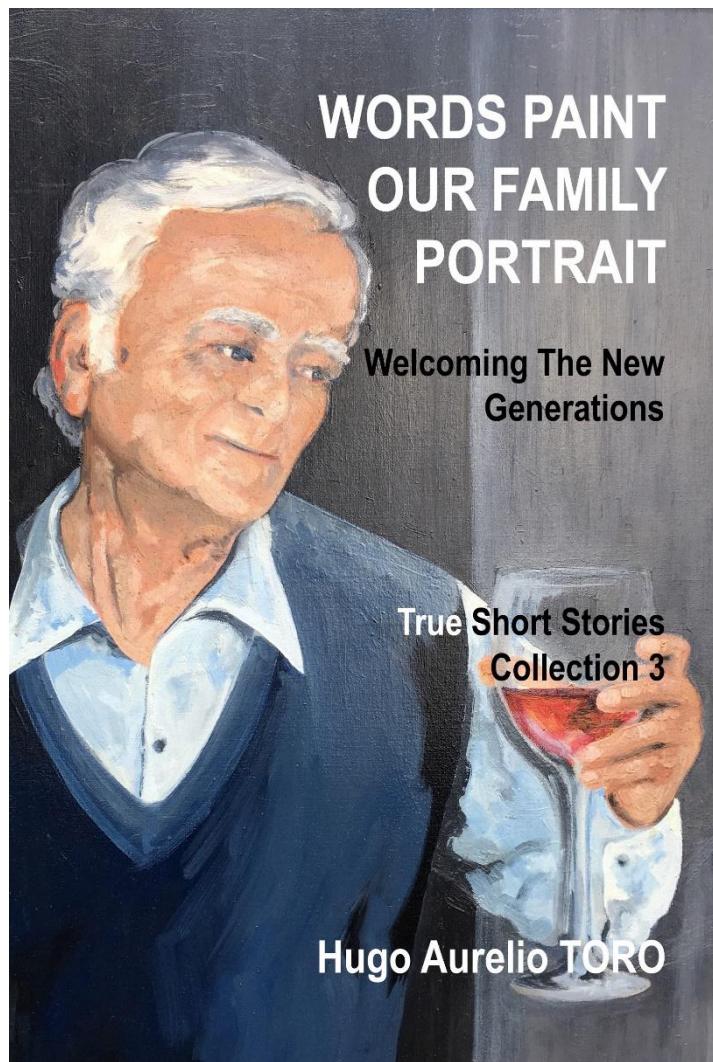


A short story from this collection.



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Cover artwork by Hugo Aurelio Toro. Original portrait photograph by Alice Cerni.

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The full collection is located using:

ISBN 978-1-7635105-5-5 eBook

ISBN 978-1-7635105-8-6 paperback

3.5) The Passing Of An Elder

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Hugo Fernando Toro (1934 to 2017)

Mr Toro, as he prefers to be called in jest, or ‘abuelito’ to his grandchildren, is eighty-three years old and in his last year of life. He has lived a long and healthy life. On this day, he calls his eldest son on the mobile in a panic, at 11 AM. He is weak and can’t get out of bed, which scares him. His son Hugo can hear the urgency in his voice. Hugo, drops his work task, makes his excuses, and rushes to his father’s house. The door is unlocked so he lets himself in. He takes a moment to catch his breath as he enters the bedroom. Father looks up from his bed with a look that whispers, *‘it has come to this.’*

The greetings are by eye contact only, and son moves closer to father. He stretches an arm out for father to grab hold of. With assistance father sits up on the edge of his bed, his skinny frame more apparent as it emerges from the neat bed covers. Hugo then took his forearm with one hand and lifted from father's back with the other. Mr Toro props up with ease, his light body barely putting up any resistance. He stabilises himself on his feet and looks his son in the eyes with a smile.

'You are a strong man,' he said in a soft voice. His comment is a fact, and it also extends pride in his son which Hugo accepts gracefully.

Hugo then prepares lunch for two. Unfortunately, appetite is poor, and soup is all his father is consuming these days. After lunch, Mr Toro sits in his retro leather recliner chair. The television is set to the ABC 24-hour news. He normally likes to discuss the news headlines. He would take great pleasure in analysing the news and world events. That questioning mind rubbed off on his son. Due to father's example, he is never fooled by fake news or propaganda. This time, father sits in silence.

Hugo stays for the afternoon, and they put a movie on the DVD player. Mr Toro's favourite film is Sidney Poitier's, 'Guess Who's Coming To Dinner.' He normally shares his thoughts on racism, but not this time. He watches in silence, with no commentary, and no astute observations.

Mr Toro is truly exhausted mentally and physically.

A Close Family

Mr Toro (Hugo Fernando) has family and friends around him constantly who care about him. From young, his family-oriented values, engaging personality and sharp wit, ensures that he is accompanied.

Alice, a sophisticated lady from Sydney is his companion. They are both widowers and are long term friends. She visits him regularly, doing the bus trip from Sydney and he spends time with her in her Bondi apartment. Healthy and fit in their seventies, they travel the world together.

His other son David is living with father and contributes by paying board. Their own father and son relationship goes deep.

David had an unfortunate accident at play when he was seven years old. The boys were jumping a row of large concrete pipes by the side of a road. His brother Hugo had a longer reach and jumped safely from one pipe to the other. David slipped and banged his head heavily on the concrete pipe.

Father recalls rushing his son to hospital as David was drifting in and out of consciousness in his arms. There was a dreadful moment in the taxi ride, when he thought he would lose his son. David stabilised well in hospital and recovered from his concussion. Unfortunately, he was left with ongoing related problems like blanking out and memory loss.

Daughter Paulina also has a strong bond with her father and visits him from interstate when she can. Her whole family, husband and three daughters and two grandchildren stay at father's place. They inject life and laughter into the house. Youngest daughter Patricia is absent, and the family rarely sees her. She is dealing with her own complex issues in another city.

Granddaughter Drina, who lives close by, takes her children to see 'abuelito' in the evenings. She arrives with a precooked meal or a half roast chicken. After dinner, the grandchildren sit on either side of grandfather enjoying an ice-cream.

Eldest son Hugo visits at least three times per week. His own family values will not let him neglect his father despite having other commitments.

Stories From The Past

Hugo Fernando Toro and Carmen Luisa Mouat, met in the late 1950s at a technical college in Santiago, Chile. They were young students and fell in love. They were married in January 1960 and started a family.

Hugo and Carmen being focused and courageous young people, purchased a vacant block of land on the outskirts of Santiago in La Florida district soon after they married. Hugo's brothers were experienced builders and built a house for them on that suburban property. They had four children that decade: Hugo, David, Paulina, and Patricia.

The four small children, in the late 1960s, always accompanied their parents on family visits. The couple made it a rule to go everywhere with the children, strengthening the family bonds. The families were vast, with Carmen being the eldest of five children and Hugo the youngest of eleven. Naturally, the children were exposed to family tales and history around the dining table. Eldest son Hugo took active notice of the family tales.

At one of these family meetings, Hugo, and his surviving siblings (Teofila, Galvarino, Ernesto) are in a story telling mood. He recalls an incident at home, which occurred when he was ten years old in 1944. His siblings who were there, listened quietly to his story.

There was a weak and frail man staying at home. Mother was caring for him. He was by her side while she folded the laundry.

'Son, come,' the call came from the frail man in the bedroom. Hugo ignored the call.

'Why don't you go and see your father,' was the request from his mother.

'He is not my father, there is my father!' Hugo replied and pointed to a picture on the wall of a handsome sailor in uniform.

It was the same man, Jose Cosme Toro who had been at sea, returned ill to finish his life at home. Hugo explained further that as a child he mistook his eldest brother for his father since his real father was at sea for long periods when he was growing up.

Jose's picture in his sailor uniform hung on a family wall to present times. Still reflecting on his youth, Hugo started to recall his primary school days. A deep trauma surfaced that he could only discuss with close family.

He was about twelve years old and attending a Catholic school. He saw one of his brothers in the distance surrounded by bullies on the school grounds. His brother stood on a mound of soil seeking a height advantage. Without hesitation young Hugo rushed to his aid. As he charged in, one of the bullies was injured. The two brothers then dealt with the rest, sending them running off.

For his part in the fight and having injured a boy, the priests handed out the punishment. Stripped naked and tied to a post in the middle of the school oval, he endured the cold and humiliation, remaining there all day. No one could go to his rescue.

That was the day that Hugo was stripped of faith. He was de-converted so to speak, by the actions of the priests. Growing up an agnostic, he learns to respect religious faith in family and friends, but it is not for him.

One of the brothers at the table, Ernesto Justiniano Toro, who is a caring family man and loves tango music, breaks the silence. He took those at the table to the memory of a recent Christmas. He referred to an old school friend that all siblings should recognise, and they nod knowingly.

Ernesto boarded a crowded bus home in the late afternoon, after Christmas shopping. He stood in the bus aisle, holding a bag full of gifts in one arm and clasping the ceiling strap with the other hand. The bus came to a stop, loading and unloading passengers.

He was startled by someone who tugged firmly at the gift bag. He stood his ground and then eyeballed the man to his side. He knew that if he let go of the bag, the gifts would disappear when that man jumped off the bus. The tug of war over the gifts continued.

At that moment, a well-dressed gentleman boarded the bus and approached them. When next to them and in a firm yet quiet voice he ordered, '*basta/enough.*' Instantly, the thief let go of the toy bag and exited the bus.

'Hola amigo, como estas - Hello, my friend, how are you?' said the gentleman.

Ernesto looked closely at the man recognising familiar features. It was in fact his old friend from the past.

It is understood that this is a story about different life journeys. It is told with precision and wisdom.

Integration In A New land

In his middle age, life journeys took Hugo, wife Carmen, and their four children to Australia in 1970 on skilled migration. The move is courageous, and they start a life in a new land with enthusiasm and hope.

At the migrant hostel, Hugo and Carmen nurture strong friendships with fellow migrants, as they had done with their own brothers and sisters back home. Hugo is not the life of the party, quite the opposite in fact, he is reserved yet a good listener. He takes great pride in being socially and politically informed and will interject with just the right argument. He is sure to enrich the conversation at hand.

He values friendship, and at any opportunity, he meets with friends to catch up over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. He prefers short visits and in jest, Carmen refers to these as doctor's visits. The children attend these visits with the couple, and they established their own friendships with the younger generation. Hugo set a remarkable example on the value of genuine friendship.

Hugo tried his hand at manual jobs, as all migrants must do. Determined not to be stuck on the road gangs he strived to better himself with English lessons and tertiary qualifications.

Hugo gains his builder's qualification and practices his trade for 20 years in Adelaide, Sydney, and Canberra, with good personal success. In the early 1980s, he builds the family dream home himself. It is a standout, yet modest white brick home with raked ceilings. The house is contemporary and designed by his eldest son who has a keen interest in modern architecture.

In the mid 1980's the family come to terms with mother's illness. Carmen manages to enjoy her new home, but she sadly passes away from kidney failure and other complications. Hugo grieves the loss of his wife for several years. When the children all reach maturity, he decides to sell the family home since without Carmen, it is no longer a happy place for him.

A Will To Live, A Determination To Die

In his later years, this family elder (Mr Toro to his friends) welcomes grandchildren, and great grandchildren into his home with enthusiasm and warmth. His living room fills with people of all ages in active conversation. His dining table is extended fully to cater for the guests. On his birthday a crowd gathers consisting of his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, partners, and friends.

'Abuelito, abuelito, grandad, grandad' is the common call in his house as children seek his attention. His arms stretch over the children's shoulders, while he engages them in conversation.

At eighty-one years of age, Mr Toro is diagnosed with stomach cancer. This frail and ageing father figure surprises the family with his will to live independently. Then, with the complexity of a man of experience, he astonishes his family with his valiant determination to die.

He wants his eldest son to be by his side, since the two have a strong friendship. Together, they visit the surgeon in preparation for the stomach operation. The surgeon informs them that there is a tumour growing at the top of the stomach that is blocking food flow. The surgeon is confident that he can remove the tumour to give father prolonged life. There are, however, risks involved due to his age. Fortunately, he has kept himself healthy. His weight is average for his height, and he exercises every evening by taking a walk around the neighbourhood. His outlook is positive.

The operation is scheduled, and family is by his side. He wakes from surgery tired and a little confused. Within days, his head is clear, and he regains his energy levels. He is out of bed and walking sooner than expected. The surgeon congratulates him since even younger patients take their time getting on their feet. The family knows father well, and this determined display is typical of him, it is 'mind over matter.'

Inevitably, his body is weak, and he is unsteady on his feet, so he stops his daily walks. Recognising his overall sense of fragility, he requests a meeting with the family. Daughter Paulina travels from interstate on short notice. Younger son David is nearby. A hospital-assigned nurse also attends the meeting.

The family sit in his lounge room in a semi-circle around him and await his words. The northern sun filters through lace curtains, coming into the room through the large windows. With his back to the sun, Mr Toro appeared in silhouette.

He announces that he wants to stay at home as long as possible. He is resigned to the fact that he is dying and expresses his wishes for a dignified end. Palliative care is in his plans. Being profoundly organised, in his typical way, he has booked ahead. Every eye in the room fills with tears.

To his eldest son, the plan seems quite specific. He questions what insight father has, that the family did not. He presses his father on the time limits asking him to clarify.

‘I know my body; it is time,’ said father.

Less than a month passes, and Mr Toro is admitted to the Clare Holland Hospice on Lake Burley Griffin. For a week he remains conscious and talkative. Family and friends visit and hold his hand. He is no longer eating or drinking. He only requests ice to roll about in his mouth.

The nurse in charge has it in mind to give him fluids through a drip, but he refuses. When she insists, father turns to his eldest son with a long stare. That was the cue to step in on father’s behalf and reassert his wishes. He did just that, then stood back, and the family watch father gradually fade away. The morphine knocks him out totally, and he passed away early the following morning.

When son Hugo arrives at the hospice, Alice is by father’s side. She is in a state of shock and is overcome by deep sadness. Hugo walks to the bed and stands next to Alice acknowledging her grief. He places his hand on his father’s cool forehead to say goodbye.

His son steps outside on his own to be with his thoughts. The hospice is set by the lake with well cared for gardens that offer a peaceful place to be with your thoughts. The Canberra winter is biting that early morning, and the sun’s rays are skimming the surface of the lake. Framed by branches from the weeping willows, the cool fog rests calmly on the lake shore, and it drifts gently upwards. A kayaker paddles by, slicing through the white fog layers.

The tranquil scene somehow mirrors his father’s peaceful passing.

Sharing His Assets

Daughter Paulina and son Hugo are the executors of father’s will, and they struggle with the legal system for six months. Father’s generosity towards his children is fair and clearly documented so there are no disputes, but the legal system is a mysterious dark tunnel.

College friend George, who is legally trained, assists them with the various probate forms. George comments that the forms are designed by lawyers for lawyers. The paper-based probate application process is full of legalistic jargon, from a past era. Probate is eventually granted and immediately after, father’s house is placed on the market. At the auction, they accept a good offer.

Mr Toro’s valuables are distributed amongst family members. Everyone has something from this elder to remind them of his high spirits.

As his home is cleared of his belongings, in the wardrobe remain Mr Toro’s worn-out shoes. The black leather business-style Florsheim shoes are highly polished yet creased and thin from years of wear. His sneakers are distorted from his daily evening walks around the suburb.

They are left in the wardrobe until close to handover, since they speak of carrying a man far on his life journey.