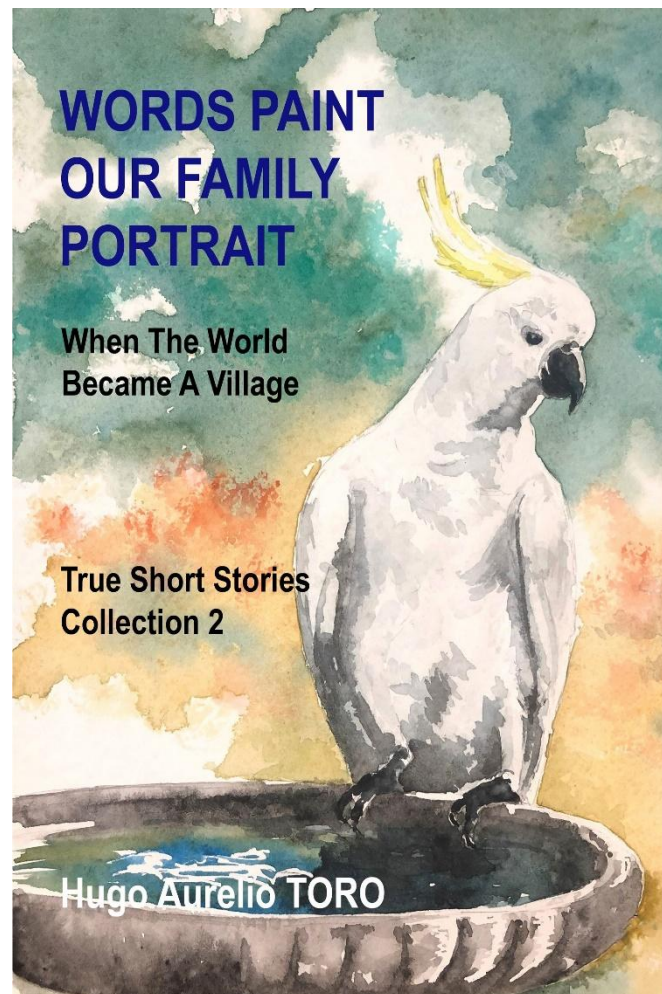


A short story from this collection.



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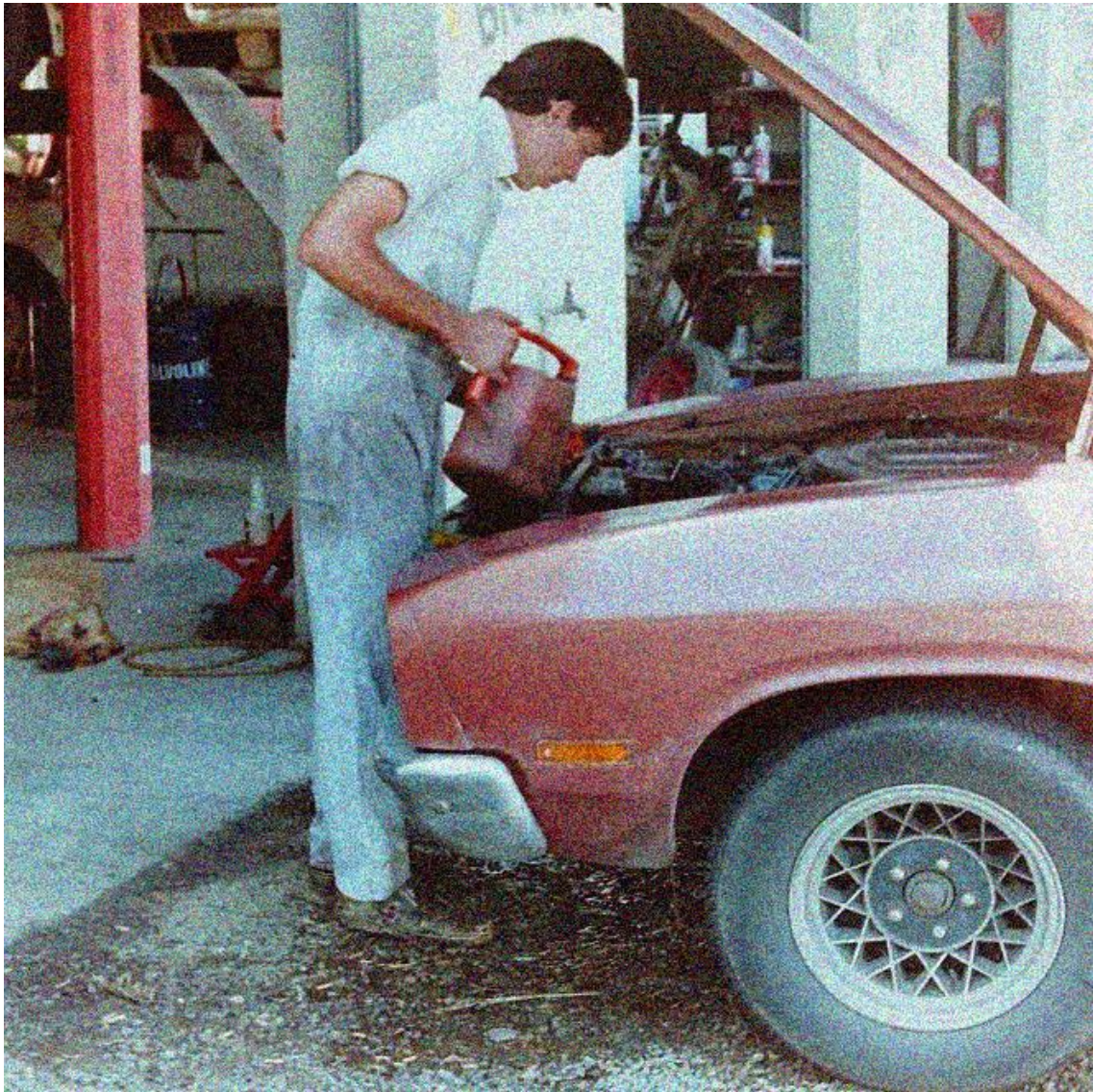
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2.5) Friends On A Road Trip

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Car overheats and Kuttabal Automotive come to the rescue – QLD Mackay 1993.

We stood back, admiring the shiny object in the soft afternoon light, like one looks at a thing of beauty. Dave then reminded me that, as teenagers, we had envisaged a road trip. We had visualised a mega drive to the top of Australia and back.

As young men often do, I jumped at the opportunity to own my father's old Ford station wagon. It was a large six-cylinder vehicle, yet like an old pet that we all loved, it was in our hearts. It had been in the family since it was new.

The restoration was not cheap, but it was fun. For better handling, the suspension received an upgrade. I replaced the tired wheels and tyres. The car looked great dressed in new hotwire wheels and new wide profile tyres. The gear box and the old engine were replaced with reconditioned parts. The engine specialist in the industrial area did

an excellent job. In his greasy overalls, he offered words of wisdom as he handed me the keys.

‘You know the mistake people make when they get a reconditioned engine? They take it easy. The engine does not want you to take it easy,’ he said knowingly. This was music to my ears - a green light.

Next, a friend suggested that I contact the technical college to have my car panels straightened and resprayed. The mechanics school agreed to respray my car. The students practiced their panel beating and spray-painting skills. I only had to cover the cost of the paint.

The students did an excellent job. All dents were repaired, and the car looked vibrant with the sheen of desert gold paint.

That was the thing of beauty before us. At the notion of a road trip, the car seemed to smile at us and say, ‘yes please.’ Had it been a dog, it would be at the door holding its lead ready for a walk.

Dave and I survived high school together. It was there where I learned to appreciate his high values, loyal friendship, and fearless nature. In our thirties and still good friends, his reminder about the road trip was welcomed. It will take us along the Australia’s east coast for six days. We will return along the inland highway, driving a total distance of over six thousand kilometres.

We will miss our girlfriends naturally, but surprisingly, there was little enthusiasm from them for a camping road trip up the tropics, in an old car, with no airconditioned, and without power steering. I conclude that, *ladies just don’t know how to have fun.*

High on our list of priorities was music. I purchased and installed myself a new Clarion cassette radio, an equaliser amplifier, and four quality speakers. It is not easy getting behind the door panels with cables but a fun job to do on a restoration. Under the seat goes a box of music cassettes - Golden Earring, JJ Cale, Led Zeppelin, and Eric Clapton. The tapes will be played loud and continuous on the journey. Between the hum of the road and the highway music, there won’t be time for chatter, nor is that necessary amongst old friends.

In the glove box was the Gregory’s road book. From the NRMA shop, we collected regional maps that unfold nicely over the dash and steering wheel as you hurtle down the highway.

The April 1993 Road Trip

We drive out of Canberra high spirited but are soon slowed down by the police. There is an accident up ahead. We pass slowly by a convertible car with wheels up in the air and blankets covering the driver and passenger sides. It is a sobering sight.

The route from Canberra to Sydney is a five-hour drive on a winding mountain range road. Predating the construction of the wide highway, the road consists of two lanes with large old gum trees lining the side of the road. Sleepy eyes and a temporary lapse of concentration could end a trip in tragedy. The trees are visibly damaged from such encounters with vehicles.

In civilisation again, we drive through the Sydney city centre, glancing up at the rows of high-rise buildings. We are impressed. Canberra’s Lovett Tower is our only high rise reaching twenty-five floors. You can see it from across the other side of the city.

Manly Beach is our first rest stop. We park the wagon at the stunning beach, which is shaded by the tall Norfolk Island Pines. We stretch our legs, have a light lunch, and then drive on.

New South Wales East Coast

Dave's parents live in Forster. We reach their home towards the evening. They wait for us with a hot meal. I know them well from when the family lived in Canberra. They are charming and caring people. After dinner and sitting in the back alfresco, I catch a conversation, between Dave and his father about the best way to shave without cutting yourself.

'Long, long strokes,' his father explains. I reflect, *how funny it is that parents can give their mature children the most basic of tips*. It is a delightful moment.

In the morning, feeling refreshed, we stop at a café in Foster for an egg and bacon roll and an orange juice. This is our traveller's preferred breakfast that will last us all day.

At the sea inlet, a fisherman is gutting fish from his early morning catch. Pelicans gather about expectantly. We walk over to watch the art of fish gutting and descaling. The fisherman hands the innards to a boy who stands by his side. It's surprising to see that the boy isn't grossed out by the slimy contents. In one action, the boy takes them and tosses them towards the pelicans. The pelicans jump and dart for the treats.

The action is captured on my Olympus SLR film camera. Since I paint for a hobby, the magic of the moment later inspires an oil painting.

We drive all day with a short stop in Byron Bay to refresh. Dave has an uncle and aunt living on the Gold Coast. They know we are coming, and we will have dinner with them tonight.

Queensland Gold Coast

The afternoon drive is pleasant as we cross the Queensland border. The landscape is familiar from a previous trip to Queensland and raises a feeling of anticipation. The highway is a two-way road winding past green hills, dairy farms, and quaint little towns. Occasionally, there is a glimpse of a beach on the far right between the forested areas.

Dave's relatives are a retired couple who have invested in an apartment by the new canals. The apartment is modern, bright and has magnificent views. We share a welcomed homemade meal and conversation, and they discuss their concern about floods after heavy rain. The apartment is on the fifth floor, so it is safe in that regard, but the owners complain that the basement and cars flood on occasions.

It is nearing 9 PM so we excuse ourselves to go to our motel to drop off our luggage and refresh. It is a warm evening, and the Gold Coast is full of life. It is a short walk to Surfers Paradise Beach. We take a seat at a café, looking out along the esplanade, and to the sand and over the ocean waves. Our spirits are raised by the infectious smiles and laughter of the holiday crowd.

Surfers Paradise Beach has developed rapidly since my last visit ten years earlier. It is boasting a skyline that looks out of place in Australia. Brightly lit high-rise apartments line the beach along the esplanade to our left and right, into the distance. The beach is shaded in the afternoon by the encroaching forest of high-rise buildings. Sophisticated shops, cafes, restaurants and clubs have replaced the old beer gardens.

The Scenic Rim

The next day, we explore O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat, on the Lamington National Park. It is a clear, warm, and humid day. We get there early at about 8am, before the information office opens. From the information board at the car park, we select what looks like a short walk on the map printed on an A4 sheet.

We trek downhill and over creeks on a narrow yet truly mesmerising rainforest track. Waterfalls awe us with their peaceful cascade. At about midday, we find a water hole to swim in and cool off. With our legs hurting, we circle back to negotiate the upward climb. In the late afternoon, the light is fading in the forest, and we pick up the pace. Fortunately, we are young and fit, able to last all day without food or water. Back at the car we recheck the map and find that it is in fact a full day hike. This was a simple mistake, yet this is how people run into trouble in a forest.

We drive back down the mountain to a village at the valley. The Canungra Village restaurant is serving meals and a welcomed cold beer. The motel still has vacancies, and we rest there for the night.

Sunshine Coast

Early in the morning, we bypass the Brisbane city centre and drive north. We cross the bridge into Bribie Island and stop by the Pumicestone Channel to stretch our legs. There is a pleasant little community on the island. Apart from the main roads being paved all other streets are sandy drives.

We continue our drive to Noosa, where we stop for lunch. It is another quiet small town with beautiful beaches either side of the heads. Dave thinks it has real estate investment potential. He has good knowledge about properties since his father was in the real estate business. I can only see a one street town with no facilities.

We leave the wagon at the nature reserve in Noosa Heads and go for a walk along the beach. The weather is perfect, and the ocean views are ever captivating. We are keen to explore and soon reach Granite Bay. From there, we follow a lengthy sandy bush path heading away from the main tourist spot that we anticipate is leading us somewhere interesting.

Coming out of the bush path, a sun-drenched isolated beach opens in front of us with rocky heads at either end. We are at Alexandria Bay, where people are few. Walking in our sneakers on the firmer, damper sand, we happen across people sunbaking on towels, and others casually strolling by. At this point, a lack of clothing became apparent to us. We had stumbled across the nudist beach by accident.

Feeling the peer group pressure to disrobe, we took off our shirts and continued in our jeans and sneakers. It seems the right thing to do, after all, 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do.'

East of Rockhampton, we briefly visit the Koorana Crocodile Farm. A wire mesh fence stands between us and a massive, captured crocodile. Without fear, I fit the SLR lens through the fence and take photos of the large reptile. The crocodile hunter jumps into the fenced area holding a large piece of meat, which soon arouses the sleepy crocodile. It lunges at him, and I click away for a great action shot.

The crocodile hunter makes a quick retreat with all limbs intact.

Gladstone

Late that night, we arrive in Gladstone. We buy a couple of pies from the takeaway shop on the main street and then search for a caravan park.

At the local park, the office is closed for the day. We enter the park and find a vacant camping spot with the intention of paying the next day. The tent goes up quickly and our sleeping bags are set up. A dry and neat tent sight is surprisingly welcoming to weary travellers. We are up early the next morning, pack up the tent, and go to pay for the site. The office is still closed and since we tried to pay, we drive away without guilt.

The highway is under repair in sections, and up ahead we cross an old single lane bridge that is being replaced. I forget to give way and meet a truck halfway. I wave apologetically and reverse the station wagon while he passes and greets me with a middle finger salute. In Rockhampton, we stop for lunch. This is a bland city with past era style main road buildings. The riverside park is attractive and refreshing, with the Fitzroy River running past the city.

Back on the highway, in a car that has no air-conditioning on a sweltering afternoon, driving is a challenge. We pour water over our heads from a bottle to keep cool. The old car also has no power steering, so we constantly muscle the car around the curves. It is more fun this way - you can really feel the tyres on the road. I can see now why the ladies preferred to stay home.

A little past the town of Mackay, the car starts to overheat, and steam wafts from under the bonnet. We stop at Kuttabul Automotive on the highway. The skilled and competent team replace the radiator hose and get us back on the road quickly.

Airlie Beach

Late afternoon, we approach Airlie Beach. Driving over the crest on the main street, the town is revealed below in all its abundance of natural beauty. It is a relaxing holiday destination, and vastly different from the more standard cities along the Queensland East Coast.

In conversation with hotel staff, we discover that employment in hospitality attracts young people to this area. Like us, they appreciate the natural beauty and holiday atmosphere. Because this is bound to be a rare visit, we decide to extend our stay by two nights.

Cairns

With a sense of achievement, we drive into tropical Cairns safely. The weather is pleasant here in April, with a hot yet comfortable temperature. We walk into the city centre, taking in the appealing older style shops and pubs.

Since we are by the Great Barrier Reef, one of the natural wonders of the world, we visit Green Island just off the coast of Cairns where snorkelling in the shallows is a popular activity. We find out that innertube surfing is equally fun, but we leave that activity for the youngsters. We watch a speedboat tow young people on an inflated car innertube at high speed. We witness that bodies reach great heights when they bounce off a wave and are flung from the inner tube.

It is a charming and captivating area. So much so that we decide to extend our stay here as well. It would have been a shame to turn around and drive back without exploring the Daintree Region. I call my boss to request more leave and Dave does the same. The bosses are fine with our requests, we are free to keep exploring. However, my girlfriend, who also works in my team, wonders if I ever intend to come back home. Dave is a bit silent on the matter, having received similar feedback from his girlfriend with a slightly more serious tone.

As good male friends do, we avoid discussing personal issues, turn up the music and drive on at almost reckless speeds towards Port Douglas.

Port Douglas

In the evening, we see a modest caravan park and a fancy resort sitting side by side. As we are camping, we choose the caravan park.

The first rays of sunlight wake me, and I step out from our tent site onto beautiful Four Mile Beach. Silver and grey tones dominate the misty sky and the reflection on the water. The beach is framed by tall and darkly silhouetted palms with coconut fruit dotted on the sand. Here in front of me is the inspiration for another oil painting.

We join the tourists on a boat cruise up the Daintree River. We are promised ferocious crocodiles but only youngsters show up on the riverbank to greet the tourists. The boat attendant carries a slab of meat on a stick to encourage the large crocodiles to come to the side of the boat and jump out of the water.

There is no sign of the mature crocodiles this time, who are perhaps asleep, digesting a tourist or two from the previous day.

Returning Home

We drive back home along the inland highway, crossing the New South Wales border at the town of Goondiwindi. The landscape is dry and flat out here. The distances are vast, but the return trip is easier because it is downhill, and it is getting cooler as we drive away from the tropics.

My father's old Ford station wagon, lasted another ten years without any mechanical problems. Eventually the car is sold to a university student for five hundred dollars. This covers the cost of the paint job.

I constantly look back at our time on the road and the places and people we saw along the way. It is a road trip to remember. More illuminating, this trip was a key transition point in our friendship from school fellows to one of mature friendship.