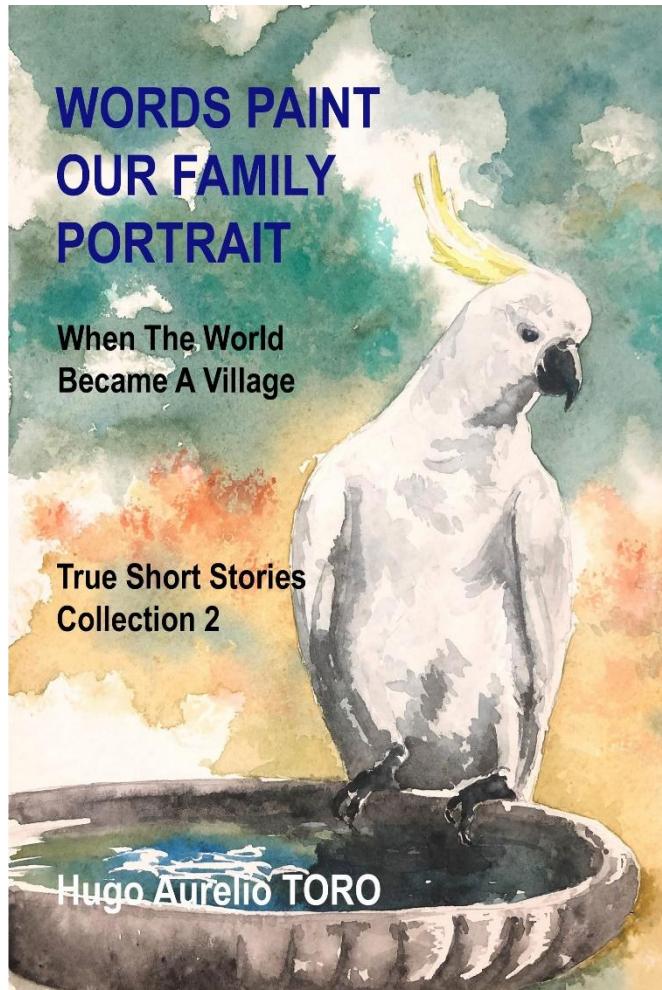


A short story from this collection.



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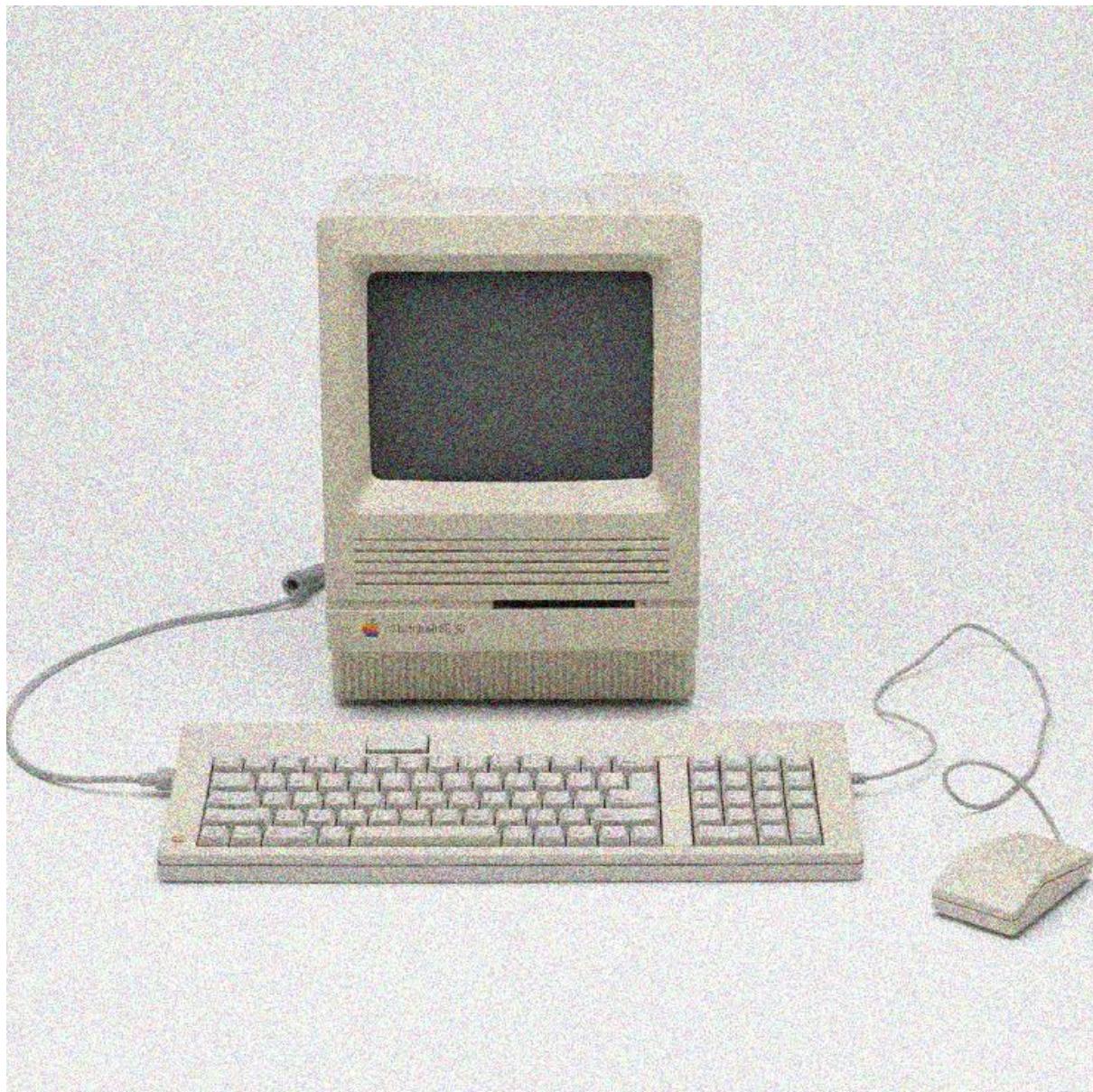
The full collection is located using:

ISBN 978-1-7635105-4-8 eBook

ISBN 978-1-7635105-7-9 paperback

2.1) A Young Public Servant

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



This was my first work PC, a game changer in the Australian Public Service - 1990.

Here is a first-hand account of twenty years of service in government. Mine is not a story about chest-beating success, nor is it about reaching the heights of power, or even about a massive fall from grace. It is just about a young public servant who took pride in his work and grew to value our government workers and what they do for the country.

The college years passed quickly, and I was drawing a blank on my career path. Out of curiosity only, at the end of 1979, I attended Careers Day in the college hall. Students

moved about, picking up pamphlets and talking with industry representatives at their information tables.

My active friends were lured to the police and defence forces who recruited the smart boys quickly. Others were interested in telecommunication and joined Telecom Australia as technicians. A few of us were drawn in by the wise words of the public servant.

‘If you are in Canberra, at the centre of politics and policy making, why would you not participate in government,’ the official stated. There, I made a fateful decision to focus my career on the Australian Public Service (APS).

In my eyes, the government offered a real purpose, a sense of worthy service, and it aligned with my pacifist views. I won’t be shot at in the APS, hopefully.

I tried university straight after college, but macroeconomics was not for me. I was keen on employment and independence, so I visited the Commonwealth Employment Services office. In an open space, rows of yellow partitions met you when you entered the open area from the street. Pinned to the partitions were typed job vacancy cards. There were fifty or so public sector jobs and I removed the junior roles that interested me.

I lined up at the placement officer’s desk with my job cards in hand. When I reached the front of the queue, I was asked basic questions to evaluate my employability. Pleased with my presentation and general smarts, the fellow behind the counter sent me to meet a manager at the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs.

My First Observations

Joan, the manager at the department, is an approachable lady who is introducing an important administrative change. The job consists of replacing Bundy Clock Timecards with Flexi Time Sheets. The Bundy Clock was an inefficient way of managing attendance. Staff clocked in and out at exactly 8.30 a.m. and 4.51 p.m. The new flex form gives staff flexibility with their start and finish times. This is good for parents with school run responsibilities.

I’m sitting in an airconditioned open space office, and by contrast I’m thinking about my father who is working outdoors in the building industry, sunburned, and covered in dust.

We sit amongst colleagues, but there is little time to socialize. Each fortnight, my desk is stacked high with thousands of timesheets. There are thousands more under my desk, a nasty backlog. At first, I check them all with my Casio calculator. Soon, I’m seeing 24-hour clocks in my sleep and can scan for errors. I send back the faulty timesheets to the line area managers to be fixed. With a strong mix of work ethic and a hint of compulsiveness, I stay on top of the task and clear the backlog. Others had given up and failed, but I have the patience to persist.

I discover early that government employees work to clock up hours. Yes, true, they work to complete their hours. My focus is on completing the job, not just doing the hours. I got this from my father by shadowing him in the building industry as a young lad. His industry is profit and outcomes focused, the government is not, hence a powerful early lesson for me.

Another odd practice is smoking cigarettes in the office. I have never smoked and walking into my boss’s office through a cloud of smoke wasn’t fun. He sits at his desk, pen in one hand and cigarette in the other. His ashtray is full next to his family photos. The medical profession is exposing the tobacco industry for the harm it is causing people, with direct links to lung cancer and other respiratory illnesses. I am pleased to see that the government acts quickly to protect

employees. Smokers are transitioned to smoking rooms at first – this is a disaster. Then in 1987, smoking is only permitted outside the building.

As a fan of fresh air and architecture, I take my breaks admiring our Cameron Offices – the rough concrete exterior, the square columns supporting overhanging floors and the courtyards and breezy walkways. John Andrews designed these offices. He is an internationally recognised Australian architect, and they were built in the mid-1970s. Significant to me is that my father worked on the construction of these offices, and he is proud of that.

Back at in the office, employees since the 1950s have been assigned fixed frame steel desks and a metal chair with the green vinyl cushion. We sit in classroom like rows, facing away from the manager's office. By design, they can walk up behind us and look over our shoulders at any moment and request anything from us.

I commit a career limiting move. Our senior manager, a Clerk Class 9 and someone to be feared, walks up behind me and makes a demand.

‘COFFEE!’ is all he said.

‘Yes please, and two sugars.’ I the junior clerk, replied without hesitation.

In the late 1980s, there is talk of ergonomic workstations. Work in motion studies in the US show that productivity can be improved using workstations and ergonomic furniture. I'm asked to draft a paper on the pros and cons of workstations. When the ergonomic furniture is approved, my colleagues and I are sent to a new ergonomic furniture store in the industrial district to select our adjustable chairs. We are excited at the thought of rolling about the office without getting off our chairs. That bright idea fades quickly; it is easier to walk.

In that same decade, we see tendonitis suddenly affect all typists at the typing pool, and there is a flood of compensation cases. I'm working in the Human Resources branch with my compensation manager Barry, and we process hundreds of claims. The typing pool was where you took your handwritten documents to be typed up by a room full of young women using typewriters. They typed an average of eighty words per minute for seven hours a day and five days a week with little consideration for the stress on their hands and arms.

With typists out of action, managers must find another way to get their documents typed – they are lost without their typist. Men in suits complain that typing their own documents is below their pay rate. They are in crisis.

In 1989, personal computers (PCs) promise to come to the rescue with the Macintosh SE and Microsoft Windows 386. Governments are already at work automating on mainframes.

A Computer Enthusiast

I have liked computers from the age of eight when my aunt, dressed in white overalls, showed me around her computer lab. My eyes feasted on wall high computers and spinning reels the full length of her lab.

In the late 1980s, three government departments are pooling their resources together to form a ‘joint development team’ to computerise the employee records. Things like leave taken for example, are handwritten on yellow cards. The contract records and letters are stored in thick paper files in the compactus. These are large sliding metal shelves the length of the room, reaching to the ceiling. It is where affairs often start – the flirtatious invitation is ‘meet you at the compactus.’

Everyone in my team is horrified that they may be volunteered into such a career limiting role.

‘Computers will never replace paper!’ is the war cry around the office. My hand shot up so fast that I almost dislocated my shoulder.

I get selected, having deciphered early technical specifications for my boss. The joint team is formed, and we relocate to a basement. It is common practice to put your best computer minds in a basement with no windows and away from clients. The idea is that it is best to lock them away without distractions and they will miraculously deliver the goods.

In our new workspace, the false timber floor that contains kilometres of computer cable, jumps under our feet. The air conditioning is set to cold to keep the mainframe from overheating. Our health is placed below that of the computer, so we work in our overcoats all year round.

My new role is in the business analyst space. I write the specifications that tell the programmers what the clients want. I explain the process and rules to the coders who then do the programming. I then evaluate the electronic records against the existing paper records. It is a steep learning curve for us and fortunately, the programmers are patient.

Technology is shifting fast, so we must play catch-up with the miniaturisation of computers and the introduction of the Graphical User Interface. This is a shame, since I had become fond of the green computer screen.

By the early 1990s, our work team has fancy software to show off. We have highly sought-after computer programmers like Nev, Steve, Ron, Phill, Frank, and Bui. The business analysts consisting of Steven, Suzy, Shirley, Marg, and myself, are sharp operators by this stage. It is time for the team to move out of the basement. Wearing our heavy-duty sunglasses to allow our eyes to adjust, we find office space near our government clients. The team expands to include client liaison and documentation writing people.

Computers Reach The Workplace

In parallel with the programming of our corporate system, is the introduction of personal computers in the workplace. Two Apple SE30 PCs are parked in our office for general office use. At first, we share them between eight staff, so we book them to do our work on Word 5.0. We can generate our own documents using fancy templates.

The technician turns up with additional PCs and kilometres of blue cable. He wires up a network for us. Blue cables hang from the ceiling and are taped to the walls. The icing on the cake is the installation of a dot matrix printer. Like magic, all PCs can print to the one printer. The printer is horribly noisy. We call the network guy back to re-install it in a broom cupboard before the screeching drives people crazy.

As a bonus, the new World Wide Web thing becomes available in the departmental library. To search the new web pages, every lunchtime I book the one library PC that is connected. I’m told by colleagues that I’m wasting my time.

‘There is nothing on the web of any value, it will never take off,’ is the opinion around the office. The nerds amongst us, silently disagree, and there is a feeling of inevitability about this new technology.

Work PCs and the Internet take hold, and the APS embraces technology. Email is a particular favourite toy with which to share blonde jokes. You no longer wait for the smoko to share jokes; you can do it instantly. A senior lady in government put a firm stop to the inappropriate emails. She introduces internet and email usage protocols in the office.

It shouldn’t be necessary, but protocols against downloading porn at work are also distributed. Several public servants, with too much time on their hands are suspended on that account.

My Own Home PC

Soon, I find myself craving a Microsoft 386 for home use, but there are none for sale in regular stores. Computer shops are still a thing of the future. Bui, a programmer friend directs me to a supplier where I can get one, for cash. I make the call and order a PC. I'm given a collection date, time, and address in the suburbs. When I arrive in the evening, the house seems fortress like. I buzz the doorbell, the door opens, and I'm told to wait in a cold and bare hallway.

A while passes, and a man holding a large cream coloured metal box in his arms appears. He then goes to fetch the heavy funnel shaped screen with corded keyboard and mouse balancing on top. He assures me that the PC has just been tested and is working. I assume, *this means that it isn't a hollow box*. I reluctantly hand over the envelope with a large amount of cash. No warranty or receipt is offered.

At home, I connect the screen, keyboard, and mouse. I fire up my 386 PC, and all is working fine. I instantly get started on a Word document – what magic! This is so much better than my manual typewriter in the blue case. At work, I copy a Word document onto a 5¼ inch floppy disk and then take it home. There and then, I invent the concept of working from home.

Sometime later, a computer shop opens in the city. I purchase a dial up modem and a plan. At home, the modem screeches, and squawks forever it seems, before I can access the internet.

Personal Clumsiness

Naturally as is the way of life, every computer nerd neglects his social life.

In our office, a charming young lady asks one of my friends at work to arrange a meeting after work. I have spoken regularly with her, but small talk only. I agree to meet her at a nearby bar after work. With my head in the technical manuals, the afternoon turns into the evening. It is too late to meet her, so I finish work and go home. Rude on my part, but in my defence, it had not registered as a date.

The next day, I see her and stop to say hello. It is a frosty reception. I ask my friend if she knows what is going on. Equally frosty from her, but she explains to me that my colleague waited on her own for me to turn up and made herself a target of drunk losers. I feel dreadful but unlike my VCR, life doesn't come with a rewind button.

Soon after, Penny from payroll comes to work in my team. She has a passion for the English language and is keen on producing a quality user manual for our software. There is a desperate need, since 'how the software works' is still in the coder's heads.

On her arrival, I'm taken aside by my senior manager, who warns me about Penny's 'determined nature.' She has a strong, no-nonsense personality, is assertive, and says what she thinks. I should have been trembling in my Florsheim shoes. Yet in total contrast to my shy and nerdy self, I'm a good team leader. My reputation is already strong in the people management field. Besides, I was raised to value strong women, so Penny poses no threat.

Warning aside, Penny and I become good friends. She tells me that she was employed at the Department of Supply in Melbourne when she was seventeen. Independent as she is, she transferred to Canberra on her own and resided at the Narellan House government hostel. It was the residence for new government employees. She stayed with the same government department as it transitioned into its modern version.

We date for a while, and I'm doing my usual 'fight or flight' response - neither one appropriate for love. One day, she pulls me aside for a serious chat.

'Do you want there to be an us?' she asked calmly.

‘Yes, of course’ is my answer. We keep the relationship from our co-workers, but eventually they suspect something.

Feeling bold one lunchtime, we stepped out of the office holding hands. The relationship is official.

The Dreaded Outsourcing Begins

By 1995, our computer system hasn’t failed, as was anticipated. Important high-level consultants start to attend our team meetings, yet with the oddest behaviours.

Mid meeting, when their Nokia 6100 phone rings, they stand up and answer it. They talk aloud while looking out the window. I wonder, and almost say it aloud, *is the meeting over? How rude!* Phone etiquette changed that day and people develop a bizarre attachment to their new cellular phones. The introduction of the earpiece sees perfectly sane people, walking down the hallway and street talking to themselves.

Our Human Resources software is offered as a bureau service to half the APS and the whole of the NT Government. I move to the client side and travel around Australia helping new clients to implement the system. Penny is working on the user manual making sure that processes and procedures are described accurately and in plain English.

In 1996, the new Liberal government turns on the public service aggressively. They hold the view that any government service that is also provided by the private sector is best done by the private sector. I’m not sure how ‘best’ was qualified, but the commercialisation and outsourcing direction is dictated from above like an 11th commandment.

Our computer system becomes an early victim of outsourcing. A government advisor from Canada (because we don’t have any good IT advisors in Australia) recommends that each government department source their own human resources systems, from those in the marketplace. What a blunder. This is at a huge expense to the taxpayer since private software implementations cost millions while our bureau service was a fraction of that. The government is playing into the hands of overseas suppliers and contractors, who will place their profits above people centred services.

In September 1997, Prime Minister Howard took the decision to abolish the Department of Administrative Services – our whole department. Penny and I are in a tricky situation, in that we share home commitments, financial obligations, and work for the same employer. We face the possibility of unemployment together. Penny with thirty years’ service and I with twenty, naturally feel betrayed, and fearful of an uncertain future.

Yet more so, is the feeling of tremendous pride. This is from having done a good job, interacting with amazing people, and experiencing office automation at its infancy.