

Justin

by Trevor Copp

I

Their house had no corners. There was clearly a floor, somewhat clearly; but as you approached the wall the detritus - solo act socks, aerosol hair spray from the 80s, plastic mall swag, scribbly hair clods - made the transition from floor to wall parabolic. There was clearly a floor then a wall but it was unclear exactly when one became the other. All four of their kids ate in every room and at all hours, slept wherever when they were tired, and showered in the middle of the night or day or not at all. The hum of low-key chaos made it easy for middle children like Justin and I to spend the entire summer basically doing whatever we felt like.

When they interviewed me, his parents warned that Justin had obsessive behaviours. I imagined a long summer of restraining him so he didn't bash in his head or pick at a scab. "He's very big on the local housing market for one." Mrs. Spencer said. She was someone who never knew where to look, so she stared at my kneecaps. Which felt odd because she was already a head taller than me. "He'll check the numbers all day if you let him." My ankles. "Anything with elevators or parking lots he loves." My toes. "Especially both."

Of course she was right. Justin spoke with a plaintive trombone sound that leaned into a full brass section when he saw 'For Sale' signs and parking lots. He kept a news channel on the TV in his room - one with banners with

shifting real estate numbers buzzing across the screen. I thought it was just noise and made the mistake of switching the channel once. The news was detailing a series of meteor showers named after someone who first squinted at them a hundred years ago, and then Justin came in and saw that the channel was changed. I never did that again.

I was supposed to lead him on walks but in truth I led nothing. Justin had a preternatural sense of where properties in the neighbourhood were up for sale and dragged me around accordingly. We never went far as Justin's walk allowed for little actual locomotion. He walked like someone made it up from scratch with every step. I tried to show him how to even it all out, but his hip appeared fused on one side and detached on the other, like his bones just didn't quite fit together, producing a rolling jutting strut that always seemed to teeter on the edge of collapse. I eventually understood that, even though each step seemed totally unlike each other step he took, he was completely in command of it. Any attempt to physically intervene was met with such a burst of fury that hurt him more than it ever did me. I ditched the disciplined reactions that my two-week part-time certification training instilled in me. Standing back without intervention became my standard, even as passing strangers judged me mercilessly.

We saw someone with a 'For Sale' sign on their front lawn putting a 'Sold' sign over it and so I asked her much it went for. When she told me they settled for \$1.11 million Justin was ecstatic in ways I hadn't seen. Every part swung of his body went into these whooping swings which lifted him clear off the ground. I had to join in. The home seller, bewildered, joined in as well. Every time one of us got tired the other two infected them all over

again. None one of us had the slightest idea why the others were jumping at all. It signalled a shift in the summer, a new way forward where I went from being the annoying kid with zero real estate acumen that Justin had to tote around to a person of actual value to him. For weeks we'd practically camp out on lawns with SOLD signs until someone emerged with the sacred selling price, and when they said the number the great whooping dance set off again.

II

We'd bus out to the airport for a special treat; he didn't care about airplanes but the undulating tar of 8 stories of parking lots suspended him in a jelly of awe. We were eating lunch in front of the electronic counter that told you how many parking spots were still available when Justin imploded. He made no sound. His eyes were still, but his limbs had reimagined their arrangement in improbable terms. Waves of frisson shivered through him as his muscles grinded like he was trying to crush himself from the inside.

The same thing happening to his body happened to my mind. I hadn't heard anything about seizures or episodes with Justin, I didn't have an Epipen or CPR or anything like that. I had no skills at all; I was young enough to be happy about getting minimum wage but old enough to know that this is why I was hired. I went out to the middle of the road to wave down cars so an adult with the unknowable things adults knew could take over.

“Are you alright?” a translucent voice. I would have been relieved, except that no car had stopped. It was still just Justin and I, and I don’t believe in God. I do believe in adults, they kind of insist on it. So I shouted:

“No! we need a hospital or something, look at him” at the sky, and the road, at anything. There was no one.

“Are you in pain?”

“No, it’s him, just look at him!” and I did.

“It will pass,” that beatific voice said. That was possible, but where I heard it wasn’t. That voice, that sound from the bottom of a silent sea, was coming *from Justin*.

III

I had many questions.

Justin explained many things.

Perhaps I shouldn’t say Justin, but I don’t have another name for the voice that came *through him*. I mean that quite precisely – his whole body became a vessel, a shell the way a violin can only sound through its hollowness - whenever Justin spoke.

But it knew many, many things.

This Justin had survived so many reincarnations that it couldn’t list all the names they had once used. But it was Justin – *and* the others it had been prior to being Justin, his muscles straining like a demented yogi while this incongruously seraphic voice emerged from it.

I asked, "Are you ok?"

Justin explained that this body was not, had never been, 'ok'.

"Why don't you stop it then? Doesn't it hurt?"

Justin explained that he had chosen to incarnate as Justin. Justin's experiences were sacred, all I needed to know was that I must not interfere.

"I have to interfere, your mom hired me. Can't you help?"

Justin explained many things.

I cannot remember them all, or they seemed to all be said at the same time, or they made sense at the time and then not at all after. He said they had lived and died many times but each time they had failed to resolve each other. Justin was the way through.

One shiver later Justin's muscles unseized and his limbs detangled. He got up and started whooping and jumping. I asked him to explain why that happened. He ran to the sign and pointed: a car had entered the parking lot, so the number of empty spots had changed to 111. Justin loved repetitive numbers. If he wondered why I didn't whoop and jump with him I couldn't tell.

IV

I sat with Justin for a long time after that and waited. I figured I would know what I was waiting for when I saw it, but I never did. No sign of that voice

that came through and explained things showed up again. Not that I didn't try.

I stared at his face all week. When he got excited, like when the market closed on a repetitive number his face would roll with delight and I thought I saw it again, the face of Justin who had that voice, and I would wait for more. It was like waiting for flames to flicker more slowly. Then I thought he was making fun of me. I shouted and shouted, and so Justin started flailing his arms and I slapped him and he slapped me back and we both cried.

I tried taking him back to the airport, to the exact spot we were when it happened. I tried making the voice sound. Justin laughed. Another plane climbed into the sky. Another car out of the lot. It flew by and I let it go, I let it all go. Hurray I thought, hurray. 121 spots left. Not 111, but close enough. We went home.

V

Justin's parents were having friends over for the meteor shower viewing, under the debris that was the garage they had a telescope that actually worked even though no one really understood what they were looking at. The stars were supposed to all look so different, the planets from the faraway ones were supposed to flicker or be blue or red but they didn't look any different to me. The adults didn't last long with the telescope and ended up standing around in circles and talking like they always do. Justin stayed with me, off in the freshly ignored dark part of the backyard, peering into the telescope.

Even though I really had stopped wondering about the voice that came through Justin, I felt it before it arrived. Justin kept an eye fixed to the telescope, but the other eye had expanded into that fugue state once more. With each breath his shoulder blades sheathed and unsheathed, his neck trying to snap itself.

I knew not to touch him, not to interfere. I asked what was happening.

"I return. Past the fathomless spires, the mottled clouds, and wayward stars."

"You're going?"

"Where the blazing shadows darken brightly. Into the unending resplendent I return."

"I don't know what you mean."

"And you won't."

The adults came crushing in like I'd fumbled a ball. Justin remained wide-eyed and clutching the tube of the telescope when his heart gave out, taking in that old light until his went out. When walking, eating, and putting on his own socks was such an effort for him it was strange that dying happened so easily. The parents-cum-bad-medics tried, phones were yelled at, then the actual medics tried. It made no difference. Justin looked wide-eyed at the stars. And the stars blinked back.

Right when the medics stopped trying, when they nodded at each other and turned to Justin's parents to use their sympathy training on them, right then the stars looked back hard. Meteorologists would later describe the

unprecedented cosmic splendour of three slivers of meteor peeling off the shower and firing directly towards the Earth, like synchronized high divers free falling into oblivion in perfect parallel form, creating the perfect image in the sky: 111. The national news said it was best observed from our province. The local news said that it was best observed from our exact area. And I knew that the very best place to see it was from that backyard, through that particular telescope, on the particular moment that Justin died.

IV

The medics had a lot of questions about everything, but I was smart enough to know not to try to say anything about what had come through Justin that night. Maybe they thought I was too devastated to speak. I was. Maybe they thought I was still in shock. I was. Maybe they thought that I understood something that they did not. I didn't.

I don't know what I came to understand through Justin. Or I do know: he wasn't there for me to understand anything at all. He was in the world for his own purposes, whether or not I would ever work out what that meant.