

MARK KRAM JR.

“I Want to Kill Him”

FROM THE PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

HACKENSACK, N.J. — Cold fear gripped George Khalid Jones as he boarded the Acela Express in Newark that summery day last July. Over and over he pondered: What would people say when he showed up in Washington at the funeral? Would they spot him in the crowded church and whisper among themselves, *“There he is. The guy who did it!”* He could feel their eyes upon him, the anger, the accusation, welling up from behind shiny pools of tears. And what would the widow say when she saw him? Would she become hysterical and scream, *“You killed my husband! You killed my husband!”* She would be there with her three children, suddenly fatherless because of him. How could he ever face them? How could he ever face any of them?

“George, come along with me to the funeral,” Lou Duva, his promoter, had told him. “View the body, see the family, and go to the reception. Go down there and let people see you.”

Two weeks had passed since Jones had stopped Beethavean “Honey Bee” Scotland in the tenth and final round of their light-heavy-weight bout aboard the retired aircraft carrier USS *Intrepid* on the Hudson River in New York. Carried unconscious from the ring on a stretcher, Scotland underwent two surgeries at Bellevue Hospital Center: the first to gauge the pressure building up in his brain, the second to drain blood in an effort to relieve that pressure. He lingered in a coma for six days, during which Jones found himself overwhelmed with an ever-deepening anxiety. Nightmares filled what few hours of sleep he could get, spooky harbingers of the phone call that would finally come on July 2: Scotland was dead at

age twenty-six of a subdural hematoma, a rupture of the veins between the brain and the skull. Uncertain if he could bring himself to attend the funeral seven days later, if only because of the profound shame that had enveloped him, he agreed when Duva told him simply, "George, this is the right thing do."

So they settled into their seats for their three-hour journey, during which Jones somberly peered out his window at the passing factories and rivers. The then seventy-nine-year-old Duva looked over at Jones and said of Scotland, "It was his time, you know? Whether it happened in a boat or car or in the ring, God has a set time for everyone." He told Jones there had been an insurance policy on Scotland, that his widow and children would get "a nice piece of money." The *New York Daily News* reported after the death that the promoter took out two insurance policies — a \$20,000 medical policy and a \$50,000 life policy. And Duva added this, "Remember: it could have happened to you." He told him boxing was a rough game, that he should get what he could out of it in the way of financial security and get out while he still had his faculties. Buy a house, get a college fund started. As they drew into Union Station, Duva said, "You have to leave this behind you today. You have to get closure."

A car picked them up at the curb and drove them to Metropolitan Baptist Church in Northwest Washington. Jones cautiously blended into the big crowd that had formed there, which included some boxers with whom he was friendly. They told him, "It happens. Keep your head up." Some relatives of Scotland were surprised to see him, but an uncle came up to Jones, held out a hand, and said, "We're so happy to see you." The uncle told him that he should go on with his boxing career because "Bee would have wanted you to do that." The widow was equally gracious, her face sad yet forgiving. As he filed by the open coffin, which was surrounded by stands of flowers, he wondered how she and her children would be able to cope in the years to come. And suddenly it occurred to him: How could there ever be closure? *A piece of me is going along with him to the grave.*

Whenever a fighter kills another in the ring, he is always the forgotten victim, walled in by heavy shadows of guilt, fear, and remorse. You cannot know how it feels until it has happened to you, which is

why George Khalid Jones found himself so distressed when he picked up the sports section a few weeks ago and saw a quote from Mike Tyson. Outrageously, Tyson had said of Lennox Lewis, his opponent Saturday in Memphis, Tennessee: "My main objective is . . . to kill him. He should want to kill me, too, because I want to kill him." It sent a wave of terror through Jones, who said that while Tyson was probably only trying to psyche himself up, he wondered if he truly knew what he was saying. Jones remembered what he had said a few days before the Scotland bout: that he had worked so hard in the gym that "I pray I don't kill anybody." They were only words then — typical prefight hype — but they have since come back to him as an unintended prophecy.

"Be careful what you say: it could come true," said Jones, seated at a corner table at an empty North Jersey diner. "And when it does come true, then you suddenly find yourself caught in a horrible nightmare. Sometimes you just say things, but you never think it'll happen."

The year that has passed since Beethavean Scotland expired has been a search for life after death for Jones, thirty-four. When he came back from the funeral in Washington, he became overwhelmed by the tragedy that had befallen his opponent, who everyone said was "a good guy who loved his wife and children." Thoughts of his own mate and five children, of how precious they were to him, would leave him in a state of anguish, his tears streaming down the side of his handsome face. A voice inside his head told him: quit boxing. Yet even as he packed up his gear and stowed it away in the attic, a part of him knew that the sport had provided him with the only piece of thread he ever had to weave a worthwhile existence. No one is exactly sure if he will ever again be the same fighter — and that includes himself. But he is certain that "some good has come out of the death of Beethavean Scotland," if only that he now understands something that had eluded him for years: the value of life.

That has been a revelation to Jones, who grew up in circumstances where life had no value. With soulful eyes that exude a mannered gentility, Jones said his late father had twenty-six children with a variety of women and abandoned him while his mother was six months pregnant with him. He fell into drugs at an early age. Jailed at age seventeen for shooting "a guy who tried to rob me

and a friend on a corner" in 1985, Jones spent four years behind bars. Said his mother, Ruth Ann Jones-Mass, who remembered how a drug-crazed Jones once had to be led away in a straitjacket to the hospital to keep him from jumping off the roof: "Sometimes our children just go astray."

He sold drugs to support a gambling addiction and was arrested again in 1997. He came before a judge who told him, "Mr. Jones, you are a menace to society." So he went to prison again for a four-year term, only this time he was leaving behind a woman, Naomi Del Valle, and their small children. Jones and Del Valle had been together since December 1991 and not a week passed that she did not go to the prison with her children. "Seeing him there was the hardest thing I ever had to do," said Del Valle, employed in customer services by The Bank of New York. "I cried every visit, but I did every second of his time with him. I just knew there was a better person somewhere deep inside of him."

Some boxing talent was in there, too, if only he could clean himself up. He had begun boxing in jail in 1985 because he discovered that boxers received certain privileges, such as Sunday ice cream and unlimited cheeseburgers. He began to spar in some local gyms in 1994, then turned pro that September against Marty Lindquist in Minnesota. He was supposed to go there as an "opponent" — which is to say he was supposed to lose — but he won a four-round decision. He then strung together ten straight victories — including eight by knockout — when his career was interrupted by that four-year jail stint, of which he served thirty-four months. When he came out again in May 2000, he clicked off four straight victories, three by knockout. His opponent for that ESPN2 *Tuesday Night Fights* date, June 26 on the USS *Intrepid*, was supposed to be David Telesco, but Telesco begged off with a broken nose sustained in training, and Scotland stepped in as his replacement.

"What would have happened if I had fought Telesco instead of Bee?" said Jones. "I ask myself 'What if . . .' every day."

The bell tolled: ten strikes in honor of a popular boxing figure who had recently died. In the ring before his comeback fight against highly rated Eric Harding at the Mohegan Sun Casino in Connecticut, Jones suddenly found himself overwhelmed by the tragedy he had just endured. Walking into the ring that evening he had been

fine — or thought he had been fine — but he had not expected there to be a call by the ring announcer for a moment of silence. As he stood there listening in his corner, he wondered to himself, “Man, is somebody playing a trick on me or what?” His eyes began to well up with tears.

“Every time I heard that bell ‘ding,’ the only thing I could think of was what had happened,” Jones said. “And I began reliving the whole thing again.”

Until he stepped into the ring on the USS *Intrepid*, Jones had been unacquainted with Scotland, a southpaw who fought out of a gym in suburban Washington called Round One Boxing. Scotland (20-6-2) worked as an exterminator to supplement his earnings from boxing, which were minimal in light of his inability to connect with a big promoter. He had married his childhood friend, Denise Lewis, and they had an eight-year-old daughter and two sons, ages two and six. Ironically, the opponent he had been lined up to face for the Maryland State 168-pound belt last June 20, Dana Rucker, withdrew because of a hamstring injury, so Scotland was available when Duva began looking for a replacement for Telesco. Scotland had to jump up a weight class; he weighed in at 170, four pounds lighter than Jones. But Scotland jumped at the opportunity because it would pay him more than he had ever earned for a bout: \$7,000 plus \$1,000 in expenses. Said Jones, also a southpaw, “We both wanted the same thing: a shot at something better.”

But it soon became clear that Scotland was in well over his head. By the end of the fourth round, CompuBox statistics showed Jones had landed sixty-four more punches than Scotland. During a forty-two-second span in the fifth round, Jones pummeled Scotland with forty-three shots; Scotland landed only three. Cries of “Stop it! Stop it!” rang out from the crowd, and even ESPN2 commentator Max Kellerman observed, “This is how guys get seriously hurt.” Ring physician Dr. Barry Jordan told referee Arthur Mercante Jr. before the eighth round not to allow Scotland to “take many more blows,” but Scotland, who Mercante later said still was defending himself, rallied to narrowly win the eighth and ninth rounds. When the fighters came out at the beginning of the final round, Jones said Mercante told them as they touched gloves: “Show me who wants it more.”

“And the only thing I could think was: ‘I gotta get this guy out of

here," Jones said. Scotland was felled by a combination with forty-five seconds remaining and was immediately attended to by Jordan and two other doctors. Jones climbed up on the ring ropes to salute the crowd in victory.

But that joy turned to horror as it became obvious Scotland was seriously injured. While the doctors found him initially to be conscious, they said his condition quickly deteriorated. Concerned, Jones looked on as paramedics strapped Scotland to a stretcher, which they would have trouble squeezing into the elevator of the World War II-era *Intrepid*. As Jones walked back to his dressing room, he reminded himself, "This is just part of the game." Johnny Bos, his booking agent, assured him Scotland would be fine, but when Bos telephoned him later at home, the report he had was not an encouraging one. Nor were any of the subsequent reports from Bos, who called Jones six to eight times a day with updates. Said Jones, "All I could do was pray: *please let him live*. It was the longest six days you could possibly imagine, then Johnny called to say, 'He died.'"

A depression fell over Jones that summer. He attended the funeral in Washington, but only when a close friend who had helped him conquer his gambling addiction told him, "What are you going to do? Are you going to punk out again, the way you always used to do? Or are you going to stand up and be a man?"

Going there had a soothing effect on him, yet if he discovered that others had forgiven him, he still was not at a point where he could forgive himself. When he attempted to go back to the gym a few weeks later, he broke down in tears and told Del Valle he was through. He began getting up late every day, at which point he would brush his teeth, then go back to sleep again. Del Valle told him, "This is not who you are. You have to get over this." And yet whenever Jones looked at her and his children, it reminded him of how Denise would never again be able to hold her husband, and how the children would never be able to say, "Daddy, we love you." Said Jones, "You know, it takes two parents to raise a child. No one knows that better than me." Weeks of inactivity had passed when Bos spoke up.

"George, you drive a cab for a living, and you hit someone, and they die, you have to get back in that cab and drive it again," Bos said. "This is the same thing. You have to get back in that cab."

You can never predict how certain fighters will come back after

they have killed an opponent; fine talents such as Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini and Gabriel Ruelas were never the same again. In the case of Jones — who began training again in the fall — Bos said he never would have booked him against Harding last December if he had been aware of just how emotionally fragile he was. But Bos said he figured it could set him up for a big-money title shot against light-heavyweight champion Roy Jones Jr. A victory would give George an undefeated record with "the rep of killing an opponent," which Bos said could only enhance his desirability. But in the week before the Harding bout — for which George wore trunks emblazoned with the words "Bee" and "R.I.P." — he did a television interview in which he began crying. Asked in the interview how he has fared since the tragedy, he said: "This is the first time I have ever felt compassion." Bos was aghast.

Compassion is not an attractive feature in a fighter.

"Naaahhh," said Bos. "You do not want a compassionate fighter."

The Harding bout did not go well in any way. Duva, who ordinarily works the corner, was rushed to a hospital when his heart defibrillator malfunctioned. And then Jones fell to pieces during that unexpected moment of silence. While Jones would say later, "The better man won that night," Bos said Jones was holding back with his punches, that he had Harding in early trouble but would not step in aggressively enough. Harding wobbled Jones toward the end of the sixth round, then finished the job in the seventh with a seven-punch combination. As Jones slid helplessly to the canvas, Del Valle looked on from her ringside seat and saw his eyes roll back into his head. "Oh God!" she yelled in terror. "Now this is happening to me!" Eleven-year-old daughter Aisha began crying hysterically. When Jones recovered back in his dressing room, Bos approached him and said, "This cannot be. Either you fight the way you're capable of or you're packing it in. I'm not letting you go out there and get hurt."

Bos said, "He called me and begged me for another chance."

He got it against Karl Willis in April. Jones (17-1, 13 KOs) fought well enough to win by a third-round technical knockout, but as Bos said, "Willis is no Eric Harding." Bos just said he told Jones to get some work in and that was what he did. Jones had command of the bout from the opening bell, got his punches off cleanly, and said that he only once drifted back in time to the

Scotland fight. It was when a fan stood up at his seat and shouted at him for everyone to hear: "Come on, George. Kill the guy."

Change has come over George Khalid Jones. Small things he does every day convince him of that. Once, he would have become enraged if another driver had cut him off. Today, he said he just shakes his head and sighs. In fact, he said you can slap him in the face and "the only thing I will do now is smile." It was not long ago, on a Saturday night, he happened to be watching the fights on television when it appeared to him that the referee should stop it. Suddenly, he began shouting frantically at the television screen: "Stop it! Stop it!" Only later did it occur to him he never would have done something like that before Scotland.

Preparing for a bout that could come as early as next month, he goes to the Police Athletic League gym in Hackensack every weekday at 4:30 P.M. He goes there after he gets off work at a printing plant, where he is the inventory manager. There, he works out until 6:30 or so and is surrounded by friends, every one of whom says what a fine fellow he is. "I told him to get rid of those damn trunks he wore during the Harding fight," said an elderly trainer at the PAL. "All that does is bring up bad memories." Whenever Jones hears someone say that, he smiles politely and explains that Scotland is a part of him now, that he has dedicated his career to him. He hopes to help his widow in whatever way he can in the years ahead and even hopes to begin a college fund to help the children. Said Jones, "What I realized is that life is short, and you have to ask yourself: How do you want to be remembered?"

What Bos and others say is that Scotland died needlessly, that the bout should have been stopped in the early rounds. They say Scotland was a victim. His widow sued New York City, which owns the *Intrepid*, in March, for allowing her husband to be "unreasonably and violently pummeled." What has gone unsaid is that the burden of grief is a shared one, and that it extends far beyond the gravesite, where Jones stood that July day a year ago and peered into eternity. He did not "punch out," the way he once would have done, but faced up to a difficult thing and has become stronger — if not as a fighter then as a man. Somehow he knows that Scotland has forgiven him. A certain inner peace has come with that realization. He can finally forgive himself.