

Ken Siewert

Coffee in a Styrofoam Cup

It's Sunday morning and I scrounge through the kitchen looking for something to eat. He is up and sitting in the big green chair and Grandma has already gone to work. She opens up the cafe every Sunday. Monday is her day off and she does the washing on the old ring washer on the back porch. God, she cusses my blue jeans and his overalls. Once she got her arm stuck in the ringer and she probably would have killed him if she could have got loose, him standing there laughing and all. Sunday is his day off, her being gone, and when he ain't feeling to bad we go to the chicken fights. I got me two fine roosters and I made tote boxes for them in wood shop at school. Teacher wanted me to make something pretty like a cedar chest, but I just hunted up some plywood from the woodpile behind the house and them chicken boxes didn't cost nothing except for the hinges.

About the only thing I can find to eat is corn flakes, so I open up the refrigerator and smell the milk. I got in the habit of smelling milk before I drink it, especially around this house. Sometimes it smells sour, but it isn't, so I take just a bit on the end of my tongue to make sure. It only takes two or three times of spitting a big mouth full of sour milk all over yourself before you

get in the habit of smelling milk. The milk's just fine, but I wish I had a banana. I like bananas in my breakfast food.

I take my bowl into the front room and sit down on the couch across from him. He has a cigarette kind of dangling from his mouth and he's just sort of staring off into space. I eat my cereal and try to figure out what kind of mood he's in. He looks kind of skinny sitting there in his underwear with his game leg stuck out in front of him. He bends down and reaches between the floor and the bottom of the chair and wiggles his fingers until he feels the neck of the bottle. When he sits up his face is red and the big old scar on his hip is real white from the effort.

"Don't tell Gramma I got this," he says as he unscrews the cap. "Nothing like a little snort in the morning to clear the phlegm from your throat. Here you want one?"

"No thanks. It don't go good with corn flakes."

"Well," he says, "It goes real good with milk. When I had my ulcer the only way I could drink was with milk. You just have to remember to add the whiskey to the milk because if you pour the milk in the whiskey it'll curdle and look kind of like cottage cheese. I'm going to the cock fights today, you want to ride along."

I never tell Grandma about his bottles, but then she finds them all over the house anyway, just like I do. When I find one of his bottles in a strange place I steal it. He doesn't know whether Grandma found it and poured it out, whether he drank it, or if I got it. He don't bother to ask anymore. He just sort of grumbles about everybody lying to him. It don't matter much though. If he can't find something around the house to drink he will just go to town and buy another bottle. Grandma don't give him any money, but he gets a little pension from the Army for his leg and when that runs out he just steals a little from her purse now and then.

Hank spends a lot of time sitting in that chair. It's a cloth chair, but the arm rests are so slick from car grease and spilled gravy that they look almost like leather. His knuckles get white and his

biceps flex up real big as he gets to rocking in the chair working up the momentum to stand up. It's real funny to watch him do it when he's drunk. Sometimes he don't get enough momentum going and he falls back down in the chair and has to get started all over again. Or he over does it and he pops from the chair and his legs get to hopping and scurrying trying to keep up with his body.

Hank hobbles through the kitchen to the back bedroom to get dressed. I get up and open the front door to go get my roosters. It's a fine spring morning. The sun is warm on my back and the breeze is cool and stirring up the apple and pear blossoms. It smells real sweet. By the time I chase down my birds and put them in their little boxes Hank is waiting for me in the Chevy. I put my chickens in the back seat and he don't say nothing, but I know he don't like me taking them to the fights. I don't think he likes my chickens riding in his car.

Hank likes nice cars. He says his Impala is almost as good as a Cadillac. He has a little thing mounted on the dash for driving at night that makes the lights dim automatically when another car comes. Sometimes when he gets too drunk he lets me drive. I ain't legal yet, but I drive real good. He has a fresh fifth of whiskey in a paper bag between his legs. Hank don't go nowhere unless he's got cigarettes and at least a pint. I like to watch him drive. His face gets real serious and he has all these holes on the back of his neck that just fascinate me. He got all those holes in the back of his neck when he was a kid. He had this boil and the doctor lanced it when it was too green and it turned into a bunch of little boils and they left all them holes. That was real useful information cause I had a string of boils all last summer. I had one on my face next to my nose and damn if it didn't look like I had two noses for a while. Anyway I let it get real ripe and then I pulled the core myself instead of going to the doctor. This guy I worked with last summer on the turkey farm told me to go out and buy some raisins and keep eating them and my boils would go away and sure enough they did. So I told

him about this big seed wart on my hand and he told me to put a dish of vinegar in the window sill and every time I walked by to put a little dab on my wart. So I did that too. One day I went to put some vinegar on my wart and the dish was dry and so I looked down at my wart and it was gone. I didn't like that guy very much but he was about the smartest guy I know.

Anyway, Hank don't never talk about his hip so one day when he was kind of in a good mood and kind of drunk I just asked him. He told me he was wounded in the war in some place called Bastogne, in Europe. The Germans had him surrounded but him and his men didn't give up. He said he was a lieutenant because he got a battlefield commission, but he didn't like it much. He said he was real lucky because out of a company of fifty men there was only eight of them alive when it was all over. Then he got real quiet and wouldn't talk about it anymore. When he did start talking again he told me all about Paris. Hank likes women a lot, but he said in Paris he got real tired of women. He told me how they would come up and sit down beside him and try to get him interested. He said if he ignored them they would reach over and grab his crotch and he would just have to follow them home. He said he had to be careful though sometimes the women would have three or four big French men waiting there to take his money. He said he got to where he didn't even like to go to the Paris taverns anymore. I can't imagine Hank not wanting to go to a bar. Anyway one of these days I'm going to Paris and Bastogne.

We're getting real close. Hank's driving real slow and I'm looking for an old brown gunny sack thrown over a mailbox or fence post. He looks kind of funny when he drives with the seat way back for his leg and he leans forward to peer out the window. Everyone knows that a gunny sack on a mailbox on a Sunday means there's a chicken fight here. Even the police know. When they need a little money they drive out here and collect some of the fee for themselves and if they don't get paid somebody goes to jail. I ain't

never been in jail, but Hank has. He gets to drinking sometimes and gets real mean. The Army paratroopers taught him how to fight and I saw him thump on three men at one time with a short little stick. I thought all three of them were going to cry. He ain't never laid a hand on me and he's only beat grandma two or three times. Not real bad mind you, except maybe once when her face swelled up kind of round and she took to wearing dark glasses for a while. Everyone knew why she was wearing dark glasses. I don't know why she bothered.

Hank and I both see the gunny sack at the same time and he turns down the driveway and parks by the barn. My chickens rustle in their boxes a little bit as I take them out of the back seat. Hank tucks his bottle in his shirt under his coat. Not that they care about him bringing in a bottle, he just don't like to share much. Hank don't have no chickens—he comes to the chicken fights to bet, drink, and sometimes for the women. He just got his check so he's got lots of money. I got a few dollars from picking strawberries and I bet a little, but I come here because I like to watch the chickens fight. I know Hank is in a real good mood cause he paid a dollar at the door for me to get in.

On the outside this barn looks like any other barn but on the inside they got it fixed up nice. They got bleachers all along one wall, three fenced fighting pits and even a little place off in one corner where they're selling coffee and hamburgers. I know the girl who is cooking food cause she goes to school the same place I do. She is real popular and too good to talk to me. She saw me but she won't look me in the eye. I go up to her and buy a cup of coffee right off the bat. She asks me if I want cream and sugar. I tell her I'll drink it black. Coffee is real bitter stuff and at home I put lots of cream and sugar in it, but I don't want her to know that. I had this thought that if you put enough sugar on anything it would taste good and that worked o.k. with coffee. When Hank had his ulcer grandma did a lot of cooking with curry powder. I swear I believe a pinch of curry

will taint a hole bag of white sugar.

Someone has eased up behind me and grabbed my ear, scared me so much that I jumped and spilled half my coffee on the sleeve of my shirt. With my free hand I reach up and feel the cold steal hook of an artificial hand pinching my ear. My ear hurts, the hot coffee on my arm hurts and the touch of cold smooth steal in my hand makes me feel like I have a snake crawling up my back. Elmo's been doing that to me every since I was a kid. Once he found out his hooks scared me he was always sneaking up. I don't like him much and I think he feels the same way about me. When I was real young and would sit and wait for grandma to close up the cafe, he would torment me to tears, snapping his claws and swinging them back and forth like a crab. He was kind of sweet on grandma. They were neighbors when they were kids and they use to play together. One night he was being real mean and I told grandma he scared me and she told me he scared her too and then she got angry and called him fool and he hasn't forgiven me since. For a long time I thought he was some kind of pirate like in the movies, but grandma told me he lost both his arms when he was a young man working in the saw mill ripping green lumber. The saw took both his arms off above the elbows. She said he was about my age when it happened. People used to do a lot of things a whole lot younger back then. As soon as he let go I spin around and gave him such a glare it would make the hackle feathers of a chicken stand on end. He just smiles and without saying a word turns around and walks off.

I walk to the back of the barn to throw my coffee away and find a place to wash my hands. I think I'll keep the cup though. It's real neat and white and your fingers don't burn. I go around by the back door looking for the bathrooms just in time to see Hank, arm in arm with some woman and his bottle leaving for one of the little cabins out back were the field help stays. Hank is a real ladies man. He has a pretty face with soft brown eyes and a little nose. I don't know what he tells them, but damn he can make the women laugh,

except maybe for grandma, but then she don't laugh much. Grandma said he was real handsome in his uniform with shiny black boots and black hair and little ribbons on his chest. Once I asked her why she married him and she said because she felt sorry for him. It made her cry so I didn't ask her what she meant. I never tell grandma about the other women, but then she knows about them anyway, just like she always knows when he's got a bottle. It used to make her real mad but now the only time it makes her mad is when one of the other women come up to her and tell her about it. The first time that happened she came home and tore into him like a she devil. That's the only time I ever seen Hank lose a fight. Every once in a while he tells somebody about that fight and his face lights up and he seems to get real happy.

I'm getting kind of hungry so I think I'll go have miss popular make me a hamburger. I've caught her looking at me a couple times, kind of glancing out the corner of her eye. I know it just galls her that I got something on her. Gossip spreads real fast at school and popular girls don't cook hamburgers at the cock fights. She sees me coming and she looks the other way hoping maybe I'll disappear. I get a real pleasure knowing she's got to fix me a hamburger, so I ask for everything on it, lettuce and tomato, cheese, mayonnaise, catsup and pickle. I hate dill pickle but I figure I can pick them out and throw them away when I get some place where she can't see me. She does a real good job and wraps it all up real pretty and gives it to me with a smile. I tell her I won't tell nobody at school that I saw her here. I thought that would make her happy, but she just gets this funny look on her face and her smile goes away. I don't know what to say next and my face starts to get real hot so I leave.

It just as well that I leave because they're starting up the first chicken fight. It must be about eleven o'clock. The sun has come up a little and it's starting to filter down through the spaces between the shingles on the roof of the barn. The little streaks of

light make the dust in the air sparkle and every once in a while someone will exhale a plume of smoke and the color of it'll change from foggy grey to a bright blue as it passed through one of the little beams. The bleachers have gotten real full. The men with the first two chickens that are going to fight stand up on potato boxes and start taking bets. One of the two men standing there has a fist full of money and he's yelling and screaming like a regular Sunday school preacher and his deacon is right next to him writing names and taking odds. I don't think I've ever seen or heard of so much money before in my life. I got caught up in the excitement myself and decided to make a two dollar bet. The scribe don't want to write it down in his little book, but I don't feel like it's official unless he does. He can either stand there and argue with me or he can write it down and get on with his business. So he writes it down but the thing that irritates me is that I bet on a chicken I don't even know.

There is a lot to know about chicken fighting. Right off the bat you got to know what kind of strike they got. If they got a long strike you got to put short spurs on them. If they got a short strike you got to put long spurs on them. The reason is if you put short spurs on a short strike chicken the most he will do is fluff the feathers of his opponent. If you put long spurs on a long strike chicken he'll drive them spurs all the way through the other chicken and most likely get tangled up because he can't pull the spurs out. Meanwhile the other chicken just keeps on hitting and punching him full of holes until he hits something vital. The first chicken to die loses. They'll leave two wounded chickens in a fighting ring all day if need be until one of them dies.

The men that were on top of the potato boxes climb down and enter the fighting pit with the first two chickens. Their seconds put the spurs on while the owners pet their roosters. The ground in the ring is real hard and kind of damp like clay. You can sweep it just like concrete and when it gets warm it makes a fine white powder that takes to the air when the chickens start fighting. One

of the chickens is white and the other's brown. The white one is a little bigger but that don't mean much. The two men start pulling on the chickens heads to make them mad and then they put them real close and let the chickens peck at each other for awhile. When they get the chickens all worked up they just back up and let them loose. Both chickens stretch their necks out real far and get real sleek like an airplane and they spread their hackles so their necks look as big as their bodies. The brown rooster is real fast and moves across the ring and is in the air before the white one. The brown chicken jumps up and tucks his feet in and gives a good kick and catches the white chicken square in the breast with both spurs. The brown one kind of does an awkward sommersault and lands on his feet. The white chicken lands on his side and he doesn't get up.

Chickens aren't real smart and men can trick them real easy. Any old chicken around the barn yard will fight and collect his hens, but when they fight they ain't doing it to kill. Sure, they get bruised a little, but mostly just scared off by the stronger chicken. Once they've been fitted with spurs the fighting is for keeps. The trouble is they just don't know it. Once or twice during the day they have slasher fights. Slashers are like razor blades about six inches long. Slasher fights go real fast, four or five minutes and both chickens bleed to death. I saw a man once get hit by his own chicken with a slasher. It cut all the tendons in his arm and he walks around to this day with is left hand all curled up in a ball.

They ain't a whole lot more to chicken fights than that. I don't know what there is about them, but I can sit all day and marvel at them. Each bird is a little bit different, he fights a little different, he dies a little different, and every once in a while one will do something you ain't never seen before.

There is a big commotion going on by the back door. I know what it is. When Hank gets real drunk he can't make his bad leg work and he falls down a lot. He won't let a stranger help him up. If they try, he gets real mad and starts yelling at them to leave

him alone. I got to go back and pick him up and help him out to the car. He'll be o.k. after he sleeps for awhile.

I was right. He's laying there in a big pile on the floor with his leg sticking out. As soon as he sees me he gets this big smile on his face and gives me his hand. I get him up and he puts his arm around my shoulder and I start walking him to the door. I wouldn't mind so much, except when he gets drunk he calls me son and then he'll start singing. I don't know what he's singing about because his words get real funny when he's drunk. Miss Popular is watching me and Hank and she's got a big smile on her face. Shit, she ain't got nothing on me, everybody knows he's a drunk. I ain't his son but I still ain't going to leave him in a pile on the floor. It's not my fault he's a drunk and not my fault I got to live with him.

I lied when I told you I had two real good fighting roosters. At the end of the day I take a gunny sack and go out behind the barn and fill it with dead chickens from a fifty gallon barrel and take them home and pluck them and clean them up to eat. So far I found two that were still alive and I nursed them back to health. One of them chickens is a blinker. He's blind on one side and ain't no good for fighting. The other's got a game leg kind of like Hank. I wrote my name on my chicken boxes and I carry them here just like everybody else. I built a little door on the top of my chicken boxes so I can open it up. Those roosters like to stick their heads through the openings and look around. I don't have enough money to buy a good rooster, but one of these days I'll buy me a hen and raise me a whole bunch of fighting cocks and they will be real good because their daddies are survivors. That's what counts in chicken fighting.