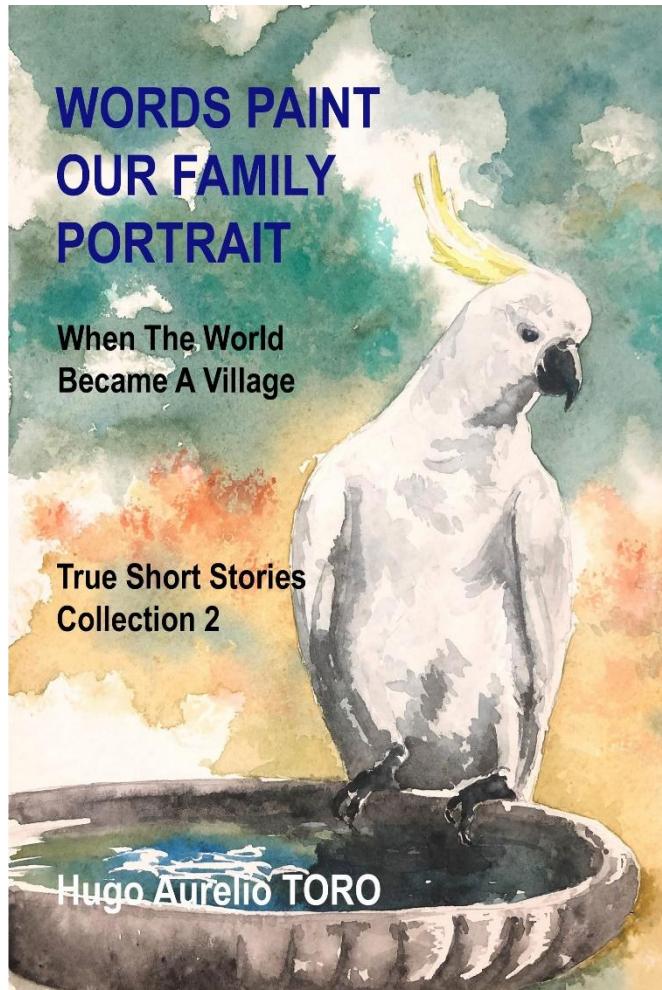


# A short story from this collection.



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## 2.8) The Solomon Islands Wedding

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



*Emma and George exchanging bows – Honiara 2004.*

Emma and George are a young couple who met in the capital city Honiara, in the Solomon Islands, and that is where they fell in love. They share a passion for island culture and tradition. Emma, an Australian girl, was working as a volunteer in the Solomon Islands. George, the local boy, showed a calm nature and unquestioned values. They planned the wedding with island tradition influencing the preparation and the wedding day.

Penny (Emma's mum) is excited to be attending her daughter's wedding, and in an exotic location. She has never caught the travel bug, travel is not her thing, but this is different. On the other hand, Hugo (Penny's partner), takes any opportunity to see new people and new places. Both are down to earth people, not impressed by superficial things. They prefer real people, and real places.

In December 2004, their flight lands in Honiara on a bright and warm day. Travellers make their way through customs in an airport that is modest and typical for a tropical island.

Emma stands expectantly at the gates ready to welcome guests. Penny's face lit up when she saw her daughter, and they hug warmly. George is with her, and this is the first time that mum is face to face with the fiancé. He is a tall fellow with strong islander features and shoulder length dreadlocks framing his face. He wears a broad smile and shows huge respect towards the female elder, Penny.

Emma's dad John is coming to the wedding, plus her cousin and best friends - all are travelling from Australia. Guests gather at the entrance to the airport and after greeting each other, they walk in a group to the car park.

Typical of the Solomon Islands, a one-ton truck is their taxi ride to the city centre. Penny sits on the front seat with Emma and George. The other guests load up their luggage on the back and climb on the tray. The traffic is moderate, and they absorb the bumps sitting on the aluminium tray while holding down the luggage.

With the wind styling their hair, they reach their accommodation.

## Honiara – Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands are experiencing peace again after a long period of ethnic violence. The government sought external assistance to help with the country's bankruptcy and chaos. The Australian-led Regional Assistance Missions to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), arrived in July 2003 to help put the country back together.

Penny and Hugo are staying at The Solomon Kitano Mendana hotel, located centrally on the avenue by the same name. The entrance to the hotel is characteristically tropical, and the welcoming smiles from the hotel attendants match the warmth of the island air. The large open-air entry highlights a steep gable timber roof and solid timber posts. Light floods in from all angles. These impressive timber structures are part of the local architectural. There are cane chairs for reading and relaxing, and the cafes and bars are located beyond the entrance.

Emma is assisting with check in, and she leans in close to share information about the hotel. She tells them that it is an impressive venue, yet more so for the tourist clientele. Unsure yet what that means, Penny and Hugo store that piece of information. The rooms are comfortable and decorated in a western style.

After unpacking, in the late afternoon they go to meet George's family. His father is a charming man, and his sisters welcome everyone openly. George and Emma receive the gifts and cards that are accumulating on a table in the centre of the lounge room. Emma reads the cards and thanks the guests who gather around.

The Solomon dwellings have a unique coastal and tropical charm. George shows guests the family gardens, which are green with an abundance of vegetables, native plants, and trees. The outdoor shelters or gazebos are open with hammocks strung between posts. The roof cover is made from folded palm leaves tied to the rafters. Since it is cool and comfortable, this is where George sometimes sleeps.

Only meters away, the ocean laps against the rear of the property. A short stone wall is the only protection. Climate change and rising sea levels are issues that are beginning to concern scientists, but they are destined to be denied by sceptics. One western politician of little tact, will be heard on a live microphone, mocking the Pacific Islanders for their climate change fate.

On another front, in conversation with a concerned family member, Penny and Hugo are told that Foreign Countries are buying forested areas and logging extensively. It is possible that all natural forests will be gone in fifty years. The Islanders benefit from this arrangement by seeing a quick cash injection and employment in the forestry industry. The long-term effect is twofold: there is a decline in village life cohesion; and there is permanent environmental damage to old forests and rivers. Any promises by the industry to provide housing and build churches is easily ignored. In fact, villagers are not equipped to negotiate at this level, and it soon becomes an unfair exchange.

That evening at the hotel open air restaurant, they are treated to a performance by Solomon dancers. Grass skirts flow in the warm evening air and heads are adorned with woven headbands.

## **The Wedding Day**

The following morning, everyone dresses for the wedding, and guests look smart in their dressy yet casual attire. It is a warm day in the sun, and the wedding party and guests place comfort ahead of any fancy western style clothes.

Guests make their way to the park by the sea, where the wedding and reception will be held. The guests are gathering in groups, in conversation, in the shade.

Hugo has his new Samsung mini digital camera with him, and he takes countless pictures of the family and friends. He is feeling like the unofficial wedding photographer. There is no actual wedding photographer because that is not a priority for the couple. Hugo is impressed and eager to test out the digital camera that is a gift from Penny. No heavy SLR, no winding the film forward, no choosing the exposure or adjusting the focus. It does it all automatically, and it saves poster size digital photos to a small memory card that can hold hundreds of photos. The digital technology blows his mind.

The ceremony is held under a clear sky with the calm ocean as backdrop and the mid-afternoon sun is warming faces. The park is green and well presented. The gazebo frames a view of a distant island barely peering out of the ocean. The preacher addresses the couple with a religious message to endorse the bond between them. The message isn't exactly what the couple had agreed on. Instead, a more submissive role for the woman is presented, much to the bride's dismay. Traditional views and values are still strong here in the Islands.

The couple and parents exchange symbolic gifts at the ceremony. Prayers follow the exchange of vows. The marriage certificates are placed on a table out in the open and are signed by George, Emma, and the witnesses. The parents then embrace the newly wedded couple followed by the family who gathers in a jovial group to also congratulate them.

Traditional food was prepared the day before or early in the morning. The family have all lovingly cooked a dish and brought it along to add to the feast. The food is laid out on long tables by the shade of the trees. Guests take a plate and serve themselves from the various fish, meat and vegetable dishes presented on palm leaves.

The feast is a cultural treat for the tastebuds and all the senses.

## **A Lesson In Culture**

Emma finds a spare moment to explain to Penny and Hugo, the intricacies of Island culture. She wants them to be culturally aware. They appreciate this extra knowledge and are sponges in her presence. She explains the concept of belongings. In fact, everything is shared in the village, so no one is too attached to any of their possessions.

‘You can’t be too surprised if you see your favourite T-shirt being worn by someone else in the family,’ she explains. It is just sharing.

She follows up with a discussion about money. She explains that running a business with locals is difficult. Surplus cash at the end of the day is often shared amongst the workers. This isn’t viewed as corrupt in any way, it is just sharing what is remaining. Unfortunately, it can have a devastating effect on the business’s cash flow.

There are other things that have challenged Emma on culture, but she accepts the diverse views. One of these is the discipline of children by their parents. It had struck her as excessive and she had found herself wanting to intervene, to protect a child. She thought better of it and looked away. What is clear and can’t be ignored, is that villagers have been successfully raising loving families for thousands of years.

Like George, with regards to his education, islanders can be educated in both countries (Solomon Islands and Australia) due to being close neighbours and having the opportunity to live and work in either country. This naturally expands the mind through exposure to diverse cultures.

## Post Wedding.

Emma and George prepare for their honeymoon in their home village on Choisuel island. Family members will accompany them including John, Emma’s father. They will embark on an adventurous trip to the island by motorised canoes. It is a 340-kilometre sea crossing from Honiara, plus another 20-kilometres by foot to cross the island to Siruka Bay. The celebrations continue there.

Penny and Hugo are less adventurous and opt to stay in Honiara. The next two days are free, so they walk to the city centre. English is still the official language even after independence from the British in 1978, so it is easy to communicate with locals. There are in fact, about 120 dialect languages spoken in the Solomon Islands - including Pidgin English.

The faces are friendly, and a friendly local takes out a folio of his drawings for them to see. His smile is infectious, and his large white teeth contrast against his dark skin. They appreciate the effort taken to produce the screen prints on handmade paper, so they purchase a print of Kesoko – The Sea Spirit of Fishermen. The Solomon Islanders traditionally used canoes for transportation, fishing, and warfare. Kesoko is closely tied to spear-fishing and net fishing. The purchase of the print is a simple act for which the artist displays open gratitude.

Penny is taken in by the artist and invites him back to the hotel for a coffee. He walks back with them. At the hotel entrance, they are surprised by the hostile reception that their guest receives from the hotel porters. Apparently, it is unacceptable to invite locals to the hotel for a coffee. Penny protests, but the porters stand firm. Sensing that they have bumped into a cultural issue, Penny apologises to the friendly artist, and they say goodbye at the entry.

Penny and Hugo felt that in an ideal world, the privileged and the less privileged would share resources and services. It is a naive thought perhaps. Now they see what Emma had referred to earlier regarding the hotel’s position in this society.

## Exploring

The following day, they want to explore the coastline, so they hire a tour guide with a powered boat. They meet the guide at the Yacht Club and board his small open tour boat. The two, are the only guests that day, and the guide is a friendly fellow, instantly gaining their confidence. The sea is calm, and the sun is partly obscured by white clouds. It is a perfect day for a coastal adventure.

The boat follows the coastline closely. The guide points out Tetere Bay and then Tadhimboko Bay, where they see more of the coastal lifestyle. The homes are becoming further apart with every kilometre that they explore away from the city. Most properties and developments seem modest. Over the humming sound of the boat's engine, in conversation with the guide, they are informed that the Solomon Islands are still an unspoiled paradise. He is proud of his small business and service, taking tourists to experience pristine locations.

He points out the shipwrecks that line the coast. These are deliberately placed there as weather barriers. They pass close to the rusting structures. The ship's bow in deep rusty red, rises above sea level to meet a deep blue sky, in a dramatic display of colour and contrast. Tipped on their sides, the ocean pushes up against the shipwrecks and waves fill the spaces between the rusting steel members.

People paddle past in their canoes, heading up and down the coast. Others load up transport boats docked a little further out to sea, yet still within the bay. The larger boats, as we are told by our guide, are used to taxi goods and people to the various islands. Sea ferry is a busy form of transport here.

The tour ends back in Honiara, and they reflect on the pleasant adventure with a friendly and open guide. It was not to be all smiles that day. Tired after a long day, a disagreement surfaces between Penny and Hugo about something that is quickly forgotten. It is his fault; he said something insensitive. Penny is certain that her holiday is completely ruined as a result. Frosty was not what Hugo thought he would be feeling on a tropical island.

The next day is warm with a clear blue sky, and from their hotel room, and between two accommodation buildings, they can see a bright sandy beach and a stunning ocean scene. A large palm tree rises out of the beach sand. The dark and cool shadows beneath the palm tree is inviting. Hugo takes his digital camera down and sits in the distinctive fan shape shadows.

A teacher and schoolchildren are enjoying the beach. Hugo refrains from snapping photos to respect their privacy and he puts his camera down by his side.

Thankfully, they are not ones to stay upset for long. Penny joins him under the palm tree, and they then relax by the pool and on the hotel grounds. The pool and deck chairs are located at the rear of the property and reach the water's edge with clear views across the bay. In a blue haze, the islands peer above the ocean horizon. They can see how locals travel by canoe safely to their islands. The islands are within reach, where generations have crossed those waters to their island homes.

## A Fine Experience

Back at home, Hugo puts together a small photo wedding album for Emma and George as a post wedding gift. The photos capture an incredible family and cultural experience.

Emma and George embark on a happy marriage. They alternate between their lives in the Solomon Islands and in Australia. They have two terrific children of mixed culture. The children are of a quiet disposition and are deep thinkers like their father. They are also nature lovers, like their mother.