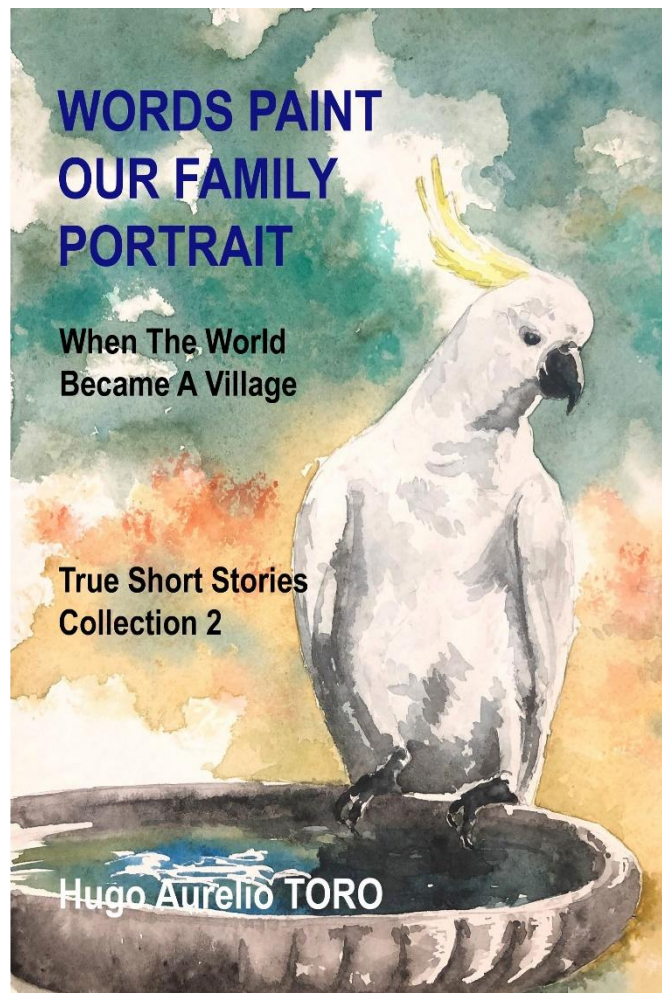


A short story from this collection.



by
Hugo Aurelio TORO

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2.9) Anecdotes - Motorcycling Fun

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



My nieces (Nina, Elisa, and Celia) on my motorcycle – 1993 and 2005.

These anecdotes, skip like stones over water, across forty years of motorcycling. I'm not a midlife crisis rider. I have been licensed and have enjoyed the freedom of motorcycling from my eighteenth birthday.

Two college friends were influential, Rod and Shaun, who also owned motorcycles young, and then Shaun rode them for work in the police force.

My friend Rod was a highly effective, and intuitive mechanic. He offered to work on my damaged 1977 Yamaha motorcycle with me. My lack of experience as a rider and carelessness with servicing led to a seized engine. It was a surprise when travelling at

100km/hour, the engine went silent, and my back wheel locked up. I was lucky to be on a straight and depressed the clutch to roll safely to a stop.

In my parent's garage, we pulled out the seized engine and replaced it with a working one. My motorcycle was running perfectly again, thanks to Rod. Sure, there was a bucket of bolts left over, but we ignored those.

Shaun shared road survival tips with me from his police rider training. At an empty carpark he instructed me on basic riding techniques. A good tip from Shaun was to stay away from the centre of the lane where cars drop oil. He also advised keeping away from the white lines on a frosty morning.

My enthusiasm for motorcycling is sensible with forty years of safe riding - knock on wood.

Judging A Book By The Cover

The handwritten notice on the billboard at the hotel said, *'Looking to purchase motorcycles for parts. Call Bill on...'* A contact number is given on the card. Here is a notice written for me. Well, not exactly for me, but for someone in my predicament.

It is midday and we stop at a once bustling mining town for a rest and a meal. The town's hotel is on a street corner, and it is from a past era, with a charming and commanding facade. The iron sheeting canopy that covers the footpath and protects patrons from the weather, is held up by neatly painted white posts. The front doors lead into an elegant yet dated entry area where a billboard displays public notices. To the left is the saloon area and locals have begun to gather for a midday beer. To the right is the kitchen and dining area, furnished with old timber chairs and tables and wall to wall light maroon carpet, elegant in a heritage kind of way.

We order a beer at the bar, then move to the dining area with glass in hand. I stop again to look at the billboard and take note of that number.

David, Greg, and I Hugo, are touring Tasmania on motorcycles. We are three work friends who ride to work. Without over planning, we took a week off work together to ride our motorcycles. The island as a riding circuit offers: a motorcycle racing history dating back to 1914; winding roads through quiet picturesque towns; larger cities with heritage charm; historic convict sites; and stunning natural beauty.

I ride a 1983 Yamaha 1100. It is more power than I need for my commute to and from work. David is on a Kawasaki Ninja 636. That motorcycle is a little rocket from 1995. Greg rides a white Honda CBR 1000. He let me have a ride on it and compared to my tractor, it was like riding on a spaceship. For clarification, I haven't been on a spaceship, but I imagine it would be like that. It was exceptionally smooth.

We rode from Canberra to Melbourne via the South Coast road which is a nine-hundred-kilometre ride. Somewhere around the halfway point we rest for the night at a hotel. The weather was ideal for motorcycling, dry and cool. We had so much fun on the winding road and traffic free stretches that the two days passed quickly. There was almost a sense of disappointment when we arrived in Melbourne to board the Spirit of Tasmania ferry.

The crossing was smooth on the Bass Strait, with the good weather forecast continuing. At the port in Devonport, we offloaded our motorcycles and began our ride around Tasmania. On our first day we travelled along the top of Tasmania past Launceston, then down the east coast to Hobart.

There were two memorable points in our first day's ride. First, were the winding roads that double back on themselves near Saint Helens. On the Saint Helens mountain road, I lost concentration and missed a corner. My 'steel horse' took me cross country down a ditch and past large boulders and trees. It seemed to know the way, so I let it do its thing. We rejoined the road below at the next turn – still upright and no limbs missing. Second highlight was the historic Port Arthur site. We arrived there in the afternoon with time to explore.

At Port Arthur, we sensed the convict history still hanging in the air. It is in the abandoned colonial buildings, jail cells, courtyards, and the flogging post. We were travelling through Port Arthur in 1994, two years prior to the massacre where thirty-five people died. That event is to change Australia and introduce world leading gun reforms. We experience the historic site in more innocent times if that was possible.

The following day, we were back on the highway, when my clutch began to slip. The throttle was on, but the revs fluctuated, and my Yamaha was unsafe on the highway. I stopped at a mechanic on the highway, to get advice. He quoted a week to get the job done and the cost will equate to more than buying a replacement motorcycle.

The next day, we were on our way towards Queenstown on the west coast of Tasmania. We could feel the wilderness and the natural beauty surrounding us. Unfortunately, my motorcycle's clutch was about to give up altogether. That was when we decided to stop at a hotel for lunch and review options.

I don't normally check billboards, unless I'm looking for a lost cat or a second-hand fridge. But I am glad to see the notice.

I call the number, and I tell the interested party about my motorcycle, and I'm honest about its failing clutch. He is close by and can meet me here within 30 minutes.

Soon after, a tall, bearded and heavily tattooed man, wearing biker clothing, steps into the bar. I spot him from a distance and think to myself, *that is not someone I would like to meet in a dark alley*. He scans the room and spots the tourists easily and walks over to us. There are no nice formalities or introductions, so we step aside to talk, and I mention a price.

He offers little conversation and puts out his hand for the keys. I dare not hesitate and I hand over the keys as casually as I can. He leaves the bar, and I return to my riding friends.

Jokingly yet with a nervous tone, I say 'perhaps that is the last I see of my motorcycle.'

In less than an hour, the stern man is back. He confirms that the clutch is stuffed, then reaches into his pocket. We all dive under the table (no we don't). He hands me an envelope containing the agreed cash. I write him a receipt on the back of a beer coaster, which clarifies that money was exchanged for the motorcycle.

I'm pleasantly surprised and grateful for a good outcome, given the remoteness of the location. My friends complete the tour, and we meet back at the ferry. I take the interstate bus back to Canberra holding my helmet and riding bags, having learned an important lesson, 'do not judge a book by its cover.'

Jekyll and Hyde

In March 2005, the documentary series Long Way Round with actors Ewan and Charley premiered on television. Inspired by this series, I plan my own long motorcycle trip. I don't have a famous travel friend and a television crew, so it will just be me on a solo ride across three states.

My niece Nina is turning sixteen, so reconnecting with family is the motivation. We have a good connection, and we share a quirky nature. The family is in Adelaide, 1250 kilometres from my home in Canberra. The ride will take me over mountain ranges, through agricultural land, a vast desert, and along life-giving rivers. It is stunning country to experience.

I now own a 1983 BMW motorcycle. It is a solid, dependable, and overall terrific example of German technology. When you ride a BMW, you instantly notice the strong pull of the engine, the smooth gear changes, safe cornering, and reliable braking. This motorcycle is fire engine red, and I hear that red vehicles go faster. It meets expectations in that regard, but it could also be the rider. I don't admit to this often, but when I get on a motorcycle, a Jekyll and Hyde thing happens.

My college friend Shaun recommends a mechanic who services police BMW motorcycles. This mechanic has a workshop at home, having recently retired. He tunes and greases my motorcycle with care, and he replaces the brittle tyres. The motorcycle feels safe, tight, and responsive on the road.

In my helmet I fit the small Ansett headphones that plug into my Sony Walkman. This cassette player is super compact, it is hardly any bigger than the cassette itself, and it even has a bass button. I create a mixed tape with my favourite 1970s and 1980s rock classics, for the trip.

Shaun also recommends that I do the Stay Upright riding course. Early in the morning, the students turn up on a wide range of motorcycles at the riding school in Mount Majura. Our instructor gives us a one-hour lecture before moving us to the track. The take home message comes as a surprise to me.

‘Do not apex a corner. Go into a corner with space for a good entry and a clear exit. An apex line can put you at risk of getting too close to oncoming traffic and running out of road at the other end,’ says the instructor.

Hearing that message, I no longer apex. Instead, I just pick a line and let the motorbike get me around safely.

The autumn weather across New South Wales, South Australia, and Victoria is fine and the skies are clear. I had chosen the best possible riding weather.

Day one - I ride through Wagga Wagga and then towards the town of Balranald on the Hay Plains. There are sections of road that are dead straight. The road up ahead disappears to a dot far in the distance. On one of those flat stretches, I see a tiny truck in my rear vision mirror. I check after five minutes, and the truck is close behind me and coming up fast. I move over and it thunders past. I suspect that his speed controller is broken.

On either side of the highway, there are flat and dry fields as far as the eye can see. The vast and clear afternoon sky meets the flat horizon in a haze. The simple desert forms and transparent colours create stunning beauty. Late afternoon approaches, and I ride into Balranald, where I have booked accommodation. I check in at the modest motel and take a refreshing shower. An evening walk looking for a meal, sees me exploring the main street.

In the evening half-light, a lady rides gently past me on her bicycle, wearing a white cotton dress swaying in the breeze. The low sun rays revealing her silhouette. Time seems to slow down at that moment, a rather mesmerising site for a lonely motorcycle rider. I shake myself free of that image and enter the takeaway shop.

Day two – I'm on the road early and riding towards Mildura. Approaching the town, childhood memories flood in. In 1971, my father moved us from Sydney to Adelaide in his old blue Ford,

and we stopped in this town to visit one of his friends. On the far side of town, while accelerating to re-join the highway, the citrus fruit trees line both sides of the road displaying a guard of honour.

In the late afternoon, the Adelaide Hills rise out of the flat and dry land. By contrast, they are covered in bright green vegetation. They are a welcomed sight since exhaustion from long hours on the motorcycle is creeping in. The scenic ride is a treat. The winding road injects a bit of energy back in my body. I roll into suburbia down the steep highway descent where heavy vehicles often lose their brakes.

At my destination, I ring the doorbell and kneel on my boots for a laugh. The three girls are growing tall, and their uncle is a shortie by contrast. My niece is surprised by my unannounced visit, and I wish Nina happy birthday. It is a joy to see my sister and family again.

Day 3 and 4 - Family time and rest is precious. We visit the beaches where our parents would take us on picnics. Henley and Semaphore beach bring back many memories from the 1970s. The tram ride from the city to Glennel, is an enjoyable historic treat.

Together we visit the Adelaide Central Markets. It opened in 1869 and has over 80 gourmet food vendors. As you approach the open stores the inviting smell from their exotic foods calls you closer. The display windows with their processed and fresh produce are a visual treat. It is easy to get emersed in the market atmosphere.

At the end of my stay, I prepare for the ride home and say my goodbyes. My three nieces pose for a photo on my motorcycle as they did when they were children, so cute.

Day 5 - On the return trip, I took a detour on the Murray Valley Highway, following the course of the Murray River into Victoria and towards the historic town of Swan Hill. I pass people enjoying fishing and picnics along the riverbank on a sunny day. I stay the night in Swan Hill. The motel is comfortable, and my motorcycle is safe outside my room.

Day 6 - The next morning, I ride out of this scenic rural area refreshed and full of confidence along a straight stretch of highway. There is no police around, and Mr Hyde is making an appearance. The throttle on my motorcycle opens to reveal a hearty raw from the engine that I have not heard before. Everything zooms past faster than I can focus my eyes, and exhilaration is running through my body with a sense of gliding through the air.

The road meets the Murray River again and curves sharply to the right. It is too late to slow down yet experience tells me to stay cool and maintain speed. I throw my weight over to the right of the motorcycle to pull it into the curve. The angle is such that to my right I can see bitumen passing by. Coming out of the curve I give it a bit more throttle and the BMW flies out safe and strong. There is a big grin on my face.

I arrive home late in a cool Canberra evening, with the body complaining from a long ride. I park my motorcycle in my driveway and take a moment to thank the higher powers for a safe trip. It is more an act of spiritual connection than a religious one.

My film crew can now stand down, and the trip is stored in my memory for life.

Goodbye Old Friend

I told Vaughn, a good work friend, who is a BMW motorcycle enthusiast, that I had traded in my old friend the red BMW for a newer model. He looked at me horrified.

‘You don’t trade in old BMW motorcycles, you just store them and fix them when you can,’ he states. He has three old motorcycles at home from when he was a young fellow and works on them continuously.

He looks over my newly acquired blue K1200RS and he admits that it was a nice motorcycle. It would have been ideal to keep the old BMW, but I have neither the space nor the mechanical skills to take care of an old motorcycle. There was no other way.

A year earlier, in February 2012, I had taken my motorcycle to the ex-police mechanic. The diagnosis was not good. The drive shaft was rattling around in the casing and making a bit of noise. As a joke, I suggested putting banana peels in there, but I only got a blank look from the expert, no smile.

He instead initiated the more serious conversation of rebuild costs. He explained the massive dismantling job. He also stated that if we are doing this, then the whole motorcycle should get a rebuild including the engine and gearbox.

As much as I was attached to my loyal motorcycle of ten years, I had not anticipated an expensive rebuild. While searching online, I came across a later model BMW in gorgeous blue. It was in fact, built to correct all the faults with my older model. It had six gears, ABS brakes, and leading-edge suspension. The motorcycle was in Gosford, a five-hour ride from home. I called the dealer and arranged a time to test-drive and trade in.

The morning ride to Gosford is exceptionally smooth and pleasant. I’m feeling guilty over what I’m about to do. A little past midday, I find the motorcycle dealer and I’m surrounded by older motorcycles that have been traded in for newer models. I wonder what adventures they have been on. My red BMW friend is now amongst them.

The test drive is a success, what an exhilarating new ride, and contracts are signed.

To avoid riding for ten hours in one day, I had booked a motel room near the town centre. After a shower, I ask the front desk lady for directions to a good restaurant.

‘Actually, if you wait across the street at that bus stop, in 30 mins there is a bus taking people to dine at the RSL club,’ she informs me. I thank her and walk over to wait.

A group of older gentlemen start to gather around me, from the nearby aged care village. They are jovial, and I can tell that they have already engaged in pre-dinner drinks. I greet the older gentlemen and board the bus with them. With a smile arriving on my face, I enjoy the seniors ride to the club. I had a strong feeling that maybe my old red BMW friend had set me up.

The next day, it is a joy to ride the blue BMW home. When you ride a new motorcycle, your senses are heightened by the comparison between the old and new ride. I’m gliding down the road with the promise of explosive performance from a well-tuned sports motor.

The trip home felt effortless. In my carport, I park the motorcycle in its secure place behind a locked gate. My partner has prepared a much-welcomed hot meal, and I share my adventure and excitement with her. She tries to look interested, but it is more my thing.