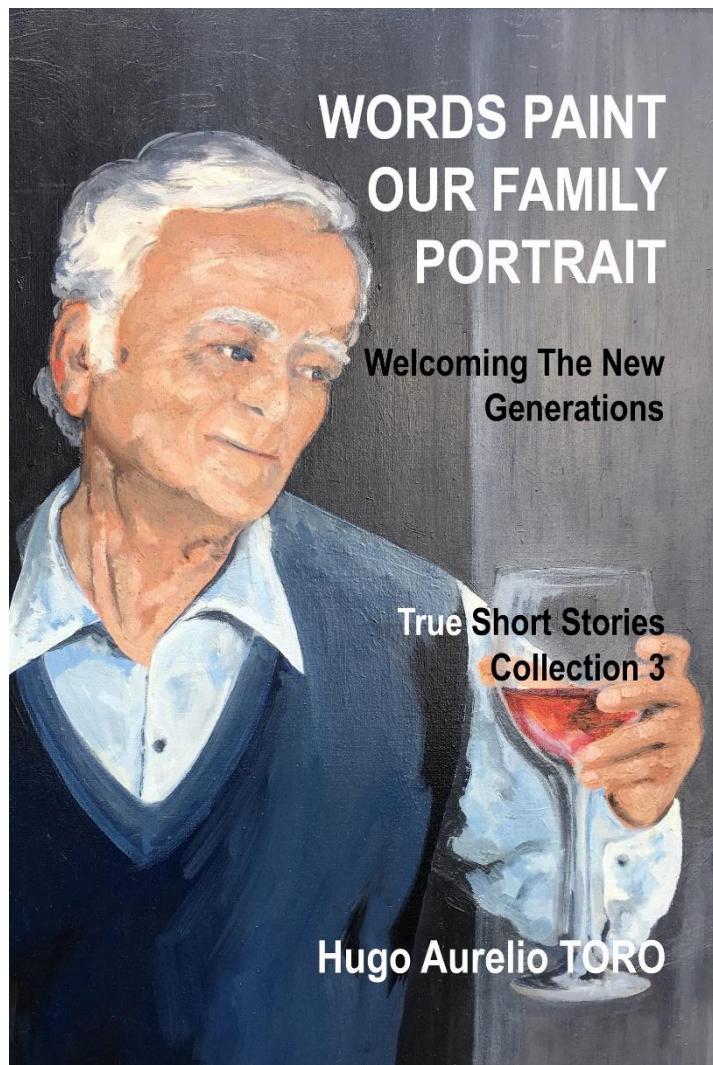


A short story from this collection.



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3.1) Matthew And The Sergeant

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Matthew and the Sergeant on an outing – Canberra 2014.

The pedestrian traffic lights are red, and I hold Matthew's hand with a firm grip by the curb. He pulls to release himself and I tighten my grip. He is a strong boy, but he is in my care, and his safety is my responsibility. This is a critical point in the development of our friendship. Matthew will soon trust my judgement and adopt safer practices himself. The traffic lights change to green, and we cross the busy road safely.

My firm grip is in use one more time in a crowded cafe. Keen to get to the counter, Matthew leans into the back of his wheelchair and pushes past cafe guests in the queue, clipping their heels. There is an initial startled reaction from the people, but their mood quickly mellows, and

they let Matthew pass. Still, it is more acceptable to be patient and wait in line. Holding his hand firmly again, the message is delivered.

We come to an agreement that dangerous manoeuvres near traffic or crowded areas are not good. That is when I become known as Sergeant Hugo. My label from Matthew makes me smile. The firm grip is not used again since he stands by me patiently, from then on.

Meeting Matthew

I was in my early forties, fully focused on my career and I had no dependents. I was in a DINKs (double income no kids) relationship. I discussed with my partner Penny, my interest in participating in a 'disability buddy program' and she was pleased for me. I also told a good friend who speaks freely. In his view, I was obviously looking to parent a child. I didn't think that was it. I just wanted to put something back into society.

I answered an advertisement in the local newspaper that was seeking a buddy for disabled clients. The young woman in charge of the program had a long career in disability and a true passion for it. I had no such experience other than having grown up with my cousin, who suffered from Polio when he was a baby. He spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. He was a little older than me, and there are photos of me in nappies sitting on his lap. The bond was strong between us.

The program organiser was satisfied with the police check and my interview. She provided two contacts of young teenagers who are on the program.

I called the first parents, and the conversation was awkward. I couldn't put my finger on it, except that the chemistry was zero. We agreed to park that idea, and I didn't follow up to see if there had been a change of heart.

I called the second phone number, and Judy, Matthew's mum answered. Judy was charming and welcoming over the phone and instantly placed me at ease. I explained my lack of experience, balanced with my love for my cousin in a wheelchair. We arranged a time to meet Matthew.

At Judy's place, I was invited into the house and directed to the kitchen and family room. I steadied my nerves by holding onto the breakfast bar. Matthew came down the stairs and stood by his mum. He gave me a side glance and pointed in my direction.

'Who is that?' he asked.

'That is Hugo from Hartley Lifecare,' replied Judy. I was impressed that Matthew had come down the stairs on his own to meet a new person.

He was a quiet yet assertive boy who interacted with confidence. Judy explained that he has endured multiple surgeries to assist with his cerebral palsy. Life expectancy is not long, yet he has a strong will and was surprising the experts.

Committing To A Regular Visit

With Judy, we agree on a routine visit. I have the weekends free so I can take Matthew out of the house once a week. The possibilities are endless with regards to activities. These outings can include a movie, the art gallery, the museum, or a restaurant.

These are my tame suggestions, but Matthew has his own ideas. I do take Matthew to the movies but as much as he wants to enjoy the film, being on the autism spectrum means that he

becomes impatient and will want to leave the movie halfway through. Plus, he is not shy about asking loud questions throughout the movie and expecting an answer.

I realise that it is not about watching a movie as such; it is the broad range of experiences that are important. With the friendship developing and enthusiasm on both our parts, the options soon expand.

On a quiet day, it is sufficient to just go for a drive somewhere and tell creative stories about wizards and spells, which I understand is big with young people these days. Not being as creative as the author Rowling, I soon run out of stories, but that is okay because we just recycle old ones.

We dedicate a whole day to exploring the Questacon Science Museum. Here, my job is easy. I just follow Mathew around while he makes his way to all the exhibits on all floors. His interest in science is remarkable, and he shows a deep understanding of physics and mechanics.

Judy tells the story of Matthew reading a complete set of encyclopedia books without having attended primary school. To his mother's amazement, he had taught himself to read and write.

He also has a natural ability with music. From a young age, he taught himself to play tunes on the piano. He surprised visitors to the home with expert notes.

Judy was extremely pleased with her talented boy. A little older now, Matthew shows an understanding of any scientific topic, and a strong knowledge of music.

Our outing highlight is Hillary Duff's concert in Canberra in December 2005. A swarm of teenagers invade the National Convention Centre. We find our well selected seats and sit down to enjoy the support act Pete Murray. When Hillary arrives on stage, Matthew pushes his wheelchair to the standing zone past the security guard who kindly lets him through. I follow having lost sight of Matthew through a large crowd of teenagers.

I did not have to worry since Matthew is in his element: front of stage. He is resting his weight on the back of the wheelchair, popping wheelies, and staring wide eyed up at Hillary. The music is pounding away, and teenagers bop around him in a hypnotic state. He gets smiles from everyone around him, and they are careful not to shove him accidentally.

Matthew has been standing and dancing for a long period, and I wonder at his level of comfort, and what his sensitive spine must be feeling. He does not complain, there is too much fun to be had. When the music stops three hours into the night, he drops himself back on his wheelchair. Judy comes to pick us up at the end of the concert. She is pleasantly surprised and happy that all is well.

The Family Bonds

With every weekend visit, I learn more about the other members of the family. Two other boys share the family home, two dogs, a litter of puppies and a new kitten named Simba. The extended family include Matthew's grandparents who are strong and healthy. When they were young, they had been involved in WWII: grandmother was a nurse, and grandfather was an air force navigator who had been shot down.

On birthdays and other such events, I accept the kindness from the family members with gratitude and within my Buddy role for Matthew. Our worlds merge in friendship. Judy needs help to set up a dog enclosure by the side of the house. Working late into the evening, we put

up a mesh barrier. We cement in the posts, but a less helpful worker leans on the wet cement post to have a rest.

Judy trusts me to house sit while she is on a much-needed overseas break with her sister-in-law. Matthew stays in disability accommodation, where he has more professional daily support. I stay in the house with the eldest teenager Kurt. That is when my friendship with the eldest boy is established. He is a tough teenager with a big heart. We take on shared responsibility for the home that week, and that is also when I meet his girlfriend and future wife.

Clyde River Boat Cruise

My partner Penny takes an active interest in my activities with Matthew. He appreciates her companionship since it is a change from mine. We booked a one-day river boat cruise on the Clyde River, boarding in the town of Nelligen. The drive from Canberra to the coast is quick and easy, with a stop in Braidwood for a morning tea.

We make it to the boarding jetty with time to spare. Passengers gather in a nicely landscaped park by the river. On the South Coast this is a healthy river with lush vegetation on either side, winding its way to the sea. Riverfront houses look down from their elevated vantage points at the boats passing by. We look up towards them with envy at the ideal locations.

On the river boat a light lunch is served, and a musician plays folk tunes on his guitar. The musician fascinates Matthew since music is one of his loves. We continue to admire the scenery out the window when I turn to talk to Matthew. He is no longer by our side; he has done a disappearing act. Penny and I panic. She searches the front entrance where the captain does his thing. Perhaps Matthew has invited himself in there with his usual charm. I go to the back door to search the rear and top deck. I find Matthew leaning against the timber rail, admiring the view, with the wind in his hair.

We are relieved and join Matthew on the top deck. The view is much better up here.

In Batemans Bay, we have booked a room at a comfortable motel. We rug up to explore the waterway and esplanade in the cool twilight. For dinner I look forward to fish and chips. The smell of frying oils in the sea breeze signals that we are approaching a special place. However, Matthew is more interested in the golden arches for a meal.

Life Goes On

With time, our friendship transforms into equals rather than child to carer. This is a good development and with it comes more flexible meetings and deeper discussions. One day, Matthew asks me about disability, seeking my point of view in relation to his challenges.

‘Am I disabled?’ he asks in a quiet yet clear voice. I hesitate at the depth of the question, but I answer it as well as I can.

‘No, you are very abled, but some people have different challenges in life - physical and mental’ I said. Matthew seems happy with that answer.

Throughout high school, he is bullied. The main problem comes from unkind children, and adults with little understanding. This is despite his high intellect and comprehension. When I meet with his teachers, they are somewhat baffled at how to fit the round peg Matthew into the square hole school system. Matthew is a hero in my eyes just for attending school.

In general, I notice a disappointing tendency among adults. They address questions to me rather than Matthew. I must repeatedly gesture towards him to divert the questions his way.

Sydney Electronic Music Class

After completing high school, Matthew takes a strong interest in music, and we look for activities for him where he can expand his musical talent. At home, Judy helps him to set up his own DJ equipment. We discuss electronic music lessons with Matthew, and he is keen.

I book a one-day course in Sydney in a recording studio. The studio is open to experienced and new musicians, and tutoring is available. We enjoy the road trip to Sydney sharing stories along the way.

Early next morning we are at the studio waiting for it to open. It is located on a busy main road near the University of Sydney. Inside the old building, we meet the tutor who is a young musician himself. He guides us to a music studio filled with electronic equipment and traditional instruments. The tutor switches on the electronics and gives a quick demo on the keyboard and soundboard. Matthew is familiar with the equipment. His hands control all the knobs and sliders with precision and confidence.

I watch the process for a while, then sit outside the studio to leave Matthew in peace. In the afternoon, upon returning from a lunch break, the tutor comes in to continue tutoring. We gave the tutor an early mark and Mathew continues to use the equipment on his own until mid-afternoon.

In a typically determined manner, Matthew switches off the equipment and reaches for his wheelchair, ready to go.

Simba The Cat

On my weekly visits, generally after completing an activity with Matthew, I catch up with Judy on the week's events and whatever else is happening in our lives. Over the years, we have shared in depth conversations at the breakfast bar over cups of coffee or an evening glass of wine or two.

The boys come down from their rooms for a chat. The dogs will buzz about at our feet seeking attention. A young long-hair Tonkinese cat with a calm nature pops up on the breakfast bar for a bit of attention. He is shy but accepting of humans. I oblige him with a pat and a head rub.

I became attached to this young cat, so when he accidentally walks out the front door and goes missing, we are all concerned. Judy's younger boy and I, search the street calling out Simba's name. We leave him a trail of cat biscuits so that he can find his way back home by following the biscuits. I'm not sure about the theory behind that, but it is worth a try.

A day passes and Judy calls me to inform that Simba has come home. We feel a great sense of relief. He is not an adventurous cat, so we think that he was just hiding out of sight watching the world go by.

The years pass, and the dogs get bigger and more dominant in the house. Simba, now middle aged, and unable to compete with them, retreats to the bedroom and hides under a bed. He does this day after day.

My own cats have passed away from old age, so I inform Judy that I'm going to the animal shelter to see if they have a friendly cat for adoption. Judy suggests that maybe I do not need

to go there for a pet. The idea of adopting Simba is raised. I can't be more pleased since we are old friends anyway.

I take Simba to my home. For an hour or so, he slinks around the house looking for the dogs. Soon, when he realises that a loud and smelly beast will not ambush him, he relaxes into his new environment.

To my surprise, Simba and Penny instantly fall in love. Penny sits in her recliner chair on an evening to read a book and Simba will be right there on her lap. I'm glad that Simba is happy, and we value the company of this wise old soul. He is the perfect companion for two older humans.

Family Friends

Seven years have passed since the Hillary concert, and Matthew is now a mature young man. I stop visiting him in a formal way through the buddy program. He transitions to support buddies more his age. We had wonderful years on the buddy program that I will always treasure.

I visit the family regularly as a friend. We share Christmas parties and birthdays during those years. I'm also privileged to attend the wedding of the eldest boy Kurt and Emily. I see kindness all around me sitting at a table surrounded by Matthew's extended family and friends. He is a truly fortunate fellow.