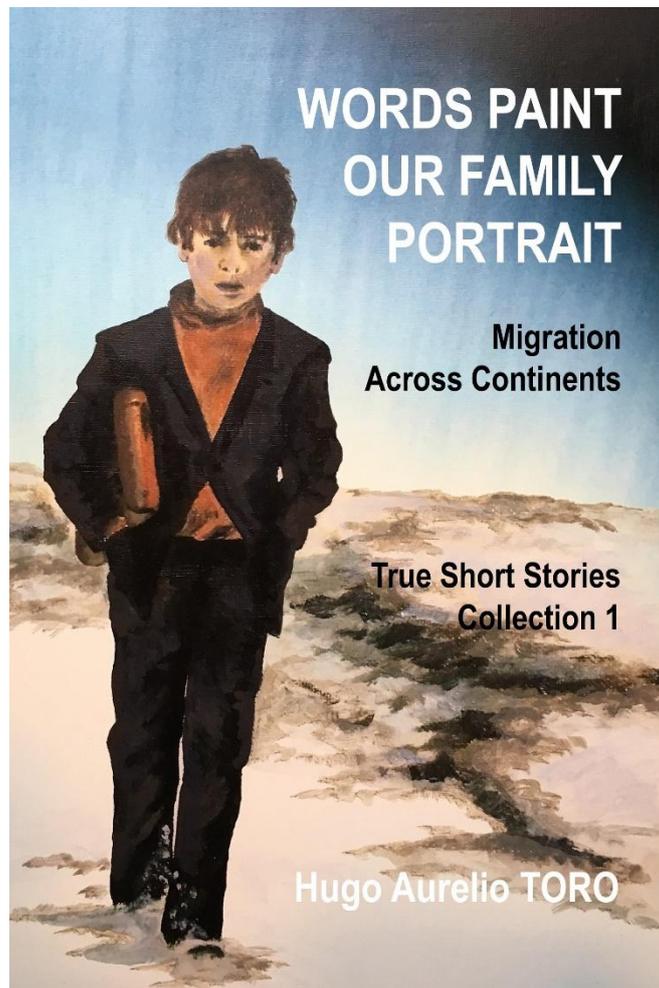


A short story from this collection.



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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

1.9) A Fun Yet Stormy Youth

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Motorcycling in my twenties is exhilarating and helps to clear the head – Canberra 1984.

My old college friends have organised a camping trip by the sea at a caravan park. Conversations and beers flow past sunset, around a small fire. My face is tingling, and I'm feeling tipsy. To sober up, I take a refreshing walk by a man-made seaside pool. The faint moonlight skims over the sea horizon and lights the path. Up ahead, I can hear the waves crashing against the rocks. I walk to the far end, oblivious to the danger, until a wave washes me off the rocks and into the pool.

The waves consume me with such force that I feel weightless and powerless. They spin me over and over like clothing in a washing machine.

0 seconds - I hold my breath and push panic to the back of my mind. In total darkness, the waves press me deep against the far rock wall.

20 seconds – At the bottom of the pool perhaps two meters deep, survival is dependent on retaining consciousness. An escape plan comes to mind.

40 seconds - I pull myself along the rocks at the bottom of the pool. The corner of the pool forces a change direction along the wall.

60 seconds - My lungs spasm for the first time trying to bring in air. I refocus on the submerged rock contours guiding me along the wall.

80 seconds - I sense that the waves were braking with less fury. My head pops up above the waves and I take a deep breath.

Out of the water I feel truly grateful to be alive. The thought remains, *what is behind that foolish risk?*

I am twenty-four and suffer from extreme shyness. Alcohol is numbing but it is also a personality bleach. I conclude that the near drowning must be a warning.

College Life

Six years prior, in 1978, at the start of our college days, the newly built Melba Copland College welcomed us. It was a white, space-age looking building made from prefabricated panels and porthole-like windows. It promised to take students on a journey into the future.

Young people arrived for the orientation day with nothing in common other than their specific age. We were all sixteen and seventeen years old. The Italian boys sat by the front entry waiting to be let in. They seemed friendly, so I introduced myself and accompanied them for a while. They were a group of brothers and cousins, who were always together.

Once in the building, it was time to explore. Past the front desk on the right, was the library, where boys and girls sat in groups, speaking softly. Towards the rear of the building was the cafeteria. The Fijian boys quickly claimed it as their club house. It was best not to linger there in case Bola, a 6-foot-tall boy with giant hands and his equally foreboding friends, decided to quiz you.

The Fiji boys may get resistance from a brave boy, in which case, the beatings are fast and furious. It stays with you when you see a boy's head repeatedly thumped against the cafeteria tiled floor.

Adjacent to the cafeteria was a large meeting hall and a stage. Students gathered there for the principal's address. Moving clockwise, two rows of classrooms stretched far on a long corridor. At the far end was access to the workshop areas where metalwork and woodwork classes were held. Young people gathered around the simulation driving machine.

Because the cafeteria was unsafe, I sat in the library with a group of boys who seemed fun. It was a smart and mischievous group. Ma Baker, the librarian, repeatedly hushed us from behind her loans desk. The group consisted of, George, Grant, Rod, Simon, Shaun, and me, Hugo. The diverse and complex personalities enriched the group. We bonded quickly, and in time, were named 'the Cohort' by our parents.

Our first mission was to access the student ID cards from the computer lab. We found it easy to access files in the simple network. Our ages were updated by one year so that we could go to pubs. There was a whole new world waiting for us at Capt'n Gregg's, the Blind Beggars, and the Pot Belly bars.

In the evening, the bars on Weedon Close, filled with young people. The 1978 funky rock hit Miss You by the Rolling Stones welcomed us at the door. They were compact establishments, with the bar to one side and bar tables and stools opposite. There may even be a band setting up, pressed up against the front window. Weaving past the young people, we reached the bar and ordered a drink. The Cohort sat together enjoying the youthful atmosphere. If you felt hungry, on the same street was a Chinese restaurant. The sweet and sour chicken dish, after a few drinks at the bar, had a magic about it.

You knew there was trouble when the barman leaped over the bar with one hand, while holding a baseball bat with the other. He gathered the troublemakers and swept them towards the door. In one of these outings, in the middle of a crowd fight, cohort George was on his way from the bar. He was ducking and weaving, trying not to get hit. He arrived triumphantly from the crush unhurt and holding his drink. What a legend, not a drop was spilled.

I was not the life of the party, but I liked people, so I was soon mixing with three sets of friends, the Italians, the Cohort, and the Brains in the mathematics and science class. Paul, a pleasant fellow from the mathematics class with an Atari computer at home, became a good friend. The science girl was cute, yet she had a brain that put mine to shame. I figured that my Latin charm was not going to be enough, so I didn't let her know that I liked her.

One afternoon, my Italian friends went from college to one of their uncle's homes that was unattended. I was invited to join them. The liquor cabinet was the main attraction. They raided the contents and relaxed on dated couches in the living room. Soon, my head was light, my face was tingling, and my feet seemed detached from my body.

I didn't like to admit it, but alcohol tasted good on my lips. It could have been a classic tale of substance abuse from then onwards, but my friends were sensible, drawing the line at social drinking.

Throughout the year, we took our driving tests and bathed in the freedom that comes from having your own wheels.

My father informed me that his friend in Sydney had a 1967 Valiant sedan for sale. We visited him and I paid one hundred dollars for the vehicle. On the drive home, the old and weathered car revealed dangerously soft brakes. I was pumping the brake pedal and applying the handbrake to slow the car down at the traffic lights. At the first service with Paul Whyte, the local mechanic, he pointed out to me with surprise, that there was no brake fluid in the brakes, just water.

The second fellow in the group to purchase a car was Simon. He was a tall, fun-loving fellow with a strong London family background. He was immensely proud of his olive green 1969 Holden wagon. The Cohort soon added a denim pack Ford Escort, a red Mini Moke, a Triumph TR7, and a dangerously fast Torana XU-1 to the mix of fun vehicles, plus motorcycles. The fun vehicles mirror the youthful personalities.

The Post College Days

Celebrating the end of college, and before schoolies was a thing, Paul, my friend from mathematics class, invited me on a holiday to the Gold Coast with his parents. I had got to know his family well, and his parents were truly kind and family oriented. The seaside holiday had been a family tradition which the parents were happy to continue at least for one more year before their youngest boy was all grown up.

This was my first visit to Queensland, so I was feeling appreciative and excited. We boarded the interstate bus in the late afternoon, and it drove all night along the Princess Highway,

winding up the New South Wales coast. The following morning, driving into Queensland was delightful. The highway was a two-way road passing green hills, dairy farms, and quaint towns. Occasionally, a beach appeared between the forested areas.

At the Gold Coast, we checked in at our comfortable two-level motel located close to the beach. It had a restaurant and a pool on site. The Gold Coast has been a popular holiday destination since the 1960's. In recent years, Surfers Paradise Beach was transitioning from its past sleepy self to boasting a skyline that looked out of place in Australia.

During the day, we enjoyed the beach, the esplanade, and the beer gardens. The smiles from the holidaying young ladies sparkled brighter than the Queensland sun reflecting off the sea. In the warmth of the evening and after a meal with Paul's parents, we sat by the swimming pool. We were the only ones there, when the restaurant waitresses finished their shift.

We smiled politely at them as they sat nearby and prepared for a swim. The word 'Paradise' with a CAPITAL P, comes to mind when the ladies jumped in the pool topless. That special moment was branded in our young brains.

Mother and her responsibility values

Several years pass, and aged twenty-two, I'm employed in the public service, as was always my goal. I present well and speak intelligently with the team manager. I'm a dedicated worker, and soon we are clearing a backlog of work. The team appreciate my strong work ethic, which I adopted from my parents.

Sadly, in time, my workmates notice that I have a drinking problem. I am spending too much time with friends visiting pubs on the weekend. Totally social activities but excessive for a young man.

'Who is reversing that car into the office,' is the cheeky remark from a friendly colleague. It is in reference to my bloodshot eyes.

This is a source of embarrassment. I want to succeed in the APS and must not undermine myself. I'm still living at home, and my mother is a sobering influence. While I sleep heavily from too many drinks the night before, from the door, she belts out a one-word message.

'RESPONSIBILITIES!' My mother is not nasty about it, she is just reinforcing her values in her home. She is referring to my work commitments.

Mother's lesson resonates. In a moment of clarity and determination, I choose to enjoy sobriety while still enjoying a social drink. The somewhat contradictory objective is a major challenge. Because I know that willpower alone won't be enough, I set myself party rules:

- a) one drink per hour only;
- b) be a designated driver; and
- c) get home before midnight.

These are not New Year's resolutions to be abandoned in February, but lifesaving choices. My party rules work well, but curving a bad habit is difficult and slow.

A Clearer Head

With a sensible approach to socialising, I can now help my younger siblings. Paulina is of the age when she would like to go out to the disco with her friends. Father will only permit it if I go with her. She hates the idea, but it is better than staying home. I'm okay with the chaperone duties from a security point of view. We all gather our friends for a Saturday night out at the Private Bin on Northbourne Avenue. In the 1980s, it is a popular venue, so we line up outside

waiting for security to check identification and let us in. The young people in the queue are well dressed and well behaved.

Being the only Latin male born with two left feet, I don't dance. Instead, I settle down on a comfortable cream coloured couch, away from the dance floor, the ceiling speakers, and the flashing lights. The young ladies pass the hours dancing while I enjoy whiskey-and-dry drinks with my friends.

On one of these nights, while relaxing on the comfy couch a hot young lady comes up and sits on my lap. My naive brain thinks, *it is dark here and maybe she did not see me*. I stand up and give her my seat. At the same disco, romance sparks for my friend George. He is not one to let an opportunity pass. His relationship is a lasting one and there will be a wedding to attend.

Work is more likely the place where I will meet someone nice, away from the noise and blurriness of a social night out. I become good friends with my supervisor. She is a single and smart professional lady. The males in the office swarm around her, but behind her back, I hear them being disrespectful.

My supervisor takes a holiday break at Phillip Island and witnesses the Penguin Parade. A postcard arrives in the work mail addressed to me. She writes that she has enjoyed the Penguin Parade, plus there is a bit of poetry tossed in. I circulate the card amongst my colleagues, assuming that it is a card for all. I don't overthink her kindness.

The office males are openly upset that someone who is 'not even in the race' receives a nice card. I didn't know there was a race, but it is clear to me that my supervisor knows where to find respect. I let time pass and eventually she sought a job interstate in a regional office. We speak about her move, and she suggests that I may also want to come along.

'Plenty of work and so on,' she says in an inviting voice. There are endless possibilities in the 'so on' message.

As tempting as it is to make plans with a friend, my mother is unwell, and I decide to stay close to her. I declined the attractive offer.

I made the right decision. The family then watches in shock as mother slips away from us over a period of four years. In 1986, she died from kidney failure and medical complications. She was young at forty-eight years old, and the family felt the loss deeply.

Father's Positive Thinking

My father, with the loss of his lifelong partner and managing health issues himself, found the courage to hold the family together. The children could see that his health is failing under the stress. Incredibly, he managed to stay positive.

At this point in time, my younger brother David and I make plans to leave home together. We are both employed. I ask my father to build us a home on a vacant block of land that I had purchased a year earlier. The land is on a new estate and overlooks the Queanbeyan River. It is a special thing when your father can build you a home to your specifications and plan.

In 1988, average new houses like mine cost \$98,000. The dream of owning a home is still alive. The interest rates are high at ten percent, but the mortgage repayment is only a third of my pay.

David and I move there to enjoy town life on our own. Well, almost on our own, our uncle Sergio joins us. Sergio has recently separated from his wife and needs urgent accommodation. He moves in for a while, until he can get back on his feet.

Frustrating me ever more, I continue to suffer from chronic shyness, leading a singles life. I have no strategies, and I can't work out why I freeze around females my age. I can feel myself slipping into depression.

My father called me over to share his wisdom. While holding his treasured personal development book, he spoke at length about positive thinking.

'Sometimes it is just about how we view things that determines how we respond. If we have a positive outlook on life, then life becomes a happier place. By focusing on the good and uplifting, we train our brains to refocus on those things that make us happy,' he explained. He felt that I needed that lesson in life, and he wasn't wrong.

In fact, below the surface was the trauma experienced by the whole family after witnessing mother's illness and her death. It left me troubled and feeling helpless since I couldn't help her.

Vital Lessons Come In Threes

My mother's messages about 'responsibility' and sharing her values, was incredibly helpful. Had I been a stubborn male, I may have rejected her message and labelled it interference. I did not see it that way, since I respected her fully as a person of high values. Her passing at an early age, made us appreciate her even more.

The second lesson was by the sea with my friends, when the force of the waves churned me over like clothes in a washing machine, repeatedly plays out in my mind second by second. I rejoined my friends by the campfire soaking wet and said nothing of what occurred. They were engaging in humorous conversation. In the warmth of the flames, I see positivity rise from being given a second chance.

Father's message was the third of these. The positive thinking lecture resonates with me because I trust him. My father was a positive man by example, so these were not vacant words. I place positivity in my resilience tool kit. Moving forward into my thirties with a clearer head, I'm

enjoying life, study, and work. There is even a hint of romance around the corner.