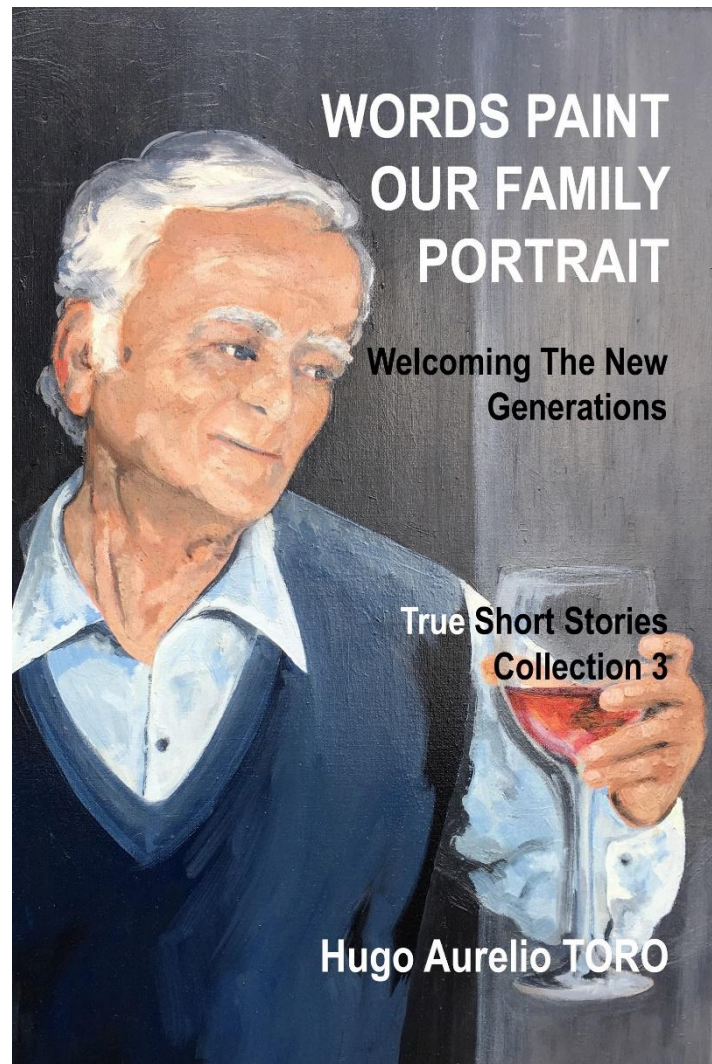


A short story from this collection.



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3.9) Ever Active

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Tutored art class in Margate QLD - 2024

When I announced that I was retiring from work, a lifelong friend, who is very career driven, far more than I was, showed concern for me.

‘What are you going to do with your day?’ he asked. Implied in that question was that I would be sitting around watching television, getting bored and lazy.

‘There is lots to do while I’m still healthy,’ I replied. Listing goals and activities in my head, but my friend was not privy to my ambitious list.

In my third age, I aim to keep active, mobile and with good mental health. It helps significantly if you have been wise with finances and have superannuation for your retirement. The bonus are the people you meet along the way and the memories you create.

I discovered that entrenched loves and hobbies, flow into retirement with you. If you are lucky, a long-term partner will also be part of your new life. Companionship at this age is primary.

Top of my list is art. It is a powerful tool for expression and good mental health. It is in effect a visual language that speaks to us about life and culture. In the past, to make a living, I rode the Information Technology wave from the 1990s to 2020s. I thoroughly enjoyed being part of IT innovation, but it was time to qualify as an artist.

Goal 1 – Get A Formal Art Education

In 2017, while still at work, I met with Paul, the Head of the Art and Design department at the Canberra Institute of Technology. I had a folio of work to show him, and he commented that I demonstrated classic drawing and painting styles. I was pleased with the assessment of my work and Paul approved my enrolment into the Diploma of Visual Arts.

At TAFE, course by course I began to understand the full breadth of what makes a good artist. Amazing teachers like Paul, Bernie and Rachael, guided us through the broad range of creative subjects. The students drew inspiration from each other. We learned about; health and safety; applying for grants; seeking commissions; and the legal aspects of copyright.

As part of the assessment for the visual art diploma, students were required to organise a group art exhibition. We all completed and framed our works with enthusiasm, then assisted with the installation at the TAFE gallery. Our tutors had a panel of experts judge our body of work. The panel interviewed us where we explained our artistic concepts to them. I was presented with a prize for my innovative artwork - a crossover between traditional art and digital art. My prize was a solo exhibition at the Tuggeranong Arts Centre. There was no cost to me, the exhibition manager covered costs and insurance. I could not think of a better start to a career in art.

The gallery space at Tuggeranong was medium sized and comfortably catered for seventeen paintings without crowding them. I felt a real sense of achievement by completing and framing my own paintings. I loaded them into my wagon and with help from the gallery assistant and my partner, we hung up all the paintings and the exhibition looked great.

The gallery manager was helpful and organised marketing and the opening night. I shared the opening night with three other artists. Finger food, music, and politician guest speakers looking for a photo opportunity, were arranged by the gallery. My college friend George and wife Loretta came to the opening of the exhibition. He delivered a short speech on the night. Over the years he had seen me evolve as an artist, and I was grateful for his kind words. The icing on the cake was the instant sale of my best paintings.

My art education took five years to complete. The community was experiencing a pandemic, and now in my retirement, it finally feels good to be able to say, *I am an artist*.

Goal 2 – Practice Art And Share My Skills

Art has been in my life since I was a child. I knew that I had natural ability when I skipped that stick figure drawing phase. In primary school, I was drawing true forms and shapes.

In my thirties and forties, I was producing competent art studies in my spare time. It was a hobby only at that stage. I was exhibiting my paintings in the local outdoor art show that came

around yearly. Placing your work up against others and with a price, gives you an internal strength, like facing one of your fears will do.

Wishing to continue to be engaged in my art, I decided to attend weekend workshops, with artists. You can learn a huge amount from the local masters. At my first workshop of this kind, I didn't know what to expect so I am doubting my ability and skills, and think, *I could embarrass myself here*. I soon realise that the group that gathers, are all in the same situation. We are keen artists and willing to learn.

When the pandemic restrictions are lifted in 2022, delighted we visited the Margate esplanade, shops, and cafes. My partner and I have made the sea change to the Redcliffe Peninsula. The whole area has a tranquil seaside holiday feel.

On one of our walks, the Revival Green arts and crafts shop catches my eye. Looking into the shop, artworks decorated the walls and quality crafts are on display. A little further in, the shop owner Kate is attending to the coffee bar. Her son Jack and senior beagle dog Mario are in the shop helping mum. Walking through to the back room an artist studio space is revealed. Kate and local artists paint and run art workshops from the studio.

Immediately, I sense that this is the right place for my tutored art classes. Conversation with Kate reveals that our community spirit and art interests align. I'm a competent artist, with an interest in sharing my skills with the community. Kate's character is complex – community focus, spiritual, competent artist and drawing on a retail background for her business. She offers me rental of the studio on a Saturday morning and Thursday afternoon.

Covid-19 has placed immense pressure on small businesses, and clients are few. As we come out of the pandemic, the visitors to the shop increase and a small group join my class. At the Revival Green studio, students ranging from ages ten to eighty, surprise me with their creativity. I only need to guide them, and they produce stunning art works to share with family.

Other doors open and I'm soon facilitating an art activity at an aged care village. There are strict visiting rules, virus tests and temperature checks, and we must all wear masks. The art activity has its complexities, yet it is extremely rewarding for all. With failing vision and fragile bodies, my students produce impressive art works. In fact, they have been artists since young and they have a chance to paint again. I can see their enthusiasm and they look forward to their art activity. Their families visit and admire their new art works.

But it is not just about painting, we also share stories. Every artist has a rich life story to share when there is a break in painting. In the class there are administrators, nurses, teachers. There are families here and abroad. The social interactions at the art workshops are invaluable.

One of my students, Enid, participated in the world war two effort by joining the Airforce and working on engine parts. She recalls being taken up on the planes as part of her training, so that she would have a full appreciation of the aircraft and its safety features. She moved into the aged care home to help care for her husband who is no longer with us. She turned one-hundred years old this year and she finds it humorous that she is to receive a letter from King Charles.

Another art enthusiast is Pat, who saw Queensland country towns grow into cities. Her father in charge, managed a sawmill, providing timber for the construction of the Queensland homes. Participating in the business she became an expert in the construction of these sturdy timber

buildings. She also enjoyed the politics of past years. Her satire drawings are clever. She is disappointed that politics turned nasty, and it was no longer fun to draw.

Goal 3 – Do A Volunteer Job

In a bizarre way, in my retirement I'm missing the routine of a job. It felt odd not to be up early in the morning, joining the peak hour rush, sitting at a desk all day, interacting with people on a job task, and then coming home exhausted. I had done this for forty years and perhaps it is an addictive habit.

In a local paper I see an advertisement, seeking volunteers to work in the visitor information shop front. What catches my attention is that here is an opportunity to meet people, establish a work like routine, and support the tourism industry. I discover that tourism is a \$31 billion per year, industry in Queensland. I apply to the manager Nicky and meet Alexis her assistant manager. It is heartening to see a mother and daughter team in business.

My partner Penny is baffled. She looks at me like I'm embarking on a crazy journey. She asks but not expecting an answer, 'what do you know about QLD tourism?' I smile with confidence because I know that the most important part is about dealing with and helping people. I'm good at that. I learn quickly so knowledge will come in time, plus there is Google search as a backup.

I do all my induction paperwork and attend basic training. I meet an experienced volunteer who shows me how it is done. I follow a well-designed task checklist ensuring that I do my job well. Generally, there are two people working on the morning and afternoon shifts and seven days per week. I choose a Sunday shift leaving my week free to pursue other activities.

I get issued a uniform shirt, and windcheater with the Moreton Bay logo. My job is to dress neatly in my uniform, arrive on time and to look after the visitors. It is a real pleasure to meet other volunteers and share life experiences with them. The majority are born and raised in the Redcliffe Peninsula.

Visitors come in to browse the shelves and take brochures and maps. Others will have specific location and activity questions. The real highlights are the people who come in for a chat, like the retired truck driver who is training his son to take over the business after his heart attack. I'm in for a chat if that helps the clients. A couple came in looking for a disused railway tunnel that has fond memories for them from years ago. We located it on the google maps.

I volunteer for a year before resigning from that job.

Goal 4 – Purchase And Ride A Motorcycle

I have owned a motorcycle from my twenties, so wanting a motorcycle is not a mid-life or even a third-life crisis. I just love motorcycles and feel incomplete without one. I had sold my old BMW, so I'm looking for a replacement.

With the aim of exploring Southeast Queensland, I go out shopping for a motorcycle in 2021. We are drifting in and out of lockdown, but I figure that on my motorcycle I can travel solo without risk. My partner Penny is not impressed with me and gives me the evil eye. She is naturally concerned about my safety on the road and had wished that I were over motorcycling.

After thorough research I come across a BMW, model R1200ST from 2006. Google it, it is a beautiful machine with a lower centre of gravity and a low seat. Suits me perfectly, since I am getting old, my arms can't wrestle a top-heavy motorcycle, and I need to place my feet firmly on the road.

This motorcycle was in storage for about five years and has low mileage. According to the service history it was purchased new in Dandenong Victoria. I purchase it for \$6000 from a fellow who lives near Tamborine Mountain. The ride home through Beaudesert and Peak Crossing is exhilarating. The motorcycle ride is smooth like a magic carpet ride. The acceleration is a bit scary but nice.

On my BMW I start to do day trips in the Brisbane hills. I become familiar with all the towns in the area: Ipswich, Esk, Samford, Dayboro, Kilcoy, Woodford, and Maleny. Then I branch out further exploring the Sunshine Coast, to Colandra and Noosa. I like to stay away from the M1 highway. It is often congested slowing traffic. The inland roads are far more interesting and fun.

Wherever I go I try to talk to the locals and get tourist information. My new Queensland friends say that I know more about the Brisbane region and Sunshine Coast, than they do.

Goal 5 – Get Fit

On a walk around the beachie suburb of Scarborough, Penny and I approach an old-fashioned corner shop painted in navy blue and orange. A rusty, corrugated iron bullnose over the footpath protects clients from the weather. The corner bifold doors are partly open in an inviting manner.

I peer in and see that the old shop was converted into a boutique gym. There are weights and exercise equipment against all walls, and a life size blue punching dummy at the far end. I stop for a moment by the shop front to hastily gather my thoughts on exercise and put together an action plan. It has been a long time since I have exercised seriously, forty years in fact. Penny thinks that if I join a gym, I am being impulsive and there will be no lasting commitment. I instead see a window of opportunity to improve my health.

Inside, Dimitri the trainer assist a client with his exercise routine. I step in to make an appointment. A fitness assessment with Dimitri, sees me going pale with fatigue and almost dying on the gym floor. Dimitri designs a light program for me consisting of three fifteen-minute rounds. Not with a sparring partner, just me and various gym apparatus and weights. He wants me to train twice per week. Slow and steady, two years pass and I'm enjoying the benefits of a stronger heart and increased fitness.

The fat is harder to shift, so Dimitri suggests I cut down on the vanilla slices. That will be hard to do. If he suggested giving up greens, that would be easier.

When you make impulsive decisions, like training, it is a pleasant surprise the people you meet. My trainer turns out to be a real character. He has lived vastly different experiences to mine, and possibly to most people. He was an Australian Commando, a bouncer in Sydney, and a professional fighter. Dimitri is an open book, and his life story is in text for anyone to read. There is a movie in his story.

Goal 6 - Write My Family History

Swirling around in my head for years, there have been stories of real people and real events in our family. Writing down tales is best for me, since I'm not a natural verbal entertainer. To start writing, I first do an online course on 'writing your story' by Luisa. Her short program was extremely helpful.

In Luisa's lesson one, we address, the motivation for writing. My main motivation is simple. As the elders in the family pass away, their stories are lost if no one captures them in writing. There are a lifetime of family tales stored in my memory, and I fear that one day these recollections could fail me.

I see strong parallels between visual art and writing. The processes are similar, I start writing with a broad brush. During Covid-19 lockdown, I sit in my studio, with my senior cat Simba, for company, and my vinyl records playing in the background. I typed out a collection of short stories. The short stories format appeal to me the most, for their precise delivery. They can be read individually since they are not linked by plot or timeline. These short stories span over one hundred years to current times. The first drafts are rough, and they are just a broad-brush brain dump. In a writing trance, I produce over twenty short stories.

In the middle brush stage, I referred the stories to a professional editor for a pre-editing service called, a beta report. Your work is assigned to professional readers who independently give you honest feedback. They follow the same criterion so that you can compare comments. I agreed totally with the report and implemented their recommendations.

There is no ego here about my abilities, so I am on a learning curve. I read books about writing, participate on online training courses, and attend workshops with other authors.

With editing, feedback, learning and research, the stories are fine-tuned with an ever-smaller detail brush. The characters are in sharp focus, emotions are explored, and scenes paint a real picture. The story structure is finetuned, making them easier to read and entertaining.

A key to writing is editing, but do not do your own editing. It is best to engage a professional editor and preferably someone who is not too close to you, who can be brutal with their editing. I did exactly that, by locating and engaging a local editor, Patricia. She worked through four major edits with me.

With her help, I'm ecstatic to have been able to capture our family tales in writing. Three years have passed, and it is time to self-publish.

Ever Active

Four years into my retirement, and it is funny that in my third age I'm far busier than I was when working full time. In fact, I say to my partner Penny, *'I need to retire from retirement.'*

My lifelong friend had not counted on me filling my schedule with activity. And there is so much more to do.

“Staying active as you get older is important for good mental and physical health and wellbeing. It reduces the risk of many diseases, including some cancers, and helps maintain a healthy weight.” Department of Health and Aged Care