

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

1.8) An Unlikely Teenage Bodyguard

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



David and Hugo at Telopea Park High School – Canberra 1977.

Nanda is being bullied badly in high school, and it is unfair since he is a gentle and passive fellow. A characteristic of bullies is that they look for weaker people to torment. Nanda is the perfect bullying target for the Milano school gang.

Nanda calls over his new high school friend to discuss something important. He wants to share his school lunch with teenager Hugo, who is a passive young fellow with a no-nonsense persona. They enjoy mum's sandwiches in the school courtyard and sit quietly on a bench. Breaking the silence, Nanda reveals his reason for the meeting.

‘I would like to hire you as my bodyguard,’ Nanda says casually while finishing off a sandwich. Hugo is flattered by the confidence placed in him.

On offer, there is a regular supply of food and Nanda's pocket money. Hugo is, of course, willing to look after his friend without being paid to do so.

They are fifteen years old and feel vulnerable in a large state school. Hugo sympathises because he knows how fear can overwhelm, when bullies are targeting you. It darkens your day and eclipses your spirit, at school, on your way there and back, and wherever you happen to be alone and defenceless.

Hugo is already keeping an eye on his younger brother David at recess and lunchtime, since he is also being bullied. He concludes that one more client is fine.

Is Hugo himself afraid? Yes, but he deals with his fears face on. Miliano and Hugo have crossed paths, and neither is intimidated by the other. A standoff has marked a line in the sand at the start of the school year. Miliano's confident smile and large fists are no insurance against a humiliating retreat.

Hugo is not an aggressor, and the idea, of course, is not to engage the bully in a fight since that is his territory. Hugo estimates that there is a seventy percent chance that a schoolboy can be severely injured in a fight. The aim is to make the bully think that there is a thirty percent chance that they will be humiliated and exposed. That is what gives Hugo the breathing space he needs in high school.

Nanda is unaware of Hugo's encounter with the bullies, but he can see that they watch him with caution. It is such a relief for Nanda that he has a bodyguard.

New City, New School

In 1975, Hugo's father followed employment to the capital, Canberra.

He landed a construction job with the new Water Quality Control Centre on the Molonglo River. This is to be one of the largest inland water treatment plants in Australia. Father was staying at the worker's onsite accommodation. Mother and the rest of the family stayed in Adelaide while the house was placed on the market. They eventually joined father when he secured rental accommodation for the family.

The two brothers (Hugo and David) were enrolled at the Telopea Park High School. The high school had a mixed reputation. It claimed to have schooled Gough Whitlam who is the only Prime Minister to grow up in Canberra. It educated the children from the High Commissions. It also had a reputation for being a tough school in relation to schoolyard conflicts.

In 1976, five friends form a close school group. They sit together at recess and play games or kick a ball around at lunch time. They are a multicultural mix of nerdy boys – Hugo and his brother David, Glen, Judi, Nanda, and fearless Dave.

One recess, the school bullies block their path in between school buildings. They want to challenge the strength of the new group. It is a temporary standoff. Hugo keeps an eye on the leader Miliano, who stands back, is calm and just lets his pack of friends do the tormenting.

The aggressors hop forward menacingly, then retreat and do this repeatedly, like the New Zealand Haka. On one of those moves, fearless Dave steps forward. He slams a solid punch into one boy's cheekbone. The loud thud echoes in the courtyard and the boy's body shakes under the impact. The bully stumbles away dizzy - he just had the 'haka' knocked out of him.

The bullies fade away after that. The boys are left alone during school breaks, and their spirits feel liberated to play and learn.

'Fight, Fight'

In 1977, the school took in Asian students from Vietnamese families. Vietnamese people have been arriving on Australian shores on boats seeking refugee status after the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975. They are accepted as immigrants on humanitarian grounds at a time when the Australian migration policy is compassionate. The Vietnamese people have a positive influence on Australian society. They are business-oriented and keen to educate their children.

At school, the Asian students stir up emotions along nationality lines. Hugo knows what that is about. It is fear of the unknown transferred from parents to children. He is a migrant boy, so he is friendly with everyone. He totally rejects racism from an early age and actively puts a check on his own subconscious prejudices.

On one day as regular as any other, Hugo is in the school corridor getting his bag out of the tall grey lockers, in preparation for the next class. At that moment, a crowd of excited boys sweep into the area, announcing 'fight, fight.'

He looks up to see two boys engaged in a full-on fist fight. It is an Aussie boy versus an Asian boy. The Aussie boy is an athletic marathon runner, who Hugo knows well from their sporting events. From the look of his stance and driving punches it is obvious that this boy has had boxing lessons. The Asian fellow is a friendly acquaintance showing self-defence skills that are artful. He blocks and deflects with arms held high and returns fire with well-placed kicks.

Hugo holds his school bag close to his chest and presses himself against the lockers as the boys move past performing their aggression dance. One of the boys is too close and accidentally struck Hugo with a solid punch to the face. He is now late to class and over this show. Hugo puts his bag down and grabs the fellows by their shirt fronts. He slams both boys into the metal lockers with a loud thud. With that, the fight is over, and the boys are separated. The crowd has gone silent. They are somewhat disappointed that Hugo stopped the fight.

Later that afternoon and on the way home, the Aussies are gathering support for an after-school fight at Telopea Park. They ask Hugo to join them. The Asians are also recruiting, and they approach him to fight on their side. It is a whole bunch of silliness, so he declines all offers. The next day, the news is that it had turned ugly, and boys are hurt at the park. The older boys from the nearby Narrabundah College had joined the fight, and they introduced crude weapons and projectiles.

The use of weapons in high school becomes a red-light warning to Hugo and a turning point. He becomes less focused on standing up for himself and more interested in his studies. His grades in the core subjects: Maths, English, History and Science improve. In that last year, he broadens his mind by doing electives that are not seen to be macho, but what others think is not a concern to him. He takes classes in Cooking, Macrame and Art, generally with a class full of girls. No peacock behaviour on his part, he just joins in as an equal.

Hugo is called to the principal's office - in a good way. Mr Devine, the principal, has been alerted to students who are making good progress and encourages Hugo to keep up the good work. A certificate of merit signed by the principal, is received by Hugo with gratitude and is treasured.

Girls And Lessons In Life

On one lunchtime break, while kicking a ball about on the school oval, a girl comes out of nowhere, grabs the football and runs off with it. They watch her disappear behind a building. This can't be a new form of bullying, but what is it? Confused, they sit down, talk amongst themselves, and wait. Ten minutes pass, and she returns with their ball.

‘Yous are the most boring guys!’ she said as she looks down at them, extremely disappointed. At that moment, the boys realise that they were supposed to chase her.

That is Angela, a stunning looking girl who has just joined the school. She forgives the boys and hangs around them while she makes her own friends.

One morning they are sitting in a group waiting for class to start, and Angela comes into school excited.

‘I’ve been bitten by a dog; want to see?’ she asks. The boys nod and glance at her arms for potential injuries. She pulls up her skirt, and on her hip, right below the panty line are teeth marks.

They are concerned for her, of course, and like any young men, they are grateful that she shared. It felt refreshing to have a female in the group, giving the day a new dimension, and the boys learn from the feminine input. Sadly, Angela is rejected by the other girls in the school, clearly it is out of jealousy. She is in a league of her own: incredibly attractive, intelligent and one of the boys - what a combo.

On the school bus home, Angela teaches Hugo a particularly important life lesson. He steps onto the crowded school bus and sees her sitting on her own with an empty seat next to her. Her tears run down her face, yet no one is comforting her. Hugo stands by her side in the aisle and intuitively knows it is the wrong reaction from him. A bodyguard is far from what she needs.

That moment, he learns that it is fine to be a rock when faced with bullying, but there is also a time to be caring. Standing in the bus aisle by the empty seat next to her he misses the chance to show another side of himself.

Angela finds herself a boyfriend, and the nerdy boys see less of her after that. He is charismatic and is seen at school with his arm around her, which is what they suspect makes her happy.

That last year in high school, romance is in the air for Hugo, yet there are obstacles. Extreme shyness gets in Hugo’s way coupled with a hardened interior. A girl in his class with a beautiful name, Cherie, instructs one of her friends to let him know that she likes him. That was a pleasing message because Hugo likes her too. They repeatedly bump into each other and exchange polite small talk.

‘Which pop artists do you like?’ asks Cherie. Hugo is silent. He is keen on Led Zeppelin and their new song Black Dog, but he does not offer it up since it is not pop music.

‘I don’t like pop music,’ he replies awkwardly. He knows instantly that he wasted an opportunity for a nice conversation. He then watches Cherie walk away.

He thinks, *it is funny in a sad way, that he can manage bullies effectively, has athletic, academic, and artistic achievements, yet he has no idea what to do about this girl.*

He appreciates that his whole sixteen years on earth have been spent on survival techniques, and he totally neglected other critical development. His social awkwardness is beginning to affect him more broadly, for example, he notices that his wit is in slow motion in comparison with his peers. He freezes, and by the time he gathers his thoughts, the moment has passed.

That pretty girl gives up on him and finds herself a boyfriend. Hugo knows him well, and they are friendly at school. At the end of the high school year, her boyfriend approaches to say goodbye. He delivers the oddest message.

‘You are calm, strong, and good at schoolwork, but I got the girl,’ he states. Hugo accepts the comment gracefully because his friend and rival, summed up the situation well.

Hugo is still a happy fellow, although growing up presents its fair share of challenges and obstacles. He is simply confused. At seventeen, a dysfunction is surfacing that he does not understand.

The Post High School Days

That summer break gives Hugo the opportunity to reconnect with his parents. Mother requests assistance with grocery shopping and cooking, so he gladly accompanies her to the shops. He is by her side in the kitchen and learning to cook those traditional Chilean dishes. Pastel de Choclo and Empanadas are his favourite, and they create a cultural link to another land.

Father, having re-qualified as a licensed builder, is working on his own building projects or supervising for large companies. Hugo accompanies him on jobs to do manual work on site, mainly consisting of digging trenches. Father will peg out the footings for a new house or extension, mark them with string, and excavate them by hand. The only time he uses excavating machinery is when the surface is hard and rocky. Hugo becomes accustomed to swinging a mattock for long periods. Father follows behind with a shovel cleaning and shaping the trench.

Other lessons from father involve, hammering a nail into timber with four well placed strikes, lifting heavy beams safely, and moving quickly and efficiently between tasks. During the week Hugo will travel with his father to Cootamundra, where a company has employed father to supervise the construction of several homes. These site visits provide a valuable insight into the building industry. He sees that father takes pride in quality workmanships and compliance with building codes.

On weekends, the family takes great pleasure in going out for pizza. Sorrento Pizzeria on Garema Place is their favourite restaurant. Walking off the street and into the small restaurant, the rich smells of warm pizza bread, pepperoni, garlic, and roasting vegetables hits their senses. The owner of the restaurant, an older gentleman, makes the Italian style pizzas while his son attends to customers. The family waits eagerly for the pizzas while they sit by the window and watch people walk past.

In effect, that summer after high school, everything changes for Hugo. It is like an insect shedding its shell and revealing a new self. He survived high school and retired himself from bodyguard duties. It is now time to look inwards, fight his way out of shyness, and develop with grace.

His high school friendships are quickly becoming a distant memory. Nanda returned to his homeland after his parent’s transfer ended at the High Commission. Angela and Cherie leave their mark on his psyche with their important life lessons. His only high school contact that remains is fearless Dave. They plan to travel within Australia once they obtain their driver licences.