. He is too young to know what to do with this information but old enough to know it is not right.

As Hugo grows older, that incident remains vivid in his mind. Thirty-nine years later, in 2013, the Julia Gillard government calls a wide-ranging royal commission to examine religious and non-religious institutions and their response to child abuse allegations. Hugo follows the news with intense interest to see where the complaints are coming from. They are in the thousands. Not surprising, expensive lawyers discredit victims and protect the Church. Hugo knows that Popes will come and go; they will make their apologies; but real change will be avoided.

In fairness to the private education system, the barbaric discipline practices, alongside the perceived inherent right to punish children, are from the dark ages and are discontinued. The class of 1974 at St Paul’s College broke new ground by going to the aid of a school friend. They demanded more humane treatment of the students and challenged the strap on that one sports day. With that rebellious act, they rattle the institution like a minor earthquake predicting bigger tremors to come.