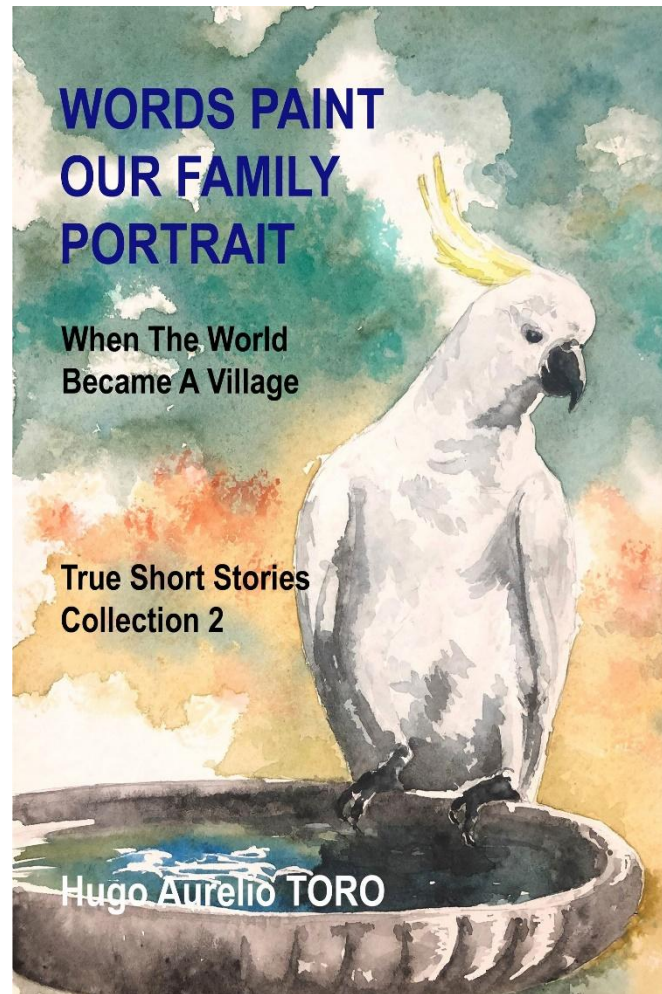


A short story from this collection.



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2.3) Two Families Merge In Australia

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Baby Drina Veljaca and parents (Patricia and Kresimir) - 1988.

With the birth of the eldest grandchild Drina in 1988, the two families, Veljaca and Toro, merged in a foreign land - Australia.

Drina is named after a famous river. The Drina River is a 346 km long river in the Balkans, which forms a large portion of the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

Drina as a baby was soon crawling about in the home where her grandmother Carmen once lived. Drina and Carmen were crossing paths, one explored with the curiosity of a child, where the other had shared life with her family.

Yet the timing was slightly out. Carmen had only recently passed away after a three-year illness and her spirit was still sensed in the home that she loved.

Patricia And Kresimir

Two years earlier in 1986, at Patricia Toro's request, the youngest daughter of Hugo and Carmen, the family met Kresimir Veljaca or Kris for short. He was a polite young trades person who sat in the family room quietly, while pulling splinters out of his hands. That is the curse of being a carpenter.

Hugo had only recently built the family dream home in the new Canberra suburb of McKellar. He was an accomplished builder. The house was contemporary and designed by his eldest son who had a keen interest in modern architecture. It is a single level, white brick home with raked ceilings. Carmen was incredibly happy there and so were their four children.

Kris who is employed in the building industry, was working on the construction of a property on the main street, nearby. Patricia was attending college at a private school and noticed Kris from her school bus on the way home. She then approached him at the next opportunity, and they became boyfriend and girlfriend soon after.

Kris was a transparent young man – not one for complexities or hidden agendas. He was refreshingly open about his life overseas and the mistakes that every young person makes in one form or another. He explained to the family that he had been married previously but it lasted a truly short time. He was saddened that he could not gain her father's approval at all. This drove a wedge between him and his new wife.

He also talked about his love of fishing. Beach net fishing was his preferred activity unfortunately it is not legal in Australia, so he must be content with rod fishing. Another character trait of this young man was that he was a talented artist. He produced burn art with commentary on European patriotism. That is, he felt strongly about his heritage, and this was reflected in his art. A major work of his was of St. Mark's church in Zagreb with its colourful red tiled roof. The baroque building dates to the 13th century.

Kris was strongly patriotic since he inherited a passion for history and politics directly from his father Ivan. Kris pointed to the oddly shaped horseshoe boundaries in Croatia as evidence of historical land grab by aggressors. He fascinated the family with his family history, and stories of conflict in Croatia.

Croatia experienced invaders over a 600-year period. Its territory was eroded with the loss of Dalmatia to Venice in the 14th century and then to the Ottoman conquest in the 16th century. In 1918 after the defeat of Austria-Hungary in WWI, the State of Slovenes was formed consisting of Serbs and Croats in a union which was renamed Yugoslavia in 1929. Croatia declared its independence in 1991. Conflict erupted in Croatia due to the large minority population of ethnic Serbs, who wanted Croatia to remain united with Serbia. Croatia retook most of the Serb-occupied regions by 1995 and regained full control of its territories by 2002. (*Online Britannica reference – Croatia summary*)

Ivan Veljaca and Slavka Skopljanac were born in an area called Radosic municipality in Croatia. They experienced conflict. They married in 1949 in the Croatian town Trogir. They

lived in a tiny home across from the Parish Church Our Lady of the Rosary in Kastel Stari. This is a historic cathedral built in 1765 with a marble stone interior, and a baroque altar. It was built on an older church that revealed skeletons in its walls.

Kris was born in the tiny house and the family later moved to a larger home in Katel Novi located near the Split airport. The city of Split has a 1700-year history. They had four boys and a daughter. Kris told the story of discovering an old mid-nineteen century musket gun in the house rafters while exploring as a child.

Due to the political unrest that comes with independence struggles, the Veljaca family experienced political unrest and Ivan as a result was victimised for his political stance. Three of the siblings, Ivanka, Tomislav and Kresimir, migrated to Australia in the 1980s. Two boys, Mate and Domagoj, and parents remained in Croatia.

The three Veljaca siblings commenced their own families in Adelaide and in Canberra. Kris and Patricia were married in 1987 in the capital. It was somewhat under a cloud after the death of Carmen. She had been ill for three years, with a combination of life-threatening issues, eventually passing away from kidney failure. The family was in shock and traumatised from seeing their mother go through three years of escalating illness and not be able to help her. She didn't make it to her 50th birthday. As tragic as that period was for the Toro family, they could still look ahead and celebrate Kris's and Patricia's union.

The wedding was intimate and held at the home of Patricia's parents – the modern new house with the white bricks. At the wedding, the families get together for the first time. The Veljaca family members were charming, and they bonded quickly with the Toro family. Kris' brother Tomislav and sister Ivanka were a pleasure to meet. Invited to the wedding was Kris' best friend Nikola or Nick from Adelaide.

The wedding created the right atmosphere for daughter Paulina, and Nick to commence a romance. She was a young woman with a classic Latin look and Nick was a tall young man with northern European features. After a short courtship, they were keen to marry and started a family in Adelaide.

Family Life

With the birth of Drina, Kris and Patricia settled into family life. They purchased an older unit in Queanbeyan and gave it a makeover with a fresh coat of paint. Drina was a charming little child full of life and curious about everything. Patricia took the path of training her in the Croatian language. This is an unusual yet effective way of instilling a sense of worldly culture in a child.

High work ethics, saw Kris establish himself as an expert carpenter and his skills were in demand. Culturally he formed strong bonds with other Croatian builders, and they exchanged skills when building homes. It is a barter system that seems to work well. Kris naturally enjoyed down time, making barbecues for his friends and sharing beers, followed by traditional harmonies in Croatian. Two things led the young men to song; firstly, they were recent migrants who remember and miss their homeland; and secondly, the atmosphere was mellow in Kris's garage with those beers going to the head.

His other pastime was fishing off the rocks in Moruya Heads. On occasions his young children accompanied him, but it was an activity that he enjoyed mostly on his own. Not everyone was as committed as he was when it came to negotiating dangerous rocky heads to find a good

vantage point, waiting for a tug on the line for hours, and later sleeping on the back of his utility vehicle. Yet it was his passion and that was where he could be found on most weekends.

Ivan (the senior gentleman in the family) visited his children in Australia in the mid-1990s. The first stop was Adelaide. Patricia's father Hugo (the other senior fellow), at the same time, was visiting daughter Paulina who had settled in Adelaide and was starting a family. Hugo drove to Adelaide from Canberra to see his new granddaughter, Nina. Two more girls, Elisa and Celia soon follow. Grandfather Hugo will return to see them as he takes great pride in his family.

Hugo offered Ivan a lift on his return trip. Ivan needed to travel to Canberra to see his son Kris, Patricia, and granddaughter Drina.

The drive took the two men over the lush Adelaide hills, past the orchards in Mildura and through the desert Hay Plains. Eastern Australia revealed itself on the drive with rolling hills and flourishing rural towns. These inland parts of Australia are diverse and beautiful.

There was an attempt at conversation on the trip, but both men spoke different languages. Only limited words were understood between them in English. They instead enjoyed the peacefulness of the drive and contemplated the vastness and newness of this multi-cultural land.

Ivan returned to Croatia since Australia was not his land. Patricia and Kris went on to have two more lovely children, Hrvoje and Zrinka. The three children relish their multicultural heritage. After a troubled beginning to family life, Patricia found her own way in life looking for peace of mind. Kris openly longed for his village life and one day will return there, to the place where his ancestors are buried - at Radosic.

A nice touch is that Hugo and Kris retained a long-term respect for each other. This connection may have been due to their links to the building industry or perhaps it was deeper than that, both men displaying quiet dedication in life.