

The Last of The Just

by Paul Abels

There is a legend that says that in every generation, the world is supported on the shoulders of thirty-six "Just Men." The world is permitted to survive because they witness and take on the suffering of humanity, and because they behave righteously during their life span. As the legend goes, neither they, nor anyone else, knows who they are. They might be anyone. They might be you. They might be me. Any man, any woman. We have reluctantly chosen not to change the gender terms of the legend, which is ancient, from a time when language was used differently.

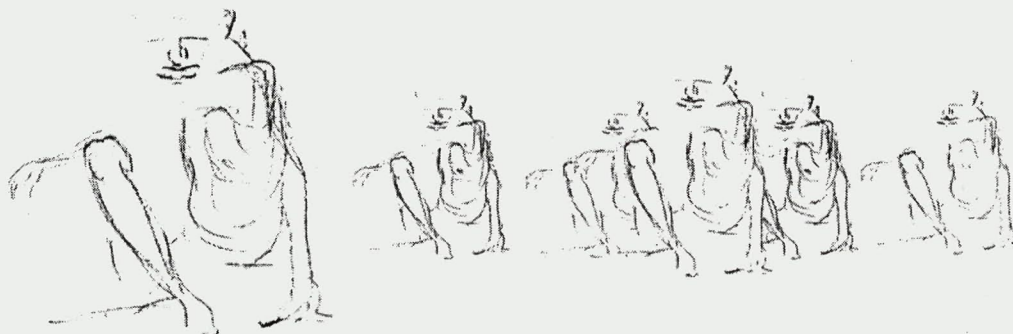
Andre Schwarz-Bart uses this legend as the basis for a wonderful novel that won the Prix Concourt, France's most prestigious literary award. On the final page of this marvelous book, the last Just Man dies in flames in a concentration camp during the Holocaust (1959).

Please allow yourself to join me in a reflective creation of what might have happened in the next seconds of eternity following the last Just Man's death.

The last Just Man came slowly back to consciousness; surprisingly, he felt very light. At first all he could make out were voices, but no particular words. Then he made out the images of a number of people standing over him; they seemed to be welcoming him. He knew, somehow, that they, too, were Just Men. Before he had time to gather his senses and even ask a question, the voices hushed and they all turned their heads in the direction of the door, their eyes turned down as if not wanting to stare. Truthfully, it wasn't really a door, because they weren't really in a room. It was more like a space surrounded by thin curtains that seemed to be flowing, maybe blowing in the air, and in no particular direction. Yet he felt as if he were on solid ground. A form came through the door... well not re-

ally, because the form didn't really come through but engulfed the entire space. The last Just Man knew immediately that the form was the HOLIEST ONE. The last Just Man couldn't think or move. "Welcome, and come with me—I will show you around," a voice seemed to say in a muted, mellow, but certain tone.

He and the great form walked, no, it was more like a glide, in spaces between other gossamer-like curtains, the other Just Men now accompanying them. "We should start here," said the HOLIEST ONE, and the curtain seemed to part. The sight was impossible to encompass. There were countless people. It seemed they extended into the horizon, except that he knew there was no horizon. Many seemed to look like people he had known, strangely familiar, though no face was recognizable. They all appeared to be busy and looked satisfied, though the last Just Man could not see them doing anything in particular.



The other Just Men were observing the same scene, but they saw different people. Some saw Asians linked to various invasions, another saw Africans they knew were linked to slaves. One Just Man saw descendants of women who had been sterilized because they were not thought worthy of having children. Another saw Native Americans, Mexicans, and Canadians connected to the first people on the continent. Still another only saw people dressed in ancient caftons, chitons, togas, and djellabahs. Another saw Armenians. In essence the entire history of oppressed people in the Universe could be seen by all of the Just Men, and all the people seemed well and pleased with what they were doing. None of the Just Men knew that the other Just Men were seeing other persons from other times. None knew that they only saw those who had been victims of injustice during their own time on earth. Perhaps this was a well deserved reward, to spare them the additional pain of knowing that injustice had continued past their own times.

"Who are all these people?" asked the last Just Man.

"These are all People who never were, and never will be," answered the HOLIEST ONE.

The last Just Man was puzzled. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"They are all the people who were never born because of

injustices, such as slavery, the holocaust, or ethnic cleansing," was the reply.

"But they all look so happy," said the last Just Man.



"That is because a world has been created for all of them," was the response. "Each has a world in which all the wonders of life have been presented to them. For each, a world for them alone, although sometimes a few paths do cross as they might in real life. Of course, they are unaware of not being alive. To them the world is real, as is everything in it. Yes, it is true that they have problems to deal with, and sorrows, even death, but no slaughters; it is a world of Justice."

The remorse the last Just Man had first felt on hearing that these were *people who never were, and never will be* lessened as he understood how good the life could be they now had. He

raised no further questions, and they continued their walk. There were beautiful gardens and other groups seemed to be involved in activities the last Just Man could not make out.

They arrived at a space similar to the others, and as a breeze wisped the curtain aside, the last Just Man noted many people scurrying back and forth, not seeming to be getting anywhere, but eager in the search. They were each speaking, but not to each other. The scene engulfed him like a heavy perfume, leaving a discomfoting presence. "Who are these people," he asked, "What are they doing?"

"They are the ones seeking people to forgive them for what they have done," was the almost immediate reply. "But of course they will never find them, because they are searching for the *people who never were, and never will be.*"

In a while, the last Just Man turned, with tears in his eyes, looking at the HOLIEST ONE. He murmured, "But you could forgive them." The other Just Men stood dazed, breathless.

The HOLIEST ONE was silent for a moment. Then, with a slight, warm smile, he slowly turned and walked away. □

REFERENCE

Schwarz-Bart, Andre. (1959) *The Last of the Just*. Bantam Books. New York, N.Y.

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