

The Pro Bono Lawyer

Eren Cain

1. The Dead Girl

Dick Berryman stood over the small, sheeted body of the girl who had been his client. Her brother had called him because there was no one else to call, and Dick was her pro bono lawyer.

Dick pulled back the sheet and winced. Amber Jax was eighteen years old, but barely looked sixteen. Even in death, she was a sad beauty with her high cheekbones and nose like a knife. A dingy, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” tank top barely covered her chest. It was her eyes that Dick would never forget. Huge blue pools frozen wide open by death.

Dick’s hand closed her eyes, a violation of hospital policy, but he didn’t really give a shit. Amber’s eyelids and face felt oily and waxen beneath his fingers, and despite being a recovering alcoholic Dick decided he needed a drink. But that was the thing about quitting drinking, it meant you could have one from time to time.

“See you, Apple Jax,” Dick whispered Amber’s nickname to her corpse and thought about her three-year old son, Jonah. Dick had been preparing with Amber for six months to defend her against the state and its action by the Department of Child and Family Services to terminate Amber’s parental rights and take Jonah. Dick looked down again at Amber’s dead face and saw Jonah being led away by a social worker into the foster system’s labyrinth.

“Life’s a bitch and then you die,” fired through his mind, or his own saying, which was “Thanks for the cherry on top of my shit sundae.”

But she hadn’t been using, at least Dick didn’t think so. Heroin had killed her husband and all Amber had tried to do was be a single mom. Now Amber was dead. How? Dick would arrange for her funeral only after he saw to it that Bill Broom, the county coroner, did a thorough autopsy. For now, Amber’s body would lie in the sallow light of St. Mary’s ER.

Amber Jax was truly a victim of society, crucified by the church league for leaving Jonah inside a parked car with open windows outside the bar where she worked. After DCFS had filed, Dick convinced Judge Leonard to allow Jonah to remain with his mother before the hearing. Judge Leonard did so on the grounds that the boy would soon be a ward of the state.

Standing over the girl who’d gone by Apple Jax, Dick thought of Chicago. Before he’d torched his own career, Dick had been a city prosecutor fresh

out of Northwestern. He'd kicked sleeping dogs awake and opened cans of worms. He was a good lawyer, but he was a bad drunk. Most thought Dick drank for pleasure, but he drank because finding justice in Chicago had been a hopeless job.

Dick thought of Jonah again. Amber had named him after the man in the bible story. Now the name of a boy about to be swallowed up by institutional life seemed very sad to Dick. He thought of a drink again and turned to leave. Something stopped him, and he turned, snatching the sheet away and looked one last time at Amber Jax's still face.

The thought of a drink vanished instantly and he went to find her brother.

2. The Dead Girl's Brother

Dick stepped through the whooshing electric doors of St. Mary's hospital out into the white morning light and saw Jeremy Jax smoking and leaning against a red Ford with Jonah in the cab.

"We going to bury her, Mr. Berryman?" Jeremy said. He coughed, sniffed thickly, and spit onto the pavement.

"Not yet, Jeremy. I want the coroner to do a good job. You told the ER doc she was taking pills?"

Jeremy's hand stuffed into his pocket and emerged with a prescription drug bottle.

"It's Cotten-Oxy—"

"Oxy-cotten," Dick corrected and read the script label, 'OXYCONTIN, 5mg/50 tablets/Q6 Hours PRN for pain.' Dick pocketed the bottle.

"It ain't right what happened—"

"No, it's not, but now I've got to go back to work and figure out how all this rolls down onto Jonah," Dick said, furious at the divine comedy of life.

"She got the pills from that clinic," Jeremy said.

"What clinic?"

"The pain clinic, downtown, across from the Post Office."

"What are you talking about?"

"Amber wadn't no junkie. She just wanted to be Jonah's mom. Then that nurse from the clinic, who lives at Sunshine with us, started comin' round. Amber was depressed, havin' headaches. That nurse gave her pills. Two to start, then two was four, four was ten."

Dick felt the same clarity he had felt looking at Amber's dead face.

"Go see the nurse, Mr. Berryman. She's a real hag. They call her the candy striper."

Dick walked from St. Mary's hospital into a block of streets marked by old red brick roads toward the house where he grew up. He thought of two things, that he was definitely going to have a drink with his breakfast, and that he would have to call The Broom to earmark Amber's toxicology for Oxycontin levels.

3. Home

Dick stood in front of his family house. Even in the soft morning light, it was a sad house. A huge Queen Anne once yellow and blue; now it looked like a cracking egg, its paint peeled and blown away. The foundation had shifted and the house slumped to the left like a sunken ship washed ashore.

Dick ran up the front steps. They creaked and groaned, and in the middle of the six steps, Dick's right foot plunged through a rotted step and he was stuck for a moment. He cackled. That was how this whole fucking morning had been going. Then the front door opened and it was his father wearing only urine soaked tighty-whiteys. Dick's laugh died instantly in his throat, and he found he wanted to cry, "Hey Dad."

His father's timpani belly hung on him like armor. His face was red and his nose bulbous from years of living inside a bottle. And now, John Berryman did not know his son anymore because of the Alzheimer's that was strip-mining his memories with its awful machinery.

Dick tucked his father in and brushed the hair from the lost old man's forehead.

As he walked out of his father's room, Dick caught himself in the three mirrors his mother dressed in when she was alive. He saw himself, carved by mirror into three reflections. Each seemed different, but all were him. One was a good attorney, who loved the law like sex, but loved justice more. One was a drunk who'd peed in court and followed that up with a pretty sensational DUI in Chicago. And the last, was him right now, a disgraced lawyer given a job at his father's old firm by the grace of the remaining partner, Steve Meyerson. For the last five years, Dick had sat in his father's office doing pro bono work. He'd even taken to wearing his father's old suits, which fit him perfectly.

Dick was finally ready for that drink and clomped downstairs.

As he poured himself a drink, he stopped and looked down into the golden Macallan's scotch and saw Amber Jax's tiny body floating like an ice cube.

He left the drink untouched on the bar and went to the pain clinic.

4. The Department of Pain

Dick saw the candy striper the minute he stepped into the Pain Clinic and she was indeed a hag. She reminded him of a sickly, black-haired Susan

Sarandon. She'd been pretty once. Now she wore her dyed black hair in a bun and pink nurse's scrubs. Her flicking eyes fixed on Dick.

"May I help you sir," she asked.

"I was representing Amber Jax in a parental rights case, and I have reason to believe she was getting drugs from this clinic," and as Dick spoke he knew how far over the line he was.

"What happened to Amber?"

Dick searched her face in that moment, and could not tell if she knew or not.

"She's dead. Died this morning."

"Oh my god," she said, and her sincerity enraged Dick.

"And you were giving her pills, nurse—" Dick looked at her name tag, she wore none, "What's your name, Maam!?" The candy striper did not bristle like Dick expected.

"Excuse me sir, but Amber Jax was a patient here...she had chronic headaches and pain we were treating—"

"I'd like to see her scripts!" As Dick's voice rose, he noticed that at the reception window behind the candy striper, a red-haired nurse stood behind the old blue-hair manning the phones.

"What's happening here? Who are you?" a slightly effete voice said from behind him. Dick turned to see a 6'2 red-faced bear of a man. The gray coif of hair that maned the doctor's face made him look like the cowardly lion. Beneath his white coat, he wore tan slacks, braided loafers with tassels, and a pique shirt and light blue tie. "I'm Dr. Levi, this is my clinic."

"Hello doctor, my name is Dick Berryman, I was Amber Jax's attorney. She died this morning. I know she was on oxycontin, and it may have been an overdose." Dick produced the empty orange bottle that had kept Amber's pills from the pain clinic.

"She died this morning and you already have her toxicology?"

Dick said nothing, and then started again, "I have information that tells me this nurse here engaged the patient outside of work. They're neighbors at Sunshine Trailer park, and—"

"Jesus Christ, Ilene? Is that true?"

Dick stopped talking like someone had crushed his voice box.

"Doctor...it's not—"

"Go home," Dr. Levi said. Dick saw that she was stunned, but she left.

"Come on, back to my office. Bonnie!"

"Yes, doctor," And the nurse Dick had seen before was there. Dick liked her because she reminded him of her Mom. She was fifty, but looked like Patricia Clarkson. It was the red hair. Dick did not know her name was Bonnie Redd, but in his mind, he already called her Red.

“Pull Amber Jax’s scripts and bring it my office, thank you.”

Dick followed Levi back past the old lady with her glasses on a chain. She smiled at Dick and he thought she looked like a Shar Pei wearing a wig.

5. Dr. Levi’s Office

Red came with the file and left. Dr. Levi explained Amber’s script as entirely conventional, and showed him records to corroborate that. Amber had complained of headaches.

“You realize I don’t have to talk to you at all, Dick. But it’s a small town and I knew your father. Doctors and lawyers are like brothers you know,” Dr. Levi smiled weakly.

“This isn’t the first time Ilene’s gotten involved with patients if that’s what’s going on here. Most of the time, Ilene brings in girls who are hurting. That’s a fact. But as for Ilene giving her pills, it’s impossible because I write all the scripts and fill them myself. I was a pharmacist in med school. We’re dinosaurs here. Only reason we keep an in-house pharmacy is to make some money on generics for crissake. Try and keep some crumbs from fucking Obama in Washington who rapes me with Medicaid. And yes, there are abuses, but I wouldn’t say a thing without seeing Amber’s tox. She may have taken the whole bottle finally. I see four deaths a year out of 5,000 patients. This will be five. Most are suicides. But that’s what pain does to people. I can tell you right now, because I’ve seen it, but if I gave you a ten out of ten pain, or nine out of nine...even an eight...for a year. You’d swallow that whole bottle like skittles too.”

“Are you saying Amber killed herself?” Dick asked.

“No, I’m just saying that this happens a lot in my world,” Dr. Levi said, but not smugly. He looked like Dick felt, worn down by his particular circle of hell.

But something was off, because all of this had gone much better than Dick had thought it would. And none of it as expected. It was time for a beer with the law.

6. Pastor

Dick waited with a water in a back booth at Deke’s. His friend Kurt Pastor, called Pastor by friends not for his last name but his priestly calm, sighed heavy when he saw Dick was not drinking.

Pastor slid into the back booth. He was shorter than Dick, but a coil of muscle. Pastor had been an Illinois police officer since he was twenty-two years old, after graduating from Vermilion County Community College. Now Pastor was forty-five to Dick’s thirty-seven and the assistant Sheriff in Stretcor.

Pastor was laconic, but a great cop. A perfect shot, or as he liked to say, as long as my eyes can see, I will hit that target. He was smart, and most of all, he was cautious.

“What kind of shit you into, Dick?” Pastor said, coming up from his beer with a sudsy mustache, which he sucked wetly with his lower lip.

“Client died this morning, young girl, leaves a three year old boy and brother with nothing. I still have to save the kid from the state. But her death doesn’t make sense, Pastor,” Dick finally said aloud. He said it as a prosecutor to a cop. One hunter to another, although Pastor was far more pragmatic than Berryman’s idealistic tendencies.

Pastor sighed even louder, “How’d she die?”

“I don’t know, but I think it’s an Oxycontin overdose. But this girl was never a drug user. Her brother, who I trust, said she got the pills from the pain clinic in downtown Streetor,” Berryman finished when Pastor picked it up,

“And they’re selling drugs down there like a candy store. I heard that, Dick. We all know that kind of stuff goes on, but you got to get more than that—”

“So I went down there—”

Pastor let his hands go to his face, “You are out of your fucking mind.”

Dick glared at his friend. “I went down there to see the faces of the people who knew Amber before she died, and I didn’t trust any of them. And I just wanted to tell you, now I have to go home and work on—” Dick began to slide out of the booth.

“Bullshit,” Pastor spat at his friend. There were both local boys, both had gone off to fight for justice in big cities and come home because it had been too dark. “Bullshit you just wanted to tell me. You’re tellin’ me cause you’re going to pull some shit just like you did with those Sneed sisters. Booze and justice, both of ‘em make you blind drunk.”

Dick said nothing, and he knew that made Pastor even angrier. Pastor was half-right.

The Sneed sisters had been two old sisters who for years had fostered children for the county. Lived in a big old gothic rambler. It seemed the boys stayed but the girls ran away, according to the sisters. Dick had been guardian ad litem to a boy who’d escaped and as a result he’d stormed into the Sneed house and found dead girls dressed like dolls in the basement. Dick had almost been disbarred for that, but the sisters were on death row now.

“Why’d you become a cop, Pastor?”

“Honest answer, it was a job. I was out of work and looking. I saw an ad in the River Ridge paper.” Pastor laughed out loud, “I’m not shittin’ you. I thought that looks really interesting. Now all I think is...I can’t wait for retirement.”

Dick shook his head disbelieving, “You like what you do. I like what I do, sometimes. This one sucks, Pastor.”

“I’m sorry, Dick. But don’t get so deep in this stuff. It’ll kill you. Believe me.”

“I do, I do. Thanks,” Dick said and left Pastor in the booth.

Dick went out into the neon-dusted night in front of Deke’s Tavern. He walked home and thought only of Amber Jax’s open blue eyes. And in his mind, they hung in the sky like haunted moons and watched him.

7. The Broom

Bill Broom, the Vermilion county coroner, was called the Broom partly because of his name, but mostly because of his meticulous nature and penchant for cleaning and clearing things up.

A week after he saw Pastor, Dick got a call from the Broom who said he’d sent his autopsy report to his son, Isaac, who like his father, was a medical examiner. Isaac, however, worked for the FBI in Grim County, which was up by Joliet and the prison.

“Since you made a point of askin’ me to be thorough, I thought I’d let a younger eye look at my work. Just like Dirty Harry says, man’s GOT to know his limitations,” the Broom laughed through the cell phone, and Dick hung up.

Dick’s cell phone rang the minute he hung up with the Broom. It was Red.

8. Red’s House

Bonnie Red lived right around the corner from Dick. They sat and had tea.

“Every summer there’s been a girl like Amber Jax. I’ve worked at the clinic now five years and every summer is always the same,” Red said.

“Does the other nurse sell drugs, Ilene?”

“It doesn’t work like that. She brings ‘em in, like little lost birds. You gotta understand something, our patients are between the ages of 36 and 46. Real people in pain. But all the girls Ilene brings in are young. She gets ‘em hooked.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. But I think Amber was the lucky one. ‘Cause the rest just disappeared. Parents and relatives come looking, but those girls were gone. You look up girls who’ve gone missing around here over the years who were 18 to 21.”

“Is Ilene killing them? Does the Doctor know?”

“Doctor’s on vacation with Bill White half the time, or drivin’ his fancy black mercedes. But he always comes home for the summers.”

“On vacation with Bill White?”

“Doc Levi is as gay as the day is long, and he’s lovers with Bill White...who used to have orgies with young boys like that movie...with the masks...eyes wide?”

“Eyes Wide Shut,” Dick said, remembering childhood gossip of Bill White’s sexuality.

“The last thing I know is Ilene keeps two ledgers and SHE fills the scripts. And if you look in there, you’ll see how she was doubling and tripling Amber’s dosage. Along with some of the girls over the past couple years.” Red handed Dick a thin folder of photocopied scripts.

Nothing made sense. Yet.

9. Digging in the Dirt

Two weeks after Red invited Dick to tea, Amber’s toxicology came back. It showed elevated levels of oxycontin and circulatory collapse and was ruled an overdose. He wondered when he might hear from little Broom up in Grim County and if his findings would be different.

Dick had asked Pastor to run a check for missing persons ages 18 to 21 in Strector and surrounding towns through the Law Enforcement Agency Data System. Thirty hit. Pastor had spent a week talking to almost fifty people in trailer parks and public housing.

The two men met in the Country Cupboard on a Friday morning at 7 am, where not surprisingly, Dick saw Digger Remy sitting at the bar with his son, Digger, Junior.

“You got some serious hunches, Dick. Over the last eleven years, ten girls have gone missing. One of ‘em was Adrienne Kist...my cousin went to school with her. Heroin addict.”

“You think the nurse is doing it—”

“I don’t know, buddy but you’ll need a hell of a lot more than this to do anything.”

“Something is really wrong here, Pastor, and you know it.”

“I don’t know anything, Dick. How’s your case with the kid,” Pastor asked.

“I hear it tomorrow,” Dick said, feeling doom hanging over him. What had happened to those girls? Death. Worse.

“Good luck, Dick. And for now, leave all parties involved alone, understood?”

“Yea,” Dick said, and Pastor left Dick with the missing persons file.

Digger Remy and his son walked by. Digger Junior said hello and hearing him, Digger himself said, “Come on down and see me soon, counselor.”

Dick thought it was nice that Digger was just being hospitable and pleasant.

10. Jonah and the Judge

“The state has presented me with evidence that demands I terminate her brother’s parental rights, and remand this boy to the state,” Judge Leonard said, cracking his gavel.

Jonah’s guardian, a woman dressed in a knee-length skirt and jacket, swept Jonah up into her arms, crooked him on her hip and disappeared through a door beyond the bench.

Dick felt hope dying inside him like it had died in Chicago, and went out to St. Steven’s Cemetery to clear his mind.

11. Blind Men

Dick knelt by his mother’s headstone with the setting sun boiling red like a cauldron of blood.

To his surprise, he was not thinking of a drink. He thought of the haggish candy stripper, who was the wolf in the community, searching for lost girls. Then he thought of the gay doctor who had lied to him. Finally, he thought of all the girls who were gone. Had they died like Amber, but in the dark somewhere? Dick’s mind did not answer him.

Then Digger Remy was standing over Dick Berryman, fireflies winked around him.

“I’m glad you come to see me, counselor,” Digger said. Dick realized that Digger had not simply spoken to Dick at the Cupboard to be neighborly. Digger had something to tell.

“I seen something before I was blind. But back then I was drunk most days from sun up to sun down, so no one paid me much mind.”

“What is it, Digger?”

“I seen a girl come out of the corn bout two years ago. First I thought I was seein’ an honest to god ghost in the graveyard. Then I heard her crying, more like whimpering, for help and I knew she weren’t no ghost. Then a car come and she waved her hands in its lights—”

Dick stood now, “What kind of car was it, Digger?” Digger smiled.

“It was a goddamned nazi-mobile. A Mer-zedes Benz.” Dick remembered Red telling him how Dr. Levi drove his Mercedes with pride. “It stopped and a big man got out and stood in the lights with her. He touched her and she fell, just like that,” Digger snapped his fingers loudly. “The big man set her in the car, and they went down Plumb’s road.”

Dick knew Streeter well enough, but not like Digger. Digger was practically a town elder. “Plumb’s road? Where is that?”

“Just right there,” Digger pointed across his boneyard to the corn, even blind his finger fell true. “It’s a left hand turn through the corn, but it ain’t Plumb’s road no more. It’s Bill White’s now. Dandy farmer.”

Dick heard Red’s voice, “*Gus Levi is lovers with Bill White.*”

Dick stood against the dark tombstones as the sun died beneath the horizon. His mind groped for what Digger had seen and what Bill White, one of the richest men in Vermilion County and in the state of Illinois might have to do with all of this.

Dick’s phone rang. The area code was Grim County.

12. The Call from Grim Country

“She had MH?” Isaac Broom, Bill’s son and a crack forensics man for the FBI in Illinois.

“What’s MH, Isaac?”

“Malignant Hyperthermia. It’s genetic and it’s rare but your girl had it. Elevated creatine and potassium levels. It’s caused by drugs used for general anesthesia.” Dick felt the sound sucked out of his world, and then Isaac’s voice came back. “The most common drug that would do this is succinylcholine. Docs and nurses call it Suxx. It’s a paralytic. For someone with MH, it overwhelms breathing, CO₂ plummets, body temp falls. Circulatory collapse. She had oxycontin in her blood, but that’s not what killed her.”

Dick knew now that Dr. Levi was the big man on the road who stabbed that girl in the neck right before Digger’s yet to be blind eyes, and he had taken her to his lover’s farm.

Dick’s mind kept leaping now, and he thought that Amber had been some kind of mistake, and that Dr. Levi had not meant to kill her at all.

Dick called Pastor, who read him the riot act, and told him not to go to Bill White’s farm.

Dick hung up on him and waited for night to fall before driving down White’s road. He did not notice the Mercedes following like a big, black shark, its headlights off.

13. White’s Farm

Bill White’s farm, or rather compound, sat on a football-sized lawn. Its drives and paths lit by soft yellow lamps sunk into the ground. It was an immense white house with red trim, made to look like an old farm, but designed and landscaped by city architects.

Dick's oxfords clicked on the poured concrete, shushing as he stepped off the driveway onto the grass. He made his way around to the back of the farmhouse.

14. The Barn

Dick crouched low and ran through the full dark. The corn whispered and the insects sang. Amidst the ocean of corn, White's property was a lonely island.

The barn stood in black relief against the corn. White's farmhouse sat on a lake of grass, but they had let the corn grow close and high around the barn, as if to hide it. Out of the corn came huge black dogs with yellow eyes and white teeth, growling low. A needle pierced the meat of his neck and Dick was locked inside his body like so many girls had been before him.

15. Inside the Barn

Dick woke in a hot white cone of light. All around him a wide dark. The concrete floor strewn with straw. Dick was not bound to a chair. He could not move. The Suxx held him like a night terror.

"Hello, counselor," came a voice both warm and empty. As Bill White came out of the dark, Dick was struck by his enormity. He stood 6'6 and wore Lee jeans painted on, loafers with no socks, and a red polo that strained against his wide chest and arms. His head was a bald stone. The only hair was on his face—handlebar mustache and eyebrows like auburn caterpillars.

Bill held a hand cannon that was a forty-four magnum. Dick thought of something.

"You, sir, are definitely a top," Dick said in his slushy, drugged voice. Bill White laughed madly and with his rolex clad left hand he slapped Dick with a clunking thwack.

Dick's head snapped to the side and he saw Dr. Levi quivering in the shadows, "What are you doing," Dr. Levi shrieked, just like a wife might.

"I'm cleaning up YOUR mess ,you fucking queen," White bellowed.

"What did you do to the girls?" Dick asked.

"You know how they say, one man's garbage is another man's treasure," Bill White said, grinning. "We brought them here. Gave them more drugs, and then we sold them."

"For money." And Bill White laughed like the devil at the end of god.

"Oh god no, Dick. You are an idealist, son. And for that you're going to die."

"Are you going to shoot him?" Levi asked.

“No,” and Dick watched Bill White calmly raise his gun and shoot his lover in the leg.

“You are,” Bill said. Levi howled, his hands clamping to his bleeding thigh as he tumbled down, yowling.

“Mr. Berryman here came over here drunk and shot my lover and companion.”

White crossed the room and knelt like a jackal. He put the huge gun in Levi’s hand and soothed his crying lover with shushing kisses on his cheek.

Behind them, came Pastor with his glock.

Dick saw Pastor count himself into place, and as his lips hit seven Pastor’s glock popped twice and the big farmer fell like a tree atop the doctor he had kept in strange shackles for sometime. Later, Dr. Levi testified that it had always been Bill White’s idea. The farmer had sold his farm to his lover because it was about money to save the clinic or not bending to Obama-care. But in the end, Bill White had done it simply because he wanted to. Evil never comes as expected it, but it comes nonetheless.

16. Beneath the Barn

Levi unlocked a square iron door in the floor of the barn. Pastor and Dick opened it. The black opening looked like a dug grave except for the flickering light.

Dick went down the ladder into the dim hold and Pastor followed. There in the dark, chained to a bed and looking like the survivor of a concentration camp, was a girl. An IV drip hung in the gloom above her and on the flickering TV was *Jersey Shore*. Both men recognized the girl as Adrienne Kist (who Pastor’s cousin had known), barely breathing. Dick smiled at her ragged breaths, feeling that her being alive was like a blade of grass pushed up through black spring soil.

Dick and Pastor unchained Adrienne and carried her up into the light.

17. At the End

Dick was suspended from practicing law for an unspecified term and Pastor was reprimanded, but Vermilion County was quietly grateful.

Dick welcomed the break. He visited Adrienne Kist in the hospital and read paperbacks by James M. Cain. He enjoyed the time and perspective. Dick knew the law would always be there for him, but for now, he was on the wagon.

Eren Cain is the author of *We Take Care of Our Own*, published in the zombie anthology, *Undead is Not an Option*. He wrote and directed episodes of *Scrubs*. He is currently writing his first novel, and rewriting a screenplay by horror legend George Romero.