

Cockfighting in Sopchoppy

By Pat Spears

ROB SPOTS THE PATROL CAR pulling from behind Mac's Seafoods. Draining a warm beer, he tosses the empty on a pile of carpenter's tools and worries about the approaching headlights in his rear-view mirror. It's after two in the morning and he's put away some beers at Tiny's place, but he's not drunk.

The light flashes caution at the intersection and when he slows, the car pulls alongside. The cop leans across and calls, "That you Crawley? Rob Crawley?"

"Yeah. I got a busted taillight or something?"

"Pull over," he says, motioning to the shoulder of the road.

From the light of a sign advertising small engine repairs, Rob makes out a dark-haired girl riding with the cop. He lights an unfiltered Camel, steadies himself, and waits. He stopped smoking dope again this morning and the cigarette is a piss-poor substitute for what his mamma calls his funny smokes. She's watched enough TV to know that what he smokes is dope, and he wishes she'd just say that if she's got to say anything.

The officer leans in and says, "Crawley, it's about your boy. Meant to get by Tiny's earlier," he winks, "but I guess you could say, I got held up."

Yeah, fucking a little high school gal can keep a cop busy, Rob wants to say, but remembering the plastic bag behind he seat, he laughs, heading off his thoughts. His unspoken words hang in his throat like bile.

"He's in trouble if he don't stop bothering stuff over at that weekend place next door," the cop says. "That butch lawyer who owns it is talking charges."

Rob is grateful when a flat nasal voice on the radio squawks and the cop walks back to the patrol car. After talking to the girl, he calls back something about a fight at Tiny's, and waves Rob on. Grinding the Chevy into gear, Rob pulls back onto 98, figuring the bout at Tiny's is

between the stranger and some local over who winds up sleeping with the big redhead he'd thought about asking to dance. There was a time when he would have fought a man over a woman. Now he'll settle for a spot along the river where he can polish off the bottle tucked beneath the seat and sleep the rest of the night in his truck. Tomorrow will come soon enough.

He opens the kitchen door and Mamma is standing before the sink filled with dirty dishes; wearing a pair of his socks and a faded housecoat, she's scraping leftovers from her good frying pan. The house smells like the grits she's let cook over. She turns toward the sound of the door dragging across the warped floor boards. "Thank God, you're home. Jake's in bad trouble with the law."

Crossing the kitchen to sit at the table, he notices the perfect circle burned around the eye of the stove and thinks that she can give even the old stove a black eye. He listens while she tells him how it always tears her up for the law to come knocking on her door, and that somehow this time was worse. The whole time she's talking, she's slicing lumps of cold margarine and placing three each on two butt-end slices of week-old white bread. Sliding the blackened pan of bread, wearing two buttered eyes and nose, and no mouth into the oven, she turns to reheat the coffee.

"I was up and down all night with these darn knees," she says, reaching for the Goody's next to the salt and pepper in the center of the table. She pops three tablets in her mouth and washes them down with black coffee. She eats pain killers, he thinks, like a kid eating Cracker Jacks.

Watching her scoop lard from the coffee can that sits in a permanent grease ring on the stove top, he asks, "Just what's he done that's so bad?"

"Oh, Lord, he's gone beyond the school this time. If you'd been here, you could've heard it straight from the nice officer."

Rob starts to say something about the young girl in the patrol car, but keeps still. While she talks about Jake's past problems with teachers, Rob's distracted by an army of ants crossing the kitchen floor, marching single-file up the table leg and onto the red-checked oil cloth, carrying crumbs twice their size.

"Ain't you carrying me to the IGA?" she says, plopping two eggs into the hot grease, their whites spitting and curling, turning brown and brittle around the edges. He'd forgotten, but he wishes she wouldn't make it sound like he's gone back on his word when he's the one sitting in her kitchen and it's her who's not ready to go. He hates the thought of being shut up in the truck with her for the time it will take, listening to her talk about Jake and how he's not turning out good, but he nods yes anyway, knowing there's no way out short of a fight.

She pushes aside packages of zinnia seeds, a pile of junk mail, and a copy of the *Upper Room*, to make a space at the table. "Here," she says, setting the food in front of him. "Eat this while I get ready. I'll tell you the rest on the way to town."

Rob pours himself a cup of coffee that looks like it's got motor oil floating on top. He hunts the sugar jar and remembers not to use spoiled milk from the carton in the refrigerator. Sitting back at the table, he looks at the plate and a cold lump of grits has fallen over the edge, forming a bridge to the oil cloth. He pushes aside the food and lights his last cigarette.

The house is quiet except for the dripping of the faucet he's meant to buy a washer for and fix and the low hum of the TV in the front room. The voices of strangers, even those from the TV, can make him jumpy. Listening to Jake's giggling, he tries to remember his son's age. He's a runt, but even so he must be twelve. He'd played Little League for two summers, or maybe it was only last summer. Rob had run into this guy who claimed to be Jake's coach. He'd said Jake wasn't much of a player, that he rode the pine unless the team got a big jump on the other team.

Rob refills his cup and makes out a LOTTO jingle coming from the TV. It reminds him of the stranger he met last night. There were drinking beers and watching the redhead work her stuff on every man in the joint, when the subject of cockfighting came up. It used to be big around here before dope beat it out. But it's still big in Tennessee where this guy comes from, and he figures it could be big again if there was somebody hustling it.

Rob admits to not knowing a thing about gamecocks: Breeding, raising, or fighting them, but he likes the sound of it. He says, "cock-

fighting in Sopchoppy,” over and over to himself, and he starts to feel lucky, like when he’s just happened on a woman who didn’t think enough of it not to go down easy. Maybe he’ll look the guy up, see what’s what.

He wonders if Jake has gotten any better at baseball. He never had. Maybe playing ball is covered under the rule. Mamma’s always preaching, the one about how a father’s sins are visited on his sons. With her, he’s never sure what part is Bible and what part is made up to suit her argument. Except for his mamma, nobody along the river had ever figured his old man for anything but a drunkard in dirty overalls. But to hear her talk you’d think Papa had worn a three-piece suit with deep pockets that jingled and walked a chalk line straight through the Pearly Gates without so much as a backward glance. Could be that the longer a man’s in the grave, the less his sins get talked about.

When she’d ready he helps her down the rickety back steps and they don’t make it to the truck before he hears again how he never fixes up around the place and how they’re looking more trifling than poor. When they leave the dirt road and pull onto the highway, he asks, “What’s the rest of the story?”

“The officer said Jake’s been plundering at that house next door. They got their screens punched out, shed door kicked in, and somebody smoked.”

“In the shed?”

“Yeah. Jake said it was Joe and Estelle’s oldest.”

“Then who said it was Jake? Them lawyer ladies?”

“They ain’t both lawyers. The little one’s something else, like a lawyer, but—”

“Okay, what else?”

“Didn’t neither of them mention Jake to the law. It was the boy who stays summers at that big vacation house up river.”

“Damn city folks don’t know nothing but to call the law,” Rob says, jerking the steering wheel hard to the right, banging the front wheel against the curb in front of the IGA.

“Son,” she says, wearing the same face she’d worn when it had been his daddy she’d tried explaining. “I tell Jake he’s lucky to even have a daddy after what you musta went through.”

She pulls herself out of the truck and the smell of Mentholatum lingers after she closes the door. Her heavy buttocks quiver as she shifts her weight, stepping cautiously over the curb, pain from her knees showing in her pace. Reaching the door of the store, she slowly turns and calls back to him, "Son, you want something special?"

When they start back, she says, "Jake's hurt you ain't seen him play. He got on base this last game. But you know it ain't me he wants there to brag on him."

He doesn't remember promising to go to any games. Maybe he'd said he would think about it. That's all. Funny, but he can't remember the team's mascot or what position Jake plays.

"You know he turned thirteen last month. He won't pay me a bit of mind. Told him plenty times to stay away from next door."

God, he wishes she'd stop saying he knows. Thirteen? The boy's thirteen. Had there been a cake or something? Had she reminded him and he'd forgotten? Last month he'd worked construction on St. George Island and stayed with a woman he knew there.

He's been the kid's father for thirteen years, and nothing has ever come of it for either of them. He remembers clearest those things that happened before Nam. She'd sat in the car holding a whimpering Jake wrapped in a blue blanket while he and Mary Alice stood off from the others gathered in tight anxious pairs or small family groups on the bus-terminal platform. He and Mary Alice had held each other, and she'd cried until he'd promised to come back the same as she remembered him.

Mary Alice and Jake had stayed with his mamma. After he returned, they stayed on while he tried straightening himself up. Mary Alice worked as a maid at one of the cheap motels on the beach and he did odd jobs. At first she was patient, saying she believed he would turn whiskey and dope loose when he'd had enough time to forget whatever it was that made him afraid to sleep at night. When she realized time wasn't the answer, and after he'd signed himself out of the VA hospital for the third time, she left, agreeing to leave four-year-old Jake with his grandmother.

Rob sets the last bag on the kitchen floor and turns to his mamma.

She drops heavily onto a chair, rubbing her knees and wiping sweat from her face with the tail of her dress.

“Where’s Jake?”

“Right where we left him. Looking at TV. Here, I promised him these cookies.”

The shades are pulled and the room is nearly dark except for the light from the TV. Jake’s lying on the sofa that’s his bed by night, a pillow wadded beneath his head. Cartoon characters flicker across the rolling screen and the room smells of soggy Cheerios. From the doorway, Rob studies Jake. He’s struck by how much the boy looks like Mary Alice. Both are willowy, with probing black eyes and features that look as though they were drawn with a fine dark point. Rob thinks Jake’s eyes are probably like hers. She had a way of seeing through him that could make him feel he was crouched beneath a glaring light, the ugliest of truths oozing from every pore of his skin.

He doesn’t know what to say, but he goes to sit on the edge of the sofa, and hopes that by being there the right words will come. Jake watches, pretending not to, and Rob hands him the bag of cookies. “Here,” he says, the thought of something sweet pushing bile into his throat. “Why’re you wasting time, looking at that mess?” It’s not what he wanted to say, and his tone isn’t right for what he had hoped he would say.

“Got nothing better to do,” Jake says, dismissing him with the set of his narrow shoulders.

“You could be practicing,” Rob says, trying to put interest in his voice.

“Oh, yeah? You fixing to show me how to throw and catch at the same time?”

“Sure. Throw it up on the damn roof and catch it before it hits the ground. Coach will play you in the outfield when you can catch little pop-ups and fly balls.”

“How do you know so much?”

Rob tries hard to grin, “Maybe getting stuck in the outfield runs in the family.”

Jake turns and there’s an intensity in his eyes that drives Rob to his feet. Standing awkwardly between Jake and Spider Man, Rob says,

“You damn right. I could show you a few tricks. And if it’s you doing that meanness next door, I want you to quit it.”

His tone stirs him and he turns, walking out of the room, past his mamma who has come to listen from the doorway. She reaches, clinging to his forearm. He turns toward her and her eyes say she’s satisfied that he tried. “Oh Rob, don’t you know, things could be right if you’d quit killing yourself with dope and whiskey.”

He believes she means to be honest and he’s grateful that she called what he does what it is; hanging from the end of his own rope a little bit at a time.

“Wait, Daddy,” Jake yells after Rob, as he crosses the yard and gets into his truck. “Ain’t you going to show me them tricks?” Hurrying past his grandmother, he jumps off the stoop, and runs through a patch of sandspurs to stand, straddling the grassy hump in the middle of the lane.

Rob slows the truck, hangs out the window and says, “I can’t. I got business to see about.”

“But you promised,” Jake cries.

When Rob doesn’t look at him, and continues driving toward the road, Jake runs after him, shouting, “You’re a rotten liar. You don’t know no tricks,” tears streaking down his face.

Rob drives slowly away, and when he glances back, Jake has turned back toward the house, walking on the sides of his feet.

At Tiny’s the boys laugh and tell him he’s too damn late. The man he’s asking about pulled out this morning with the redhead riding beside him, her hand resting on his thigh. Nothing to do but leave, so he grinds the truck into first, pops the clutch and drives away, thinking that those fighting cocks might have meant something.

He drives around in the national forest until after dark, a bottle of Old Crow riding on the seat next to him. He parks on a bluff overlooking the river and kills the engine and headlights. He sits, listening to the sounds of the river lapping against tangled roots and twisted limbs along its bank. He’s never left the river for long at a time. He’s seen it swollen out of its banks by rains, pinched thin by drought, and snatched back and forth by endless tides. In the end, it spills itself into salty marches, where it ceases to be a river.

From the darkness beyond the front of the truck, he hears the high-pitched whistle of a snared rabbit and his eyes stretch wide with their own horror. The face of a slender Vietnamese woman flashes in the space behind his eyes and his M-16 explodes, disemboweling her into his outstretched hands. An old woman crouches on the edge of the flashing light, a baby in her arms. There is his sergeant, dragging him away, and a second round of firing.

He takes the plastic bag from behind the seat and drops to the ground on his knees.

He watches starlight prick silvery holes in the Spanish moss overhead, and his mind drifts, flattening shapes, distorting sounds, confusing times, and the slender young woman cradles him in her arms, smiling down at him.