

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

The texts that built the case against the death penalty

V . 1 4

**AN EYE
FOR AN EYE**

A Novella

CLARENCE DARROW

Reset in a Contemporary Context by
JEFF HOOD

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS
V. 14

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This edition resets the original story
in a contemporary context.

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FOREWORD

I have sat in rooms like this. Not once. Many times. The room where a person spends their last night alive before the state of a free republic comes in the morning and kills them. I know what the air in those rooms feels like. I know the quality of the light. I know the sounds that come through the walls at two in the morning — the institutional sounds that become grotesque on those specific nights, because you know what they mean. The footsteps. The doors. The machinery of bureaucratic death that has been running all night, quietly, preparing.

Darrow knew those rooms too, or he knew enough about them to write this story. What he gives us in *An Eye for an Eye* is something that no philosophical argument about the death penalty can quite accomplish: he makes you sit in the cell with a man who is going to die in the morning, and he makes you listen. Not to a saint. Not to a monster. To Jim Jackson, who killed his wife with a poker in a fit of rage after a bad day and a cooking dispute, and who is going to pay for it with his life, and who has spent the night explaining to his friend Hank how it all happened — not to excuse himself, but because he needs someone to understand.

What Darrow understood — and what this story demonstrates more powerfully than any treatise — is that the question of capital punishment cannot be separated from the question of poverty. Jim Jackson is not a wealthy man who had every advantage and chose violence anyway. He is a man who grew up

without parents, raised by an aunt in one of the hardest neighborhoods of a hard city, who did manual labor for wages that kept him permanently behind, who lived with debt as a constant presence, whose marriage buckled under financial pressure that would have strained any relationship, who drank because the culture of physical labor assumed drinking, who had a bad day and came home to a fight that escalated beyond what he intended or imagined.

None of this excuses the killing. Darrow is not asking you to excuse it. He is asking you to understand it — and then to ask whether the state has the right to kill this man, given that the state created and maintained the conditions that produced him. That question is not simple. It is not answered by the verdict. It is not answered by the sentence. It hangs in the air of the cell all night, unresolved, while the sounds of preparation come through the walls.

I have heard that question asked by men who were going to die in the morning. I have never heard a satisfying answer. The arguments for the death penalty — deterrence, justice, closure for victims' families — all feel abstract and thin when you are sitting with someone who is about to be killed for something that took thirty seconds of his life and that he has been reliving every night for three years. The punishment feels untethered from the crime. The crime was committed in a specific moment, by a specific version of Jim Jackson who was drunk and cold and angry and had seen the poker lying there. The man being executed is a different person — older, sober, full of sorrow, able

to see exactly what happened and why. We kill the latter for what the former did. And we tell ourselves this is justice.

What Darrow is really arguing, through the long night of Jim's story, is something that the subsequent century of criminological research has abundantly confirmed: that crime is produced by conditions, not by some irreducible evil in certain human beings; that those conditions are social and economic and addressable; and that a society which refuses to address them while executing the people they produce is engaged in a profound moral evasion. We kill the individual and leave the conditions untouched, and then we are surprised when there are more individuals.

Jim Jackson tells his story in the vernacular of working-class Chicago in 1905. We have reset it here in the vernacular of working-class St. Louis in 2026, because the story is the same story. The specific forms of economic precarity have changed — the switch-yards have become fulfillment centers, the horse-drawn peddler's cart has become a delivery app's algorithm — but the fundamental situation is unchanged. A man with no financial cushion, no reliable work, no access to good legal representation, no social capital, and a marriage under impossible strain ends up in a cell the night before his execution, trying to explain to someone he trusts that he is not what the newspaper said he was. Not a demon. Not a monster. Just a man who did a terrible thing in a moment when everything had gone wrong, and who has been paying for it ever since, and who is about to pay the final price.

I have never been able to answer the question of what justice requires in such a case. I know what mercy requires. I know what the Gospel requires. I know what the tradition that produced me — the tradition that says every human life is sacred, that no one is beyond redemption, that the point of punishment is transformation and not destruction — demands of us when we face such a man.

It does not demand his death.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood
North Little Rock, Arkansas
2026

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE AUTHOR

Clarence Seward Darrow (1857-1938) is best remembered as the greatest criminal defense attorney in American history — the man who defended Leopold and Loeb in 1924, who stood for John Scopes in the Tennessee evolution trial in 1925, who argued against capital punishment in dozens of high-profile cases and delivered some of the most powerful anti-death-penalty oratory ever recorded. He was also a writer, and *An Eye for an Eye* (1905) is his second and last novel, following the autobiographical *Farmington* (1904), and the only one he gave over entirely to crime and punishment: a short novel that puts his legal philosophy into narrative form, making through story the argument he could not always make through law.

Darrow wrote the story during the period when he was most active in capital cases, when he had sat with enough condemned men to understand exactly what the night before an execution felt like from the inside. The question the book puts, and never answers in the abstract because it refuses to leave the cell, is what anyone gains by killing this man.

THE STORY

In the original, *An Eye for an Eye* is the story of a single night at the Cook County Jail in Chicago.

Hank Clery, a workingman, visits his friend Jim Jackson, who is to be executed at dawn for the murder of his wife. Jim, who has not spoken freely to anyone since his arrest, tells Hank the whole story — his childhood, his work, his marriage, the debt that accumulated like water, the cold November day that ended in a moment of violence he did not plan and cannot fully explain.

Darrow structures the story as a confession, but not a confession of guilt in the legal sense. Jim knows he is guilty. He is not asking to be excused. He is asking to be understood — asking that the full context of his life be considered alongside the single act for which he is being killed. The story is Darrow's argument that this is never possible under the death penalty: that the legal process strips context away, leaves only the act, and kills the person who remains after the act has been metabolized and mourned and fully comprehended. The person who dies is not the person who killed.

THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING

This edition moves the story from Chicago to St. Louis, Missouri, and resets it in 2026. Jim Jackson in this version works in a fulfillment center and then as a gig delivery driver rather than in the railroad switch-yards and as a potato peddler. The specific textures of poverty have changed; its structure has not.

The move from Illinois to Missouri is not incidental. Illinois has one of the most significant death penalty histories in the United States. In January 2000, Governor George Ryan — a

Republican — declared a moratorium on executions after thirteen men on Illinois death row were exonerated and released, more than had been executed in the same period. Ryan called the system “arbitrary and capricious” and said he could not in good conscience allow executions to continue under a system so demonstrably prone to error. In January 2003, on his last day in office, Ryan commuted the sentences of all 167 people on Illinois death row to life imprisonment — the largest mass commutation in American history. Illinois formally abolished capital punishment in 2011 under Governor Pat Quinn.

Ryan’s moratorium was one of the most consequential acts of executive conscience in the history of American criminal justice. It was a direct vindication of everything Darrow argued in this story a century earlier: that the system is not reliable enough, not fair enough, and not accurate enough to justify an irreversible penalty. The thirteen exonerations that moved Ryan to act were not anomalies. They were the visible portion of a systemic failure.

Missouri, by contrast, has continued to carry out executions into the present decade, making it one of the most active death penalty states in the country. St. Louis — like Chicago, a working-class industrial city with deep economic inequality, a large poor population, and a criminal justice system that has consistently failed its most vulnerable residents — is a setting where Jim Jackson’s story is not hypothetical. It is happening now.

Everything essential to Darrow's story is preserved: the humanity of the condemned man, the weight of economic circumstance, the inadequacy of his legal representation, the arbitrariness of who gets executed, and the long night in the cell when someone finally listens to the full story no court was willing to hear.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The original story is told in Jim Jackson's dialect — the vernacular of working-class Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century. This contemporary setting preserves the character's voice: Jim speaks naturally, plainly, without the vocabulary of education or legal training. His story is told the way he would tell it, not the way a lawyer would summarize it.

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

I

The Visit

When Hank Clery parked on Tucker Boulevard in downtown St. Louis, he sat in the car for a minute before getting out. It was just getting dark, a cold early November evening, and the City Justice Center rose above the street in the way that buildings built for confinement do — massive and self-contained, telling you from a distance that whatever happens inside happens away from everything else. Hank had never been inside. He had been arrested once, years back, after a scuffle outside a bar on South Grand, and processed and released from a district station before they had reason to move him anywhere. He had paid a fine his sister helped cover. He did not think of himself as someone who went to jail.

He thought about Jim Jackson a lot lately. He had been thinking about him ever since the priest from Saint Cecilia's had come to his apartment and told him Jim had asked for him. Jim had no family left. He had a boy, five years old now, being raised by his dead wife's mother somewhere on the south side. For most of the three years Jim had not been told where. Hank had told the priest he would go. He had not really wanted to, but Jim had asked specifically for him, and you could not say no to something like that.

He checked in at the visitor window, showed his ID, surrendered his phone in a plastic bag, and

passed through two sets of security doors into a waiting area where perhaps twenty people sat on attached plastic chairs. Most of them were women. Some had children with them. They all had a quality of practiced stillness — the stillness of people who had been waiting in rooms like this for a long time and had learned not to expend energy on anything except waiting. They held bags and containers of food and folded letters. Hank sat among them and felt conspicuous, the way you feel when you walk into a church service already in progress.

When his name was called, a corrections officer named Reyes walked him through a fluorescent corridor that buzzed very faintly, at a frequency you registered somewhere below conscious thought.

“Death watch started two weeks ago,” Reyes said. “He’s been on the special unit since then. You’ll have ninety minutes. Jackson’s a good one. No trouble the whole time he’s been here.” He stopped at a reinforced door and ran his badge. “Whatever he did out there, in here he’s been decent. You’ll see.”

The special housing unit smelled of industrial cleaning solution and something underneath it that Hank couldn’t name. The cell was the third from the end — a bunk, a steel toilet, a fixed desk, a window the size of a legal pad looking into the corridor rather than outside. On the wall Jim had taped a printed photograph of a small boy with white-blond curly hair, smiling at the camera from someone’s backyard.

Then Jim was standing up from the edge of the bunk with his hand out through the slot in the door and Hank took it, and it was the same hand he remembered — big, calloused, with an old scar

across the knuckles — and the feeling of the crime and the sentence and all the rest of it dropped away for a moment and it was just Jim, just his old friend Jim, thinner and grayer but with the same eyes.

“I’m awful glad you came,” Jim said. “I been looking for you since two o’clock.”

Reyes unlocked the door and brought a second chair. He said he would be at the end of the corridor if they needed anything. “You can talk,” he said. “I won’t hear it.”

II

Where I Came From

They sat across from each other in the small cell. The corridor hummed with the distant sounds of the facility. Jim looked at his hands for a moment and then looked up at Hank.

"You want to know how it happened," he said. "Not just what happened — how it happened. Nobody in that courtroom wanted to hear how it happened. My lawyer kept saying 'what does that have to do with anything' and the judge ruled out half of what I tried to say. I need you to know, and I need to tell somebody before — well. Before."

"Tell me," Hank said.

"I was born here in St. Louis," Jim said. "I grew up in Jeff-Vander-Lou, on the north side. My mother was in and out of treatment and my father I never knew. My aunt Patrice raised me from when I was about four. She worked double shifts at Barnes-Jewish doing laundry and housekeeping. She made sure I went to school. I got as far as junior year at Soldan, and then she had a stroke and I had to quit and get a job.

"I got on at a fulfillment center out in Earth City — one of the big warehouse operations out near the airport. Sorting, packing, loading. They had quotas and they tracked everything you did on a scanner. Your rate fell below standard, they put you on a performance plan. Most people couldn't keep the rate long term. Lot of turnover. But the ones who

stayed — and I stayed three years — you get close. Ten-hour shifts in a building the size of six football fields and you're moving the whole time.

"There was a guy named Carlos Restrepo on the belt next to mine. Good man, two kids, sent money home to his mother in Jalisco. One morning one of the automated carts malfunctioned and hit a loaded pallet and the pallet hit Carlos. He went out in an ambulance and never came back to the floor. I went to see him at the hospital and he seemed okay, but the company fought his claim, and the last I heard he was still in physical therapy eighteen months later still fighting their lawyers. After that I couldn't work the floor the same way. When the machinery moved wrong I'd freeze. My rate went down. They put me on the plan. I knew what that meant.

"So I got a job doing deliveries. App-based, you know how it works. You sign up, you get a bag, you pick up restaurant orders and deliver them. You're an independent contractor so there's no benefits, no workers' comp, nothing. You're renting out your car and your body for about twelve, thirteen dollars an hour before expenses. But it was flexible and I could work as much as I wanted and I wasn't on a warehouse floor with autonomous carts anymore.

"That's when I was living with my aunt. She passed away that next summer and I was on my own. I moved into a one-bedroom on the south side, rent was twelve hundred a month. I was working twelve hours a day to cover that plus the car payment and insurance and gas. I was always a little behind. Every month I started out a little more behind than the month before."

III

Maria

"I met Maria at a restaurant on Washington Avenue — one of those places where I picked up orders three or four times a week. She was a server. Good-looking woman, laugh that you could hear across a room. We traded numbers. We went out a few times. I was thirty-two and I'd never had a serious relationship, and I was lonely in that way you get when you've been working too hard for too long and you forget there's anything else.

"We got together quick. Within three months she was basically living at my place. She was good. I want to be clear about that. She was a good person and she worked hard and she was better to me than I probably deserved. But two people in a one-bedroom on the south side, both in service work, both with unstable income — it's a lot of pressure.

"We got married at City Hall. Her family threw a small reception — her mom Delores and two sisters and some cousins. My side was just one buddy from the warehouse and his wife. It was a good day. About three weeks later she found out she was pregnant.

"I wasn't ready. I'm going to be honest about that. I was already behind on rent. My car needed brakes. I had a payday loan rolling over every month that was eating two hundred dollars in fees alone. And now we were going to have a baby, and Maria couldn't do long restaurant shifts through

the last trimester, and the hospital bills — we had marketplace insurance with a sixty-five-hundred-dollar deductible. That was basically all the money I had in the world.

“When Marcus was born I forgot all that for a while. He came out with this white-blond hair — nobody knows where that came from, neither of us is blond — and these serious dark eyes, and I held him in the delivery room and everything else went quiet for a minute. I would have done anything for that kid. I still would.

“But the bills didn’t go away because the baby was beautiful. I was doing fifty, sixty hours a week on deliveries and still not making it. Maria went back to work at four months. Her mom watched Marcus three days a week. We put him in a day care program the other two days, six hundred a month we didn’t have. We put it on a credit card. We put the brakes on a credit card. We fell behind on the hospital payment plan. The collectors started calling. The day care said they needed current payment or they’d hold his spot.

“We started fighting about money. Of course we did. There was nothing else to fight about. And the fights got worse. Once I hit her. I’m not going to minimize it. She went to the police. The judge read me out and fined me three hundred dollars I didn’t have, and I did three days in county until she came and asked them to release me. We talked about separating but couldn’t afford the lawyer. The priest said divorce wasn’t something the Church could sanction under our circumstances. The mediator at the community center said to stay together and work on it.

“So we stayed. It was better for a while. Then it wasn’t.”

IV

The Steak

"I need to tell you about the steak," Jim said. "That's really where it started, that night. Not the steak itself — what it meant, and how it got there.

"It was the fourteenth of November. I'd been doing pickups since six in the morning. First real cold of the season, one of those days where the wind is wet and gets through your coat. I hadn't dressed for it. The car was losing heat on one side — the passenger blower was broken — so every time I opened the door to pick up an order the cold came in at me. By noon I'd done eighteen pickups and made maybe seventy-five dollars before expenses.

"I stopped at a bar on Cherokee for lunch. The bartender knew me and gave me a beer with my food. Then I ran into some guys I knew. Then there was a guy running for alderman who came in and bought a round. Then the guy running against him. I'm telling you how it goes. By the time I left it was four in the afternoon and I'd had six, seven drinks over four hours and hadn't eaten much, and everything felt slightly blurred at the edges.

"I got back in the car and did more pickups. My rate was bad. The app was sending notifications. I had fifty-three dollars in the account and rent was due in two weeks. Maria had told me that morning she thought Marcus might be getting an ear

infection and asked if we had money for urgent care. I'd told her to wait and see.

"I was driving down South Grand around sixty and passed a butcher shop — one of the good ones, with cuts behind glass. I thought: I'm going to bring home something nice. I'm going to bring home a good piece of meat and cook it and we're going to sit at the table together and have a decent meal and things will be all right for one evening.

"I bought a twelve-ounce sirloin for fourteen dollars I didn't really have. Wrapped it in white butcher paper and put it on the passenger seat and drove home.

"When I came in, Marcus was crying in the bedroom and Maria was in the kitchen and she didn't look up. I said hello and she said 'he's been crying for two hours.' I said I was sorry. I showed her the steak. She said 'I already started pasta.'

"I said let's skip the pasta and cook the steak. She said she'd already put the water on. I said the water could wait. She didn't think that was funny. I went in to check on Marcus and sat with him until he settled. When I came out she was at the stove and I watched her take the steak out of the paper, put it in the pan, and reach for the kettle.

"I said don't add water. She said what. I said don't add water to the steak, it'll ruin it — you lose all the flavor. She said this is how she always cooked steak. I said I knew that and it was always wrong. She said I could cook it myself then. I reached over to take the kettle and she turned it into the pan and the steam and hot water and grease splattered up in my face. I grabbed the kettle and said what the hell is wrong with you.

"She said 'don't touch me.' I said 'you just burned me.' She said 'good.' I said if she ever did something like that again I'd — and I said something I shouldn't have said. I didn't mean it. But she heard it.

"She turned around from the stove and looked at me different from how she usually looked at me when we were fighting. Not afraid — the opposite of afraid. She put her back against the counter and said 'go ahead.' I said go ahead what. She said 'you know what. Go ahead. If that's what you're going to do, do it. I'm tired of waiting for it.'

"I told her to shut up. She said she wasn't going to shut up. She said she was leaving. I said she'd said that before. She said this time she meant it — she'd called her sister that afternoon. I said she wasn't taking Marcus. She said watch her.

"And she came right up close to me and she looked me in the eyes and she said: Kill me. If you're going to do it, just do it. I am not afraid of you anymore. Kill me.

"There was a fireplace in the apartment — one of those old St. Louis apartments where it's decorative, can't actually use it, but they keep the iron tools there. The poker was in the stand by the hearth. I had walked past it a thousand times.

"She said it again. Kill me. And I reached down and picked up the poker and I brought it down across her head.

"She fell. And I stood there with the poker in my hand and I waited for her to get up."

V

After

Jim stopped. Outside the cell the corridor hummed. Somewhere down the unit a door opened and closed. Hank got two bottles of water from Officer Reyes. Jim drank half of his without stopping.

"I waited for her to get up," he said. "I thought she was playing. I sat down in the chair across from her and watched her. She didn't move. I went over and felt for her pulse at her wrist and thought I felt it, then wasn't sure. I poured water over her face. Nothing.

"I knew then. I knew before I looked carefully at her head. There was a lot of blood.

"I don't know how to tell you what the next few hours were like. I prayed. I haven't prayed since my aunt made me go to church as a kid, but I got down on the floor next to her and I prayed as hard as I have ever done anything. I begged God to bring her back. I told him everything I should have done differently. I promised things.

"She didn't come back.

"Marcus was asleep. He was two years old and he was asleep in his room and I went in and looked at him and he had no idea. He was curled on his side with his fists closed and his mouth slightly open, the way little kids sleep, like they're not afraid of anything. I stayed in the doorway a long time.

"Then I washed her face. Fixed her hair. Put a towel under her jaw. Wrapped her in a blanket from

the hall closet. Cleaned the floor. I don't know why I did those things in that order. It seemed like something that needed doing before anything else could happen.

"I waited until the building got quiet, after midnight. Then I carried her to my car in the parking garage. I don't think anyone saw me."

VI

The Drive

"I drove south on 55. It was a cold clear night, same cold as all day but still now, and the highway was almost empty. I had thought I knew where I was going — there's a flooded quarry off a county road near Festus, a place I'd been once years ago with some friends. Deep, limestone walls, isolated. I drove about forty-five minutes before I found it.

"The whole time I drove I felt her in the car. Not a ghost — I'm not saying that. I just felt as if she was present. I felt as if she could hear me. I talked to her. I said I was sorry. I said it so many times the words stopped making sense.

"I got the car off the road at a gravel pull-off and carried her through a field and to the edge of the quarry. I said something at the edge — I don't know if it was a prayer or what — and I let her go. I heard her hit the water. I stood at the quarry for a few minutes and then walked back to the car.

"I drove back to the city. Parked. Went up to the apartment. Checked on Marcus. Still sleeping. I packed a bag — clothes, my wallet, my phone. I stood in his doorway again for a long time. I could not wake him. I could not explain to a two-year-old. I thought her mother would come. I thought someone would come.

"I left him.

"I know. There's nothing I can say about it. I left my son asleep in his crib and I walked out of the

apartment. When I think about what I did wrong — and I have thought about nothing else — that's the thing I can't find any way around. The killing I can explain, step by step, how it got there, even if explaining it isn't excusing it. But leaving Marcus I can't explain at all. I just left him.

“He was found the next morning when he started crying and the neighbor heard him through the wall. He was fine — hungry and scared, but fine. He was with his grandmother Delores by that afternoon. That's what I was told later.”

VII

Running

"I took the Greyhound from the downtown station south to Memphis, then a bus to Jackson, Mississippi. I had about four hundred dollars in cash. I got a room at a motel for a week and then found work at a lumber operation about forty miles outside the city, hauling logs. Hard outdoor work and I was around no one who knew anything about me. I told them I was from Cincinnati. I told everyone I was from Cincinnati.

"The work helped. Not morally — it kept me from going out of my mind. Ten hours of physical labor, and then you eat whatever you can put together, and then you're too tired to think clearly. The thinking happened in the mornings before you were fully awake. For a few seconds I didn't know where I was, and then it all came back at once.

"I dreamed about Marcus. About Maria too. In the dreams she was usually alive and fine and we were just going about our lives. Those were worse than the dreams where I was being chased.

"I'd been there about three weeks when one of the guys showed me something on his phone. Someone had tagged a news clip in a Facebook group — St. Louis news — a wanted man in connection with a missing woman. My work ID photo from the fulfillment center. My name. A tip line number.

“The guy looked at the photo and then looked at me and I could see him working something out. I finished my shift, drew my pay, and left that night without telling anyone. I walked miles down a county road and found another small town and looked for work.

“I was caught twelve days later. I was in bad shape — I’d slept rough several nights, my clothes were in poor condition, I’d lost weight. Someone in a gas station thought they recognized me and called it in. A county sheriff’s deputy brought me in. The facial recognition confirmation took about four minutes, they said.

“They extradited me to St. Louis. There were two detectives from the city. They were not unkind. One of them had been following the case. He asked me questions and I answered them. I told him more than my lawyer later said I should have. But I was exhausted and I couldn’t see what difference it made.

“When we came back into the city, when the car came through the north side neighborhoods, I looked at everything through the window and tried to memorize it. I knew I would not see those streets again.”

VIII

The Trial

“The trial. I’ll tell you about the trial.

“The court appointed me a public defender named Gutierrez. A young woman who’d been a lawyer three years. Forty-two open cases — she told me this herself, not as a complaint, just as context for why she would not be available by phone most of the time. She came to the jail three times before trial. Each time she had about forty minutes. She told me she couldn’t pursue an insanity defense because we had no funds for an independent psychiatric evaluation and the state’s examiner had found me competent. She said she would do everything she could.

“I believed her. I think she meant it. I also think forty-two cases meant she was doing a lot of things at once.

“The trial lasted four days. The state called eleven witnesses — the neighbor who heard us fighting and heard Maria fall, the detective who interviewed me in Mississippi, the forensic examiner who matched the wound to the poker, the pathologist on cause of death. They had my phone’s location data — the route I drove that night, where I stopped. They had security camera footage from the parking garage and from a gas station on 55 heading south.

“My lawyer cross-examined each of them. She made some points. The neighbor admitted she’d

heard us fighting many times before and never previously called the police. The detective admitted I had not been threatening or resistant at the time of arrest. It wasn't enough.

"I testified. I wanted to tell the full story — the whole story, the way I'm telling you now, starting from the beginning. The prosecutor objected to large portions of my testimony as irrelevant. The judge sustained most of those objections. What the jury heard was: I bought a steak, I came home, we argued, I picked up the poker and struck her once, she died, I disposed of the body, I fled. That is accurate. It is about one percent of the story.

"The prosecutor in his closing called me predatory. Said I had come home looking for a fight. Said the steak was pretext. Said there were women all over this city afraid to leave their partners because of cases like mine. He wasn't entirely wrong about any of it, and he wasn't entirely right about any of it, and the jury found me guilty of first-degree murder in about three hours."

I X

The Sentence

"The judge sentenced me to death. He said it was a grave responsibility but that some crimes by their nature required the ultimate penalty. He said Maria deserved justice. He said Marcus deserved to grow up in a world where what happened to his mother was acknowledged by the full weight of the law.

"I thought about telling the judge that Marcus was going to grow up in a world where both his parents were dead. But I didn't.

"I appealed. It took fourteen months for the appellate court to rule. They affirmed. There were procedural grounds they could have used to send it back for a new trial — an issue with jury selection — but the court declined. My lawyer took it to the state Supreme Court. Another eight months. Also affirmed.

"Then the governor's petition. Gutierrez put together a clemency petition and worked hard on it. She reached out to people who knew me — people from the warehouse, from my delivery days, the priest from Saint Cecilia's, who wrote a letter. She argued that the mitigation evidence had never been presented at trial. She argued I was not a risk to anyone, that I had shown genuine remorse, that execution served no purpose.

"Three weeks ago I got word that the petition was denied.

"That was the last thing. So. Here we are.

"I need you to know where Marcus is. They finally told me last month. He's with Maria's mother — Delores Velasquez — in Benton Park. I want to know he's going to be all right. I'm not asking you to be his father. I'm asking you to know he exists and to know where he is. Can you do that?"

Hank said yes.

"And one more thing. I don't want him to know what I did. Not now, when he's five. Maybe when he's older you can decide. But I want you to tell him the whole thing, if you ever do. Not what the newspaper said. The whole thing. The steak and the quarry and the drive south and the trial and all of it. Not so he understands, necessarily. Not so he forgives me. Just so he has the real story. So he knows his father wasn't a monster. He was a man who was tired and poor and stupid about the most important moment of his life."

He looked at the photograph on the wall. The boy with the white-blond hair.

"He's going to be something," Jim said. "You can tell by looking at a kid sometimes. He's going to be something."

X

Morning

At four-fifteen in the morning there was a sound from somewhere in the facility — mechanical, deliberate, different from the ordinary institutional sounds of the night. Hank did not ask what it was. Jim heard it too, sat very still, then went to the window and looked out into the corridor and came back and sat on the bunk.

"They're doing the equipment check," he said. "They do it early. You'll want to leave soon. Breakfast comes, then the priest, and after that it's just protocol."

He looked at Hank with a face that was calm in a way Hank couldn't fully account for — not peaceful, not resigned, just present. The way a person looks when something is happening whether or not they can find a way to process it.

"I'm glad you came," Jim said. "You're the only one I asked. I thought about who I wanted here and it was just you. I don't know what that says about my life that it was just you, but I don't mean anything bad by it. I just mean you're the one I trusted."

"I know," Hank said.

"Don't let what happened to me make you careful," Jim said. "I mean don't let it make you shrink. I know that sounds strange. But I've been in here three years thinking about what I'd do different, and most of it is just: be in the world

more. Care about people. I was so inside my own trouble I couldn't see anything else. Maria was in trouble too. I could see it but I couldn't actually see it. I was too far inside my own head. So don't do that."

Hank was close to crying. He pressed the backs of his hands against his eyes for a moment.

"You can go," Jim said. "You should go. I'm all right."

They stood up. Through the slot in the door they shook hands, and Hank held Jim's hand for a moment, and Jim let him.

"Tell him the whole story," Jim said. "When the time is right."

Hank said he would.

He went out through the door. Officer Reyes was waiting at the end of the corridor, respectful, not hurrying. As they walked back through the facility toward the entrance, Hank heard, from somewhere behind him, what might have been Marcus's name — spoken very quietly, once, to no one.

Outside it was still dark, but the sky to the east was beginning to change color. Hank stood on the sidewalk on Tucker Boulevard for a moment. A delivery truck went by, its lights bright in the early morning, the driver invisible behind the windshield, heading somewhere.

He put his hands in his jacket pockets and started walking toward his car.

EDITORIAL APPARATUS

Definitions and Terms

Clarence Darrow (1857-1938): The author of this work — American defense attorney, lecturer, and writer, widely considered the greatest criminal defense lawyer in American history. His most famous cases include the defense of Eugene Debs during the Pullman Strike (1894), the Leopold and Loeb murder trial (1924), and the Scopes evolution trial (1925). He was a lifelong opponent of capital punishment and argued against it in dozens of cases over his career. He published two novels, the autobiographical *Farmington* (1904) and *An Eye for an Eye* (1905).

Hank Clery: Jim's visitor, and the eyes the story is told through — a workingman and an old friend from the years they worked together. In the original he is a switchman in the railroad yards; in this edition a warehouse and logistics worker. His role is to listen: he is the audience for Jim's story, the one person who asked to hear the whole truth before the execution.

Jim Jackson: The condemned man — convicted of the murder of his wife and awaiting execution at dawn. Darrow designed Jim not as a monster but as an ordinary working-class man whose crime grew out of circumstances: poverty, debt, a bad marriage under financial strain, a day of cold and drink, a moment of fury. His name is deliberately plain and common, suggesting he could be anyone.

St. Louis City Justice Center: The jail where Jim is held, a real institution in St. Louis on Tucker Boulevard in downtown. The original story's Cook County Jail, where the Haymarket anarchists were held before their 1887 execution — an event Darrow considered a judicial murder — has been moved to its Missouri equivalent, a city that remains an active death penalty jurisdiction.

The death watch: The round-the-clock guard placed on a prisoner in the days before their scheduled execution, ensuring they do not harm themselves or attempt escape. In both the original and this edition, the death watch has been running for two weeks — the institutional machinery of execution has been in motion long before the morning it culminates.

The fulfillment center: The modern equivalent of Darrow's railroad switch-yards — the large automated warehouse where Jim works until a coworker is crushed by a malfunctioning cart and he can no longer stand the floor. The switch-yards in the original are places of constant physical danger, where workers are routinely injured and killed; the fulfillment center carries the same combination of physical hazard, algorithmic control, and expendability of workers.

Gig delivery work: The contemporary equivalent of Darrow's potato-peddling — piecework, paid per delivery, no benefits, no protections, classified as "independent contracting" to avoid labor law obligations. Jim's shift from warehouse work to delivery driving mirrors the original's shift from the

railroad yards to the horse-and-wagon peddling route: a step down in stability, taken because the more stable work became untenable after witnessing a colleague's injury.

The steak: The piece of sirloin Jim buys on impulse on the way home — fourteen dollars in this edition, fifteen cents in the original. In both versions it represents the same thing: a small gesture toward decency in a life of scarcity, a bid for a good evening, a hope that things might be all right for one night. The cooking dispute over the steak is the immediate trigger of the killing. Darrow chose the steak deliberately — its smallness is the point. Jim is going to be executed over a ruined piece of meat.

The public defender: Darrow's original has a young, inexperienced court-appointed lawyer who genuinely tries but is overwhelmed by the case and the public climate. This edition's Gutierrez carries the same function: a lawyer who means well, who has forty-two open cases, who cannot give Jim the representation his case requires because the system does not fund adequate representation for poor defendants. The inadequacy of Jim's legal defense is structural, not personal.

Marcus: Jim's son, two years old on the night of the killing and five on the night of the story, with white-blond curly hair — one of the emotional centers of the story. In both editions, Jim's love for the boy is unambiguous and genuine. The boy is the person Jim cannot explain himself to, cannot say goodbye to, cannot protect from what is about to happen. He is also the one person Jim leaves behind when he

flees — the act Jim cannot forgive himself for, more than the killing itself.

Lethal injection: The method of execution in this edition, replacing the hanging of the original. Missouri has carried out its executions by lethal injection since 1989 and remains among the most active execution states in the country. The change in method does not change Darrow's argument: the point is not how the state kills but that it does.

Darrow's argument: Never stated as a proposition, always embedded in the story — that crime is produced by circumstance, not by irreducible evil in certain human beings; that the social and economic conditions that produce crime are addressable; and that a society which executes the people those conditions produce, while leaving the conditions untouched, is engaged in a profound moral evasion. The death penalty, in Darrow's view, is not justice. It is vengeance — and vengeance masquerading as justice is worse than either one alone.

Further Reading

BY DARROW

Darrow, Clarence. Resist Not Evil. Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1903. Darrow's major nonfiction statement on crime and punishment, published two years before this novella; the theoretical framework that *An Eye for an Eye* dramatizes.

Darrow, Clarence. Crime: Its Cause and Treatment. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1922. His most systematic account of the relationship between environment, poverty, and criminal behavior — the argument of *An Eye for an Eye* extended and documented at length.

Darrow, Clarence. "Address to the Prisoners in the Cook County Jail." 1902. A lecture delivered at the actual institution where Jim Jackson is held; Darrow's direct statement of his philosophy to the people it most concerns. Available in multiple anthologies.

THE SERIES

Beccaria, Cesare. An Essay on Crimes and Punishments. V. 5. Edited and modernized by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The Enlightenment foundation — the argument from which all modern abolitionist writing descends.

Spear, Charles. Essays on the Punishment of Death. V. 10. Edited and modernized by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The American abolitionist tradition, 1844.

Burleigh, Charles C. Thoughts on the Death Penalty. Edited and modernized by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. The mid-century American argument — Burleigh engages the same scripture debates that Bovee addresses in Christ and the Gallows.

Bovee, Marvin H. Christ and the Gallows. V. 13. Edited and modernized by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. Published thirty-six years before Darrow's novella, Bovee's insanity chapter anticipates Darrow's argument about circumstance and responsibility.

ON CRIME, POVERTY, AND PUNISHMENT

Stevenson, Bryan. Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption. Spiegel & Grau, 2014. The contemporary account most directly resonant with Jim Jackson's story: inadequate legal representation, economic marginalization, the irremediability of wrongful execution, and the persistent humanity of the condemned.

Alexander, Michelle. The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. The New Press, 2010. The structural account of how poverty and race interact in the American criminal justice system — the framework within which Jim Jackson's story, and thousands of stories like it, occur.

Gawande, Atul. "Hellhole." *The New Yorker*, March 2009. On solitary confinement and the psychology of isolation — relevant to what Jim has experienced in the years between his arrest and the night of the story.

Western, Bruce. *Punishment and Inequality in America*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2006. The social science behind Darrow's intuition: the relationship between economic inequality, incarceration, and the perpetuation of poverty.

FICTION IN THE TRADITION

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. Harper & Brothers, 1940. The major American novel in Darrow's tradition — a young Black man in Chicago, economic deprivation, a killing, an unfair trial, a death sentence. Wright acknowledged Darrow's influence.

Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. Random House, 1966. The nonfiction novel that does for the condemned men Perry Smith and Dick Hickock what Darrow does for Jim Jackson: insists on their full humanity while neither excusing nor minimizing what they did.

COMPLICIT PRESS

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

The texts that built the case against the death penalty