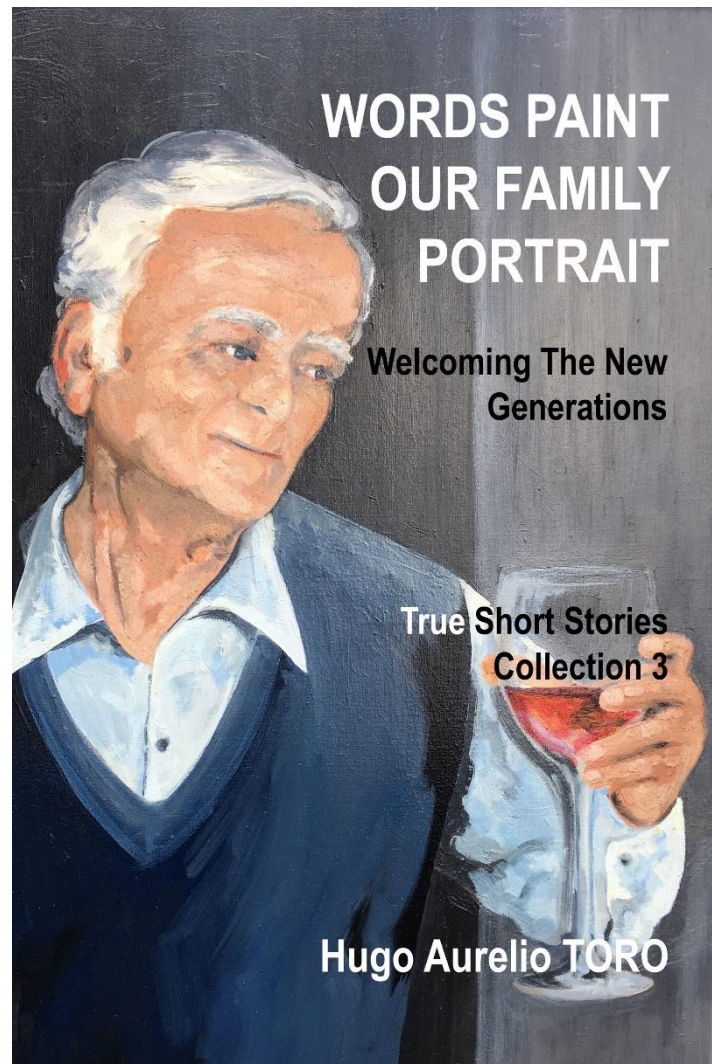


A short story from this collection.



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3.4) Warriors And Spears To Our Throat

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Penny and Hugo, happily captive - Vanuatu 2016.

Four warriors from the Runsuc Village surround us with aggression in their faces. Spears are raised and pointing towards our heads. I feel the tip of the barbs close to my skin. The young men are strong and ready to defend their village as they move menacingly closer. Their display of power renders us helpless, and we did not dare make any sudden movements. They are agitated by the sight of foreigners on their land. The message is simple, *this is our land, and you are here on our terms.*

I glance over at the chief who sits nearby in a large cane chair. He observes the warriors with pride. I'm hopeful that the young warriors remember that this is a 'welcoming' dance.

Through all this, Penny is by my side, enjoying the performance a great deal. She has a big smile on her face. At a nod from the chief, the warriors stop their dance and lower their weapons. The rest of the tour group applaud their display.

The chief addresses the visitors, to pass on basic cultural knowledge. He explains his role as chief and how important it is to retain their traditional village life. He then invites us to take photos with him and his warriors.

The villagers are expecting visitors, so they have set up stalls in the park where they sell their produce and crafts. I couldn't walk past the large shark tooth on a neck chain. I will take it home as a gift for my grandnephew.

The Pacific Island Cruise

In December 2016, we book ourselves on a boat cruise. Anticipation is our main emotion since this is our first cruise ever. Our destination is Vanuatu and Fiji.

We travel to Sydney Harbour to board the cruise ship Noordam, from the Holland America line. We chose this ship because of its medium size. It seems more personalised in terms of options and services. The thought of joining a giant pleasure cruise ship with thousands of others is not appealing to us. Big is not better.

Penny is friendly and disarming in her demeanour, so our taxi driver in Sydney has an urge to tell us about his encounter with Prime Minister Abbott.

On one of his jobs, he collected the Prime Minister. Tony became agitated during the drive and threatened to get physical. Our driver had taken a different route to the one that was anticipated, and the Prime Minister felt a misguided right to get abusive.

Our driver explained to Tony that it would not be advisable to put a hand on him because he has training in martial arts. He was clear that he would not hesitate to defend himself. Tony was silent for the remainder of the journey.

Our driver tells this story to demonstrate an insight into Tony, using his misguided power over the common man.

We listen intently to the story and behave impeccably for the remainder of the trip.

At the terminal, a ship attendant registers our arrival and then points us towards the luggage drop off. However, the out of uniform luggage fellows trigger my acutely suspicious mind. I inform Penny that I'm nervous about releasing my luggage to people who are not wearing a name or company tag. We return to the registration window where the attendant assures us that they are legitimate porters.

Inside the boat, we are shown to our cabin by the now uniformed porters. The cabins are impressive, yet not overly luxurious which suited us fine. The room is clean, spacious, and nicely furnished. Most importantly, the bed is comfortable, tested by me bouncing on it on the edge. Our room is located on one of the middle floors, and it features an amazing window view across the water to the horizon. Bonus, our luggage turns up at our door, which is a relief.

Following our emergency procedures, we sail away (or diesel away in the absence of sails). We wave Sydney goodbye from the rear deck, while holding a large fruit cocktail. We comment that passing close to the underbelly of the Sydney Harbour Bridge is in fact, a rare visual treat. We also pass slowly by the Sydney Opera House, as if honouring the iconic building with a stately nautical procession.

Out At Sea

The next two days at sea are calm and we travel northeast towards New Caledonia. We are glad that the Coral Sea is almost flat, and the days are warm and slightly overcast. It is the perfect poolside weather.

For two days at sea, we explore the ship: its various eating areas; bars; coffee shops; galleries; and gift stores. Walking the perimeter deck with other guests becomes our daily exercise. The ocean views are stunning. There is even the chance to sight a whale arching its back out of the water.

In the evening, we socialise with guests at the shared dining tables. Travel stories are exchanged with open and friendly people.

Out at sea, internet connectivity is unpredictable. When mobile phone reception is available on the ship, I make sure to contact my father. He is old and frail, recovering from his stomach operation, so I'm keen to know how he is coping. Fortunately, he is not alone at home and family members visit him regularly.

New Caledonia

The ship arrives in Noumea at 9 AM and docks in a cargo lane. The city reveals itself from our cabin window with sense of intrigue at this pacific island and its people. The Melanesian are yet to gain independence from the French, despite a history of uprising and conflict. We are keen to go to shore.

Breakfast is being served in the Vista Lounge and freshly cooked omelettes is our favourite. The chef meets us at the food display window, where we smile and point at the fresh ingredients, but we cannot go past the mushrooms. He beats two eggs and takes them to the pan. We watch and wait with our taste buds ready.

At the table with the ocean view, the waiter with the refillable cups of coffee annoys the heck out of me. Apparently, it is good customer service to come by every sixty seconds and offer a refill. I conclude that he is bored and likes interrupting people who have a mouth full of food. Or maybe it is about gaining tips, which is not common practice in Australia.

After breakfast we travel ashore with a tour group. A small tour bus takes us to see the inland highlights and then makes a long stop at the cultural centre. The tour guide keeps the group informed on culture and history. My imagination is captured by the traditional island shelter and meeting place. It is a round building with a steep and tall grass roof and a central fireplace. This is where important villagers once met to discuss village life.

Our next stop is Mystery Island, Vanuatu.

Vanuatu

It is not our intention to get off the boat, but when we see in the distance how beautiful the small tropical island is, we quickly join those going ashore. A group of children and adults

welcome us at the beach with traditional dance and songs. We stay a while to watch the unique performance.

We are told that you can walk around the entire island in just forty-five minutes, so we set off on our way. There are no permanent residents on the island, and there is no fear of crossing private property unaware.

The sand on the beach under our feet is mainly made of crushed shells. Small crabs dart from rock to rock. The rocks are slippery with algae, and I slip and take a tumble. Strapped to my wrist, my digital camera breaks my fall, and it smashes on the rocks. Penny took the opportunity to lecture me on beach safety and is waving her finger at me. A concerned islander came to see if I'm okay. Five minutes later, Penny is also on the rocks 'a-over-t.' I only show concern of course - no finger pointing. It is fortunate that neither of us are hurt, just our egos bruised, and we have scratches on our arms.

The following day, we join a tour group to the Runsuc Village. It retains its traditional Melanesian culture, so it is well worth visiting. This is where we meet the angry warriors. We return to the ship unharmed, since the young men were just putting on a show for the visitors.

We spend the afternoon by the poolside. With my Occupational Health and Safety hat on, I see serious incidents occurring by the large pool. Children are running on the edge of the wet pool, and one slips and bashes his head on the tiles. Another child is bullying his little sister in the water and splashing her despite the cries for help. Another brat is pushing his sister's head under water. There is no lifeguard on duty, and there is no responsible parent in sight. Being the 'grumpy old man' that I have become, I report my safety concerns to the front desk and naturally, never hear back from them.

In the late afternoon, we return to our cabin to get ready for dinner. We dress up and go to the Pinnacle bar for pre-dinner cocktails. There, we engage in friendly conversation with another couple learning a little about each other. Cruises are like that; people are obliging and ready to share their experiences.

We then move to the Vista Restaurant. We sit with a fellow from Sweden who is keen to let us know that he hates Vegemite. I agree wholeheartedly, so he is in good company. He is a musician traveling on his own while he is on a break. From his comments, we conclude that it is a mental health rest, and a cruise would be ideal for that.

At 10 PM that evening, we catch the show at the theatre. It is Paul Martel, an Irish comedian. His wife Jane was from the Young Talent Time TV show, and she joins him on stage. We had a good laugh at the expense of his mother-in-law. I remember one joke.

'They are travelling on the road, in winter with their mother-in-law. She is complaining of the cold, so they pass her a blanket. She continues to complain, so eventually they stop the utility and let her sit in the cabin.'

While still in Vanuatu, the next day we visit the town of Luganville. The taxi drivers are keen for our fares and are pushy when the police are not watching. We decide to walk into town with our new friend Suzi, from Macedonia. She is travelling with her mother, which is an admirable thing to do. It is a real shame that the streets are not tourist friendly. There is rubbish on the sidewalks, rough footpaths, unkempt shopfronts, and no landscaping anywhere. We discuss, how easy it would be to tidy up the town and give the tourists a nice destination.

Back on the ship, in the evening, we splash out at the casino with twenty dollars each. Alas, no luck. The tempting \$270 thousand jackpot goes unclaimed of course, since gambling is a loser's game, and the only winner is the casino. We walk away at that point.

The next day is at sea and the hours pass with us relaxing. The sea remain calm, and it is a lovely thirty degrees outside. Mind you the ship's air conditioning inside is set to ten degrees, so you need a jumper. There is a misguided thought in hospitality that if clients are freezing, they will stay longer. My thought goes to - *maybe they are trying to cool the planet, or is the opposite happening?*

Fiji

In the morning of December 29, we move gently between island landmarks and arrive in Fiji. We are excited and keen to experience this fascinating culture. In Lautoka, the day starts with a visit to one of the oldest villages in Fiji. We witness a Kava drinking ceremony, as well as traditional dancers and singers.

With my trained artistic eye, I study the distinctive facial features of the locals. The features are stored in my brain. Their islander features inspire one of my paintings back home.

The tour then takes us to the town centre for shopping. A safety tip from the bus driver led us to be cautious when meeting people on the streets who may be targeting unaware tourists.

'It is best not to find yourself in an isolated situation in case criminals decide to borrow your credit cards and cash,' explains the driver.

On 30 December, we jump on the ship's tender boat to explore Dravuni Island. This is a tropical paradise, complete with a small community. We climb the main hill which is quite a challenge in the tropical warmth. The reward is a breathtaking 360-degree ocean view at the top. We look out to sea where the ship docks in the distance facing the white sandy beaches. The scene provides a postcard photo opportunity, with vivid colours and the bright sun painting the scene.

The next day, the ship docks at the capital, Suva, early in the morning. 'Bula' is the welcoming call from the driver as we board the tour bus to visit the highlights. An interesting fact from the bus driver is that the parliament house was moved. It was considered a bad luck location after the military coup. I'm sure they will have to move it again, since army generals seem to hold presidential aspirations around the world.

The bus lets us out to wander around the museum and botanical gardens. It is a delightful location rich in cultural artifacts. Penny becomes so captivated by the culture that she loses track of time and commits the eternal traveller's sin. She holds up the bus by being late back and is unpopular with the other tourists. I'm already on the bus and pretending to be travelling on my own. Penny who? I innocently gesture.

In the afternoon, we walk the length of the large undercover markets. I observe that the Fijians are polite and will not harass tourists. They have a lovely nature. I stop to talk to one of the vendors and purchase a gift.

Back on the ship, Penny rests with a book. She tells me about the first book she owned as a child. It was a Christmas gift from her mother. Penny sat up in bed until the book was read in full. Her love of books has lasted her whole lifetime.

I sit with a travel journal to recollect the journey highlights, jotting down notes. Prior to the trip, my niece gave me a small burgundy trip diary with a thin gold pen. I found

myself filling up the pages with observations and comments. I'm thorough with my note taking on this trip, since it may make a good story one day.

The ship leaves the port late in the afternoon and is farewelled by a military band. We wave goodbye from the deck.

New Year's Eve

That evening, we party long into the night in celebration of the new year. There are events for all ages.

The young people are 'doof doofing' to a loud DJ and strobe lights at the rear of the ship. Not for me or Penny.

The middle-aged people are on Level 9, enjoying the B.B. King All Stars in the theatre lounge. I join them on my own for a while taking in the classic blues.

The oldies are at the Vista Lounge where the Noordam Singers play old chart favourites to midnight. I am unfamiliar with the war songs, yet these revellers know the words.

Penny and I, plus our new friend Suzy and her mum, welcome the new year with a bottle of bubbly. I naively purchase the \$90 champagne bottle, only to find out that champagne flows free from midnight onwards.

Returning To Sydney

The next three days are at sea, on our way back home. We are never bored. There are a range of activities and games on the ship to keep us busy. On quiet times, Penny reads her books in the comfortable seating area by the coffee shop. I enrol in a Windows 10 course that is run in one of the boardrooms. There is scepticism amongst the participants.

'Won't be as good as Windows XP,' they whisper at the back of the class. The instructor sold the product to me based on its new security features.

I understand the online security issues since the internet is progressively holding much of our personal information, so I'm keen to upgrade at home.

At first light, Sydney appears in the distance. I'm up early to capture the soft morning light over Sydney from the harbour. The ship passes slowly under the Sydney Harbour Bridge and docks in White Bay. We leave the ship that has been our home for two weeks with a sense of accomplishment. We can tick that off the bucket list.

The welcoming committee is only a row of taxis, such a disappointment. I ask myself, *where are the dancers and singers in grass skirts?* This subdued entry to Sydney is in marked contrast to the welcoming warriors at Runsuc Village or the children singing traditional songs at Mystery Island.