

John Schulian

John Schulian (b. 1945) launched his sportswriting career with a freelance story for *Sports Illustrated* about a Baltimore fight promoter with a gym above a strip joint. A year later, in 1975, *The Washington Post* hired him to cover pro football, and two years after that, he was at the *Chicago Daily News*, hailed as one of the country's leading sports columnists. When the *News* folded in 1978, Schulian took his column to the city's *Sun-Times* and set out on an improbable career path. He turned down an offer from *The New York Times* to succeed Red Smith; published a well-regarded collection of his boxing writing, *Writers' Fighters and Other Sweet Scientists* (1983); and left the *Sun-Times* after a dust-up with an editor imported by new owner Rupert Murdoch. In 1986, Schulian startled friends and colleagues by jumping from the *Philadelphia Daily News* to Hollywood. He broke into television with a script for *L. A. Law* and worked on *Miami Vice*, *Wiseguy*, and *Midnight Caller* before co-creating *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Through it all, he wrote regularly for *GQ* and *SI* and maintained his affection for boxing. In his debut script for *Miami Vice*, Schulian made Randall "Tex" Cobb, the roguish former heavyweight contender, the first of many characters he has killed in the name of drama. "Nowhere to Run" was Schulian's *Sun-Times* column for April 1, 1979.

Nowhere to Run

IT was a glorious place, the Del Prado Hotel was. If you listen closely, you can still hear the echoes of the young lovers and swaggering big leaguers who used to make its lobby so fresh, so vibrant. But to open your eyes in there is to see the other side of midnight. The furniture is cheap and frayed, and the old folks arrayed on it live with a fear dramatized by a sign taped to the front desk: SORRY, NO MONEY ON PREMISES—PLEASE PAY RENT BY CHECK OR MONEY ORDER. Yes, that is what has become of Hyde Park's leading hostelry, and the change is a hurting thing for everybody except the lost soul dozing in the corner, the one the fight crowd used to call Honey Boy.

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He lives in a world that skirts reality, a world filled with panhandling buddies and visions of old movies, a world where no one can hurt him. Late at night, when he is alone in the lobby, alone with his jumbled thoughts, he will rise from the couch where he sleeps and slowly walk toward the full-length mirror. He will raise his fists and bend at the knees and, suddenly, he will be Johnny Bratton, welterweight champion, once again. Never mind that his hair is more gray than black or that he is an easy fifty pounds over his fighting prime. You can't take the past away from him.

He bobs and weaves, jabs, recalculates the old combinations—all in slow motion. How sad and yet how perfect for the setting. It is as if you aren't allowed in the front door of the woebegone Del Prado unless you, too, represent faded elegance.

Johnny Bratton showed up one evening last winter, in the middle of his one-way trip to nowhere. A chill ran through the lobby, for its elderly white denizens did not know how to deal with a black drifter who was caked with street grime and whose long silences were punctuated by bursts of unexpected laughter. There was no predicting that he would soon be running errands for new friends, receiving invitations to breakfast, or whistling at Patricia Bock, the hotel's salty manager, and getting away with it. Indeed, Patricia Bock had to be grabbed by the arm and shaken before she would stop looking down her nose at this uninvited guest.

"Don't you know who that is?" asked the man who runs the variety shop.

"No," she said.

"That's Johnny Bratton."

"So?"

"Do you remember Joe Louis?"

"Oh, he was my idol."

"Well, that man there was as famous as Joe Louis."

The point would have been exaggerated anywhere other than the South Side. But on the turf where Johnny Bratton discovered that he could be somebody, however briefly, it was the stone truth. So he found a roof to cover his head during the blizzard of '79 and, no matter how ragged he was, the Del Prado boasted its first celebrity since American League teams declared the neighborhood unsafe for their

precious athletes. “The hotel doesn’t look like the Astor anymore,” Patricia Bock says now, “so why should anyone care?”

Johnny Bratton wasn’t supposed to have to rely on charity, though. In the late forties and the early fifties, when he was fighting in Chicago Stadium and on TV, when it was all you could do to escape reading about him getting ready for a fight or winding down from one, he thought he had gone over the wall from hard times. He was a taxi driver’s son, a Du Sable High School dropout, but he wore zoot suits and gold cuff links and cruised the city in a Cadillac bearing the name “Honey Boy” and a Jaguar bearing the name “Johnny B.” And the marvel of it was, the soft life didn’t make him a pushover in the ring.

“I could do it all,” he says, “but I had to do it under my conditions. You understand? My conditions.”

He had a style that would have become a man trying to sneak into the house past his sleeping wife. It was capable of turning crowds venomous even when he was beating Charlie Fusari for the old National Boxing Association’s welterweight title in 1951. Still, there was something about Johnny Bratton that endured longer than the memory of his caution. Perhaps it can best be described as courage.

He came to the fore when boxing moved at a relentless pace. A victory meant the loser got another fight, and if the loser won that one, there had to be a rubber match. Just look at Johnny Bratton’s record. He fought the brutal Ike Williams three times. He battled Holly Mims twice within twenty-one days, with a lesser bout sandwiched in between. And nobody who witnessed his last chance to regain the championship, when Kid Gavilan carved him up for fifteen rounds, ever will forget his absolute refusal to retreat or surrender. Afterwards, he lay on his dressing room table unable to speak.

The problems Johnny Bratton had always were supposed to be physical—an impacted tooth that led to a fractured jaw or tiny hands that crumbled like potato chips. But what got him in the end was his mind.

He was not punchy.

He was mad.

“It started getting worse after my last fight,” he says. “I got beat by Del Flanagan. The referee patted me on my back and told me I

was through. I was twenty-six or twenty-seven. A couple years later, I went to the state hospital at Manteno. I had a private room. Do you think they were giving private rooms to psychopaths in 1954? I wasn't no psychopath. I even had my picture in the paper. Do you remember that? They had a picture of me looking out the window. I was in my room."

There were other rooms in other hospitals and, finally, Johnny Bratton was allowed to step back onto the streets seventeen years ago. He has walked them ever since, refusing to settle at a halfway house or with an older brother. There is always a letter from Hitler or a covered wagon surrounded by Indians to distract him, to let him know he must keep moving. "You don't understand, do you?" he says, and looks for a bus that will carry him to safety. If he is lucky, it will pass a movie theater and he can hop off and take refuge there. Movies give him something to cling to, something he can't seem to find anywhere else.

"The fella next to you kinda looks like Paul Muni, don't he?" Johnny Bratton says. "I seen Paul Muni in a lot of pictures. Him and Errol Flynn. I don't think Errol Flynn ever made a bad picture. But he got in trouble, right? Him and all his women. Me, what I think you got to do is live a good reputation, like James Cagney. Yessir, the Yankee Doodle Dandy hisself."

On Rush Street, that mecca of clip joints and cut-rate love, they say they have never seen anyone who knew as much about movies as Johnny Bratton. Sooner or later, he makes it up there every day to win his daily bread—and drink—with his vast knowledge. And if that fails, there is always out-and-out panhandling. "He can put the arm on you pretty good," says one old fight guy. "I figure it's good for a sawbuck if he sees me." To be sure, Johnny Bratton is always looking, always moving. He pauses only to gaze at his reflection in the windows of a disco.

What he sees is a slightly stooped figure cloaked in a dirty overcoat; rising up out of the coat's collar is a face on which scar tissue and a goatee fight for prominence. What he sees is what the conventioners and the swinging singles don't always want to see. The pattern is never altered: a handout here, a turndown there, and don't scare any well-dressed women. He can get by that way, Johnny Bratton can. He

won't get rich, but another day will be done and he will have bus fare back to Hyde Park, back to the Del Prado.

The septuagenarians who live there worry about him on those nights when he doesn't show up, and he seems to sense it, even enjoy it. But just as he is getting comfortable, perhaps for the first time in a long time, some hotshot outfit is pumping \$4.5 million into the Del Prado to gussy it up again. When the old furniture goes, Johnny Bratton will have to go, too. You can say time is running out on him if you like, but of course that really started long, long ago.