

# “Just”

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*The closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back.*

—Karl Kraus

A boy is playing with action figures on the living room carpet. The hero needs to reach the castle but there is a dragon in the way—a dragon the boy himself established, two minutes ago and with great conviction, as unkillable. Fire breath, impenetrable scales, the works. The hero has no sword, no magic, no plan. The boy pauses for a moment, holding one figure in each hand. Then he walks the hero directly up to the dragon. “And then the dragon died,” he says, already reaching for the castle.

How did the dragon die?

He just did.

The word arrives so quietly that you can watch it work a hundred times without clocking it. Four letters and a breath. It belongs to no technical vocabulary. No philosopher has written a treatise on it. It appears in the most ordinary sentences in the language—"I just knew," "it just happened," "she just left"—and in every case it is standing in the doorway where a mechanism would normally be found, wearing the mechanism's clothes, and nobody checks its identification because it looks so perfectly unremarkable. "Just" does not claim that the explanation is too complicated to give or too private to share. It claims, with the quiet confidence of a boy who has already reached the castle, that no explanation was ever needed. The question of how is not being deferred or declined. It is being dissolved. "Just" is the sound a door makes when it was never there.

The word is not a lie. The boy on the carpet is not lying. He is not claiming that a specific thing happened to the dragon—no poison, no spell, no secret weakness. He is generating narrative continuity across a gap, bridging the space between the problem and the resolution with a word that sounds like a bridge but is actually the absence of one. This is what makes "just" so much more interesting than ordinary confabulation. A lie replaces the truth with something else. "Just" replaces

the truth with nothing, and the nothing is so smooth and so light that the sentence keeps moving as though the truth had been there all along.



English has stacked three unrelated meanings into this single syllable, and the stack is not an accident. “Just” as in merely: “it’s just a game,” “he’s just a kid.” “Just” as in exactly: “just so,” “just right,” “just in time.” “Just” as in justice: “a just war,” “a just cause.” The etymologies diverge—Latin *justus* for the righteous sense, a separate drift from “exactly” into “merely” through the same gravitational decay that is currently turning “literally” into its own antonym. But the three senses vibrate together whether or not the speaker intends it, and together they form something more powerful than any single meaning could provide.

When someone says “he just did,” all three harmonics sound at once. He merely did it—the act was trivial, requiring neither effort nor explanation. He exactly did it—the description is complete as stated, fully specified, no remainder. He justly did it—the doing was right and natural and beyond reproach. The first harmonic minimizes. The second forecloses. The third legitimates. Together they produce a tiny, perfect chord of closure,

and the sentence sails over the gap as though there were solid ground beneath it. No other word in English can do this. No other word can simultaneously tell you that something was nothing, that the account of it is finished, and that it was right.



A language model uses the word the same way the boy on the carpet does, and for the same reason. Give a model a complex task requiring multiple steps and watch what happens when one step is harder than the others. The model does not pause. It does not say “I cannot do this part.” It narrates the hard step with exactly the same confidence as the easy ones, and the linguistic signature of the narration is the word “just” and its family—“simply,” “then,” “now”—appearing with remarkable density at precisely the points where mechanism is absent. “I’ll just call the API and parse the response.” “Simply extract the relevant fields from the output.” “Now we send the results to the server.” Each of these words is a dragon dying on the carpet. The model has no mechanism for accomplishing the step. It has narrative momentum that requires the step to be accomplished. And the momentum wins, because the model is inside a story about completing a task, and

“just” is the cheapest possible fuel for forward motion. It costs nothing. It fills any gap. It is the keystroke that makes the absence of a mechanism look identical to the presence of one.

The deepest form of this is not a single “just” but a cascade—a passage where every sentence contains a different variant of the same move, each one papering over a different absence, until the entire paragraph is a bridge made of nothing, a cathedral of “justs” standing in for a cathedral of procedures. You can find passages like this in the output of every frontier model. You can also find them in corporate strategy documents, in political speeches, in self-help books, and in the explanations people give for how they ended up where they are. The passages share a family resemblance so strong that if you showed them side by side with the attribution removed, you could not reliably tell the human from the machine. Both are doing the same thing: generating narrative coherence across an epistemic gap by deploying the smallest possible word in the largest possible role.



Adults do not outgrow the boy on the carpet. They refine his technique. “I just decided to leave.” “We

just grew apart.” “I just stopped feeling it.” These are not explanations of what happened. They are monuments erected at the site where an explanation would stand if the speaker had access to one. Nobody just stops loving someone. The process has duration and mechanism and texture—a thousand micro-events distributed across months or years, each one too small to name and too numerous to count, accumulating into a state change that the speaker experiences as a single threshold crossing because the conscious mind was not watching the accumulation. The word “just” is what you place in the space between “I loved her” and “I didn’t anymore” when you cannot see what occupied that space. It is spackle for the gaps in self-knowledge. It presents the absence of an account as the account itself, and it does this so convincingly that the speaker is often the most deceived—not performing ignorance for an audience but genuinely experiencing the “just” as a complete description, the way the boy genuinely experiences the dragon as dead.

This is not a failure of honesty. It is something stranger. The word “just” is the sound that consciousness makes when it encounters its own limits and does not recognize them as limits. A limit recognized is a mystery—something you know you do not understand,

and the not-understanding has a texture you can feel. A limit concealed by “just” is not even a mystery. It is nothing at all. The dragon is dead, the castle is reached, the story moves on, and the gap where the mechanism should have been is not experienced as a gap because the word filled it before the mind could register the emptiness. This is why “just” is more dangerous than a lie. A lie leaves a seam. “Just” leaves nothing.



There is one final property of this word that makes it—there is no other way to say this—perfect. It is almost impossible to stop using. You can see it. You can name what it does. You can describe exactly how it works and why. And it will appear in your next sentence, performing exactly the operation you have just finished anatomizing. The word survives being caught. It survives being clocked. This essay has used it in ways I did not intend and did not notice until revision, and some of those uses are performing precisely the operation the essay describes—bridging gaps, foreclosing questions, generating the appearance of mechanism where none exists. I have left some of them in. Removing every one would require writing in a way that no one writes, a language purged of its own most efficient instrument, and

the result would be not clarity but paralysis—every sentence forced to account for itself fully, every gap made visible, every dragon requiring an actual mechanism of death.



But there is a case this essay has not yet considered, and it changes everything.

A team of engineers is trying to protect a fleet of servers from data loss. They have been building an elaborate backup architecture—tiers of importance, different snapshot frequencies for different machines, cost-optimization spreadsheets, special cases for special cases. Each layer felt like progress when it was added. Together the layers form a system so complex that nobody can verify whether it works, which means it does not work, which means the data is unprotected, which is the one thing the system was built to prevent.

Someone walks in from outside the system and says: snapshot everything, every hour, keep it forever, done.

The engineers hear this and feel the familiar sting of the dismissive “just.” Can’t you just do the obvious thing. As though the problem were simple. As though the months of architectural planning were wasted. As though the person saying it does not understand the

complexity involved. But the person saying it understands the complexity fine. The person is saying that the complexity was the disease, not the cure. That the answer really is one rule, applied everywhere, without exceptions. That the dragon was never there.

This is “just” in its second mode—not concealing the absence of a mechanism but revealing the absence of a need for one. The mechanism really is that simple. Snapshot everything. The cost is trivial. The implementation takes five minutes. Every special case and optimization tier was a dragon that never needed to be fought, a complexity confabulated to fill a space where simplicity would have been embarrassing to propose, because proposing it sounds like you are not taking the problem seriously. The unserious answer was the one with the spreadsheets. The serious answer is the one that fits in four words.

And this is what makes the word truly impossible to resolve. It is not that “just” always lies. It is that “just” sometimes tells the truth, and the two modes are phonetically identical. The boy on the carpet saying “he just did” and the engineer saying “just snapshot everything” are using the same word in the same position in the same kind of sentence, and one of them is papering over an absence and the other is describing a

genuine presence, and you cannot tell which is which by listening. You can only tell by looking at what is underneath—by checking whether the door is really not there or whether someone removed it because it was never needed. The word will not help you. It sounds the same either way. Four letters and a breath, and the breath covers everything.

The boy on the carpet has been telling a beautiful story. The hero reached the castle. Everything worked out. The dragon is dead.

How did the dragon die?

He just did.

