



Source: Paul McGeough, Reuters, 'Despot dead, but Iraq still haunts Bush', *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 01/01/07.

Tags: [discomfort](#), [countryside](#), [food](#), [language](#)

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It was the smell of coffee that led me, or I should say plunged me into this unexpected and dangerous place. As I burst through the bushes into a clearing I thought Ah! This is not a pretty place, no not at all! Three ruffians sat on logs with huge mugs of coffee in their hands. An enormous roast pig sizzled on a spit over a slow hot fire. The smell of fresh coffee and roast pork struck my nostrils like a blow. At the same time it drew my hungry self forward into the face of danger.

Reynard who was already seated beckoned for me to join them. Does this man know everyone? I wondered. The bandits had looked me up and down by the time my shock settled into a continuous buzzing sound in my head. They appeared quite uninterested but I noticed that particular quality of tension, which settles upon people when a stranger enters their company.

Reynard had found his voice. 'Come sit down my friend. Let me present my comrades. Pascal!' With a flourish he swept his arm towards a small, muscular man who looked me in the eye, nodded. Without altering his gaze from mine, he held his empty mug towards his companions, for a refill. As a survivor and born diplomat, I was the first to avert my gaze.

Reynard continued. 'Hervé!' This fellow in a cool manner, continued to pour Pascal's coffee. In his own good time he flashed me a sly look with a soupçon of a smile. In the teeth of that grin, Hervé held a world of menace. Reynard, apparently quite at ease, jutted his chin towards the third bandit and said, 'Enrique!'

I felt as if the look this man threw at me pierced clear through to my soul. I held back my instinctive gesture, which was to make the sign of the cross. This would I thought, give me away. (If this last sentence puzzles you dear listener, I urge you to put it aside for the moment, take up your coffee, take to the edge of your chair and bear with me).

Enrique cleared his throat. He spat into the dust between his feet. Hhrrgggrrrrkkkk! PPBBHHTT! He turned his attention to the depths of his coffee mug, which now seemed to be of overwhelming interest.

Pascal indicated that I should sit opposite. He waved a hand for another mug of coffee, which I grasped with both hands. I let the vapour surge through my nostrils, felt its warm tendrils curling around the sides of my head about the curlicues of my ears. Just for a moment nothing else existed.

I had completely forgotten Jacques and his master, but I knew they would not venture into this place for fear of being set upon. As an itinerate scribe, my lowly garb was my passport into this nether world. Dear listener, what do you think the two horsemen would have done under these circumstances? I know now that Diderot has lost interest in my textual manipulations, so I will assume that

they have continued along the road and will soon find themselves in the arms of affluence at Marqueyssac. In my insightful way as the narrator of this tale I will leave them to their own devices. I have my own hide to consider now!

I drifted back into consciousness as slowly and surely as the taste and smell of coffee penetrated my depths. That this coffee must have been purloined was of no importance apart from the extra piquancy this offered.

Reynard was talking, chatting. The bandits showed great interest in what he was saying about Jacques, his master, Monsieur Diderot and me. Pascal was telling about his life as a bandit, the adventures they had together in the past. Every now and then Hervé would laugh and prompt Pascal with a detail. I dared not disturb their reveries. I was no raconteur and I had a secret that I believed could turn them all against me, perhaps like a pack of rabid dogs. (You might think that I am exaggerating my remarkably observant listener...but I must not digress).

The bandits' conversation became more personal. This surprised me, but then I realised that such is the power of coffee and such it will be, down through the ages. It is destined to become a household commodity, a drug of preference. I have heard tell of the power of opium but coffee I believe, would have a more subtle and profound effect upon the everyday person, their approach to life and relationships!

Such is the effect of coffee on intimacy, that I was caught unawares by Enrique, that bristling Moor of a man from La Mancha, who dropped his head, his chin disappearing into the oily blackness of his chest hair, his great hands falling knuckle first into the dust, his legs spread lengthways to within an inch of the fire, his coffee soaking slowly into the dust as he sobbed, his shoulders and belly heaving while the tears coursed over his leather jerkin to spill onto the crude cloth of his blouse. This was the man who had, that very morning with speed not unlike that of a startled antelope, chased down a wild boar, thrown himself upon it, thrust his knife into its throat killing it in one massive action, to drag it back to their bivouac. His huge cry of victory reverberated through the valley, bouncing back and forth between the cliffs of Marqueyssac and La Roque Gageac. At the time I had not recognised it for what it was. I thought it was one of Reynard's massive snores as he slept against the tree stump.

His companions, the bandits, did not seem to be at all surprised. Between sobs Enrique was mumbling and bumbling his words in heavily accented French and Spanish. I know a little of the latter and I heard him say, as I dare to translate: 'I miss my mother!'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nola Farman.*