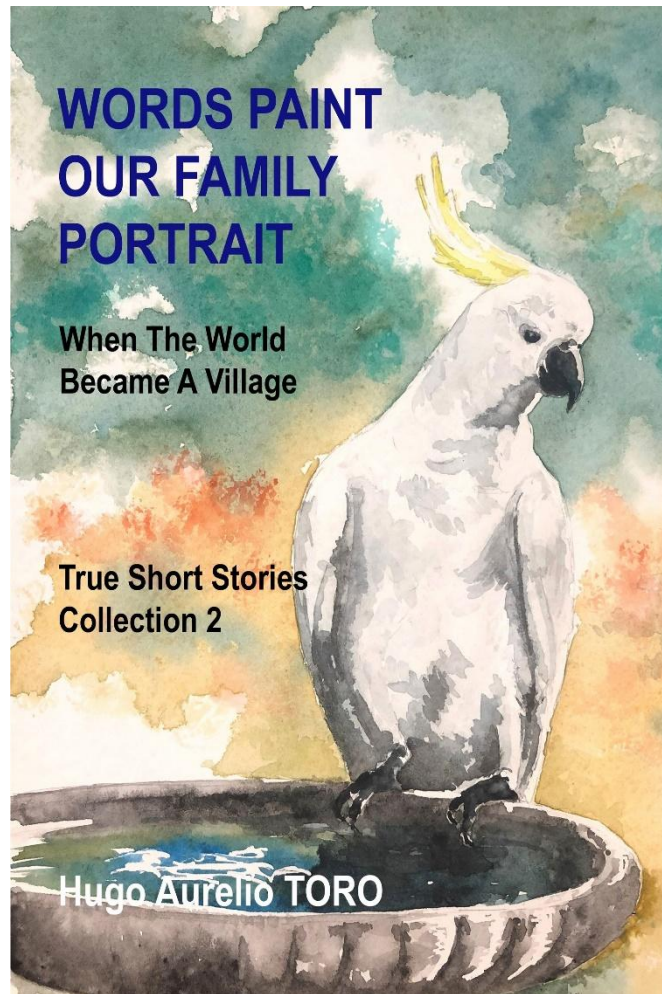


A short story from this collection.



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Cover artwork by Hugo Aurelio Toro.

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The full collection is located using:

ISBN 978-1-7635105-4-8 eBook

ISBN 978-1-7635105-7-9 paperback

2.2) The Early Death Of A Loved One

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Carmen Toro Mouat (1938 to 1986)

Carmen, despite being raised in the 1940s and 1950s, was in an equal partnership with her husband Hugo. She assumed a role in the family that was far from submissive. She was an early feminist - kind, wise, and courageous. Her strength of character came from being the eldest of five siblings. Hugo placed a great deal of trust in her judgement. He was supportive and had a great deal of respect for Carmen.

The young couple were raising two boys in the early 1960s. As is the case with Latin families, they all benefit from being close to extended family, although this closeness can lead to conflict.

In late 1965, daughter Paulina was born. Carmen stayed in hospital to recover from a difficult birth.

To take the pressure of the family, Carmen's aunt Lucia and her large family, cared for Paulina. The couple were extremely grateful for the family support. Since they lived in another city, making regular visits to see the baby was difficult.

Four months passed and Carmen was well again. Naturally, she requested that the baby come home. Aunty Lucia's family made the most heart-pounding request: they implored that the baby remain in their care and quite possibly for life. They had bonded with her and loved her. In fact, they outright refused to give her back.

On Carmen's request, Hugo hired a taxi late one evening to retrieve the baby. He didn't have a vehicle of his own but his friend, the neighbourhood taxi driver was ready for a midnight run. Hugo took his eldest five-year-old son for company. On this recovery mission, there was something of an electric urgency in the air. At the destination, the taxi driver was instructed to wait with the engine running while Hugo rang the doorbell.

The door opened, and Hugo shoved his way in without saying a word. He rushed up the stairs towards a bedroom. He grabbed the sleeping baby and returned quickly to the awaiting taxi. They exited the city and drove the two hours to get home.

Back at home, Carmen was glad to have a reunited family. Three years on she has another baby daughter, Patricia who is born in 1968. Now they are a joyful family of six.

Mother's Migration Intuition

Australia is reaching out to skilled migrants after its white Australia policy was abolished in 1965. It has become a friendlier nation in Carmen's eyes. Her strong intuition motivates her to seek a better and safer home for her family.

The combination of her youngest son's health issues, and her husband's wellbeing motivates her to investigate migration to Australia. Her son David had a bad accident and will require modern treatment unavailable in Chile. Her husband Hugo is politically to the left as are his brothers, and at his work politics has become toxic, and staff are feeling intimidated by right-wing elements.

Carmen is therefore on a mission. Her husband is open minded and lets her take the lead in this adventure. Skilled migration takes the young family from Chile to Australia in 1970.

Her intuition was correct with regards to Hugo's safety. In September 1973, the military overthrew the democratically elected Allende government in Chile. Soldiers visit Hugo's family, asking for his whereabouts. Grandmother Ester was at home alone, and the soldiers paid her a surprise visit and scare her with their questioning.

The 1970s unwind in a noble multi-cultural land. It is liberating for the young family to establish themselves in a modern and kind society. Carmen sees life with a sense of humour.

'I'm so embarrassed!' she tells the family after arriving home from work.

'I walked all the way along a crowded bus saying, squeeze me, squeeze me.' A nice person politely pointed out my error, she explained.

The migration change is tough for the young family yet rewarding. The benefits are reaped through positivity, hard work, and a willingness to adapt.

True to their application, Carmen and Hugo use their skills to be productive in Australia. Hugo's work transitions from roadworks into the building industry. She fully supports the move to Adelaide and then Canberra, following Hugo's construction work. He is

communicating fluently in English and qualifies as a builder. Hugo plans to purchase a block of land in a new Canberra sub-division and build the family their dream home. Carmen has allowed him to find his stride.

Carmen started working as a kitchen hand but is determined on upskilling. She is focused on curtain and dressmaking work that she loves. She finds employment at workshops. With her friendly nature, she forms a lasting relationship with her work colleague Franca, and her family. They are also new to Australia having recently migrated from Italy. Hugo, with his quiet and friendly nature, forms strong and lasting friendships with Franka's husband Auro. Their personal qualities and work ethics set a good example for the children.

Life in Australia offers peace of mind and an opportunity to support extended family. In 1974, Carmen's middle brother Sergio is experiencing harassment from the military in Chile. She sponsors him to come to Australia to be safe. He is a gentle and charming Latin fellow who brings joy to his sister.

Sergio was a young activist. In the dark hours, he painted anti dictatorship slogans on city walls. He was caught by the military, out after the evening curfew. He was tortured with a rifle butt. The injuries to his spine had left him bed-ridden, so at home, he was cared for by the family for months.

He made a full recovery, but he needed to place distance between himself and the military. Another incident like the last one could potentially see him permanently injured or worse, disappear altogether.

Sergio is close to the family and a helpful role model to the young boys growing up in Canberra.

Illness Strikes

In 1983, Carmen is troubled by a past head injury. She is diagnosed with a menacing brain tumour and her health deteriorates quickly. Her two young daughters, Paulina and Patricia are at home with her one afternoon, when she suffers a strong seizure. This is a tough and scary thing for children to have to deal with on their own. The girls are terrified and call the ambulance.

At the hospital, the medical specialist treats Carmen with seizure suppression drugs. These drugs are necessary to settle brain activity, but they are aggressive drugs that come with dreadful side effects like grogginess and memory loss. In no time, her body is overcome with chemicals.

Once affected by the drugs, she spends all day in bed sleeping. Treasured times with her are gone and the family adapt to visiting her in bed.

Youngest daughter Patricia, who is fifteen, confesses to the family, of a feeling of abandonment because of mother's illness.

There is evidence of her anxiety when she took her mother out of bed to go shopping one day. Mother obliges because she wanted to share time with her youngest daughter. On their way, the walk to the bus is slow and tedious. The bus steps are menacing, and mother takes a long time to negotiate each step.

Window shopping that day is anything but fun. They make it home safely, but Patricia is emotionally scarred. She no longer recognises her mother. Where was the one who was talkative and full of advice and life tips, and the one who gathered the family at the dining table every evening, and who consulted everyone on important life changing decisions?

For sons Hugo and David, the evening conversations that they value, stop abruptly. Until then, mother had talked till late about anything that was in her mind. She is instrumental in giving them an insight of feminine qualities. They miss those talks.

Husband Hugo finds himself overloaded. He is working long hours in construction, caring for his ill wife at home, and holding the family together. Emotionally he is a rock, but stress can't be sustained for too long, and his heart begins to fail him.

The Medical Tug Of War

In 1984, Carmen undergoes radiotherapy, with all its nasty side effects. Later that year, she has her brain operation in Sydney. A remarkable and quick recovery illustrates her resilience, and the family are astonished, so pleased to see her well. At the hospital, she is seen up and about chatting with other patients. She is soon back at home.

Conscious of her appearance, she buys herself a brown wig to cover her hair loss. She is jovial and wears that odd fitting wig with pride.

For a reason that is unclear, her brain specialist continues the chemotherapy treatment for Carmen. It seems to be a precaution in case further seizures re-occur. The seizures don't return. After a year or so of consuming heavy drugs post her operation, Carmen's kidneys fail from the assault. She is weak again and must endure dialysis.

Carmen becomes the tug of war rope between chemotherapy and dialysis. She consumes the drugs in the morning for their doping effect, only to be cleaned out later by dialysis. Her brain and body are twisted and strained daily by the conflicting treatments prescribed by the specialist.

Her eldest son has no medical training, but he realises that the specialists are treating two opposing symptoms and not the person. There is no evidence that the nephrologists (kidney specialist) and the neurologist (brain specialist) ever meet to discuss her case. He raised his concerns with his father, who is from the older generation and is not one to question doctors. The family watch helplessly from the sidelines.

Carmen cries out in desperation in the hospital hallways when taken to the dialysis unit. It breaks everyone's hearts. The family members know that there is no way that she will accept the treatment any longer.

Late in 1986, as the Soviet Chernobyl nuclear disaster plays out across television screens, Carmen is dying. The kidney specialist calls an urgent meeting with the family. He is honest and states clearly that she will not survive without dialysis. The family is in shock for days. Consequently, it is asked of them to accept her death as inevitable. It is a heart-breaking and shocking thing to come to terms with.

With her consent and at the age of forty-eight, dialysis is ceased.

The family form a hospital visiting roster. Husband Hugo and younger son David are there early in the morning, a quick visit and they are off to meet work commitments.

Eldest son Hugo passes them in the hallway, and they report to him that mother is awake but tired. She has dozed off for a moment, so he sits in her room without disturbing her, and flips through the pages of a magazine. She opens her eyes and turns to him.

'What are you reading?' she asks. It is a celebrity article, and he spoke to her a little about it. She is then startled by something. Still lying in her bed, she points to the ceiling corner.

‘Can you see that?’ she says wide eyed. He looks up and sees nothing there. Sadly, she is hallucinating. Carmen goes back to sleep, and her son leaves for work.

The two girls visit mother mid-morning. Paulina who drives now, goes to work while Patricia stays by mother’s side to help her with a small midday meal.

That afternoon, they receive a distressed call from Patricia. Mother has passed away. Patricia is the one to witness her last breath.

That evening, Carmen is resting peacefully and is no longer in pain. Complex feelings fill the room, as on one hand, mother is no longer suffering, but on the other, deep sorrow affects the close family unit. Husband Hugo, sons and daughters sit around her bed in silence, each saying goodbye in their own way.

Father Bernie, a young priest, enters Carmen’s hospital room. The family invites him to say a prayer over her body to ensure that, true to her beliefs, she will be welcomed into her afterlife. He then turns to the family and delivers sound words of wisdom about grieving.

‘We may grieve and miss the person deeply, but it is more for our benefit, than anything that the deceased person needs from us,’ he said in a sage and intelligent way for a young man.

That message helped everyone to understand loss and grieving a little better.

Resilience After The Grieving

In a daze and deeply saddened by their loss, the family organises the funeral. Friends come past the house with cooked meals. At the funeral, all her friends gather around the coffin. The children’s friends from school also attend in remembrance and in honour of her friendly and welcoming disposition.

Once all family members allow themselves the time to grieve, they show resilience to one degree or another. Widower Hugo at a family meeting admits that their dream house is no longer a home without mother. It is an unhappy place for him, and he makes plans to sell the property, which is a surprise and wake up call to his maturing children.

The two boys who are young men now, have secure jobs and make plans to move out of home together.

Carmen’s two daughters marry in quick succession to two friends from Adelaide. Patricia, the youngest, seems to be the most eager to marry. She is infatuated with a young carpenter working near the family home. Patricia goes on to have three charming children in Canberra to the young carpenter. Paulina moves to Adelaide, being her husband’s home state, and has three lovely daughters. Unfortunately, without Carmen to offer wise motherly advice, both young women have rushed into marriage, and they struggle in complex relationships.

Hugo sells the family home and within two years, marries a Polish widow. They have their loss in common and there are familiar traits in this mature lady. Eldest son Hugo notice that her mannerisms, her hands, and even her nail polish are like mother’s. Her strength is equal in terms of the care she displays towards the family.

A Goodbye Visit

Eldest son Hugo often reflects on Carmen’s life and their interactions and treasured memories. She was a naturally creative person, and she shared her creative genes with him. She had a sketch that she had drawn of baby and father asleep on a chair. Her line work was precise and sharp. She captured the resting figures accurately and with love.

They joined painting classes together. Under the guidance of a tutor, they produced skilful paintings. Sharing those moments with mother was one of the things that he will always treasure.

In a moment of contemplation, son Hugo is thinking about what he misses the most about his mother. It is the communication with her: the handwritten notes, the jokes and laughter, the wise life messages, and sharing of feelings.

Carmen had the habit of going to her son's bedroom to say goodnight. A night did not pass when she would not do the rounds with all her children. Hugo recalls fondly that she would sit on the edge of his bed, and they talked for a while. She shared with him stories of her youth, relaying tales of when she met his father. She revealed her lightest and deepest thoughts giving him an insight into human nature.

Soon after her passing, he is drifting off to sleep in the family home, and on his side facing away from the door. In semi consciousness, he felt the bed behind him dip like someone's weight is on the edge of his bed.

He thinks, *is my mother visiting me or is my brain playing tricks on me?* He didn't roll over to look, it was best that way. He wishes her good-night and drifts off to sleep himself.

During the grieving, son Hugo takes out his oil paints and paints a portrait of mother on canvas. The aim is to capture her while the essence of the person is fresh in his mind. He had no experience with oil portraits, so with every brush stroke the technique is refined. In painting that portrait, he transfers vulnerable memories to a permanent canvas.

That portrait is part of the healing and is hung on a family home wall.