

## BUSHMASTER COFFEE

A grenade bounced into our house and killed my mother, father, three brothers, and baby sister.

Three days later, I sneaked into a rust-streaked tin shed looking for food. A fat man laughed and yanked me by the hair into the air. “You little thief.” He had crooked green teeth and small hog eyes. He stank of mescal and garlic. I kicked him and he knocked me nearly senseless. Two men looked away. All skin and bones like my father had been, they smoked hand-made cigarillos of the same pungent wild tobacco he had used.

The fat man dropped me into a coffee bag of burlap and swatted it to settle me down. A big needle sewed the top shut. Faint light filtered through the burlap.

Something moved against my ankle. “Sir, there is a snake in here.” It was one of the black ones, young and thin whose bite nevertheless makes you froth at the mouth and soon after die.

“Is that so,” he said.

I was afraid to move and the snake curled up in the dry warmth between my knees.

In the night flashes came through the weave of the burlap. I thought they must be from phosphorus grenades, that my oldest brother, in his all-knowing way, had told me about. Then came thudding, from artillery, bombs, and rockets? I shivered so much I feared the snake would bite me. At last, so familiar and welcome, rain rattled on the tin roof.

In the morning a blade stained with sauce or blood sliced the burlap in front of my eyes. The fat man hoisted me again by the hair. He looked at me with first one eye then the other. “You little thief, why are you still alive?”

The snake slithered into his shirt. Ever so carefully, I got eased to the floor. In a small, scared voice he asked the thin men to remove the snake. Moving only his eyes, he said: “Do this small thing for me and I’ll give you more food, goats to eat, fish from the coast. Your families, too.”

Puffing on their cigarillos they glanced at each other and kept their distance.

Sweat poured down his face. He showed those ugly teeth in kind of a smile. “Boy, reach in and get the snake. I promise, he won’t bite you. Like you, he is only a child. You like strawberries? I’ll give you strawberries. Ice cream, too, as much as you can eat. Carry a bucket of it home to your family. Just reach in and get him.”

I folded my arms and waited. After a time, he swore nastily and swatted his belly, which jiggled. Shortly after, he frothed and died. The snake wiggled out of his shirt and went down the steps and into a row of coffee bushes. I called after him: “Thank you, little friend.”

The two men dragged the body by the feet. The fat man’s head went bonk, bonk, bonk on the steps. They rolled him into an arroyo filled with old tires and other trash.

One of the men gave me a tortilla, the other a tin that still had a swallow of sweet condensed milk.

And that, my daughter and sons, is how our family got its start in the coffee business.

The End