

# Los Angeles Times

December 5, 1999

## The Sport of Exiles

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Down a fraying stretch of Wilmington Avenue, somewhere between Watts and Compton, past liquor marts and storefront churches and the spray-painted threats of Crips and Bloods, there is a corral.

It is hidden from the street, behind a weathered Depression-era bungalow, up the driveway, through a chain-link fence, then another padlocked gate. Pavement gives way to dirt, thick with dung and feathers. A life-size poster of two barely clad Bud girls, nailed to a plywood wall, says: "Let's Fiesta!"

What comes next is pure Mexican country, adapted to inner-city Los Angeles — a labyrinth of rusty pipes and patio awnings, snaking down tarp-covered alleys and into a network of rickety chambers, each filled with roosters, more than 150 in all. It is the chicken coop of an urban cockfighter, the refuge of Tony and Miguel.

Arriving for today's match in his '67 Camaro, Tony lumbers across the dust, cracking open a beer. Outside the corral, he is a high-school teacher, addressed as Mister. But crossing this threshold, he becomes El Gallo, the Rooster himself, a swashbuckling fixture of L.A.'s cockfighting underground. He is built massively, like the nose guard he once was, though at 40 his belt is concealed by the folds of his belly. A gold medallion hangs from his neck; it is in the shape of his prized bird, a seven-time winner, which earned him more than \$9,000 until its death.

Miguel is already here, prepping for this midsummer *corralera*, the sort of backyard duel that occurs almost every weekend, dozens of times, across Southern California. He is 27 and balding, a warehouse clerk for a record-store chain, leaner and less assuming than his partner. If Tony is the bankroll, Miguel is the yeoman, up before sunrise in his red Aztec poncho to feed and water the animals; as a boy, he did the same for one of the most revered cockfighters in Mexico.

While Tony fusses with his cell phone and beeper, Miguel rinses out a syringe in an empty detergent bucket. He fills it with Cyanocobalamin, a B-12 cocktail. They are surrounded by a squadron of poultry — Laceys, Kelsos, McLeans, Roundheads, Johnnie Jumpers — each in a separate cage to keep it from attacking its own brood. Miguel finds the bird he is looking for. It is missing an eye. He cradles the animal in the crook of his arm, stroking its neck, then pokes its breast with the needle.

"I don't know why you're wasting your time with that junky old chicken," Tony says.

Miguel shrugs. "To be a *gallero*, you have to follow your heart."

The shadows have disappeared on this Saturday in July, the only shade coming from a lone persimmon tree. It is hot and dry and flat, as close to a ranch as you can get in the hood. Tony hoses down the dust. Today's fight, it turns out, will be his and Miguel's last of the 1999 season – a year of uncertainty, of changes both political and personal, leaving them at a crossroads from which they have yet to break free.

**I**llegal, improvised, all but invisible, the cockfight is thriving in Los Angeles, nowhere more so than in the concrete snarl of the central city. The last time the sport was this popular, California was a Mexican province and roosters sparred after Mass near the Plaza, next to what is now Olvera Street.

Tens of thousands of cockfighters – breeders and trainers, cutlers and pit masters, impresarios and bookmakers – are doing business in metropolitan L.A., hatching and dispatching hundreds of thousands of roosters a year. The most obvious sign of their presence is the proliferation of feed stores; in a 4-square-mile corner of South-Central, there are at least seven such outlets, including a granary Tony once owned, selling tons of gamecock mix every week.

During the season, which runs from Thanksgiving to late summer, the fighting is everywhere: a tent in East L.A., a junkyard in San Pedro, a garage insulated with egg crates in Inglewood. It can be as casual as two guys on a patio, \$50 and a case of beer on the line. Or it can be as edgy as a round-robin derby in an abandoned warehouse, with a crowd of hundreds, not all good losers, battling over a \$20,000 jackpot. On a June afternoon in El Sereno, one cockfighter fled with his winnings rather than risk a rematch with a cocaine-snorting playboy known as El Bigotes (Mr. Mustache). The next month, at an 8 a.m. fight in Watts that featured the roosters of El Pelucas (the Wig Man), everyone was treated to a free breakfast of cucumbers – picked fresh from the host's garden.

In most of America, cockfighting tends to be a good-ol'-boy affair, white, rural, isolated. But not in Los Angeles. There are asphalt grids where dawn is a symphony of barnyard cries; working-class cottages where the gamy waft of fowl hangs like smog. To enter is to rediscover the pockets of raw frontier that survive in the shadow of downtown, a parallel world, hidden from the mainstream's view by only a fraction of degrees. For while cockfighting here may be covert, it is not a secret: not for the modern-day descendants of El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora, mostly *mexicanos* like Miguel and Tony, but also Filipinos, Cubans, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Chinese, Vietnamese and Hmong – exiles from agrarian nations, re-creating the rhythms of their homeland in the great futuristic sprawl.

"If you had the choice, of course, the city would not be the best place to do this," says Ramon Abreu, who heads the Southern California chapter of the Assn. for the Preservation of Gamefowl. "But this is something so deeply rooted in culture and tradition. It's in people's blood. It's a part of who they are. That's why they will be fighting chickens here forever: they have to, to be who they need to be."

For anyone not born of that culture, the idea of two roosters battling to the death is likely to seem alien, if not indefensible. Only three U.S. states now permit cockfighting, down from five a year ago. Oklahoma—one of the holdouts, along with Louisiana and New Mexico—is facing an initiative to have it outlawed by 2000. Congress is weighing a bill that would ban the transport of gamecocks across state lines, even to states in which cockfighting is legal.

Some critics lament the plight of the animal, others decry the vices of the crowd. But in the end, the question is really one of human evolution—whether, in this day and age, civilization has tamed, or should have by now, mankind’s appetite for combat. In the language of the animal-rights movement, the cockfighter is a kind of bloodthirsty retrograde, a “cockamaniac” or a “crow-magnon.” For the cockfighter, history is its own validation, a 3,000-year-old ritual that unites Socrates and Henry VIII and George Washington. Depending on one’s perspective, our society has become either more enlightened or more squeamish; the cockfight an abhorrent relic or a timeless art.

“Why go through all the trouble of raising them if you’re not going to fight them?” says Miguel, who considers himself the protector, rather than the executioner, of a fowl that might otherwise die out. He is reaching into the bucket again, scooping a handful of murky water into his mouth. He draws the bird close. He purses his lips and blows out a cloud of mist, first into the rooster’s face, then into its rear, a cornerman cooling his prizefighter.

The cock is a two-time winner, a brown Hatch with a shaggy blond mane, a breed known in Spanish as a *giro*—as in El Gallo Giro, the L.A. taco chain. Its crest and wattles have been trimmed, the better to evade a rival’s bite. Its right eye, though, has not fared so well, pecked clean the last time out. Tony had wanted to kill it. Instead, Miguel sought out another wounded rooster. In a fair matchup, he reasoned, his animal might yet prevail—and should it happen to die, as one surely will this afternoon, at least it will have died in battle.

“These creatures are like my own kids,” he says. “I choose their parents. I raise them from eggs. I feed them and care for them all their lives. When I put them to fight—knowing that they’ll fight until their last drop of blood, knowing that they’ll do it for me—well, that’s why I do it . . .

“With Tony, if the stakes aren’t high enough, it’s not worth his trouble. But I’d fight my roosters for free.”

**W**hen they discovered the property last year, a dozen miles from the city’s skyline, it was nothing but brush and junk. Tony and Miguel rented a bulldozer, razing the lot to a bare acre of dirt.

Piece by piece, they began reassembling: cinder blocks, twine, cardboard, burglar bars. They shoveled in fresh earth, donated by a friend who excavates swimming pools. They hauled cages from Tijuana and made perches out of broom handles. They mounted a hand-cranked mill for grinding feed and plugged in a mini-fridge, stocking it with a

vet's arsenal of antibiotics and stimulants. Then they shielded it all behind 8-foot-tall walls, jury-rigged from garage doors, still etched with old addresses.

Rent is \$325 a month, but Tony and Miguel have managed to recoup their investment, even turn a profit, by expanding the corral and offering parcels for sublease. One of their tenants, Pepe, is here today. He is a novice, early 20s, unemployed, name tattooed on his hand – the perfect cockfighter to answer Miguel's challenge. He disappears into his own makeshift hut, emerging a few minutes later with a molten red bird, the tip of its beak cracked off.

The stakes are \$100 – and bragging rights for as long as the winner chooses.

"Mickey Mouse," mutters Tony.

If it were up to him, he would be at Copper State or Neighbors, the nearest Arizona pits, clustered just across the Colorado River. In seasons past, Tony headed out at least once a month, the cockfighter's equivalent of a road trip to Vegas – high stakes and quality birds, without the threat of a bust. But last year, Arizona voted to outlaw the sport. Tony plunged into a funk. It is not a crime to own a gamecock in California, but it is a misdemeanor to fight one, to own one for the purpose of fighting and to be a spectator at a fight. For the right price, Tony will take that risk, but not for this everyday contest, even if Miguel sees something profound.

"If the day ever came when this was made legal, I'd sell everything I owned and put up a real pit," Tony says. "Man, that would make you a millionaire."

Ballads of borderland outlaws spill from a radio. Dung beetles buzz over the pens. Nearly a dozen people are gathering, most of them kids. Pepe's son is here. So is Tony's. And so is Miguel's. Today is his seventh birthday; the *giro*, in fact, belongs to him.

Tony is uncomfortable bringing children – and insists he would not have, if this had been something other than a match among friends – but Miguel never hesitates. He believes that the corral instills discipline and patience, that a youngster who feels the pulse of a fuzzy chick – and nurtures it into a plumed gladiator – earns a respect for life and death. "I'm teaching him everything I know," he says.

What Miguel knows about cockfighting is considerable, given his own childhood in the ranchlands of Jalisco, the Pacific coast state that has bestowed Mexico with tequila and mariachis. When he was 11, he began working for Sergio Corona Blake, a mythic figure with a corral of some 5,000 roosters; Blake makes a cameo in "*La Muerte De Un Gallero*," a classic '70s Western about a dishonorable cockfighter slashed to death by a rival's bird. Miguel came here a decade ago but is still more of that world than of this one, proud, dreamy, poetic. He would like nothing better than to show off his roosters in Mexico someday, returning triumphantly to the *palenques*, the county fairs that have turned cockfighters into folk heroes.

“Here in L.A., I try to do the best I can, you know, considering the conditions I have to work under,” he says. “But if I had stayed in Mexico . . . how lovely! . . . Just think of where I’d be by now.”

Tony makes this an odd couple, anxiety and guilt lurking just behind his swagger. Although most of his family is from Jalisco, where his grandfather owned a bullring, Tony was born in Los Angeles, earning a football scholarship at a Catholic high school and graduating with an engineering degree from UCLA. As a teacher, fluent in English, he is more attuned to America’s disapproval of this game, more conflicted by the lure of tainted cash. He keeps a separate bank account for cockfighting expenses—“chicken money,” as his wife scorns it—and has vowed to quit if his roosters ever stop paying for themselves. He has seen too many men lose it all; indeed, he has caused it, taking watches off of opponents’ wrists, car keys out of pockets, paychecks from wallets.

“A lot of people say, ‘Hey, I bet your son’s gonna be just like you,’ and I say, ‘Oh, no, he’s not,’ ” says Tony, who won his first fight at 13, splurging afterward on cheeseburgers. “If I knew for sure that he could control it and have my success, then maybe. But why take the chance? If he ended up like those other guys, lowlifes who play until they have nothing, that would be on my conscience—and then what would I do?”

Tony has quit before, twice. The first time was in 1987, while pitting one of his favorites at a ring in Compton. The rooster suffered only a single blow, but instantly froze, dazed and rigid. Tony thought it had been poisoned. Pistols were pulled, threats flung. “I said, ‘That’s it, I don’t need this.’ I sold everything I had.” Two years later, he was back. “I guess it’s the way people look at you, the way they treat you, the respect, the recognition. When you’re winning, everyone wants to be your friend, you know, like, ‘Hey, Tony, whassup? Buy you a beer?’ ”

The second time was in 1996, just before Christmas. His wife, a computer technician for an L.A.-area school district, had gone shopping at the Carson mall with little Marco Antonio, then just 3. Tony got her frantic call at his feed store; their son was lost. As he sped over, he crossed himself and prayed, promising to make the greatest sacrifice he could imagine: “God, if you return him safely, I won’t fight chickens for an entire year.”

The boy turned up in IKEA. Tony kept his vow.

**I**n Miguel’s hands, the *guro* is a pet, tucked into a plush ball, resting its platinum tresses on his forearm. Its face is a coarse, reptilian red, its eye a lidless disc of orange. Miguel coos, sliding the bird’s beak into his mouth, a soothing balm of saliva.

In one hand, he holds its foot, a scaly, four-digit claw with a bony spur, which juts out of its ankle. In the other, he grips the saw, a straightedge blade he bought at Home Depot. With a few strokes—the equivalent, roughly, of snipping a toenail—he cuts the spur in half. He wraps the stump in moleskin tape. He slips on a chamois bootie, threading the nub through a slot in the leather. Then he unfurls a shop rag, the kind they sell by the box at Pep Boys, revealing a dozen gleaming, razor-sharp sickles—illegal in California,

but available by mail order from just about anywhere. Miguel picks one out and slips it behind his ear, like a cigarette.

Knives are perhaps cockfighting's greatest sticking point, the man-made implement that ensures a slaughter. Although roosters can peck each other raw, they deliver their deadliest blows with their feet, leaping into the air and kicking forward, a rat-a-tat flurry of swats. In early times, the rooster's natural spur was its only weapon, a practice known as "naked heel," still revered by some purists. But spurs often grow unpredictably; in most Western societies, cockfighters defend metal blades as a way of equalizing the odds – and accelerating the inevitable.

"If you didn't put anything on their feet, these roosters would spend hours, maybe days, ripping each other to shreds," says Miguel, who uses a typical Mexican blade, about an inch long and double-edged. "Now that would be cruel."

He balances the knife on the rooster's sawed-off spur so that the blade curves upward from the back of the heel, like a Nike swoosh. With a roll of waxed string, he begins to wrap it tight, joining steel with flesh, his mouth pinched and forehead creased, no small talk. Many skilled cockfighters, who can sound like doctoral candidates when discussing nutrition and genetics, struggle to tie a knife. If it is loose or off-kilter, even a champion rooster becomes an easy mark. A tiny group of freelancers makes a living by tying; Tony knows an *amarador* in Orange County who jets between the U.S. and Mexico, commanding \$1,000 a day, plus expenses. For that price, though, he is expected to also administer first aid, sucking the blood out of a rooster's mouth and oxygenating its wounds with his breath.

Genetically, a gamecock is about as far removed from a barnyard chicken as Secretariat from a pack mule. Descended from the red jungle fowl of India and Southeast Asia, it has been bred over the millennia into a sly predator, five pounds of dense muscle smoldering under an iridescent flutter. A chicken headed for the nugget factory has an average life span of 42 days, mostly in squalid confinement. A rooster headed for the pit usually spends a year or two in training, during which it is maintained like an Olympic athlete. The reason is clear: Chicken sells for a few bucks a pound, but a fighting cock is worth \$150 to \$300. Pedigreed breeders, which are advertised in the national cockfighting magazines – *Feathered Warrior*, *Grit and Steel* – can run as high as a Rolex.

"If I was rich, I'd just stick to roosters and forget about all my hassles, all my bills," says Tony, who once considered going straight and becoming a veterinarian.

Six years ago, still hoping to channel his expertise into something legit, he opened the feed store. He stocked it with sacks of his own recipe, a concoction of 27 grains and extracts, prepared for him by a Buena Park wholesaler, Consolidated Seed & Pet, which offers custom mixing for a one-ton minimum. The exposure helped cement his reputation – Miguel met him this way – but the added pressure took its toll. First came headaches, then chest pains. Tony went to a doctor. "The doctor looked at me and said, 'If you keep this up, you're not going to last a week.'" Before the 1999 cockfighting season, Tony sold his shop.

As he yells at the children to get back, Miguel and Pepe flirt the birds, bringing them face to face. The animals tug and squirm. Their necks uncoil and their feathers expand, tense and erect, poultry transformed into serpent. Many of these traits have become staples of English vernacular: cocky, cocksure, hackles raised, feathers ruffled, plucky, game, unflappable. For generations of anthropologists and poets, they also have become laden with symbolism: religious resurrection, sublimated homoeroticism, self-mythologization, blood sacrifice, catharsis. Yet on a rudimentary level, there is no puzzle; the cockfight boils down to one simple, ancient, masculine impulse: kicking another guy's butt.

"Let's get ready to ru-mmmmm-ble," someone bellows.

Miguel and Pepe slip the scabbards off their knives. They lick their fingers, running them across the blades. From a dozen paces, they release.

The roosters barrel across the dirt. They take flight, collide in midair, tangle, fall, break free, charge again. It is often difficult for the untrained eye to perceive an advantage, even to spot the flashes of steel. Wings and legs and beaks blur together, like chickens in a blender, spinning, flapping, thrashing, spitting out specks of feather and blood.

Miguel crouches, studious, a gold virgin dangling from his neck. Pepe kicks and hollers.

"I took the whole thing like, 'What the hell,' you know, basically meaningless," Tony would say later. "But Pepe, that little punk—he was taking it like a \$1,000 fight."

During one dizzying swirl, the knives get stuck. The roosters flop to the ground, joined and helpless. Pepe and Miguel pull the animals apart, gingerly extracting the blades from their flesh, before setting them back down to finish each other off.

Cockfighting became a crime here in 1905, when lawmakers for California's newly entrenched Anglo population decided the Mexican pastimes of the day, including bullfighting and bearbaiting, could no longer be tolerated. Mexican cockfighters have been getting roused ever since: in the L.A. river bed in the '20s, in an Eastside *colonia* in the '40s, in a Torrance tomato field in the '50s. Armed with a tip that a mammoth derby was underway, sheriff's deputies stormed the American Legion stadium in Montebello on July 4, 1938; instead, they found an indignant crowd of 4,000 Latinos celebrating Independence Day with fandangos and mariachis.

This dance—cop and cockfighter, crime and culture—may have reached its apex a few years ago in Compton, not far from Tony's old feed store. Although the city is renowned as a seat of African American political clout and a beacon of gangsta rap, its population has swung from predominantly black to majority Latino over the last decade. In the process, it became the front lines of L.A.'s rooster wars.

Among the earliest Compton *galleros*, if not the first, was Emilio Becerra, a 69-year-old butcher from Jalisco whose left middle finger is paralyzed, pierced by one of his own birds. In 1985, he stumbled upon Richland Farms, a 10-square-block remnant of

Compton's rural past, where horses still roam the sidewalk-less streets. Encouraged by a zoning code that placed no restrictions on poultry, he invested in an elaborate corral: 60 individual wooden huts, painted red and white, in a courtyard landscaped with roses and bougainvillea. "If I was told I couldn't fight roosters anymore, I'd die the next day," says Becerra, who spends one month at his Lennox meat market, then the next on Mexico's *palenque* circuit, a life that Miguel can only dream of.

Not long after arriving in Richland Farms, Becerra shared his discovery with yet another Jalisco-born butcher, Francisco Ruiz, who owns *carnicerías* across L.A. Ruiz bought a house on the next street over, constructing an even more impressive corral—with a walled perimeter, which he proceeded to paint with portraits of roosters. "It was like a mark, a symbol of the Mexican invasion in Compton," says Abreu, the game fowl lobbyist, whose organization would later help defend the two men.

Because of them, the Compton City Council changed its municipal code, restricting the number of roosters in Richland Farms to six per resident. The cops then raided Becerra, as well as his neighboring gamecock owners, almost all of Mexican descent. But they seemed to reserve a special animosity for Ruiz. Four times between 1991 and 1993, Compton police and L.A. County animal control officers descended on his place. They threw him in a squad car. They condemned his corral and cited him for intent, a tricky allegation to prove without a fight in progress. Each time, the charges were dropped.

Animal-rights activists would like to see cockfighting upgraded to a felony in California, as it is in 19 other states, making enforcement a higher priority. But the last time the Legislature tried that, in 1990, Abreu successfully fought the bill, arguing that such a crackdown would be "more about suppressing a culture than protecting an animal."

During one of the four raids on Ruiz's corral, Compton officers carted off his roosters. A Municipal Court judge gave them back. A year later, the officers seized his roosters again. The judge once more ordered them returned. This time it was too late. The animals, 80 of them, already had been euthanized.

"Can you imagine? They killed my *gallos!*" says Ruiz, who filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against Compton in 1994. He contended that officers singled him out because he was Mexican. The city denied the claim but paid him an undisclosed sum.

**F**or another minute, maybe two, the fight continues. The roosters lunge, slice, spin, tumble, condemned by their own tenacity. Each is bloody, faltering. But Pepe's bird, even with its chipped beak, has given out better than it has taken. It drives one last peck into the head of the half-blind *giro*, slumped on the ground.

Miguel pokes it with a broomstick. Nothing. All afternoon he has been doting on the animal, caressing, nuzzling. Now he picks it up by its feet. He dumps the carcass in a metal garbage can. Pepe, grinning from ear to ear, sizes up his bird. It is alive but leaking badly. He grabs it by the neck and twirls. Victor, like vanquished, ends up in the trash.

Miguel hands him five \$20s. "The first thing a *gallero* needs to know is to know how to lose," he says.

Tony, at the last minute, had decided to gamble on Miguel's rooster, adding another \$50 to the pot. He pays up, fuming. It was bad enough to have stooped to such miserable animals. But now to suffer the lowly Pepe, here on his home turf, gloating with a fistful of cash – that, for El Gallo, is just too much.

"When I don't win, I feel like a vampire – I got that little stake stuck in my chest and I gotta get it out," Tony says.

He tells Miguel to bring another rooster.

"What rooster should I get?" asks Miguel.

"Get any one," Tony barks.

Miguel brings a Lacey, a first-time fighter, not quite a year old. Its feathers are mostly red, but shocks of orange and green and purple burst through the dazzling layers of its coat. Like most of their roosters, it has no name. "I don't want to get too attached to my animals," says Tony. He puts up \$100. Miguel backs him with another \$100. Five-year-old Marco Antonio eyes his father's bird. "He's bad," the boy says. "He's gonna win."

They follow the same ritual – saw, tape, boot, knife, string – only this time Tony is doing the tying. When his reputation is at stake, he takes no chances. "Miguel spends a lot of time with the roosters and maintains them good," Tony says. "But he don't help the animal when it's wounded. We lost a derby once because he didn't suck the blood out of the rooster's neck. Hell, I've even swallowed the blood. Any way I can help them, I will."

Miguel says, "Tony has his bit of fame, but sometimes he thinks he knows more than he does."

Tony's rooster gets in the first blow, and the second and third and fourth. The action is easier to follow this time. Pepe's bird, a *giro*, is getting pummeled even worse than Miguel's in the last round. The Lacey is relentless, leaping and slashing, knocking its opponent backward, stomping and gashing.

"Shoot, baby," Tony growls. "C'mon, finish him off."

The sun is high, the dust rising again, blood soaking into the earth. Only it is not Tony's bird that delivers the denouement. Pepe's *giro*, its breast exposed and feathers soggy, manages to unleash one last, desperate kick. The blade surprises Tony's rooster, spearing it in the back of its thigh. An artery erupts, a red fountain, impossibly bright. The Lacey drops in a puddle, drained of life.

"Damn!" says Tony. "What a lucky son of a bitch."

Pepe scoops up his new champion, holding its wounds tight. He lays it on a table, exploring its chest cavity with his soiled fingers. He pulls out clumps of down, tears off shards of meat. The rooster does not flinch. Pepe sews it up with needle and thread.

Tony takes his loser to the trash. He sets the three animals on fire. A foul black smoke rises from their damp hides.

“Daddy, how come your rooster didn’t win?” asks Marco Antonio.

“Bad luck,” says Tony.

“Fight another,” his son says. “Bet all your money.”

“This is not a good thing, *mijo*.”

Marco Antonio looks confused. “How come you do it, Daddy?”

**I**t is now late summer, the earth brown and hard, the time for roosters to molt. Old feathers are shed, new ones grown, leaving the birds almost too tender to be handled, let alone fought. Not long after the match in the corral, Tony and Miguel decide that their season—for what it is worth—has come to an end.

To be fair, it has not been a typical year. After the Arizona pits were shuttered, Miguel suggested taking their birds to Jalisco, where his cousin—another graduate of the Sergio Corona Blake school—is a professional *gallero*. Since coming to the U.S., Miguel has operated in the shadow of this older relative, vowing to live up to the family name, even if he must do it in a country that disparages his talent. Tony agreed, shipping a dozen roosters to Mexico, but they got drubbed at the first *palenque* in El Grullo, Miguel’s birthplace. Tony accused the cousin of sabotage—of trying to thwart Miguel’s homecoming—which could be true or could be bombast, but which led to harsh words all the way around.

“Sometimes I think I should have stuck to being a vet,” says Tony. His eldest daughter, who is 13, recently announced that she shares the same ambition. Tony has promised to provide her with her own clinic if she makes up for his failings.

For now, he and Miguel are waiting on the new season, which gets underway with a bang on Thanksgiving weekend. They hope to join a \$30,000 derby in the far reaches of San Bernardino County, a \$3,000 gamble. On a Friday night in August, their anticipation already rising, they head out to the spot, a barn, at the fringe of the L.A. exurbs, where the march of peach-and-tile townhouses, with neat lawns and fancy names, abruptly ends in desert. Here, at 9 p.m., one of the summer’s finales is starting, and even if they will not fight their own roosters for another three months, Tony and Miguel want a taste of the action.

A parking attendant greets them with a flashlight, waving them onto a rutted lot. Admission is \$20. Inside the wooden shed there is a rectangle pit, maybe the size of a

handball court, filled with dirt and fenced in by particleboard. Fluorescent bulbs hang from the roof and empty beer cans litter the ground. Somewhere chicharrones are frying in a vat of fat. A vendor hawks souvenirs. A popular logo: "Born 2 Die."

The room is humid and tangy, and by the time the first roosters clash, at least 200 people are pressed against the ring, hanging from rafters, bent over the rail. Tony is in front, on a bench, boasting and braying, Miguel behind him, perched atop a folding metal chair, craning to see.

They recognize the emcee as a refugee from the Arizona pits, a vaudevillian character with a lame leg and a cane. "C'mon, place your bets, gentlemen, don't be cowards," he hollers, drawing two foul lines into the dirt with his stick. His nickname is Macarena, not for the dance craze, but for the doomed protagonist in "*La Muerte De Un Gallero*" – Don Luis Macarena – a heartless gambler who limps around with a silver-handled staff. In the film, he wins a man's house, and his daughter, too, but loses the respect of his cockfighting sidekick, who then trains a rooster to exact revenge on his old boss. Miguel and Tony have watched the scene at least half a dozen times.

As the hours pass, the action grows furious, sweaty, meaningless. As soon as one bird goes down, another is waiting, knife already tied. There is scarcely time to decide which rooster to bet on, no pageantry or pomp, just the whirl of the blender and the rustle of cash. Buckets of water, in which the handlers wash off, turn pink. Between rounds, pierced and tattooed gangbangers roll dice, waving thick wads of hundreds, lighting joints, pouring tequila into cans of Squirt. The purse is \$18,000. Only the most fragile code of honor, if it can be called that, seems to keep the whole contest from combusting into a free-for-all.

"Look at these people," says Tony, who is wearing an Eddie Bauer cap and Tommy Hilfiger boots. "What the hell am I doing here?"

When they leave, it is after 1 a.m. Miguel is up about \$20, philosophical as always. But Tony is steamed. He has lost \$200. His polo shirt is splattered with blood. "I hate betting on other people's chickens," he says. It is harder for him, an American product, college-educated and middle-class – paying \$840 a month to keep four kids in parochial school – yet drawn to the old country, sometimes against his better judgment, by its mettle, its romance. "Maybe I'll quit, maybe I won't," he says. "I don't know. I did what I did. I got the most out of it I could. Do I stay just to maintain my little name?"

They hit the freeway. Tony slides a CD into the stereo. It is Vicente Fernández, the legendary Mexican singer, king of the *rancheras*. After a few songs, he launches into the theme of "*La Muerte De Un Gallero*." This is not planned, but it should have been, a tune that is like a lullaby for Miguel and, for Tony, a caution:

*The palenque fell silent  
When, in the ring, a huge giro  
Flying low to the ground . . .  
Slashed him in the chest*

*Slashed him in the face  
And with fierce stabs . . .  
Finished off Macarena  
And began to sing with joy*

In a few minutes, Miguel is asleep. Tony grips the wheel, heading for the lights of the city, wide awake.