

ALIENOCENE – SOUND & VISION

# JUSTLE

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My father, when he had had a few drinks too many and my mother was not around, would sometimes draw me close and whisper too loudly, conspiratorially, his boozy warm breath flooding my face: “Son, did I ever tell you about Justle?”

“But I’m Justle, father,” I would say, for this was the unusual name which, despite my mother’s objections, my father had bestowed upon me.

“So you are,” he would say. “So you are. But it’s a place, too. Not just you.”

“What kind of place?” I would ask.

He would squint into his empty glass. “Not much of one,” he said. “Hardly a place anyone can live. More a waystation, really. A place between places. Does that still amount to a place?”

Whether I said yes or no, chances were this would be the end of it, that he would fall silent and say nothing of note, until, ten minutes later, maybe twenty, he passed out.

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But twice, he went on to tell me more, to tell me the story of Justle, of what had happened to him there.

The first time he told me I was too young to make sense of it, but I still had the feeling, perhaps because of his manner as he spoke, that he was telling me something he should have kept from me. Not only from me: from everyone. The second time I was older, nearly an adult, and could make more sense of the story, though it took my becoming fully adult before

certain portions of it grew clear. There is still much about the story that I have difficulty believing was not fabricated or false. And yet, when my father told it to me, he did so with a sincerity that was, in him, not only uncommon but completely unheard of. This left me feeling that at the very least he himself believed all he said. Or at least that whoever he became when he was drunk did.

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The story he told was this: when he was young, before he met my mother, he lived in a settlement in what was called in those days a recovery sector. This sector, like the others, was devoid of vegetation and the air was dim with heavy smog or smoke. His eyes burned constantly, as did his throat, even though he used an oxygen regulator. In places, the ground seemed to have been stripped bare and hit repeatedly with mallets to make it very hard indeed—as if the dirt were not dirt at all but something artificial.

Work in a recovery sector merited hazard pay, and for the promise of this my father intended to spend several months participating in a cadre that would work to speed the sector's recovery. Most young people did such a stint in those days, he claimed, as a way of gathering money to purchase a place within one of the domed cities.

He was assigned to one of two twinned settlements, each established within one of two ruined, adjacent cities. Castu his was called, Polx the other. They had been, he explained, named after the ruined cities, and the cities in turn had been named after two brothers. *So, you see, he told me, some people are named after places, like you, but some places are likewise named after people. A name can travel in either direction.*

Food had to be shipped in. If it remained more than a few days uneaten, it became contaminated and could not be consumed. Individuals, too, were cautioned not to remain in a recovery sector for more than sixty days at a time. Each

settlement was a single, sprawling prefab erected within the confines of its larger ruined city. The prefab was sealed off for safety: to enter you would pass through an airlock and into a decontamination chamber. Protective clothing was discarded there to be sanitized for use the following day. Along with this protective clothing, my father and all his cadre were issued regulators that filtered and recycled the air. Within the building, one could breathe normally. Outside, one could not.

“What I did exactly, what I managed to accomplish, how effectual it was, is still not clear to me,” he told me. “In those days, we did as we were asked and it did not seem important to know exactly why. A job was a job. Some days, I would be told to strap a device to my back and suck fumid air through a tube. Other days I was given a stick-like device that made a clicking sound, the frequency of which changed depending on where I pointed it. Still others found me on my knees using a red and abrasive soap to scrub clean a designated stretch of ground.”

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One day, as, eyes watering, he was again drawing contaminated air into a tube with no indication that he was having any effect, his cadre leader approached him with the command to go to Polx. *Now?* he asked. *Yes,* he was told, *Immediately.*

He unbuckled the device and shrugged it off. “Who is to accompany me?” he asked. For whenever anyone went to the other settlement on some errand, they took a companion, in case anything went wrong.

“Just you,” said the cadre leader.

“Just me?”

“Polx has need of an extra man.”

“How long?”

The leader looked at him, confused. “What do you mean, how long? For good.”

And so my father packed his scant possessions, said goodbye to the other members of his cadre, and left Castu for Polx.

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Halfway to Polx, his regulator began to have trouble. Soon, it had become quite difficult for my father to breathe. Or not breathe exactly—he was breathing fine, but the air was deficient: he was not getting enough oxygen. He felt as if he were slowly suffocating.

He considered turning around and going back, but he calculated that it would be slightly farther to go back than to go forward, so he continued on, despite knowing there was no chance he would arrive. *Stay calm*, he told himself. *The more you panic, the more oxygen you'll use. The more oxygen you use, the sooner you'll die.*

And so he moved forward but very slowly, as if traveling underwater. His goal was not to make it to Polx—there was no chance of arriving there without a working regulator—but only to make it far enough along the path before he passed out that he would increase the likelihood of his body being found while he was unconscious and comatose rather than lifeless.

But did Polx even expect him? And wouldn't Castu just assume he had arrived? Would anyone miss him?

He blew into the regulator then banged it against his hip to clear it, but it was no use.

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He began to experience hypoxemia, though he did not know to call it that. Instead, he told me how his head began to ache. He kept walking. Despite the slowness of his stride, his heart was beating rapidly and he began to experience a strange euphoria which he associated with the knowledge that he was going to die—though why death might make him feel euphoric he was at a loss to say. His vision began to darken as if the world was growing dim, but it was only him growing dim, so to

speak, not the world. Through it all he told himself: *stay calm, stay calm.* He kept walking, slowly.

“If I had had a comm, I would have alerted my cadre leader,” he said. But he had none. They had taken his comm away when he left for his new cadre—the comm belonged to his cadre, not to him. “I kept trying to figure out what to do, but all I could think to do was keep walking. Either I would make it or I would not.”

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He walked for perhaps twenty minutes until something further began to go wrong with his already irritated eyes, portions of his vision becoming occluded by dark blotches. He felt dizzy and nauseous and wanted to sit down and catch his breath, but he knew that if he sat down he would not get up again. And so he kept moving, seemingly slower and slower, the air bitter in his lungs. Soon, despite being in motion, he felt he was hardly making any forward progress.

And then the path took a slight curve. As the ruined buildings fell away, he glimpsed something. At first he thought it was nothing, a hallucination, but as he drew closer he became convinced it was real. Something whitish and rectangular, a sign or a placard at the top of a metal pole slightly taller than he. *Probably a relic from before*, he thought, *something that by freak accident survived the devastation that leveled the city, an advertisement for a long-gone shop.* Or perhaps it was more recent and he would reach it to read something like *Polx 4 km*, with an arrow pointing along the path.

But the sign did not say any of that. Instead, there was just the word *Justle* and there, beside the word, an arrow pointing him off the path.

*Justle*, he thought. He peered off the path. Maybe three hundred meters away, almost obscured by the smoky air, was a structure that seemed intact. Of recent construction? No, he

didn't think so. But hardly as weathered or dilapidated as the few intact structures he had passed.

"I thought that either I could keep walking in the direction of Polx and probably die or I could stop here, leave the path, and see what this Justle held in store for me. And so I left the path."

Carefully he stripped a glove off and left it in the roadway, facing the sign. He folded over the fingers of the glove, leaving only the pointer finger extended, gesturing off the path toward Justle, hoping that if they did come looking for him they would guess where he had gone. And then he stepped off the path and began to walk toward Justle.

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It was not far, just a few hundred meters away. In normal circumstances he would have reached it almost immediately, but hobbled as he was, regulator defective, slowly suffocating, unable to move quickly, it seemed to take forever. *I thought I could convince myself to finish the journey by focusing on walking halfway there. Then, once arrived at the halfway point, I would walk half of what remained, then half of that...* My father sighed. *Only after having done this three or four times did I realize that something was wrong with my thinking, that if I kept walking in this fashion I would never arrive.*

He came close enough to the structure that he could see, stamped into its metal wall, the word *Justle*, which he took to be the name of the place. I have asked myself since: was he right to see it as such? Am I truly named after a place? Or am I in fact misnamed after something else entirely, something misunderstood?

There seemed to be a light inside, a dim but steady illumination. Someone was there. Or perhaps he was simply hallucinating.

*But, he told himself, there comes a point when it does not matter whether what you are seeing is real: you have no choice but to go toward it.*

Even as he thought this, the door to Justle began to swing open and, swaying, he lost consciousness.

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When he awoke, he was alone on a rickety metal cot. His throat still hurt, his eyes still wept, but the air here was a little better, breathable, or at least he thought so. He was, in any case, alive.

“Where am I?” he asked.

No one answered him. He was alone in a small octagonal metal room whose interior walls had been burnished to a mirror-like sheen. A flashlight stood on its end in the center of the octagon and its flashbeam made the walls glow madly around him. He stood and stumbled toward the flashlight and watched his warped reflections stumbling all about as well, a clamor of mimed motion. Except one of these warped selves did not move in the same fashion as the rest, but instead placed its finger to where its lips would have been had it had lips and made a muted hushing noise. Yet when he tried to look straight at it, he could perceive nothing at all.

*I’m going mad, he thought.*

*No, said a voice barely above a whisper from just behind him. Whatever madness you have, you brought with you.*

He whirled about, but no one was there. In turning, he lost his balance and now he fell to his knees. There he remained until half-glimpsed and barely substantial hands lifted him again and coaxed him back onto the cot.

*Hold still, said another whispered voice, one which, despite also being a whisper, he could recognize as different from the first. You prefer to live, don’t you?*

A blur of movement out of the corner of his eye and the flashlight tipped and clattered over, and either went out or was switched off.

He could see something now, two indistinct figures, vaguely human, hazy as ash, just visible in the near-darkness. One approached him very slowly, as if walking underwater. He could see nothing of the features of either of these figures. It was as if smoke or static had been poured into a roughly human form and kept threatening to come asunder and billow away. One, though, was larger than the other, and the general shape of one, despite its vagueness, struck him as female, though ambiguously so.

*Now it's dark*, it said. The voice seemed a little louder now, though only just.

*Does that feel better?* asked the other, the smaller one.

“Who are you?” asked my father.

*We have a proposition for you*, said the female, if female was the right word. Perhaps it had been once.

*Would you like to live?* asked the smaller.

“Live?”

*It's a simple question*, said the smaller.

*We can help you*, said the larger. *We can save you. We can take you to safety.*

*But*, said the other, *there's a price.*

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They explained things to my father, whispering by turn in his ear. They were trapped there, there in Justle—though they did not use that name—and they wished to leave. They had been there for a long time: months, maybe years. Within Justle they could survive and persist—though, as he could see, just barely. But, without help, they couldn't depart.

*We were once just like you*, said the larger.

*But now we are not like you at all*, said the smaller.

*This place has changed us.*

If they were to leave, it would have to be with him. Or not so much *with* him as *in* him. They could make a place for themselves within his body, hollow a place out under his skin in which they could live.

*A sort of pouch within your flesh*, said the smaller. *You will mother us.*

*But we will not do this without your permission*, said the larger.

*At least we prefer not to*, the smaller said.

*Yes*, admitted the larger. *That is what we prefer.*

*In either case, we will have to take charge of you*, the smaller said.

“Take charge of me?”

*Ever so briefly*, claimed the larger. *We will manage the body and keep it alive.*

It was not lost on my father that she referred to it as *the body* rather than as *your body*.

“Why would I ever allow this?” he asked.

*Why? Because of the alternative. Without us, you will die. And if you stay here much longer, you will become like us.*

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For some time, hours maybe, even days, my father held out. He was waiting for someone to come in search of him, someone to discover his abandoned glove and follow it to Justle, but nobody came.

*No one will come*, said the larger, as if reading his mind.

Still he waited. The world grew strange around him. He became desperately hungry and then that too faded. His tongue grew dry and stuck to his palate. In the near darkness he watched the two figures come and go, moving slowly around Justle. Often they were there beside him, observing him. Sometimes, though, they withdrew and he glimpsed them standing

near the wall, the head of the smaller inclined toward the head of the larger, as if giving obeisance.

They illuminated the upended flashlight again and Justle was again ablaze with light. The distorted images of my father's own face all around him made him dizzy. And then the flashlight was extinguished. In the silent and sudden darkness the pair came very, very close.

*You haven't much time, the larger said. Soon you shall reach a point beyond which we cannot use you.*

*And then, soon after, you will be like us.*

*Will you invite us in? Before it is too late?*

After a long hesitation, seeing no alternative, he reluctantly assented.

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The pain, my father told me, was tremendous, nearly unbearable. He must have already begun to become like them, for as they approached he could see them much better than when he had first arrived. First, the pair of them drew close together and then closer still and began, as he observed them, to melt into or meld with one another, the larger engulfing the smaller. The resultant mass looked not human but monstrous and fluid, the head of one rising up as if out of a dark tide only to be quickly swallowed again and replaced, momentarily, by the other. The form undulated more than ambulated toward him and then billowed down upon him and over his prone body. It began to insinuate its way in. It did this first through his nostrils and mouth, sliding in in a way that made him feel he was suffocating. Soon it also did so through his ears, creating a thrumming against the eardrums he could hardly bear, and through his eyes, working its way through the sclera and sending a torrent of broken images along the optic nerve. He cried out but it did not relent, and now he could feel it leeching its way into his very skin, penetrating each pore and

pushing its way into an inner place that was too small for both it and him to occupy at the same time.

It was as if his every nerve was on fire at once, and even after the shadowy mass was fully within him the burning didn't stop. It felt like the lining of his body had become terminally inflamed.

*We lied to you, said a warbling voice within him that was half the larger's and half the smaller's. There is no pouch. Or, rather, the pouch shall be the whole of your body.*

And then he felt his body stand. He could do nothing to prevent it. They were—or it was—in charge of the body now. Even though the body kept moving, my father was unaware of it. For he had fainted, though his body kept on.

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After that, he offered me only scattered images. Perhaps his drinking had caught up with my father and this was the only way he could finish his story. The body lurching its way back to the path. The body trying and failing to replace the glove on its hand and so leaving it there in the road before stumbling on toward Polx.

The body did not make it far. It fell on the path and lay there, but the being or beings inside of my father did something to preserve it, to keep it alive. The body lay there for several days, my father drifting in and out of consciousness until, suddenly, he awoke to find individuals in protective suits all around him, slapping his face, affixing a regulator over his nose and mouth, welcoming him back into the land of the living.

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My father paused. I thought perhaps the story had reached its end. Or that he would simply pass out and leave the story unfinished.

For a long moment he stared straight ahead, and then abruptly he turned and regarded me. Momentarily, he seemed

confused as to who I was and what I was doing there. But then recognition warmed his eyes and he looked away and continued.

“They did not release me. When I awoke, in a hospital bed in Polx, they were still with me, still in control of the body. Everything the body did, it did at their behest. Surprisingly, they seemed intent on continuing my life just as I had planned it. I watched myself finish my job in the recovery sector, then buy a place in a domed city, this very city in fact. And then I met your mother.”

He looked at me again, furtively, and then looked away.

“Or rather, *they* met your mother. They courted her, seduced her, married her. It was not I who climbed into the conjugal bed with her, but they. It was not I who formed the beast with two backs with her, but they. Which I suppose would make it a beast with three backs. Or perhaps, if you count the body itself, four.”

I did not know at the time what he was talking about.

“In that coupling I felt them flow out of me and into her. Not, as I initially thought, to do to her what they had done to me, but because they saw it as a way back to being truly human again.”

He looked again at me.

“Can you not guess what happened?” he asked. “Can you not divine what I am going to say next?”

But I could not. I was, after all, just a boy.

“What went into the making of you is not something of me and something of your mother, no matter how much you might believe you resemble us,” he said. “Rather it is those two creatures that came from Justle and who saw your inception as an opportunity to become flesh again. I named you Justle so that I would not forget what you were.” He leaned very close to me. “I’ve thought many times of killing you,” he said. “The only thing that stops me is my worry that were I to do so, it would let them out again.”

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Now that I have come to what seems to be the end, I find myself compelled to go further, to tell not just what I set out to tell, but everything.

There was, I will admit, one other evening when my father was drunk enough to tell me about Justle. A third time, just a few months after the second. When he started to talk, I made excuses and tried to retreat to my room. Sloppily he grabbed my wrist, hard enough to make the bones ache.

“No, you don’t,” he said. “You need to hear this. You need to know what you are.”

And so, wincing, I was made to sit. Pretending like nothing was wrong as my father kept a tight hold of my wrist, I once again listened.

He told the story just as he had told it before, if slightly off: the same paired settlements (though this time he called them camps), the same journey with a broken regulator (though this time he called it a respirator), the same odd sign (though this time greenish rather than whitish). And, above all, that same arrival at that small, single-roomed structure he called Justle.

He had just reached the temporary safety of Justle itself and was beginning to detail the discovery of the two indistinct beings hiding among his reflections when a movement caught my eye. I turned. It was my mother, standing in the doorway, an expression on her face I had never seen before, listening.

For a time my father kept speaking, but finally he noticed her too. When he did, he stopped mid-sentence, releasing my wrist. He looked afraid.

“Go to your room, Justle,” my mother said, not taking her eyes off my father.

“But—” I started.

“Go to your room,” she said, more forcefully this time, still not looking at me. “And stay there.”

And so I did. I would like to say that through the walls or door I went on to hear something that told me what my parents said or did to one another in my absence, but the truth is I heard nothing at all. The truth is, after a while, I fell asleep.

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When I awoke, my father was nowhere to be found. The room he had been in had been cleaned. The walls had been wiped down and the floor polished so much that you could see your blurred reflection in its surface. When I asked my mother about my father, she simply said, “He’s gone.” She still would not look at me. And when I pushed farther, “He won’t be coming back.” And then finally, when I foolishly inquired if his leaving had to do with the story he had told, she turned her gaze upon me and said, “What story? There was no story.”

Just for a moment, when she looked at me, angry eyes blazing, I had the feeling that my father had been wrong, that he had misjudged. I had never believed the two beings my father feared, if they did actually exist, were inside of me. Indeed, I hardly believed his story at all. But perhaps, I thought, after seeing my mother like that, I could believe they had remained in her after all, all this time, hidden there, imperceptible, cautious, until my father said too much to me and they decided it was time to take action. I could, I felt, see them staring out through my mother’s eyes.

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But I knew better than to let on I thought this. I pretended that there was nothing wrong with my mother. I pretended that I did not miss my father. I pretended everything was fine.

I, Justle, am still pretending to this day.