

Contents May Be Extremely Hot by Shane Sanford

When I was ten years old, my uncle came to visit so he could, as Mom said, get his feet back on the ground. It was during his stay that I acquired a fond nose for the coffee he'd brew every morning, when it was still night outside the frost-covered windows. The alluring aroma—some kind of roast—would drift heavenly from the muted kitchen through the living room, stretch down the narrow hallway of monochromic memories, past the bathroom and my little sister's room, then limbo under my bedroom door and crawl up into my nostrils. I'd wake up smiling and float out of bed, my nose lifted. Guided.

From behind the white tile counter separating the kitchen from the family room, I'd peek over at my stumpy and dark-as-a-Mexican uncle hunched over the counter on the far side of the kitchen, facing the other way. He'd fill a red plastic Super Big Gulp cup over halfway to the top with coffee and then dump in countless heaping spoonfuls of sugar from a Christmas cookie tin can kept on top of the refrigerator. After adding enough sugar to build a sandcastle, he'd put the can back and open the fridge door—which always made a gross slurping noise when opened—and reach beyond the jar of pickles and foil-wrapped leftovers for a small carton of Half & Half. What the difference was between that stuff and actual milk, I hadn't a clue. My uncle really liked it, though. He'd chug it before emptying the rest into the Super Big Gulp, then stir his concoction with Mom's long wooden cooking spoon and dip his handlebar mustache below the cup's rim. His rounded back would slowly expand and then contract. His nose whistled. I imagine his eyes were closed.

Coffee smelled really good from afar, I knew that, and it smelled even better in the same room, but I could never get as close to it as my uncle did. I envied his ability—his passion—to get so close to it. It looked delightful. Inviting. Romantic, even. Mom, however, disagreed. Later in the day, when the sun was just over the eastern horizon and my uncle was in the kitchen hunched over a sizzling pan of scrambled eggs and chorizo, she'd thwack the top of my head with a fly swatter as soon as I neared his almost empty and neglected cup. “Hey! Psst!” she'd hiss. “Leave that alone. It's not for you,” or, shaking her wicked finger at me: “Don't you dare, mister.” I don't know why, but every time Mom said those things, I wanted even more what was in that cup.

He never knew I was in the quiet shadows, watching his morning ritual like a hawk. He must've been so focused and I so covert that he never thought to scan his surroundings. He'd waddle out into the living room, Super Big Gulp in hand, and ease back onto the creaky Lay-z-Boy that had been in the house for as long as I could remember—a mere stretched arm's length away and directly in front of the television because the remote was, as Mom said, M.I.A. My uncle would set his giant cup down on the fiery orange shag carpet in front of the chair next to his moldy and rancid tube-socked feet, lean forward and flip on some black and white movie with the volume turned down to a whisper. I'd be on the other side of the living room by then, still a hawk,

behind the matching loveseat and side table with the porcelain lamp on it Mom used for reading books at night. I'd usually get tired shortly thereafter and drag myself back to bed.

One morning, like any other, I followed my nose out into the living room behind the kitchen counter, but when I peeked over, something unusual appeared. My uncle wasn't one to have company over, especially when it was nighttime. Mom said it was one of the "agreements" of living with us. So why, then, were there two steaming cups on the counter and no sign of my uncle? Mom wasn't due up for another couple hours at least, and my little sister, who'd just graduated from using sippy-cups, was completely out of the question. Crouched there behind the counter, my eyes darted between the Super Big Gulp and the cracked "#1 MOM" mug next to it. This was definitely strange. Mom never drank coffee nor woke up before the Sun.

Suddenly, a man's voice trembled the sweet air and sent what felt like a million tiny ants crawling up my spine. "We're up mighty early," my uncle said, his voice behind me, raspy and tired sounding. "Did I wake you?"

"Uh...yeah," I croaked, using the counter to slowly pull myself up. "No... I mean, no. You didn't wake me. I couldn't sleep."

My uncle ruffled the greasy brown hair on my head and scooted past me into the kitchen. "You thirsty?" he asked, facing down to the cups.

"I dunno."

He turned around and set the "#1 MOM" mug down in front of me and said, "Here." Steam twirled up out of the mug and disappeared like magic. It never looked so mystical, so dangerous and beautiful than right there in the dim kitchen light. "You wanna watch a movie with me?" he asked.

I followed him into the living room and sat criss-cross on the shaggy carpet next to the Lay-z-Boy while he leaned forward to press the TV power button. Closing my eyes, I put my nose to the coffee vapors and sniffed. Wonderful. Then, I put the piping hot liquid to my lips, cracked open my mouth, and burned my tongue.