

Justice for All

Brenda Kezar

Brenda Kezar is a short story writer pursuing a bachelor's in English. She has the uncanny ability to imagine the worst that could happen in any given situation, and she channels that superpower into writing speculative fiction in the genres of horror, science fiction, and fantasy. When not reading or writing, she wrangles research rodents for the UND School of Medicine.

Marly couldn't tear her eyes away from the stranger at the far end of the counter. Although he never left his ragged barstool, he remained in constant motion: he swiveled his stool side to side, swirled the ice in his glass, tapped a restless rhythm with his toes on the foot rail. He dragged a napkin across his sweaty brow, crumpled it, and tossed it among the others that drifted on the counter in front of him. He feigned interest in the football game on the dusty television, then scanned the room with wary eyes and caught Marly watching him.

She dropped her eyes to her glass and hoped the bar's gloom hid the heat blooming in her cheeks. She turned and searched for something else—anything else—to occupy her eyes. On the flashing pinball machine, a buxom, bikini-clad woman screamed silently from the clutches of a giant gorilla. A well-used dartboard hung not far away, surrounded by a halo of black dots, holes from misses thrown by drunken players. At the pool table, three men in blue work shirts circled like Olympic wrestlers looking for an opening. The bar was a dive, and her colleagues in the district attorney's office would be mortified to see her there, but she grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood just like this one. Being here felt like home, especially when she faced a difficult case.

As if pulled by a magnet, her eyes wandered back to the stranger.

Johnny, the bartender, stood with his back to the stranger. He was absently drying a glass, his eyes riveted to the television. The stranger slid off his stool and thumped his empty glass three times on the bar in front of him. His lips moved, saying something to Johnny's back, but Marly was too far away to hear.

Johnny's attention remained on the television.

"Hey!" The stranger slammed his palm on the counter.

Johnny continued drying.

The stranger reached out, his fingers barely brushing Johnny's Semper Fi tattoo.

Johnny spun around, lips twisted, mustache bristling like an angry rat. "Don't touch me, dirtbag." The stranger held up his hands in conciliation as the air between them trembled with tension.

Marly held her breath, wondering if Johnny would reach under the counter for his Glock, wondering what she would do if he did.

After an eternity, Johnny snatched a whiskey bottle off the bar and filled the stranger's glass, his eyes locked on the man the whole time, daring him to start something. Wisely, the stranger kept his eyes submissively downcast.

Marly dropped her gaze to her own almost-empty glass and sighed. *It's a good law*, she reminded herself. The legislature passed it almost as she had written it. It flew through both houses with nary a protest, and the governor was quick to sign it into law.

The stranger was the first person she had seen in public since her law went into effect. To make matters worse, the case currently weighing her down was related to her new law: a man, just like the stranger, had been cornered in a bar, like this one, and beaten to death by four men. The defense attorney was seeking probation for his clients, claiming temporary insanity brought on by frustration over a judicial system that gave criminals no more than a slap on the wrist. Marly could relate. Her own frustrations with the system had left her on the verge of leaving the DA's office. At least until she had conceived of her "public disclosure law," a compromise between criminals' rights and public protection. Now she had to decide whether to agree to the defense attorney's deal or prosecute the men. Her decision could have a tremendous impact on the future of her law.

It's his own fault. If he hadn't broken the law in the first place . . . She drained her glass in one swallow, accepted responsibility for the hangover she'd have in the morning, and waved Johnny over for a refill. Johnny poured her drink and turned away, and her eyes wandered to the other end of the counter again.

The stranger was gone.

She frowned and leaned sideways, craning her neck, expecting to spot him heading for the restrooms at the rear of the bar. She leaned right into him.

She jumped, and her face grew hot again.

"Thought I'd come over and give you a better look, maybe let you take some pictures for your social media." He was short and stocky with sagging, bulldog jowls,

his nose crisscrossed with red rivers.

Marly stammered, dropped her eyes to her drink as if dealing with a raging animal. "I didn't mean to stare. It's just, I've never. . ."

"So I'm the first." His gravelly voice reminded her of the junkyard dogs she had passed on her way to elementary school and their growled promises of carnage should she stray too near. At least there had been a sturdy fence between her and the dogs; the stranger was close enough she could feel the heat of his anger coming off him in waves, smell the cheap cologne barely covering the hidden sweat smell beneath.

Marly nodded, kept her eyes locked on her drink. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his lips curl into a sneer. He leaned in closer, and she could practically taste the whiskey on his breath.

He paused, narrowed his eyes. "Hey, don't I know you?"

"I don't believe so." She hoped she sounded convincing.

She searched for words to appease him, words that would make him go away and leave her alone, but couldn't think of any. She made her living with words, used their magic to convince people, but all her words left her now. She snuck a sideways glance at him, but his attention was no longer on her. He was eyeing the three pool players sauntering their way.

"Hey, sicko." The one with the 'Ray' name patch lifted his chin in challenge. "Bout time for you to hit the road."

The second pool player smiled, his eyes glimmering coldly beneath his ragged baseball cap. The name patch on his shirt read, 'Chuck.' "Yeah. We don't want your kind hanging around here. Johnny's gonna hang a sign; no perverts allowed. Right, Johnny?" He grinned and winked at the bartender.

The third pool player, 'Bill,' scowled and cracked his knuckles.

Marly glanced at Johnny expectantly. He'd keep things under control.

Johnny leaned back against the counter indifferently. "Just don't you boys break nothin'. And if you make a mess, you gotta clean it up yourselves." A smile crept from beneath the edges of his mustache.

Marly shot a quick glance at the stranger. For the first time, she noticed the dark smudges beneath his eyes, the greasy, waxy pallor of his skin, and the way his clothes sagged on him as though he had lost weight. He looked tired and defeated.

"I'm going." The stranger held up his hands. "I didn't mean to bother no one."

He threw one last glance at Marly that made her face burn with shame, and she held her breath as he slunk to the door like a whipped dog. The pool players jeered and taunted him as he passed, but the roaring of Marly's blood in her ears drowned out their words.

At the jangling of the bell over the door, Marly exhaled and turned to watch the stranger leave, her heart still pounding. On the other side of the door, even in the dark of night, she could still see his shirt, his permanent uniform required any time he was out in public thanks to the new law—her law. The text, in bold black letters on both the front and back, jumped off the bright orange of his shirt and seemed to hang in the air even after he was gone: SEX OFFENDER, KEEP AWAY FROM CHILDREN.

She drained her glass again and decided to call the defense attorney first thing in the morning.