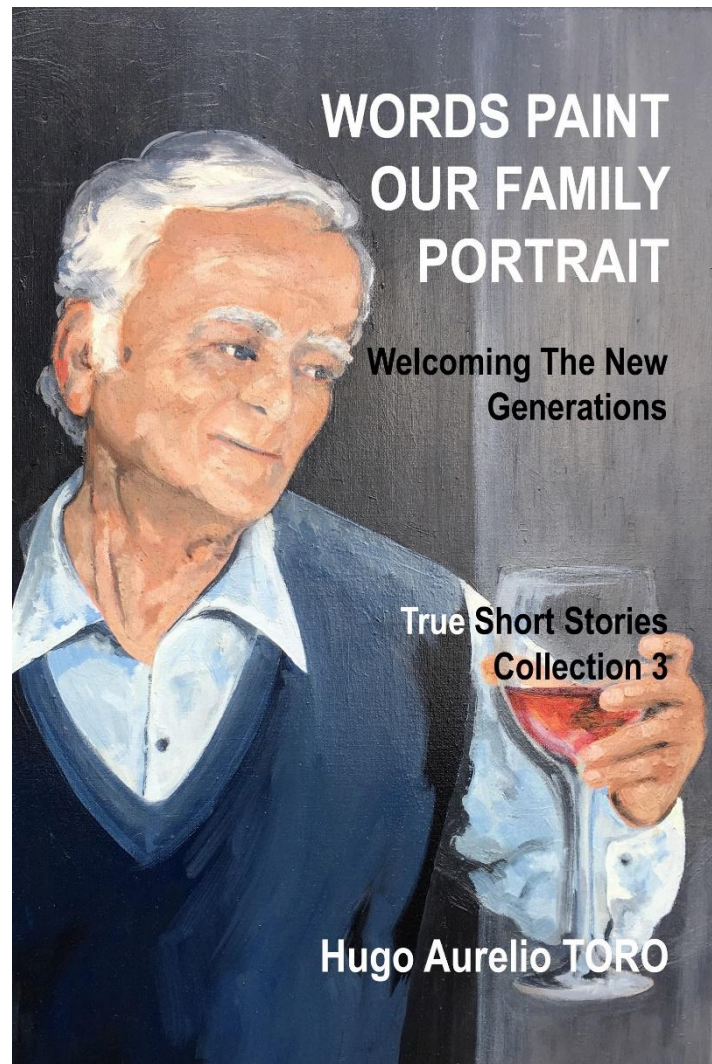


A short story from this collection.



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3.8) The post-Covid Family Reunion

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro.



The sea, captivating, beautiful, peaceful, and unpredictable – Pebbly Beach NSW 2022.

There are no lifeguards on duty on the isolated beach, and only eight or so people can be seen spread out along the length. A parent and child run in and out of the water's edge. A group of young people sit on the sand in conversation and laughter, more focused on each other than their stunning surroundings.

The midday sun shines bright with a gentle sea breeze sweeping in from the ocean. Beach towels and belongings are placed down in a shady spot near bushes. The children are excited, grab their boogie boards and go to play in the shallows. Mum watches them from a distance, and their safety is in the forefront of her mind. Her intuition tells her that the sea is unpredictable, so she joins the children by the water.

Within seconds, calm is interrupted. Mum and the children are gradually moved along the water's edge. An invisible watery force lures them gently away. Then, a series of heavy waves roll in and the three are pulled away from the shore and in between the waves. The sea is buffeting them about, and they struggle with their footing. Real-life then plays out like a slow-motion video.

The boy is frightened by the pull of the water as it makes its way back out. He abandons his boogie board to swim back to the shallows. At that same moment, the girl drifts away from mum and she is taken into deeper waters. Mum reaches out to her daughter and grabs her arm, but mum is not a good swimmer, and the submerged sandy floor drops away from her.

Their only hope, the boogie board, pops out of their hands and is out of reach. Mum desperately tries to hold onto her daughter and keep her above water while going under herself. Mum can no longer keep her head above water to help her daughter. She forms a strange peace with her own potential fate. The girl lets go of mum for a second, to swim for the nearby boogie board. She gets to it and paddles back to mum. They both grab the lifesaving float, and exhausted they kick their way back to the shallows.

The boy reaches the shallows and calls out for help. He gets the attention of the group of young people nearby.

Mum, son and daughter reach safety through their strong bonds and intelligence under pressure. The group of young people help them out of the water.

They sit at the water's edge panting and in shock from the fright.

The Family Reunion

During the pandemic lockdown, we all craved to see our families. When the state borders opened again in early 2022, I planned my trip. I want to bathe in that freedom, so I was vaccinated and took my motorcycle out of hibernation. The trip will be challenging, over 2400 kilometres in total. For an old rider on an old BMW, this is doable over two days with rest stops, countless toilet breaks and a comfortable sleep at a halfway point. Did I mention the toilet stops? If you have watched the movie *Wild Hogs*, you will know what I mean.

My partner has seen me own a motorcycle for many years, but naturally she still worries about me on the road. I was also secretly concerned. I prepared with a high degree of attention to safety. The nerves themselves are a risk, and I put them aside to focus on enjoying the ride.

My trip started at home in Moreton Bay, in the morning, with a ride through Ipswich and Toowoomba. The old bones were soon complaining, feeling every bump on the road. I switched left and right on the motorcycle seat to relieve the pressure on my joints. I rolled into Tamworth where I had booked a night's stay. Being a 'baby boomer' with a bit of cash in my pocket, I treated myself to a night at The Rydges Hotel.

The following morning, feeling revived, I got on the motorcycle and rode down the mountain range and past Newcastle. On the Pacific Highway, I stopped for fuel and a lunch break. Parked to the side at the service station, someone was struggling with a flat tire, on a large four-wheel-drive vehicle. I walked over to see if they needed a hand. A young lady accepted my assistance. She was an army cadet, taking advantage of the relaxed border restrictions, and was also heading south to see her family. We pulled out of the service station at the same time and headed down the highway to long-awaited family reunions.

In Canberra that afternoon, it was a joy to see family again. My niece, Drina, had set up the spare bedroom for me. Her children, Marko and Nikolina, were still on their school break and wanted to re-join friends at school after an extended period of home-schooling. It will be my grandnephew's first year in a private high school, so I showed him how to do the Windsor tie knot.

The Beautiful And Unpredictable Sea

On one fine Friday, and with spirits soaring, we drive down to the coastal village of Batemans Bay and a beautiful beach called Pebbly Beach. It is a favourite holiday destination for our family. Aptly named, after one of the small bays that is totally covered in perfectly smooth pebbles, with no sand around them. It is located just a short walk along the Clear Point Walking Track, and it is an amazing sight.

An easy to miss sign marks the turn off the highway and down a dirt road through a nature reserve.

The main beach is vast and sandy with grassy areas rolling down from the carpark. Coastal bushes line the well-manicured paths and picnic areas. Once, friendly wallabies and parrots waited eagerly for picnic treats. However, the area has since been blackened by the horrific 2019 bushfires. We are pleased to see wallabies returning to graze by the beach. The trees seem to have recovered well. Still, their charred trunks speak of the previous devastation.

Marko and Nikolina are eager for a swim. They put on the sunblock and leave their t-shirt on for sun protection. With boogie boards under their arms, they go to the water's edge.

Drina appreciates this beautiful beach, but her focus is on the children, and she goes to join them by the water. Within minutes, fun in the shallow waters turns into fear and a struggle for life. A rip current has formed where they swim, and the power of the ocean shifts them out between braking waves.

Like an electric shock my brain wakes my body into action. Sprinting along the wet sand to help my family, I ask for strength from a higher power. It is a familiar story that often ends in tragedy and fortunately this incident ends well. Intelligence and perhaps a helping hand from a higher power has taken Drina and her children out of danger.

In shock, we stay on the beach for a moment, to gather our thoughts and make sense of this terrifying experience. In silence, we ponder on the fact that it could have gone horribly wrong.

Safe back home that evening, we sit down to recollect the day's drama. The seconds that transpired are vivid in our minds. Constant chatter and nervous conversation replays every moment.

We don't blame nature; it is simply good to understand its beauty and force.

Normality Again

Nikolina and I take out the paints and paint brushes. Art and painting form part of my mental health toolbox that I share with youngsters. We paint a 'pawtrait' of Valentina, the wise long haired grey cat that accompanied my niece for eighteen years. We aim to capture the wisdom in her eyes and place her in a tranquil green background. She was, an indoor cat, but in her final resting place we imagine nature around her.

With Marko, we go to a football tryout with a highly skilled group of boys. Football is his passion. It is a terrific team sport with healthy competitiveness. I watch him play well on the field, with ball skills above his age group. He is frustrated by his lack of fitness. He is a determined boy and aims to get on top of his fitness and practices his ball skills in the garage.

Drina wishes to see her father since it is his birthday on this same weekend. It will be nice to catch up with my brother-in-law and his wife. We make our way over to his place in the afternoon. By any measure, he cooks a fantastic barbecue, being highly skilled at it. His wife prepares traditional Croatian dishes and salads to accompany the meats.

Since guests have only just recovered from Covid-19, we continue to observe social distancing at the party. We are feeling nervous but don't let that spoil a family reunion after two years. It is a fun evening with good food, wine, and conversation. It is just the right thing for my niece after such a fright at the beach.

On the first day of school in February, in a family group, we accompany the children to school. In their uniforms they explore their new environment and look out for familiar faces. Their dad and grandad are there also. It is ensuring to see the children being supported by their families on important days. Photos are taken in front of the schools to capture the moment.

Returning Home

The following day, I prepare to ride back home on the motorcycle along the inland highway. I stop off at the cemetery first to sit by my parent's grave for a while. I give them a quick update on my life and the narrow escape at the beach, but I sense that they already know.

The La Niña weather system is affecting the region with heavy rainfall. Clouds are forming along the Australian East Coast. On the highway I'm chasing the sun as dark clouds close in on my rear-view mirror. Heavy rain eventually catches me. Visibility is almost zero, and I see that rain is starting to fill the creeks, and flood water is washing dangerously over the road. With the cold biting through my soaked clothes, I experience ever-increasing uncontrollable shakes. It is too dangerous to proceed.

Mid-morning, the Glenn Innes township comes into view, where I find a motel just off the main street. The owner of the motel is welcoming. In his office, checking into a vacant room, he informs me that he regularly receives riders who are caught in severe weather. He offers me the use of his industrial dryer for my clothes.

After a change of clothes, it feels good to be wearing dry clothes again, and not be on two wheels out in the storm. The coffee shop around the corner on the main street, which promotes local farm produce, is inviting with its country charm. For my lunch, I order a large hamburger on a sweet American style bun. I sit at the bay window, watching the locals in the rain running from one dry shopfront to another. The food and hot coffee relaxes me, and I try not to think about the risky ride home.

The following day, the friendly motel owner confirms that there is a small break in the weather with cloudy yet clear skies for two or so hours. In my eagerness to eat up kilometres, I open the throttle on the ride north along the Cunningham Highway and down the mountain range. The morning ride is exhilarating. With the road soon levelling out, the flat farmland opens ahead. At Ipswich, I call into a service station to fill up with fuel.

In the car next to me is a man with three little boys. They all have big smiles on their faces and are bopping in their seats to the radio. When the car door opens, the stereo is blasting out rap

music at a dangerous volume. I think, *he must be a weekend dad, because there is no way that mum would allow that.*

I ride into Moreton Bay in early February 2022 just as torrential rain hits the region. I'm feeling lucky to be home safe. The Brisbane River floods once again after eleven years. In the following weeks heavy rain falls in the Northern Rivers. Lismore, Ballina, and other towns suffer the worst flooding in history.

Reflection

The two years of pandemic restrictions, the natural disasters and my adventure on the road are dwarfed by the thought that my niece and the children came remarkably close to tragedy on my watch.

Their strong bonds and intelligence under pressure surfaced just in time. Drina was there at the right moment responding to the threat like only a mother can. Marko was quick to sense the danger, moved himself to safety and called out for help. Nikolina, when asked why she let go of mum, said 'a guardian angel spoke to me and instructed me to get the boogie board.' She swam to it with child strokes, before it disappeared behind the next set of waves, collected it, and paddled back to mum. This gave them the buoyancy they needed to reach the shallows again.

It is sobering to reflect on those seconds. Nature is beautiful and unpredictable at the same time, and we won't take it for granted again.