

# Jockamo

By Scott Wolven

After prison, it was hard to get a job. Most work faded if they found out I'd been incarcerated. I left Maine and went down South to look for a construction job. After the hurricanes hit, I found some work in New Orleans. Running heavy equipment and driving truck. Hauling tons of ruined houses to the dump-sites. The worst was the kids' toys and the pictures. Moldy, soaked stuffed animals. That really got to me. Pictures so wet you could wring them out. There was other stuff there – dead, bloated pets, and in one house, a dead body. The kitchens were always awful. People don't realize it, the simple danger of what was in some of those refrigerators. The food had sat unprotected for months. The smell of it could kill you. Lethal air-borne bacteria. We taped the fridges shut before handling them. We wore masks and breathing tanks. Special hazard suits. We looked like we were still underwater, even though the water had receded. That work ended too. On a Friday, we got back to the big garage where we kept all the equipment and they were handing out the last paychecks. Said the disaster money had run out and good luck to us in finding new work.

I got hold of a buddy of mine, back in Maine. He was part owner of a logging operation. He sent me plane tickets. I'd fly to Cleveland, then to Burlington, Vermont. He'd been awarded a contract to supply a wood-fired power plant. I could run one of his crews, cutting delivered logs from the yard into a usable size for feed-stock, and help with that side of the operation.

I was at the New Orleans airport, at the last gate in the terminal. Two hours early for my plane. I sat in the seat closest to the flight attendant's station.

An older man walked by with a small, younger woman. They looked out the floor to ceiling windows at the planes. He was old from work, you could tell that about him. A short man, black and gray short hair cut at home and thick black glasses. Big hands and forearms. He moved stiffly.

The woman was handicapped and retarded, from the way she walked and held herself. Her hair was short and uneven. Almost torn, not really cut. She wore denim coverall shorts, a jumper, over a pink short-sleeved shirt. Brown corrective shoes. She balled her right hand into a fist and punched her own right thigh. Slowly, she did it again. The bruise on her thigh showed purple and blue from under her shorts and slowly, she punched herself again. She and the man stood there. They looked out the window together.

"There's the plane," the man said. He had a little bit of the bayou in his voice. He looked around and nodded at me. I nodded back. The woman punched herself in the thigh. She said something, but I couldn't hear it.

"They'll take good care of you," he said. "You're going to go on that plane right there." He pointed out the steel and glass window at the runway and the plane closest to the window.

"I can't," she said. She punched her thigh.

The man put his hand on her back. She rested her head on his shoulder and she shook as she cried. His sleeve was wet with her tears when she stood straight.

“We can’t drive, honey,” he said. “You think about it.” He stepped away from the window and walked over and sat one seat away from me. He turned to me, as if we knew each other. “Doctors say she’ll kill herself with this,” he said and pretended to punch his own thigh. “Give herself a clot and break it loose and float to her heart. Then it’s over.” He stopped. “She used to do it once in a while, but the hurricanes were too much for her.”

The woman spoke. “Since I was eight,” she said. “I did this.”

He bent forward and looked at the carpet. He lifted his head and we both watched the woman. She was punching herself and softly crying as she looked at the plane. The voice over the loudspeaker system announced flights boarding.

The man got up and guided the woman over to the seat next to me.

“Pardon us,” he said.

“No problem,” I said.

The woman looked at me and smiled as she cried. Her face was red and streaked.

“I can’t,” she said to me.

I nodded. “It’s fine,” I said.

She managed to punch herself even sitting down.

“Just watch her, okay?” the man said. He held out a dollar bill, lengthwise and creased along the center, so it was stiff.

“That’s not necessary,” I said.

He tucked the single into my front shirt pocket. “Buy yourself a cold beer when you get the chance. You can still get cheap beer in the Quarter, if you look around for it.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Do you like the beer down here?” he said. “They used to brew Dixie beer right in the city. It was always pretty good.”

“If I’m thirsty, anything cold is good for me.”

“I like that beer they got from Abita,” he said. “I like Andygator best, and the Jockamo, with the Indian on the bottle.” He paused. “I got a cooler with a couple beers in it out in the back of the truck right now. I think I got a bottle of Jockamo in there.”

“I like the Andygator,” I said. “I’ve had that.”

“Used to drink a lot of Pabst Blue Ribbon,” he said. “PBR’s, we used to call ‘em.”

“I like the can,” I said. “They’re good if they’re cold.”

“My one cousin – Steve – he got up to Michigan, chasing a woman, a while back. So I’m sittin’ down here, sweatin’ my potatoes off, and the phone rings. I pick it up – Hello? And the voice says, Hey Cousin, it’s Steve! And I said; well alright Steve, how’s Michigan? And he says I had to call and tell you that the place we’re eating at has a drink on the menu called the Johnny Cash and I’m having one, what do you think it is? I said Steve, I have no idea and he said It’s an ice-cold PBR and I thought of you right away. I got a real laugh out of that, both because of the PBR and because I used to be such a big fan of Johnny Cash,” he finished. “I was so glad he called me to tell me that.”

“That’s something,” I said.

“It’s funny,” he said. “You never know when people are thinking of you.”

“No,” I agreed. “You never do.”

“I used to drink a lot of hard liquor,” he said. “Now I mostly drink beer, to keep cool.”

“I try not to drink when I’m working,” I said. “But afterwards I’ll have a few.”  
He nodded. “That’s the way to do it,” he said. He motioned at the woman. “Sit tight with her for me.”

“Okay,” I said.

He stood and walked over to the counter and I heard him talking to the woman about his tickets. They wouldn’t give him his money back on them.

The punching woman turned and looked at me.

“Were you here for the hurricanes?” she said.

“No,” I said. “Right after.”

“It scared me,” she said.

“I bet,” I said.

“We’re doing the best we can,” she said.

“Sure,” I said. “It’ll be okay.”

He came back over from the ticket counter.

“Nothing doing,” he said. He pointed at the punching woman. “She can’t fly.”

“I can’t fly,” she repeated.

“What are you going to do?” I said.

“I don’t know,” he said. His eyes filled up. “This is a hell of a mess.” He sat down on the other side of her. The punching woman stared straight ahead.

He kept talking. “Some of the family prays for her, but I don’t. Not anymore.” He turned to me. “Do you know what God is?” he said.

“No,” I said. “I don’t.”

“God is fear,” he said. “Fear that something bad will happen to you, if you don’t stay in good with Him.” He pointed around, at the whole terminal and the rest of the world beyond. “When you’ve seen all this,” he said, “what is there to be afraid of? There’s nothing left to be scared of. When you run out of fear, you stop believing in God.”

“These are hard times,” I said.

He patted the punching woman on the head. “She’s punched herself since she was eight years old. I can’t even imagine it anymore.” He raised his voice and then lowered it. “God better be afraid of me, that’s all I’ll say.” He looked over his shoulder at a man and woman leaving the terminal. His eyes glistened with water.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said.

He shook his head. “I don’t know what to tell myself either.”

The punching woman was still staring at the planes. “I can’t fly,” she said.

“We’ll drive,” he said. “Tonight we’ll drive to Baton Rouge and stay with Aunt Jean.” He stopped. “I’ll borrow some money from her and see if we can take their truck to Cleveland to drop you off.”

The woman shook her head yes.

“Maybe we’ll stop to see your cousins in Toledo and get some money there too.”

“Yes,” she said.

“And then I’ll have to leave you,” he said.

“No,” she said. She put her arms around his neck and even as she did it, she pulled her arm off to punch herself. They sat there crying and I stood up, as if my plane was boarding.

The man wiped his snot with a stained handkerchief. "Sorry about all this," he said. "We're having a tough day."

"No worries," I said. "I've had my share of those." I nodded. "Good luck to you."

The woman looked up at me. They both stood.

"Luck forgot about us," the man said. He walked a couple steps and turned around. "Can you give us a hand getting out to the parking lot? Have you got time?"

"I've got time," I said. I had already sent my bag through and I hadn't seen any line when I'd come through security. I'd leave myself time and go back through. I took the suitcase out of the punching woman's hand and walked slowly with them, back up the linoleum grade, into the main terminal.

"I'm just right out here in the parking garage," he said as we walked across in front of the ticket counters. We went through the doors and stepped outside.

The three of us walked past the concrete pillars and crossed the street into the first floor of the parking deck. We took an elevator to the second level and got out. There was a concrete deck overhead, but it was open-air on the sides of the deck, with some sun coming in. He was walking toward an old pick-up truck with Louisiana plates, among the rows of cars and trucks. Sportsman's Paradise it read at the bottom of the plate. The man took a key from his pocket and opened the passenger side first. The punching woman got in. He closed the door behind her. He reached into the bed of the pick-up.

"Have a beer," he said. He took the white lid off a cooler, pulled out a brown beer bottle and popped the top with an opener on his key ring. He handed it to me and popped one for himself. He raised his bottle and clinked it against mine. "Here's to you," he said. There was an Indian on the side of the bottle. "I love those Mardis Gras Indians," he said. "With the costumes and big feathers."

I raised my beer bottle. "Better times," I said.

"Here," he said to me. "Take a look over here." He opened a tackle box behind the driver's seat. He lifted out the removable middle and underneath were two flat automatic pistols.

"That small one is a Berretta," he said. "Pain in the ass to load, but it does the job up close. The other one's a Wilson concealed carry .45. That's a man-stopper."

"Nice," I said.

"The Berretta is my daddy's pistol," he said. "Kept it in his front pocket, even in church."

"Really?" I said.

"That pistol knows how to do its job," he said. "Let's leave it at that." He sipped his beer. "My daddy had a reputation around here and people thought twice before crossing him." He picked up the black Berretta and handed it to me. The metal was cold. It was hard to imagine something so lightweight ever spitting sudden, violent death.

"That's a special heirloom," I said, handing it back to him.

"We could do a private sale right here for say, about four hundred dollars and that would give me gas money to get her out of harm's way," he said. The punching woman sat in the passenger's seat, with her seatbelt on. He talked as if she wasn't there or couldn't hear him. He talked as if I might need to carry a gun. As if he knew who I'd been, years ago.

"I'm flying out in an hour," I said. "I have no way of transporting them."

"You don't have to carry them," he said. "I'll drive with 'em and once you get settled up North, I'll drive 'em right up to you. Keep right on going after I'm done dropping her off." He paused. "Just that I need that gas money to get me on the road today."

"Right," I said.

"You might need a pistol up North," he said. "Never know what might happen up there."

"I thought your truck wouldn't make it up North?" I said.

"That's if I got her," he said, looking at the punching woman. "If it's just me, I can get out and change a tire on the highway, or do whatever's necessary."

I sipped my beer. "No need for that," I said. The planes were loud coming and going and I could see the black tarmac and the sun-burned green grass.

"Suit yourself," he said. He had his beer in his hand.

"I can give you about two hundred fifty dollars," I said. "Will that help?"

"Two hundred fifty?" he said. "That's fine. That'll get me started. You can pay me the rest when you see me again." He wrote his number on a piece of paper and handed it to me. "That's my number, for when you come back down."

"That's fair," I said. "I'll probably be back in a month or two. As soon as the snow starts to fly up north." I nodded. I pulled some damp twenties out of my pocket, counted them, and handed him two hundred fifty dollars. I tore the scrap of paper he'd given to me in half and wrote the number of the office number of the wood-burning plant on it. I handed it to him. He handed it back to me.

"Put your name on the back of that," he said. "I'll forget." I did. He shook hands with me. "Good to know you," he said. "I'm Eddie Ourso." He motioned at the punching woman. "This is Lenore."

The phone rang late in the day at the yard and somebody motioned to me. I shut the saw down and took my helmet off. I walked into the office and put the phone to my ear. Snow was starting to come down.

"Yes," I said.

"Hey bud, it's Eddie from New Orleans, how you doin'?"

"Good Eddie, how 'bout yourself?"

"Hell never stops, you know, just keeps on going. Look, I got a question for you," he said.

"Go ahead," I told him.

"I got to pawn those guns, I need that money," he said. "She's back with me and I got no money for groceries." I could hear the hurt in his voice.

"Pawn 'em, Eddie," I said. "Get whatever you can for 'em."

"You sure?" he said. "I feel bad about doing it, but you understand, I'm in a tight spot here."

"No problem," I said.

"And I can't pay you back that money you gave me for 'em," he said.

"I understand," I said. "Do what you have to do. Buy me a beer when you see me."

“I will do that,” he said. “Get some time off and come down and we’ll go fishing and drink beer. On me.” He paused. “I hate to pawn my father’s gun,” he said. “Selling it was one thing, but pawning it,” he paused, “pawning is bad times.”

“He’d understand,” I said.

“No,” Eddie said. “No, he wouldn’t, but it’s nice of you to say that. He’d have beaten me to within an inch of my life if he knew about this.” He was crying now.

“Take it easy, buddy,” I said.

His voice was choked off. “His grave,” he said. “His grave was covered by thirty feet of water.”

I could hear him crying. “Hang in there,” I said.

“I will,” he sobbed. “I will.”

The cold and snow was everyday in Burlington. Late in the afternoon, on a Friday, I was standing in the loading yard talking to Steve, one of the yard foremen, when a Vermont State Police cruiser eased its way down the sloping entrance ramp and parked in front of the equipment shed. A plain blue cop-sedan followed right behind. A uniformed State Trooper got out of the cruiser. Another State Trooper got out of the passenger’s side. He had unclipped the shotgun from inside his car and stood there, watching me and Steve, holding the shotgun. We stopped talking. A cop in street clothes and a heavy jacket got out of the plain sedan. He had pushed his coat back, as if he might need to get at his revolver. Both cars had their engines running.

“Are you armed?” the street clothes cop said to me.

“No,” I said.

“Come over here,” he said. “Put your hands on my car and spread your legs.”

The one uniformed cop spoke to Steve. “Go on about your business,” he said.

“What the hell’s going on?” Steve said.

“Get out of here or I’ll throw you right in the back in cuffs,” the other trooper said. Both troopers were older. Steve walked into the shed, headed back to the fuel and feed-stock unit.

The troopers frisked me, took my pocketknife and put cuffs on me. They loaded me in the back of the plain cruiser. The street clothes cop got in and we pulled out of the yard, onto the highway. Headed south as the sun was going down under the snow clouds. He looked in the rearview mirror as he talked to me.

“Do you want to talk?” he said.

“I have no idea why I’m here,” I said.

He held a photograph against the dividing grate. It was a still photo from a surveillance camera. It showed me and Eddie Ourso, standing, leaning on his pickup truck. I was handing him the black Berretta.

“What did he do?” I said.

“I’d rather not say,” the cop said. “Right now, we’re interested in what you did.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“Sure,” the cop said. “You think about it. Maybe you’ll feel like talking at the station.” He sipped from a coffee cup. “From the looks of your record, I’d think about talking.”

The cuffs were tight on my wrists and every bump hurt, as I rode with my arms behind me. A car went past going north, tires crunching the snow. The uniformed troopers were behind us in their cruiser.

“He’s singing his head off down in Louisiana,” the cop said.

Lake Champlain was on our right as we drove and the sun shone faintly pink and purple, almost blue onto space between the scattered snow clouds. The colors reminded me of her. I thought of everything all at once – Eddie and Lenore and that we all bruise ourselves constantly and that the time in front of me was just a series of bad things that hadn’t happened yet. That my bruise from years ago had broken loose and was floating through me, looking to clog the veins and arteries of my life.

“We know your record,” the cop said. “You just found a loophole and got out. Shitty prosecution.” He sipped his coffee as he drove. “We’ll get you for the full-maximum on this one.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“I doubt that,” he said. “Maybe you’ll talk at the station. Maybe the smell of that room will remind you of inside.”

“I remember what it was like inside,” I said.

The cop kept talking, like all cops do. I stopped listening. I wondered what Eddie had done, to get himself into such a jam. I sat cuffed in the back, calm. Waiting for the station and the room and their lies and pressure. And release.

*Scott Wolven is the author of False Hopes (forthcoming) and Controlled Burn, with the title story recently selected for Best American Noir Stories of The Century. Seven years in a row, his stories have appeared in the Best American Mystery Stories Series. Wolven teaches in the Stonecoast MFA Program/University of Southern Maine. Big thanks out to all at Thuglit, especially Sam.*