

Where the Rabble Drinks (Sweet Science Fiction)

Written by Rick Folstad

Tuesday, 09 January 2007 19:00

It was never just about the money, though you couldn't tell that to the punks downtown. They wouldn't listen, never believed it. The punks downtown – the ones driving the cherry-red Cadillacs and wearing the three-piece suits – they never bought into it. To them, it was only about the money. If you had a pocketful of cash, you had the world by the balls. You had pretty women and fancy clothes and damn if you didn't have cherry-red Cadillacs.

And you had respect, or at least that's what they called it.

Me, I never figured it that way. You didn't buy respect like you might buy a bottle of good wine. Respect didn't come that easy. Anyone who told you they could buy respect, well, don't trust that sonofabitch because he doesn't know what he's talking about.

To me, it was all about taking a chance, about putting your ass on the line and winning and then watching the bastards reach deep into their pockets to pay up. There was nothing sweeter than watching them dig. That made it all worthwhile, made it count for something, proving the assholes wrong.

Gambling and winning, that's what it was all about. Not the money. Not really.

Maybe that's why I was always broke. Maybe that's why Jo had a hard time living with me, watching me spend big when I won, and hock her jewelry when I lost. But I always knew that someday I'd hit the big one, score enough to where I didn't have to worry about the rent or pawning her rings. I guess in a way, it was about the money, but that was only when I didn't have any.

I thought Kenny Boy might be the big score I was always looking for. I put a lot down on him to win and got great odds. No one thought he had a prayer, but I thought he had a chance. There's always a chance. That's why you go with the odds. He gets lucky and lands one of them barroom, overhand rights he always used to throw, and bingo, I'm suddenly sitting prettier than a homecoming queen, buying Jo new jewelry instead of trying to get the old stuff out of pawn. I'm buying three-piece suits and silk ties and a better car and I'm getting us out of that dump we're living in on the second floor. Maybe I find a place closer to the beach where you don't hear the rats scratching inside the walls late at night.

Too bad Kenny Boy had to lose. The guy he lost to busted him up pretty good. He was never the same after that night, but for awhile, it looked like he might win. I was so close.

The street cops on the South Side, they never trusted Kenny Boy after he lost, never gave him a chance. They said he was crazy, messed up in the head like those crackheads down on Fifth Avenue who were always beating the shit out of each other over pocket change.

The street cops say Kenny Boy took too many right hands to the head and it changed him, left

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him mean and wild and touched, someone to watch out for. So every time they saw him limping down the street hunched over wearing his dirty Yankees baseball cap and that ratty, old, green army jacket of his, they'd laugh to themselves and go shake him down.

They'd shove him into a dirty alley, slam him up against a wall and search his pockets for blow or a pipe, something they could take him in for. Even if they didn't find anything they'd still pull out their sticks and swat him across the back of his knees. They'd leave Kenny Boy hobbling around in the cold, wet alley, yelling at the pricks as they walked away laughing.

'Kiss my ass,' Kenny Boy would yell at them. "You got nothing on me and you never had nothing on me. Go to hell."

And the street cops would always turn around and smile and yell to Kenny Boy that he was crazy, that he'd been hit too many times in the head and it wouldn't be long before he couldn't remember where he lived or where he was going or how to count to ten.

"Hey, Kenny Boy," they'd yell. "You know what time it is? It's punch-drunk time, asshole." Then they'd laugh.

Pricks. They didn't understand. They didn't know what it was like to be good at something, to be one of the best in the whole goddamn world. Kenny Boy was there for awhile, was almost king of the mountain. But he didn't quite make it to the top. He had his chance, but the poor sonofabitch lost. Lose and the bastards who used to beg you to come into their bar and drink were suddenly turning their backs on you at the front door, treating you like you had some kind of contagious dying disease.

I never thought Kenny Boy was so bad. I think he just had a hard time after that last fight. Something broke loose inside his head and it kept rattling around in there and it messed him up pretty good.

Kenny Boy fought for the championship of the world once, but that was the fight I was telling you about where he got beat up so bad. He never got another chance at the title.

Hell, he never fought again.

"Hey Billy," he used to say to me on those slow nights when I'd stop by his apartment above the drugstore to see how he was doing. "I think I could have beaten that bastard if only I hadn't gotten caught with that right hand of his. Man, one right hand and nothing is ever the same any more. Damn it, Billy. If he don't catch me with that right hand, I'm champion of the whole world, a rich man with nothing but Cadillacs, diamond rings and big-titted women with long hair."

"Yeah, Kenny Boy," I'd tell him. "If pigs could fly, huh? He beat you, man, beat you like a drum and that just about says it all. I'm surprised he didn't kill you. He sure tried to."

I remember the fight like it was yesterday because you don't forget the times you do something mean and can't forgive yourself for doing it.

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The fight was on a hot, muggy Friday night in July in the big arena downtown and everyone was there, all the guys from the gym and most of the street cops and the mayor and the city council and everybody who had money and wanted to show it off.

Kenny Boy's name was in big red letters out in front on the marquee and everyone was dressed up fancy. Even the pimps from Riverside were there, wearing white furs and two-tone shoes and wide-brimmed hats the color of red wine.

The cops who had to work, who couldn't make it to the fight, had to shut down Main Street an hour before the first prelim because there were too many people standing in the street, blocking traffic, waiting to get inside and see Kenny Boy win the title.

I was in Kenny Boy's corner that night, working with Doc Thayer, who everyone thought was the best thing to ever happen to Kenny Boy.

Doc Thayer was about 55 with a tiny white mustache and thinning white hair that he combed straight back. He was short and stocky and when he got excited, he'd start blinking real fast, like he had something in his eyes. They said he used to be a minor-league catcher and that's how his fingers got all busted up, but I never believed it. It wasn't foul balls that snapped his stumpy fingers. It was someone slamming a pool cue or an iron pipe across his hand.

Along with most of his fingers, Doc's nose was also broken, which gave him a little credibility in the gym. If the guy teaching you to fight doesn't have a few scars or marks to show, you figure he never had a tough fight in his life. No one's so good that they don't show a few nicks. You're not going to listen to a guy like that. Fighters are picky about who they listen to.

Doc was always in pretty good shape for how old he was and how chubby he was, but you had to be in shape if you were working with young fighters most of your life.

He was a smart guy and I figured that's why everyone called him Doc. I don't think he ever got a degree or anything.

I used to sit in his tiny, cramped office at the gym and listen to him bullsh-- other trainers and managers, trying to get fights for his guys. That's how I usually knew who to bet on.

His office didn't have any windows and the only light in the place came from a lone bulb that hung down from the ceiling on a long, twisted brown cord. The place smelled like a mix of sweat, leather and ointment. It wasn't a bad smell, just different.

On the wall behind Doc's tiny desk were a bunch of old fight posters and photos, and above the doorway going out was a picture frame with an old quote in it that said, "Life is a well of joy; but where the rabble drinks too, all wells are poisoned – Nietzsche."

I used to ask Doc about it, why he had it hanging up there, but he said he just liked the way it sounded. I still think about that quote, how it seemed so right that it was hanging in a boxing gym.

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A few weeks after Kenny Boy started coming to the gym, Doc pulled me aside and told me the kid had potential. It was late afternoon and the gym was empty except for me and Doc.

“He's a tough, tough kid,” Doc said. “Got real potential. Can take a shot and doesn't seem to mind getting hit in the face once in a while. I just gotta see if he can punch as hard as I think he can. He knocked Danny Toliver on his ass the other day. Did ya' see it? I don't ever remember seeing Danny get knocked on his ass like that. Of course, you never know what they're gonna do until you get him in the ring in a real fight.”

It was just a week later when Doc decided to take Kenny Boy under his wing. He made him start training harder and got him some better sparring and he even bought Kenny Boy new boxing shoes. White with red stripes. I thought Kenny Boy was going to cry right there in the gym.

Kenny Boy's family was out in Iowa or Wisconsin or someplace and he said he never got along with his old man. One day his dad came after him swinging a two-by-four, so Kenny Boy took off and never went back. He was bagging groceries at the A&P when he happened to stop in the gym one day. That's where he met Doc.

Four years later, after Kenny Boy had won something like twenty fights in a row and had worked his way up to being a top contender, Doc went out and somehow put the championship fight together. He talked the people who were handling Fin Baker – the middleweight champion of the world – into coming into Kenny Boy's backyard to defend his title.

No one could believe that Kenny Boy was really getting a shot at the title, no one but maybe Doc.

“It ain't that tough if you got somethin' to deal with,” Doc said, smiling that tight smile he always showed when he thought he was pretty big stuff. “And I showed them a special deal they couldn't turn their backs on.”

Doc made it sound like he did something special, which was just bullsh--. What really happened was, Doc knew one of Baker's handlers and the champ agreed to take what he thought was going to be an easy fight just to keep sharp and make a little money until something bigger came along.

That night in the arena, Kenny Boy fought the fight of his life. He showed a set of balls I never knew he had. He even rocked the champion a couple times in the first few rounds and the place went crazy, the hometown crowd cheering for their hometown boy.

It wasn't until the sixth round that Kenny Boy finally got tagged. It was a left hook and it caught him just above his right eye, the punch causing a small explosion of flesh and blood. Kenny Boy instinctively reached up with his glove to brush away the cut, which quickly became a deep gash.

When the bell ended the round, he came tottering back to the corner like he was drunk.

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“How bad is it?” he asked Doc after collapsing on his stool. There was a trace of panic in his voice. You could tell he was struggling to stay calm. He looked up at me. “Can you stop it, Billy?”

The blood was flowing pretty good out of the cut and the ringside physician, a small, old, mousy guy dressed in a gray suit wearing wire-rimmed glasses, climbed up onto the apron of the ring to look at the damage.

But Doc played it real cool. He managed to get in the doctor's way, kept him from getting a good look at Kenny Boy's eye.

While Doc was running interference, I was working on the cut, rubbing some of Doc's miracle cure on a Q-tip and placing it in the cut, then squeezing it together over the Q-tip. It was a bad gash. Real bad.

Just before the bell rang starting the seventh round, I smeared some Vaseline over the cut and looked at Doc.

“I don't know, Doc,” I told him. “He'll be lucky to get through this round. One punch, that cut could bust wide open again.”

Doc didn't say anything. He just shook his head, like he didn't want to hear what I was telling him.

Somehow, Kenny Boy managed to rally back in the seventh round without the cut opening up. He even bounced a few left jabs off Baker's forehead.

At the bell ending the round, he came back to the corner tired, but smiling. I couldn't believe he was still on his feet. I worked on the cut again while Doc told him to keep the jab going, to let everything follow the jab.

“That sets it all up,” he told Kenny Boy. “Everything starts with the jab, son. Double it up. Throw it three times in a row. Pop, pop, pop. Keep him off balance. Stay loose.”

Bent over in front of Kenny Boy, Doc was waving the water bottle around in one hand and pulling the waistband of Kenny Boy's trunks out with the other to make it easier for him to breathe.”

“You can do this, son,” he told him. “You can beat this guy.”

The 10-second whistle blew and Doc slipped Kenny Boy's mouthpiece in and slapped him across the leg before climbing out of the ring.

“You can do this,” he whispered to him.

I couldn't believe it, but Doc was right. Maybe Kenny Boy could win. Going into the eighth

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round, I had it a close fight.

There was maybe 20 seconds left in the eighth when he ducked into a right-hand lead. It was a beautiful punch and it landed flush on the bridge of Kenny Boy's nose. I still swear I heard his nose crack.

With his nose broken and blood pouring out of both nostrils, Kenny Boy went down hard. By the time he realized he was no longer standing, the referee had reached the count of six. He finally got back on his feet and just beat the count when the bell rang.

We managed to get Kenny Boy back to his corner, but you could see the fight was gone in him. He was pretty busted up. He didn't know what town he was in, what day it was or why he was sitting on a stool in a hot room with bright lights.

I don't know why I even bothered, but I stuffed a couple Q-tips way up his nose to slow the bleeding down, then started working again on the gash above his eye. The right hand to the nose had been so hard, it broke open the cut over his eye, and now there was blood trickling down the side of his cheek. The poor bastard looked like he'd been in a car accident, his head banging off the steering wheel. There was blood everywhere – on his cheek, on his shoulder, dripping down the front of his chest.

I was just about to tell Doc to stop the fight when Kenny Boy looked up at me and asked me where he was. I looked over at Doc.

"He's done, man," I said. "We need to call it. Tell them he's done, that the fight's over. He can't go out there again."

Doc didn't say anything. He just reached into his pocket, pulled out the scissors he used to cut tape with and handed it to me so that no one noticed what he was doing.

"Slice his glove," Doc whispered to me. "Slice it right in the middle, in the fat part of the stuffing. Maybe we can buy him some time."

"I tell ya, he's done, Doc. He doesn't need to go back out there."

"Cut it, Billy. Quick."

I reached out and using my thumb, pushed down hard on the edge of the scissors along the thick part of the glove where the cut would be easy to see. It was a small slice, but it was enough.

Kneeling down in front of Kenny Boy, who was still lost on some distant planet, Doc turned around and yelled at the ref.

"Hey ref," he yelled. "My fighter's glove is torn. Here, look at it. He can't fight with a torn glove."

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The ref quickly came over to our corner.

“What's the problem?” he asked, leaning over us.

“My fighter's glove is torn. Here. Look at the slice. He needs a new glove.”

The ref picked up the glove, saw the slice and looked over at one of the commissioners at ringside.

They stopped the fight long enough to put a new pair of gloves on Kenny Boy. It gave him time to clear his head a little. The guys in Fin Baker's corner were really pissed, yelling out that we were just trying to buy some time, trying to give our fighter a chance to rest and clear his head.

“Assholes,” I thought to myself. “Of course that's what we're doing. Just about everyone in the place knows that's what we're doing. But there's not a damn thing you can do to stop it.”

When they were finally ready to start the ninth round, Kenny Boy still had that far away look in his eyes, though he did manage to answer a few simple questions Doc asked him, like where was he and who was he fighting. But he never should have gone back out there for the ninth and I never should have let him. But I had two grand riding on Kenny Boy, and I got those great odds. If he lands one of them overhand, barroom haymakers, Jo and me are moving away from the rats.

Of course, it was wrong what we did that night, pushing him back out there, making him fight when he didn't have nothin' left to fight with. I knew it and Doc knew it. But sometimes you get caught up in stuff. Sometimes you do stupid things you wish you hadn't done. I never should have sliced that glove, but damn, the punks would have been paying out the ass if Kenny Boy could have landed just that one punch.

Somehow, he staggered out there for the ninth round and managed to stay away from the champion for most of the round. He clinched him every time Baker got close, and once in awhile, he even threw a punch or two. But it was over. He never should gone back out there.

Toward the end of the round, Kenny Boy started taking even a worse beating, Baker landing just about everything he threw. The sonofabitch couldn't miss. Toward the end of the round, Kenny Boy looked like a blind man trying to feel his way around a strange room.

I thought the referee would stop it, but he must have been listening to the home crowd, afraid of getting jumped later if he stepped in and took away any chance Kenny Boy had of landing that magical punch everyone heard about but never saw. He was still on his feet when the bell rang.

In the corner before the start of the 10th, Kenny Boy was breathing real hard, but he had gotten his head back together. He asked Doc if he was winning, which surprised me. He seemed almost clearheaded, like everything was all right. Sometimes, when you get hit hard enough, I think it can knock you out of your stupor, sort of bring you back from the dead. I think that's what happened to Kenny Boy.

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Doc wouldn't lie and told him he was losing. He told him he needed a knockout to win, and poor Kenny Boy just sat there breathing hard, his arms dangling between his legs, his body covered with sweat, his right eye swollen shut and his busted nose spread out across his face, blood trickling from one nostril.

He looked down between his legs.

"Damn," he whispered to himself. Then he spit up some blood.

When the bell rang, he somehow found the guts to stand up and go back out there.

I put my hand on his shoulder to stop him, but Doc grabbed my hand.

"Let him go," he said. "He's got his second wind."

Screw his second wind. He was getting his ass kicked and Doc wasn't doing anything to save him. If I didn't have that money bet on him, I would have tossed in the towel. Instead, I dropped down off the ring apron, sat on the stool and watched Kenny Boy take the beating of a lifetime.

"Right hand," I yelled at him, wishing to God he'd land the punch. "Right hand, right hand." But he didn't throw it. He couldn't. He didn't have anything left.

In the end, it got to where even the hometown crowd couldn't stomach it anymore. They started booing and yelling at the stupid-ass ref to stop the fight, to put an end to the slaughter. When that still didn't work, they started throwing junk into the ring, empty beer cups and coins and hotdog wrappers.

Finally, Doc grabbed a towel, stepped up onto the ring and tossed it in, the white towel floating down and landing at the referee's feet. He quickly moved in between Baker and Kenny Boy and waved his hands up over his head, putting a merciful end to one of the worse beatings I'd ever seen, in or out of the ring. Kenny Boy's face looked like something you'd see at the butcher shop.

That was it for Kenny Boy's boxing career, though Doc didn't want to admit it.

"You're all guts. I never seen a guy with so much guts," Doc told him after the fight when Kenny Boy was sitting on the table in the locker room getting his face stitched up. "We'll get a rematch. Yeah, that's what we'll do. We'll get a rematch. You can beat that guy. You can do it."

I glanced over at Doc and shook my head. He knew better. We all knew better.

Kenny Boy didn't say nothing. He just stared back at Doc with this strange look in his eyes. I think he was still trying to remember why he was there in the first place.

Kenny Boy stayed away from the gym after that night and Doc never said another word about it. It was a few months later when we started hearing rumors about Kenny Boy getting high all the

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time. He was getting into all kinds of trouble and that's when the cops decided to come down hard on him.

I didn't tell Doc, but I visited Kenny Boy quite a few times after his last fight, always bringing a few beers with me. I guess maybe I felt bad about cutting that glove and letting him go back out there when he shouldn't have. Besides, Jo left me after I lost the two grand on the fight, so I had a lot of extra time on my hands.

His apartment above the drugstore was a dirty, rundown place with torn, green carpeting and holes in the walls, most of them looking like they were made by someone's fist. When he opened the door and you walked in, the first thing you noticed was the smell of stale beer, pot and piss. The second thing you noticed was that it was hard to see anything. He kept the place dark, using old blankets to cover the windows because there weren't any shades to pull down.

The only furniture in the room was a fold-out, blue couch, a black-and-white TV on a wooden box and an old metal table with two chairs. The place was always a mess – clothes, empty beer bottles and old newspapers scattered all over – but that didn't bother Kenny Boy.

We'd sit at his table drinking beer and he'd always say the same thing, telling me how if he hadn't gotten hit with that one right hand, he might of been middleweight champion of the world.

"Kenny Boy," I'd tell him. "He didn't beat you with one right hand. He beat you with everything he threw. In the last few rounds, he couldn't miss. He might as well have been hittin' the heavy bag. You looked like a goddamn statue out there."

Kenny Boy would shake his head and run the fingers of his hand through his dark hair, trying to understand what I was telling him.

"No, no," he'd say. "I remember it, Billy. He just got lucky with a right hand."

It was about six months after the fight when Kenny Boy really began to lose it. The last few times I visited him, he couldn't remember the fight at all.

My last visit, he couldn't remember my name.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah," he said when I reminded him of who I was. "Sorry, Billy. Just slipped my mind. I been getting these headaches lately and sometimes I just forget stuff."

It was in early January when Kenny Boy suddenly showed up at the gym. He didn't make a sound coming in. He just found a quiet corner and stood there watching everything.

Doc, who was in the ring working the focus mitts with a Mexican lightweight, saw him first.

"Christ, Kenny Boy," he yelled out. "You scared the sh-- out of me. I didn't see you come in."

Along with me and Doc, there were only four guys working out, so when Doc yelled, everyone

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stopped what they were doing and looked over at Kenny Boy.

“Hey, what are ya doin’ here?” Doc asked him, lowering his voice almost to a whisper and glancing over at me like he was wondering if I knew what was going on.

I’d been watching some big, dumb heavyweight hit the heavy bag, and when I looked over at Kenny Boy and then back over at Doc, I could see something was wrong. Doc looked nervous, scared.

Kenny Boy still hadn’t moved or said a word. He was wearing his ratty army jacket and his dirty Yankees cap and I remember thinking he looked different. I couldn’t tell what it was, but there was something about him that wasn’t right. Then I realized he was smiling. I hadn’t seen him smile since before the fight six months earlier.

“Hey, Kenny Boy,” Doc said to him again. “What’s up?”

No one moved or said a word and it got real quiet except for the sound of one of the heavy bags creaking as it swung back and forth on its chain. We all just stood there looking over at him, waiting for him to say something.

Thinking back on it now, I should have seen it coming. We all should have seen it coming. Kenny Boy was on the raw edge and something had to happen. He couldn’t go on like he was going, getting crazier and crazier, the headaches getting worse. We should of gotten him some help.

We were still waiting for him to say something when he pulled out the gun. It was a .38 and he’d been hiding it in his pocket, holding it in his right hand, the same right hand I’d put all my money on in his fight with Fin Baker, the right hand he wouldn’t throw.

Now he was pointing the gun at Doc, making a strange humming sound as he pulled the hammer back.

“Sonofabitch,” Doc said, his voice cracking. “What are ya doin’ Kenny Boy? What are ya doin’?”

Kenny Boy, who hadn’t taken his eyes off Doc, suddenly stopped humming and took a step toward the ring.

“You never should have done it, Doc,” he finally said, sounding calm and clear for the first time in weeks. “Why did you do it? Why? I lost it all because of you.”

Doc shook his head.

“Geezus, Kenny Boy, we were just trying to buy you some time,” Doc said, almost pleading with Kenny Boy. “We figured if we cut the glove, you’d have time to recover, to get your head back. We were just trying to help you win.”

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“No, no, no, Doc,” Kenny Boy said, closing his eyes and shaking his head while still pointing the gun at Doc. “That’s not what I mean, that’s not what I’m talking about, Doc. Don’t ya know? Don’t ya know what I’m sayin’, what I’m tryin’ to tell ya?”

Doc just stood there in the middle of the ring, the focus mitts still on his hands.

“I don’t understand,” he said so softly you could hardly hear him.

“The towel,” Kenny Boy said, sounding tired. “The towel, Doc. Why did you throw in the towel? I coulda been middleweight champion of the whole world, but you stopped it. You took my championship from me.”

Then, in what seemed like slow motion, Kenny Boy turned the gun on himself, jammed the barrel into his mouth and pulled the trigger, the sharp crack of the gun bouncing off the old walls of the gym. Blood and pieces of bone and flesh splattered across the wooden floor as Kenny Boy fell backwards onto his back, his body twitching two times before growing still. Lying there with his eyes still open, a pool of dark red blood started to form around his head.

No one moved or said anything for what seemed like an hour, though it was just a few seconds. Finally, Doc yelled for someone to call the cops.

I didn’t go back to the gym for a couple months after that. I tried to patch things up with Jo, but it never happened. She found someone else, some stable guy who didn’t gamble and who worked 40 hours a week. I guess it was what she needed.

When I finally went back, I found out nothing had changed. Doc was standing on the apron of the ring yelling at a couple middleweights who were sparring.

When the round ended, he climbed down off the ring and came over and shook my hand and started telling me what I’d missed.

It was getting late and there was a little featherweight standing over by a heavy bag waiting for the bell to ring to start another round. When it finally sounded, he began to pound the bag with both fists, snapping his punches and shuffling in and out as the bag swung back and forth. The whole gym suddenly came alive again, everyone hitting bags or skipping rope or shadow boxing in front of cracked mirrors leaning against gray, concrete walls.

Doc turned and looked over to where the little featherweight was still slamming his fists into the bag.

“Hey Billy,” he said. “That little featherweight over there, he’s a tough kid. He’s got potential. He can take a pretty good shot. Of course, you never know what they’re gonna do until you get them in the ring in a real fight. But a couple years and some good wins...”