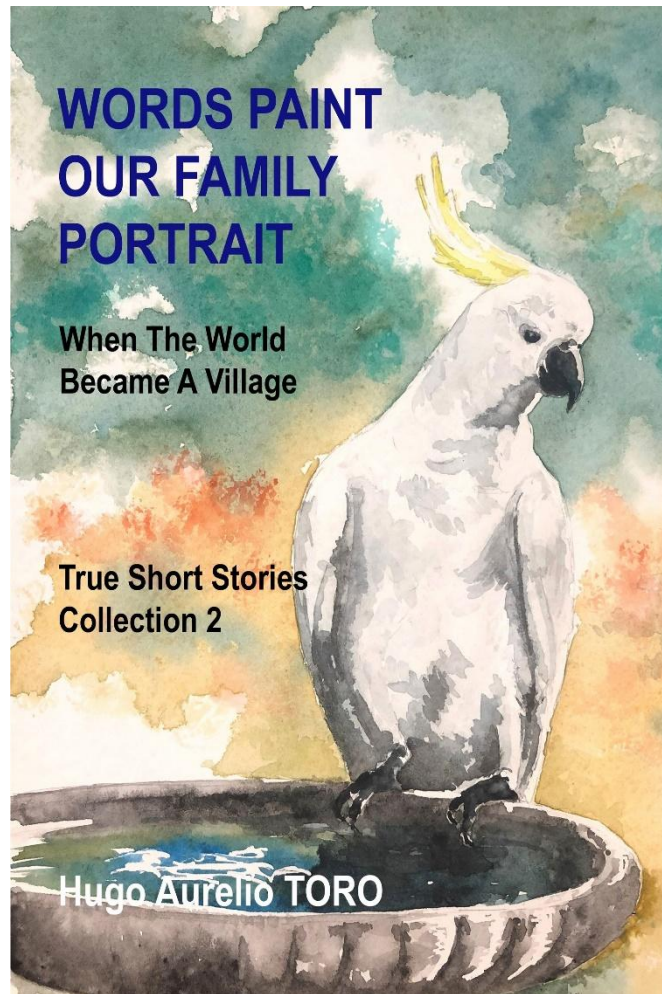


A short story from this collection.



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2.7) Our Family Friends In Italy

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



The two Hugos travelling together - Rome 2004.

My father and I are travelling overseas together, yet we book our flights at different times. We have separate seating arrangements and that is fine since we are mature fellows.

Our plane takes off smoothly, and I prepare for a long flight from Australia to Italy. In my middle-age, the aisle seat is a well-deserved luxury. The passenger next to me introduces herself. She is friendly, and we engage in pleasant conversation.

With the seat back, my eyes are heavy, and they start to close. It is one of those enjoyable things in life where your body becomes lightweight, and sounds fade away. The air hostess interrupts my cat nap. She leans forward with a message.

‘Excuse me, your father has a vacant seat next to him and he would like you to sit with him.’ Signs of confusion and possibly amusement spread across her face as she takes in the countenance of a man clearly in his forties.

‘No, thank you. Please let him know that I’m comfortable here,’ I reply and close my eyes again. She leaves to deliver my message. I’m secretly pleased with my assertive reply.

She returns soon after and stresses that he really wants me to sit with him. My father is in full parental mode and is choosing to forget, that I’m no longer a child. When I reach my father, he welcomes me with a wide grin. I’m uncertain if he is pleased that he got his way or pleased to see me join him. Naturally, he is in the aisle seat, leaving me no choice but to take the middle seat.

As I sit wide-eyed pressed between him and a stranger for the duration of the flight, my father drifts off into blissful slumber.

Three months prior, I was informed that my contract with PricewaterhouseCoopers was ending late 2004. I should have been stressing about my next contract but instead I was looking forward to a break after five years with the company. An unexpected travel opportunity with my father popped up.

Normally, mature children make any excuse to avoid traveling with their parents. I instead feel, that if we don’t take the opportunity to share time and laughter with our parents, then that can become a regret. We have a strong camaraderie and are still fit and healthy. Our partners at home have witnessed our strong connection, so they welcome our trip without worry or concern.

My father and I agreed that it is time to catch up with friends in Italy and family in Chile. We then purchased tickets for around the world flights since they are more cost effective. It gave us options for extra stops along the way and for more extensive sightseeing.

I reflected on how in the 2000s the world had in fact become a village, with the internet, and the freedom to travel anywhere safely and quickly. We were able to be in contact with family and friends across the world by email and on our mobiles. For the first time in 2001, smartphones could connect wirelessly with a 3G network. Connectivity had arrived!

The Origins Of A Lasting Friendship

In Italy, we have two generations of friends. There are the parents who are my father’s age and the offspring who are more my age. Despite the distance across continents, the connections with our friends are strong.

It was 1976, and my mother Carmen, and Franca were working in a curtain making shop in Queanbeyan on the main street. They were in a workshop on the first level above the shops. Typical of my mother, she made friends and invited Franca and her husband Auro, to our house. They were a charming young couple with two children – a young girl Sabrina, and a baby Barbara. They had recently migrated from Italy. We had migrated from Chile five years earlier, being a young family of six.

Our new friends were renting a first-floor apartment near the railway station. Their apartment block had a modern appearance and was only three stories tall with garages on the ground level. We were living in a single level rental house that had a charm typical of the 1930s. A small courtyard welcomed us at the front, just past a rusty iron

gate. The house was constructed using chocolate coloured brick, red terracotta roof tiles, and white timber window frames.

A feature of this house was the outdoor toilet and under house laundry room. The nightly loo visits scared my young sisters. My mother did the laundry in the dark and damp laundry room that smelled of aged handmade soap.

On weekends, it became a regular occurrence that our two families would plan a picnic. Everyone loaded up into my father's AP6 Valiant and Auro's HR Holden wagon. Auro was an outdoors person who enjoyed fishing and hunting. My father related to him, as they both had a quiet yet determined nature and were caring family men. Our bond grew stronger with time spent picnicking by the Murrumbidgee River and in the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. These outings were a highlight of our week. We played ball games together, explored the parks and rocky pools by the river's edge.

Tragically, while hunting feral pigs for a property owner, Auro failed to cross the river safely and met his end. Police concluded that the weight of his bullets held him down and that his heart gave out under the struggle to reach the surface in the icy mountain waters. My father identified him at the city morgue. This was a terribly difficult thing for him to do. He was greatly fond of his friend.

Franka and her girls were in a severe state of sadness and shock. They decided to return to Italy to be with their family.

My father and the Italian family stayed connected, and the strength of the friendship survived time and distance. When my mother passed away in 1986, we made sure that her curtain making friend Franca, was one of the first to be notified.

When Franka's daughters grew up and married, they made the trip to Australia with their husbands. They visited my father and the places where they had lived as children.

In Italy

Upon arriving in Rome, Franka's new husband Geraldo, collects us at the airport. It is the first time we have met him, yet he welcomes us warmly – just as if we are old friends.

We stay in their home for four days in the city of Velletri, located forty kilometres southeast of Rome. Sara, their youngest daughter, kindly gave us her room during our visit. The young men in the family are also welcoming and show us around the district of Lazio. It felt good to see the family again and catch up. Velletri is a pre-Roman fortress city of the Volsci tribe, filled with history, and we are fortunate to experience modern Italian home life within it.

The Velletri cobblestone streets are narrow. Picturesque historic buildings and shopfronts enclose the winding streets. Courtyards and fountains appear suddenly to reveal churches that have stood for centuries. A café calls to us with its rich and wafting aromas. We sit there with our friends, enjoying the atmosphere.

These cultural experiences are pleasantly familiar to us since we have our own European influences. My great-grandmother was from Sicily, and although my father has a strong Spanish heritage, he taught himself to speak Italian fluently.

The nature in this region is fresh and abundant. The lower hill slopes and valleys are fertile. Within the walls of the fortress city, land is scarce. Geraldo did well to acquire the block next to his elevated house. He is building a garden looking across the valley and the distant mountains. It is a peaceful and restful garden to enjoy.

We share home-made meals and late-night conversations with the family in Velletri. We reconnect and cement the bonds of friendship. At the end of our stay, with a little sadness, we say goodbye and go to Napoli by train to explore.

‘You are to be alert in Napoli,’ explains Geraldo, referring to a high crime rate in the city.

With his words in mind, at the Naples Centrale Train Station, I guard our luggage while my father looks for a taxi outside. At that moment, a distracted tourist is punched in the face, right in front of me. She stumbles backwards under the impact and cries out in shock and pain while reaching for her face. The thieves disappear in a flash with her bags. I stay with my bags fearing a second swipe at tourist bags. Others go to her aid and a crowd forms a circle as she is comforted, and they wait for the police to arrive.

In the streets, there is absolute traffic chaos, and not a taxi in sight. We conclude that our accommodation is close enough to walk to. It is two or three kilometres away. My father is a keen walker, so he charges ahead pulling his luggage effortlessly. I try to keep up with my dodgy ankle that I fractured playing football. Although my ankle has recovered, it is still painful to pace out with my father.

We walk down to the shore at the Gulf of Naples and join the esplanade. There we sight the ancient Castel dell’Ovo on the water’s edge. We will return on another day to visit this mid-fifth century fortress. At the far end of the esplanade on Via Mergellina we take the Funicolare Centrale the four stations up to reach our elevated hotel. That great 1950s song ‘*Funiculi Funicula*’ was buzzing in my head. I feel privileged to experience the same mechanical achievement that inspired this popular Latin song so many years ago.

Once we settle in at our hotel on the hill, we explore the sites, discovering that Naples is a charming city. The streets are full of history and heritage architecture. The fishing boats come to shore at the port, selling fresh fish. Stray cats join the people on the esplanade boat ramp, waiting for the fresh catch to arrive. A mini fish market is set up quickly in the nearby carpark.

In the evening, we enjoy the simple pleasures, like a pizza at a real backstreet pizzeria. We order the original and the best of course, a Napolitana pizza. Conversation with my father is active and mature, yet familiar and close to home. We discuss issues affecting the family, the economy, social change and even world issues. He fact checks everything, and gossip is of no interest to him. I value greatly his insightful discussions.

On a day trip, we travel by train to the Pompeii ruins. Up close, Mount Vesuvius looks menacing. I fix my stare on the mountain and ponder, is *that a grass fire lifting white smoke above the mountain or is it volcanic smoke?* On site, the archaeological excavations continue, with more treasures being discovered daily. The day passes quickly as we explore the city ruins. We walk the excavated streets in a state of repose, traversing where a busy ancient civilisation rushed about two thousand years ago on the cobblestone.

A day trip takes us to Rome, where we stand by the Colosseum, admiring the ancient structure. The repair work on the external curved walls, with modern clay bricks is brave but garishly out of place.

In the back streets of Rome, we discover that the further you are away from the tourist trail, the better value for money you get. We purchase a tasty and cost-effective lunch at a delicatessen in the back streets. The shop assistant makes us an Italian baguette sandwich, filled with processed meats, cheese, and other goodies. We are hungry from walking all morning and wait in anticipation.

We sit in the shade on a low wall by the sidewalk to eat our lunch. Accompanying us are colourful parked moped scooters, bunched together like flowers decorating the side street.

Madrid is our next stop. We have the Prado Museum on our schedule.

In Spain

The Prado Museum is an impressive building designed in 1785 by Juan de Villanueva. It was opened to the public as a museum in 1819.

We take in all the masterpieces that you rarely get to see in a standard individual's lifetime. Goya's masterpieces draw me in. They range from happy subjects playing on a country outing (The Swing), to the executions showing Spanish resistance to Napoleon (The Third of May 1808).

While I engage in people-watching, I notice Spanish males who could be my father's twins or brothers. It is possible that I'm overimagining the likeness, since I'm now tuned to our own Spanish heritage.

After a short stay in Spain, we are off to Chile to visit the family.

Family Bonds In Chile

In Santiago, we stay with my aunt Teofila, my father's oldest sibling. She owns a modest cottage house on the outskirts of the city. There, she lives with her son, Dagoberto who suffered from polio as a child, and her lifelong maid Rina, who is considered her adopted daughter.

It is a pleasant little house with a rich family history. My grandfather's picture, Jose Toro the Chilean sailor, hangs on the wall. I take a digital photo of that picture, since it is the only connection, we have with him. He died from stomach cancer when my father was a boy.

Despite the years that have passed, or perhaps because of it, we are welcomed with joy by my father's family. He is eager to catch up with his sister and brothers. The walk from the train station to my aunt's place in Santiago is a familiar short stroll. We meander past the local shops and through the estate which consists of hundreds of red brick villas sharing the same design. Some are two stories, and some are single story but three streets in and they all start to look the same. There is relief when we see Rina waiting for us at the street corner. She has been expecting us with genuine anticipation.

After a rest day, a barbeque is organised for us, and family members start to arrive in the late afternoon. Four generations squeeze into my aunt's cottage garden at the rear of the house, where long-extended tables have been set up. Colourful streamers cross above us from wall to wall. Laughter and cheer fills the courtyard until late in the evening.

Teofila has aged significantly since we last saw her. She takes me to see her lawyer to amend her will. She wants me to look after my cousin when she passes away. He has been in a wheelchair all his life and will need care into his senior years. I love my cousin and can see what my aunt wants me to do, but I realise that from across the ocean, it will be difficult. I agree to being placed in her will, since I know that a mother of a disabled child needs peace of mind beyond her passing.

My mother's family is also welcoming, and my father is available to see them despite lasting differences of opinion. Every senior member of the family gets a visit from him. I visit my uncles and aunts with the understanding that perhaps I will see these elders for the last time.

I'm glad that we see my uncle Roberto again, who married my mother's youngest sister Mireya. He is a fun-loving accomplished gentleman. My father was close to Roberto when they were young.

The story goes that in the early 1960s, they rode a motorcycle from Santiago to the coast. The family had arranged to meet at grandfather's coastal cottage for a weekend by the sea. The trip was approximately 200 kilometres of winding narrow roads descending to the ocean. My father was the terrified pillion on the back.

On this visit, Roberto is frail and suffering from a heart condition. He confides in us that without private health insurance, he is often having to miss his heart medication.

We spend time with the family and witness again their loving bonds. I have a strong connection with my cousins Mireya and Cecilia from when we were children. Soon after our visit, uncle Roberto sadly passed away.

Back in Australia

This trip with my father, leaves me filled with joy. Back home, I calmly and steadily process these treasured days with my father, our family, and our friends. All interactions are special, and they trigger treasured memories that warm the soul.

The bond with our Italian friends is now stronger than before. We communicate regularly, and we are truly extended family. The bond with the Chilean relatives is equally precious and lasting.

I'm glad that we embarked on this adventure together.