



Chicken Man

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And when our daily prayers to God had been said,
we began to go to the baths; for that place was
comfortable and suitable for our disputation,
whenever we could not be in the field on account
of inclement weather. Suddenly we noticed barnyard
cocks beginning a bitter fight just in front of the door.
We chose to watch.—Saint Augustine

VIC RABELAIS WAS MAKING THE EVENING ROUNDS at his game farm when the wheel of his chair caught on a rock. It was so small, he could barely see it, but nonetheless it hung him up and he had to use all the strength in his arms to propel his wheelchair over the obstacle before he continued down the dirt path to the fly pen. His niece Luce was inside, pacing on the oyster shells and rice straw that covered the floor of the pen, watching as the birds went about their flying exercises. They were conditioning thirty birds with the hopes that a handful would be ready for battle that weekend in Duson. The rest Vic sold to cockers as far away as Thailand and the Philippines. Luce held one of them in her hands. Joule, Vic's ace cock.

"How's he doing?" he called out.

"He'd fly all day if we let him."

"We can't have him exhaust hisself before the derby. Bring'm here."

Luce did so and Vic took Joule into his arms, resting him on his lap. He put one hand underneath and used the other to stroke his feathers softly, always

the same direction. His best bird liked to be held and Vic could feel Joule's patterning heartbeat slow the littlest bit. He was a beautiful rooster with a bright sun-orange hackle that gave way to speckled saddle feathers of brown, white, and red. A regal Prussian blue sickle was the exclamation point on the striking creature. He wasn't just pretty either. In a sport that could end in a matter of seconds, plenty of birds didn't survive a single fight and most more than a few, but Joule had already won nine.

"What you say, Unc?" said Luce.

"Let's let these boys fly a little longer and after dinner we'll have'm walk the string."

They made their way back to the house, where Vic's mother was in the kitchen stirring pots on the oven. Everyone called her Teensy because she was small, even though she was tougher than most anybody. The three of them sat at the table and ate sausage and rice from bowls, speaking now and again but mostly just savoring the warm food and the sounds of the roosters in the yard. They crowed from first light to last. A cacophony of screech and cluck, unsettling to most, but reassuring to a chicken man like Vic. Luce was his brother's daughter, but Doug worked out on the rigs in eastern Texas and could only get home to Erath for a visit when he could, every couple of months or so. Luce was seventeen but already one hell of a cocker. Even on school days she helped him before she left and after she returned. Vic had taught her how to train and condition birds, raising them up from shell to pit, and at the fights she was his legs, pitting and handling the birds as Vic looked on from his chair, taking notes on each fight in his notebook.

Soon, however, it would all be over. It was the last year of legal cockfighting in the country and Louisiana was the final state to enact a ban. Over the last decade, as other states shut down the sport, outsiders had flooded into the area to fight at pits in Duson, Carencro, Opelousas, Rayne, Dulak, St. Martinsville, and of course the best and biggest pit of all: Sunset. Come August 2008, however, they would all have to give it up or go underground. It was already April and Vic wasn't sure what he'd do.

Luce was tall and lean, the body of an athlete though she showed little interest in school sports, with long brown hair that she tied up when she fought roosters but otherwise let fall free down her back. She was newly seventeen and had become something more than a tomboy in the last year, her face softening

and her body curving here and there, but she seemed only half aware of it. She was wearing light blue canvas shorts and ate with one leg on the floor and the other propped up on an empty chair, exposing one long sun-splashed thigh. Vic looked away, anywhere but there.

“Didn’t I tell you to wear jeans out in the yard,” he said.

“Too hot,” she said, her mouth full of food.

“Birds’ll scratch up your legs.”

“I’d rather that than having to wear them denims. My underwear’s already sweat through as is.”

“Luce,” said Teensy, putting a hand on her granddaughter’s leg so it fell the floor.

She looked at her gran. “Desole,” she said.

Luce only spoke a few French words—sorry, please, thank you—and on the rare occasions she did, they seemed to come out unbidden, an atavism from their collective past. As a boy, Vic’s father had been beaten by teachers with a rubber tube, while his mother had had to carry bricks around the flagpole during recess, punishment for speaking the language at school. Vic recalled his mother’s smile when he asked if she’d done a lot of marching: “How you think my hands got so strong.” But by the time Vic and other kids of his generation went to school they didn’t have to be coerced. He was forty-one now and few his age spoke the language. Mostly it survived here and there in their parents and grandparents.

Things were calm and quiet and then suddenly Luce shot a sharp look at Vic. “I’m not gonna wear jeans, okay? You’re not my dad. You’re not the boss of me,” she said and stormed out of the kitchen. In a matter of moments there was the sound of the truck’s engine coming to life and the garble and crush of tires tracking over dirt.

Vic and his mother met eyes.

“Where the hell’d that come from?”

“She’s seventeen, is all. She don’t know what the hell she’s feeling from moment to moment.”

“She gonna be a queen alright.”

“What you mean *gonna*?”

Vic took his plate into his lap and then Luce’s and rolled over to the sink. Teensy came over and set her hand on his shoulder, told him to leave the dishes be.

"Ain't no queen like you, Mama."

"Don't you forget it, sha."

After dinner, Vic took the birds to their A-framed hutches, where they were fixed to a string that allowed them to walk around the yard while still keeping distance from one another. Without that restraint, they'd fight, no encouragement needed. That was their natural way, their gameness, their desire to dominate. Vic filled their water dishes and sprinkled some feed here and there, then took out his cell and called Bobby.

Bobby was the closest thing Erath had to a cabbie, but there was nothing official about him. No license, just a serviceable car and an amiable driver who accepted cash, check, or barter, even the occasional IOU if you were hard up. There wasn't a huge need, but after Vic's accident—that night five years ago when he'd driven home from the bar drunk and fell asleep only to wake up in the hospital paralyzed—Bobby was a lifeline. Driving was one of the things Vic missed most; he always felt a little twinge watching Luce tear off in his old blue Chevy pickup.

When Bobby arrived, Vic climbed into the passenger seat and Bobby folded up his chair and put it in the trunk. "Well," Bobby said, smiling, "where we heading, Rabelais?" There was a purple ring around his lips and a massive Styrofoam cup wedged into a holder.

"Looks like you paid a visit to the daquiri stand."

Bobby got excited, thinking he'd found a partner in crime, a copilot to his buzzed evening of lassitude.

"You up for a one, Vic? I'll head back to the drive-thru so you can catch up."

"No thanks," he said. "Just take me to Abbeville."

It was a short drive from Erath and along the highway between the two towns were rice fields that had been harvested in the summer, flooded in the fall, and were now crawfish ponds turning out mudbugs by the thousands. Bobby asked Vic about his birds, wanting a little inside betting info for the upcoming derby, and before long they pulled into the parking lot of the strip club and parked.

"Whyn's I just stay here with you and enjoy myself some titties?" he said as he retrieved Vic's wheelchair and set it outside the passenger-side door. "You can pay for your ride that way, in trade. How 'bout I do?"

"How 'bout you don't," said Vic, unable to suppress a grin at lonely Bobby, the endearing couyon. "I'm meeting someone, but pick me up in an hour and don't be late. I have to get back to my birds."

Vic rolled inside, getting a little push from the big man working the door. It was a slow evening, just a handful of men and one woman, sipping drinks and watching a young girl dance. She couldn't have been much older than Luce, but she had a thick middle that impeded the removal of her lacey do-dah, the sort of thing you could get for a few bucks in the adult stores that lined the highway. She stopped dancing and stood there, top-naked but for pasties, really concentrating as she tried to work the tight-fitting nightgown over her stomach when it hit him. She was, Vic realized, pregnant.

He went to the bar to get a beer. Vic had never much cared for strip clubs in the past but had started coming after his accident. He could no longer get an erection due to his paralysis, and that made the ache of desire all the more acute. Sometimes he felt hollowed out by it, that lusty want that couldn't be relieved, and he would make his way here, but it was never satisfying. It was, in fact, torture, a kind of self-flagellation, but pain could also make you feel more alive, the same way sadness sometimes could.

And then one day last fall he'd seen a new woman dance. Her name was Misty and she was different from the others. She had long curly red hair and danced with a Burmese python draped over her shoulders during her set. As a boy, Vic and Doug had caught wild snakes. Given their speed and unpredictability it seemed impossible to him that someone had trained one to behave like that. It was fascinating to watch it slither around her shoulders and torso and legs. He'd been so impressed that after her set he worked up the nerve to approach her, asking if they could talk.

"Buy me a drink," said Misty, "and we can go in the back."

Vic followed her to one of the private rooms and he soon realized that she thought he was asking for a lap dance. She was telling him how much it cost, but his desire had been replaced by curiosity and he cut her off. "I mean, I'll pay you something," he said, "but I really do just want to talk."

"Oh," she said, as though no one had ever asked to have a conversation with her. "What's on your mind?"

"How do you make them behave?"

"The fellas in the audience?"

"No," he said. "Snakes." He told her about catching them as a boy, how he trained battle cocks now. "Did you teach yours to behave like that? To do whatever you want?"

"Give me a twenty and I'll tell you the secret."

He did so and she smiled, appreciating his appreciation for her craft. Misty took a swig of her beer and Vic, remembering he held one as well, did the same.

"Snakes are cold-blooded. They crave warmth. So what I do is I keep Jake in a room with the AC turned up full blast. When it's showtime, I come get him and he just wants to slide all over me."

"Jake the snake," said Vic, a longtime wrestling fan, smiling.

"That's right, honey. Jake the snake. He likes it hot." She took Vic's hand and placed it on her thigh. "Feel how warm that is? Sure you don't want something more than conversation?"

"I can't," he said. "I'm not able to."

She looked at his wheelchair.

"Well, shit. We can just talk. I'm good as hell at that."

The two became friendly after that first conversation, and Vic started coming to watch Misty perform once, occasionally twice, a week. After her set, they would always talk. He felt something like friendship, or possibly more, had grown between them. She always said she wanted to see his birds fight and today he'd come to invite her to the derby that weekend—maybe they could grab dinner after—but there was no trace of Misty. When Vic inquired after her to the bartender, he said she'd gone and left town without so much as a goodbye. No one had seen her in five days. Just up and vanished with wages still waiting for her to collect, he said. People did that sometimes, disappeared. Maybe she'd return, probably not. Vic felt the disappointment as a physical pain in his side.

Later that night, he went to check on his birds. Tomorrow marked the start of the last three days of keep before the fight, so there would be no sparring or work in the scratch box or exercises in the fly pen. All of the intense training and conditioning had been done by this point and the next few days would be about limbering and resting, reserving energy for battle. Vic stopped by Joule's coup and fed him a little piece of ripe banana.

"Hey, Unc," said Luce, coming out to join him. "How they looking? They gonna be ready to fight?"

"He'll be ready," said Vic, petting Joule. "These others, I'm not sure. We'll

find out one way or another.”

“They game alright.”

“Courage is all I want. That’s the thing. Everyone gets his ass beat sometime. The real question is whether you’re willing to take the beating. Can’t have none of them montres les plumes blanche.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s an expression amongst the old timers: ‘showing the white feathers.’ That’s what a scared cock does when it doesn’t want to fight, a sign of cowardice.”

They were quiet a few moments, and then she apologized for earlier, for storming off in a bluster. “Sometimes I just get *feelings*,” she said. “Hard feelings. I shouldn’t have yelled. Not at you. You know I think you’re the best guy in town.” That was the sort of thing she could do: Say something like that one minute that would explode his heart and then the next she might tell him to piss off or go silent altogether.

“Where’d you go?” he asked. “What’d you get into after dinner?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Where’d you go? What’d you get into?”

“Nothing.”

They shared a smile and then she went back toward the house, leaving him to say goodnight to his birds.

That Saturday, with the help of his mother and niece, Vic loaded up the truck with the carriers, and the three of them squeezed into the cab to make their way to Duson. Cockfighting had always been a family affair. That was how the sport was learned and passed on, how it sustained itself from generation to generation, and on fighting days entire clans often came out to support their cockers. Duson was a smaller pit but still drew a good crowd, especially with the ban approaching. It was to be a four-cock derby, and Vic had brought Joule, Zizi, Biscuit Head, and Bottlecap to fight. No one else he knew named their birds, not wanting to get attached with death all but certain, but Vic was an anomaly. He felt at the very least they deserved names, so he hung a handle on all of his warriors. There were just over twenty people entered and the \$200 entry fee meant the winner would take home a cool four grand, minus a cut for the pit owner as well as a possible payoff to the cops who sometimes stopped by to wet their beaks. Of course, that was just the prize money. A lot of action

came on side bets in the crowd and head-to-head bets between cockers on individual fights.

After registering, Vic and Luce took the birds to have them weighed, banded, and numbered by officials who matched them secretly to opponents based on weight. Over the last decade or more fighting with long knives attached to the rooster's natural heel had become popular, but Vic felt that took a lot of skill out of the sport and left the results to chance, so he stayed true to tradition and only fought with gaffs.

Joule was drawn to fight first, so Vic went down to the pit and let Luce handle the bird. The circular pit was filled with sand and encased by clear plexiglass spattered by dried blood from previous fights. Luce wore sky-blue denim, a red-check flannel, and had tied her hair up in a bun so it didn't get in the way. Vic took out his notebook, making a new entry for this fight and each that would follow, noting the weights of the birds, a description of the fight, its length, and the result. Joule's opponent was a Kelso red whose handler was younger than Luce. Just a kid. But his daddy was nearby, watching the same way Vic watched his niece.

With the fight about to start, the referee called for the pitters to bill the roosters, so Luce and the boy took their fighters to the center of the ring and let them peck at each other a little, getting them eager to fight.

"Alright, get ready," said the referee.

Vic looked back at the stands and saw Teensy with a fistful of money in the air, wagered on a side bet. Luce and the boy went to their respective scores, white lines in the dirt eight feet apart, and set their birds down, holding them still until the referee said so. At the call of "Pit!" they let go and the birds approached each other. Joule looked sassy and snappy, and he wasted no time, rushing toward the Kelso and taking flight, coming down on the opponent and landing a cut. The crowd roared, calling out encouragement or admonishment, as their bets dictated, but Vic watched it silently, though his insides hummed with adrenaline. When Joule landed a second blow, the gaff got stuck in the Kelso red, and the referee called out, "Handle."

At that point the pitters were allowed to approach and take hold of the birds so as to remove the hung gaff. They were then given twenty seconds of rest before the fight continued. This time Joule didn't rush toward his opponent. He stayed where he was and for a moment Vic worried. He knew his

ace cock wasn't scared, but plenty of men had been embarrassed by a bird that lost interest or got confused. The Kelso made its way toward Joule, whose head darted left, then right. "Go on," whispered Vic. The Kelso took flight and suddenly Joule came to life, scuttering away to avoid the incoming blow. As the Kelso landed, Joule hung a gaff straight through its wing. Once again, the gaff was stuck, but Joule began to peck savagely at the Kelso's head and was able to dislodge his weapon. Seriously injured for a second time, the Kelso was all but done and it was only a matter of moments before Joule finished him off with a brain blow from his opposite heel. The referee called an end to the fight and instantly money started changing hands in the crowd. Luce took Joule into her arms, smoothing his feathers and whispering to him, and the boy stood there with tears in his eyes, looking down at his defeated, dying rooster. His father passed by him silently and picked up the bird. After removing the gaffs, he wrung its neck and dropped it in the trash bin.

Vic was making notes about the fight when someone patted him on the shoulder.

"Damn your bird can cut, Rabelais."

Vic looked up, squinting into the sun to find Mr. Savoy. He didn't fight anymore, but he still came to watch and bet. Vic liked talking with him, listening to his stories about the old days of cocking or how he'd been part of the Swamp Angels during the Second World War, scouring the Louisiana coastline looking for German U-boats.

"He's a fighter alright," said Vic.

"That's one hell of a pit chicken," said Savoy. "If all your birds are like him, then the rest of these fools can go home now."

But it was not to be. Zizi and Bottlecop didn't survive their first fights, while Biscuit Head won but was too injured to continue, so Vic had to drop out of the derby once he saw there was no chance to win. Still, with all the betting action on the side, they recouped the lost \$200 entry fee and in Vic's experience, breaking even often felt like winning. Vic and Teensy stayed on to watch the rest of the derby, placing small bets now and again, while Luce took Joule and Biscuit Head back to their carriers to rest and feed. Later, when it was time to go, Vic found her near the concessions, smiling at a man speaking to her. He had short black hair combed slick, baggy clothing hanging off his thin frame, and a big black mole above his right eyebrow. He was older than Luce, early

twenties at least. Vic had seen him around the pits—Coba was the name he went by—but Vic fought gaffs and Coba fought the long knife so they'd never competed against one another. Luce saw him watching them and walked over holding a bottle of beer.

“What are you doing?” he said. “You shouldn’t be drinking that.”

“I was just holding it for Coba.”

“Right.”

She smiled conspiratorially.

“I just had a taste. Same as Teensy lets me at home.”

“Speaking of gran, she’s ready to go, so let’s get a move on.”

Vic started to turn his chair.

“You go on. Coba’s gonna give me a ride.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I won’t be home late,” she said. “I promise.”

“Your daddy wouldn’t want you to stay out.”

“My daddy barely knows me.”

“Well I don’t want you to then.”

“Oh, Unc,” she said, leaning down to hug him. “You’re not the boss of me.” This time she said it without anger, like it was a shared joke, something just between them. “Get gran home safe. Take care of Joule. He was so good. He sure didn’t show the white feathers tonight.” Vic watched her walk back to Coba, who placed a hand on her hip and took a swig of the beer she held. “That’s mine,” she cried, playfully swatting at him. “You get your own.”

A few weeks after the Duson derby, Doug came home for a visit. He stayed for eight days, a gift to them all. He went on walks with Luce, took her shopping for clothes, spending time with the daughter he loved but saw so little. Vic went fishing with his brother, and Teensy cooked her eldest’s favorite meals. Doug’s visit even overlapped with a derby in Carencro that saw Vic take home the winning pot, thanks to Joule and a few of Vic’s new battle cocks. He only lost one of the four. How proud Vic was to win in front of his brother. He missed Doug. They all did. Of course, Doug’s presence only made his absence all the more felt. There was a sense of dread as his departure neared. That last night Teensy cooked her grandest meal yet—redfish and maque choux with crawfish etouffee followed by pecan pie—and after clearing plates Luce went

back to her room and appeared a few minutes later, dressed in red boots, tight jeans, and a black t-shirt with a gold necklace hanging from her neck. A new outfit her father had purchased for her.

"You sure are dressed like you think you're going somewhere," said Teensy.

"Coba's picking me up in a minute."

Despite Vic's protestations, she'd been seeing him every few days since that evening in Duson, but she hadn't done so once during her father's visit. Vic thought that considerate of her, but now here she was wanting to make a big show of it on her father's last night.

"I don't think so," said Teensy. "Here your daddy's leaving in the morning and you're fixing to run out with a boy."

"A man," said Vic.

"Who's Coba?" asked Doug.

"My boyfriend."

"He's from Puerto Rico," said Vic. "Fights the long knife."

"Boyfriend?" said Doug. "When did this happen?"

"A few weeks ago," said Vic.

"And you didn't stop it?"

"I tried. She don't listen to me."

"She'll listen to me," said Teensy, turning to Luce. "You're gonna sit yourself down and have a nice night here with your family. Okay, young miss?"

For a moment it seemed that Luce might do just that, but then her face purpled with rage.

"Don't be mad at me because I'm young and you're not. You may be invisible to men, but they notice me and they like what they see."

Teensy raised her hand to strike, but Luce stormed out of the kitchen before she could. Vic started to wheel after her, calling her name, but Doug told him to stop. "Let her go," he said, turning to his mother with those doleful eyes of his. "I'm sorry, Mama. She don't mean that."

"I know, sha," said Teensy, taking a seat at the table. "Don't mean I won't beat her ass later for speaking to me that way though."

The incident came and went, but it reinforced what they all already knew, that they needed Doug home, and yet his work on the oil rigs was what kept them afloat. He sent back half his paycheck each month. Still, it didn't stop

Teensy from trying. "Why don't you come home," she said. "Be with your people."

Doug laughed.

"Shit, there's so many of us out there in east Texas they call it 'Little Abbeville.'"

"Luce needs you here," said Teensy. "We need you here."

"We need that oil money."

"You're both right," said Vic. That was their predicament.

They sat at the table all evening, talking or not talking, getting a little drunk just the three of them, telling the old stories. The roosters crowed until the sun went down and everyone went to bed. The next morning Doug woke before dawn and left.

The following month, near the end of May, they went to Sunset for a five-cock derby. It was the biggest fight of the season so far, and Vic and Luce had spent all month training and conditioning nearly forty birds to find the four that would fight with Joule. Sunset was the biggest pit left—it was like fighting in a large amphitheater—and the first time Vic had fought there the crowd intimidated him. Didn't help that he'd been drawn to fight against none other than Johnny Jumper in his first match. And after handing Vic his very own ass, the legend hadn't bragged or strut. He'd shaken Vic's hand and told him his rooster fought well even though it hadn't. A real gentleman cocker, too few left.

Today Sunset was busier than Vic had ever seen it. With only a couple months left before the ban went into effect, everyone turned out to fight while they still could. As Teensy milled around the stalls and took in the wares, Vic and Luce checked in their roosters. Afterward, leaving the registration tent, they ran into Coba. Luce threw her arms around him and tried to kiss him, but he pulled away so that her lips only grazed his cheek. He wore a black shirt and black trousers. A missed button exposed a ring of hairless chest. That big mole above his right brow just seemed to stare like a pitiless third eye. He nodded at Vic.

"You fighting knives?" asked Vic.

Coba nodded.

"You sticking with gaffs?"

“It’s what I know.”

“You’re old school,” said Coba. “I respect that. But it’s too bad. I’d like to see your ace cock fight mine. He’s undefeated.”

Vic turned to Luce.

“Can you give us a minute?”

“I’m not going any—”

“Please,” said Vic. “I’ll meet you at the pit.”

Luce looked to Coba, who nodded just the littlest bit, and then she walked away.

“She’s young,” said Vic.

“She acts it.”

“Then why do you want to mess with her for? There’s plenty of women around who won’t give you a headache like she can.”

“All women are headaches.”

Vic smiled.

“True enough, but she’s my niece. I’m trying to look out for her. I can see you don’t like her the way she likes you, but she can’t. You’re setting her up for heartbreak. Why don’t you let her be?”

Coba considered this for a moment.

“Because why would I give up a young choice little piece like that when I don’t have to?”

Vic lunged at him so hard that he fell out of his chair onto the ground. Coba took one step back, just out of Vic’s reach, and regarded him as though he were a pitiful, dying animal before Mr. Savoy intervened and helped him up.

“You okay, Vic?” he said as Coba walked away. “Let’s get you back in your chair.”

That afternoon Vic wrote nothing in his notebook as he watched his battle cocks win their first four contests. There was no anxiety this time because he was thinking about other things. He felt calm, resolute. Periodically he looked to the packed stands and found familiar faces: Teensy, Mr. Savoy, Bobby. Though he knew it was foolish, once he turned hoping he might see Misty or Doug there as well, but instead he saw Coba staring back impassively. Vic’s birds made it far in the derby before he had to bow out and cut his losses. Joule had won his fights and little Puck had fought well in his first derby, but the

other three didn't survive. It didn't matter. Vic understood the real fight hadn't yet happened, one with higher stakes.

"Tell your boyfriend I want a hack," he said to Luce afterward. "Joule versus his best bird."

"Now?"

"Now. Tell him to meet me down by the drag pits."

It wasn't ten minutes before Coba appeared with his rooster in his arms and Luce at his side. Vic held Joule in his lap, smoothing his feathers.

"This is what you want?" said Coba, smiling. "A good old fashioned trash fight?"

"That's what I want. Your best against my best."

Coba lifted his bird to show him off, a pretty black-and-white breasted spangled hatch with a long white sickle.

"You sure about that?"

"I'm sure," said Vic.

"How much money we talking? A thousand?"

"How about two?"

Coba's eyes narrowed, looking for a moment like he might decline before nodding his approval. "Knives of gaffs?" he asked.

"Flip for it."

Vic took a quarter from his pocket and handed it to Luce, telling Coba to call it in the air, which he did, and when it landed they all moved close to examine. It was heads. Coba cursed.

"I don't have gaffs," he said.

"You can borrow my inch-and-a-quarters. I got extras."

Vic took out his gaff case and the two men outfitted their roosters.

Coba handled his own bird and brought him out to his score, but Luce said she didn't want to handle Joule this time. She looked at Coba and then her uncle.

"Handle him," said Vic. "He's your bird. You trained him up. You've worked him."

"But—"

"Do it."

And so she did, picking up Joule from Vic's lap and taking him into the pit. "Bill 'em," said Vic, and Luce and Coba brought the birds together to peck at

one another. The spangled hatch caught hold of Joule's comb and Luce pulled him away, bringing Joule to his score and Coba did the same. They both looked at Vic.

"Pit!" he called out, and they let go of the roosters.

Having fought the long knife, Coba's rooster was accustomed to quick fights and he wasted no time coming right for Joule. He was the bigger bird and game, anxious to prove he was better. He ran hard and fast toward Joule before taking to the air and coming down to land a blow to Joule's back. The hatch's legs were a yellow blur as they worked to worsen the wound, but Joule was able to get free, circling away to regroup. His opponent came after him again and flew six feet into the air, but Joule ran forward and landed a blow on its wing as soon as he touched down. They came together, breast to breast, shoving and pecking, until the hatch broke free and hung a gaff on Joule's shoulder.

"Handle!" said Vic.

Coba and Luce untangled the birds and went back to their scores. Luce smoothed Joule's feathers and whispered to him as Coba spat into his rooster's beak and took his comb into his mouth. He rubbed the bird's thighs vigorously and blew on him, licking its head feathers and hackles. Vic had seen cockers do all sorts of things over the years to nurse and encourage their warriors, but he never went in for histrionics, thought it was a sign of nervous doubt. He'd taught Luce to just stroke feathers and whisper encouragement. When he called "Pit" again, the birds were released and once again the hatch was the aggressor, running toward Joule and jumping onto his back. He pecked hard at his head and landed a blow to Joule's right eye, which flew out of the socket like a marble. It seemed like it was all but over, but as the hatch continued to peck harder and faster his beak cracked and then broke. It was there and then it was gone, replaced by a large burble of blood that flowed steadily.

Vic called for them to handle and they did so. Coba licked his bird's eyes and then took his whole head into his mouth to suck the blood out, but when the fight resumed Vic could hear the strangling sound of the cock's throat filling with blood. He was exhausted from a fight that went much longer than he was used to, and Joule dashed forward with his hackles raised and took off on a low flight, cutting deeply into the hatch's neck. Coba's ace wasn't dead, but he refused to fight any longer, which infuriated Coba: "Get up, you coward—fight to the end!" But the rooster would have no more. When Coba conceded victory,

he picked up his bird by the feet, removed the gaffs, and bashed its head against the wall. Then he tossed the bird into a nearby trashcan as Luce gathered the wounded Joule in her arms.

“Take him to the medical tent,” said Vic.

They watched her run away toward the commotion and bustle, but out here it was just the two of them. Coba walked toward Vic, handed him the gaffs he’d borrowed, and then began counting the money he owed.

“Should have never let him fight gaffs,” he said. “You’re lucky that coin toss turned out the way it did.”

Vic was silent as Coba proffered the money.

“Keep it,” said Vic.

“What?”

“You can keep the money if you leave her alone.”

Coba considered this.

“The world’s gonna be hard enough on her,” said Vic.

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“You’ll make it harder. Leave her be, I’m asking you.”

Instead of putting the money back in his trousers, Coba folded it in half and slid it in the breast pocket of his shirt.

“I was about done with her anyway.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise,” said Coba.

“A cocker’s word binds.”

“I’ll honor it.”

Vic watched him leave and stayed where he was for a few minutes, collecting himself. The sun was starting to set. An older woman walked by but stopped to inspect the trashcan. After a moment, she pulled out the dead hatch and kept on walking as it dangled from her hand.

That night when they were back at the house and settled, Vic rolled out to the yard. Luce was down by the coup, checking on Joule. She was bent over so that an inch-wide ribbon of black underwear was exposed above the waistline of her jeans.

“Pull up your pants, would’ya,” he said. “You’re showing the whole world your butt.”

"That's because the whole world can kiss my ass." She stood and hiked up her jeans. "Especially you, Unc." It would take time for her to forgive him for interfering in her relationship, but Vic knew that before long there would be another boy or man and either would bring more headaches, if not trouble. He would do the best he could to look out for her, but soon she'd make all her own decisions and have to own the consequences.

"How's Joule?" he asked.

"He's okay, but he won't be fighting any time soon."

"He won't be fighting again period."

"You gonna stud him?"

"I guess I will."

"Won't matter much longer. What's gonna happen come August?"

"I don't know," he said. "We'll figure out something, I guess. It'll be okay."

"I know it will."

"How's that?"

"Because we never show the white feathers."

He smiled.

"That's right," he said. "Now give your uncle a push back to the house, would you?"

"I'm still mad at you," she said. "You rolled your ass out here, you can roll your ass back."

Vic watched her walk away in the starlight and hum of a warm spring night before she entered the lighted kitchen. Through the window above the kitchen sink he could see Luce talking to Teensy. He'd join them soon enough, but for now he wanted to stay outside a little longer until the last rooster calls had quit and the yard went silent.