

A CHICKEN FIGHT

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Somewhere in the rich bottom land looped off from the rest of the hollow floor by a creek, and backed up against the mountain stood a drab cinder block building. The only way to it was across a homemade one lane wooden bridge, the entry to which was blocked by a metal gate. Two young freckled boys tended the gate, the youngest came up to the driver's window of the approaching car and looked around the car's interior. Without an exchange of words one of the passengers flashed a card, and the young lad motioned to his partner, and the gate was opened to allow the car to pass.

Perhaps thirty cars and pickups were parked about, and people came and went from the cinder block building. Inside the light was dim, and after adapting to the poor light one could see the interior. The room was about fifty feet square, and high ceilinged with a curved roof supported by rusted metal trusses. The four walls were fronted by homemade wooden bleachers, creating a central open square. In the center of this open space was a wire cage about twenty feet on a side, and outside of each of its four corners were smaller pens enclosed by low cinder block walls, but without any wire caging. People came and went out a door in one corner of the room to a side room, where short order cooks were dishing out hamburgers, hot dogs, and french fries as frantically as they could.

The people were mostly men of all ages, but women were not rare, and several teenaged couples were there seemingly on a Saturday night date, sipping Pepsis and devouring french fries. Even though there was an air of anticipation, the mood was subdued and orderly. No one was drunk or drinking. There was no boisterousness. Blue jeans with the right hip pocket deformed by a round can of snuff and tee shirts or cotton printed shirts and blouses were the standard dress.

Men in ball caps were intently carrying beautifully colored cocks cradled in the bend of their arms. These roosters were invariably referred to as "chickens". The chickens were being weighed, and their legs banded with identifying numbers. On the rear of each heel was strapped a gently curved needle about 2 1/2 inches in length. These were called "gaffs". The men in ball caps were sticking the gaffs through holes in a plastic gauge, and were running their finger nails up and down the length of the gaffs. Occasionally a file would be applied to a gaff, and then the gauge reapplied.

At the appointed hour, a man stood up and called loudly for a pair of chickens to present to the center cage. The chickens were identified each by two numbers, the first number identified the man who was to fight the chicken; the second number was the number of the chicken. Each fighter would fight several chickens during the run of the evening. The chickens had been previously matched by weight. Three men, two wearing different colored ball caps and cradling cocks in their arms, and a judge, entered the wire cage by a door next to which hung a sign that said "No gambling".

Inside the cage painted on the concrete floor were two yellow stripes, about ten feet apart. Each chicken fighter stood behind his yellow line facing each other, with the judge standing off to one side between the chickens. Suddenly members the crowd began to stand up and shout "twenty on the blue hat", or "fifty on the white hat", or "two to one on the white hat". Others across the arena would stand up and make eye contact with the bidder and nod knowingly. The color of the hats spoken of were the color of the ball caps worn by each of the chicken fighters.

Momentarily the chicken fighters began to sway back and forth in unison toward each other, presenting their elbows cradling their roosters to within a foot or so of each others beaks. The cocks became agitated and the feathers on their necks flared out in beautiful arrays of amber and black. After the maximum fever pitch had been generated in the chickens, they were placed on the floor with the three men stooping over them. They flew into each other with their feet forward, slashing downward with their gaffs. Feathers flew in puffs that wafted out over the audience, and blood began to spurt in the nostrils and beaks of the combatants. The combat paused suddenly with one cock's gaff being stuck into the body of the other. The fighter whose chicken was impaled carefully removed the gaff. After the gaff was removed the judge began to loudly count a twenty second count, while one fighter stuck the entire head of his hemorrhaging chicken into his mouth, and sucked the blood out of his wind pipe and beak, and spat it to the side. The other fighter buried his mouth deeply into the feathers of his chicken's back, and began to blow forcefully. At the end of the count the chickens were repositioned facing each other on the concrete and released. Another flurry of feathers and puddles of blood on the floor were produced.

The whole time the fighters avoided eye contact with each other as they swayed back and forth over their charges. From the neck of one swung a cross on a chain. Body language, but no talking, encouraged their cocks on. There was no speaking among the three men in the cage. Little League ball games are more vocally acrimonious. The affect was one of detached surrealism.

At a signal the chickens were suddenly swept up into the arms of their handlers, and the entourage exited by a side door in the central cage to one of the corner pits, where the fighting resumed. Meanwhile the cry went out for another numbered pair of cocks and their handlers, and the audience again began to shout numbers and to refer to the color of hats. Into the central cage stepped three more men and two roosters, and the ballet began again. This one was over in forty five seconds, and one chicken lay unblinkingly in a pool of its blood before being carried outside by his expressionless handler. Individuals from within the audience jumped up and went to others in the audience, and money changed hands. A pair of teenagers went for more pop.

The cry went out for a third pair of chickens. Meanwhile the first fight went on and on in its corner pit with all its twenty-count time outs, and with all the blood sucking and back blowing. At times there were three fights going on at the same time. At one point, neither cock could get up, but as they lay in their pools of blood, they tried to peck at each other. The judge stooped low over the chickens, trying to see if the head movement was really aggressive pecking or just the head doddling of a dying cock. All in all, five chickens died in the center ring, each being carried out by the seemingly emotionless fighter. During the sixth fight, an hour and five minutes after it had begun, one of the first pair finally was dead.

Members of the audience periodically got up and went to a corner of the room to visit the gift vender, who had tee shirts for sale emblazoned with the image of two cocks slashing down on each other, and with the sentiment printed at the bottom "Only the Strong Survive."

The drama continued till false dawn, with thirty some pairs of cocks having been fought before it was over. A large pile of dead roosters lay outside the cinder block building. The teenagers had long gone home. The gate across the road on the other side of the creek was open, its freckled attendants gone. Misty vapors rose from the tall grass in the horse shoe bottom as the last of the cars disappeared into the rising sun.