

# So Does Life

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POV Michael

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Justin returns to Pittsburgh in a blaze of glory after years away. Somehow it doesn't surprise you that he did so well, that - even knowing the odds of how unlikely it is that any artist would become so successful in their own lifetime - Justin succeeded. He always managed to land on his feet.

You can't be jealous. Justin deserves it and, besides, Brian's happier than you've ever seen him.

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They're rich. Sometimes it surprises you just *\*how\** rich - although you're doing well enough yourself, your second store turning a nice profit. Brian has made all the right moves with Kinnetik, and Justin can charge practically anything he likes for his commissioned art these days. They never deliberately rub it in anyone's faces - unless that someone is an annoying straight guy - but they have great cars, great clothes, and the rest of you get great presents on birthdays and Christmas.

You know Brian would still be happy just giving everyone money, but Brian's always been different when Justin's around.

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Justin dies suddenly of a brain aneurysm. They're in the shower together when it happens. Brian never talks about it, and you try not to imagine what it must've been like; struggling Justin's dead weight (fuck, you hate that expression) out of the shower, trying to revive him, calling 911.

You're all told later that it was instantaneous, sudden; there was absolutely nothing anyone could have done, and despite that you know that all Brian can think is *If I'd just moved a little faster, called sooner, done something \*different\* then Justin would still be alive.*

You know he'll never stop blaming himself, but he handles it as well as he can for Brian - until the doctors let slip that the aneurysm might've been related to the brain damage Justin suffered when he was eighteen.

You don't know if Brian ever got over the prom, and decide he didn't when you find him in Woody's three hours later. He doesn't - or didn't - drink as much as he used to, and he's drunk already, slurring his words and talking about Justin as if he's still alive.

When you finally convince him to leave you take him back to the loft, and ignore the tears you can see escaping from his eyes. He'll hate himself for it later.

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The funeral happens, and so does life. The family has to split back into their separate lives, Brian is acting like himself again, and although you know it's an act and try to be there for him, your own life gets in the way. Before you know it Ted's confessing that Brian hasn't been to the office for a month, and when you find no one in the loft you drive out to the house.

You let yourself in, and find Brian in their bedroom. He's laying on the bed, staring straight up at the ceiling. He obviously hasn't shaved in weeks and has probably barely eaten anything, too. You hate yourself for not getting here sooner, but do everything you can to be here now.

"He'd hate this," you hiss, standing by the bed and glaring down at him, "he'd hate this. If he could see you right now, he'd kick your fucking ass."

Brian doesn't look at you. You think he's not going to acknowledge you at all until he replies, "Fuck him. I never cared about anything that little shit wanted anyway."

"Bullshit." All Brian ever wanted was for Justin to be happy.

So you bring in the big guns. Gus flies back into town again, and kicks his dad's ass in Justin's place.

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You start hearing about things Brian never mentions. The Justin Taylor Art Scholarship. A sizeable donation to one of his favourite museums. An article in the paper where Brian is quoted as saying that, *"art is something that should be encouraged in every kid - it doesn't matter how f\*\*\*\*\*g bad they are at colouring inside the lines."*

Brian avoids most of his old haunts, especially the diner, and you know it's because of the way Ma always tries to assure him that everything will be okay (it broke her heart when Justin died, but Ma's still working at the diner, insistent. You're pretty sure she's expecting to live forever, and you really don't know how God's planning on stopping her).

More often than not, when you drop by the house Jennifer's there. She's looked older, wearier, since Justin died, and spending time with Brian seems to ease some of that. You don't know specifically what they talk about - although you guess there's a lot said about Justin - but they're both happier than they've been for a while so you try not to intrude too much.

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You start noticing more than the occasional grey hair. Brian tells you you should dye them, but Ben likes you natural and frankly so do you.

You like that you're starting to go grey. It reminds you that you're still alive.

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A few years later, Brian has a heart attack at work.

You're called to the hospital and rush inside. Some of the gang made it there first, but you're let in before anyone else. Holding on to his hand, you sniff back tears and try to smile down at his pained face.

He tells you to stop being such a fucking baby, to keep an eye on Gus, and quietly lets go.

Brian never did anything quietly.

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The doctors say that it was almost inevitable - a lifetime of bad diet, smoking, drinking, drugs - and you fight back the urge to tell them to fuck off.

Your family is all still alive - HIV treatments having improved considerably, thank God - and Hunter and JR (with Mel and Linds) fly in to the funeral and Ben holds you as you cry.

At the wake afterwards - none of his family is there, just the way he would've wanted it - Linds dabs at her eyes and whispers that she knows Brian never got over Justin.

You can only nod.

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Brian leaves money to everyone, Kinnetik to Ted and Cynthia, the house and loft for Jennifer to sell as she sees fit - the money to go to Gus - and everything else to Gus, too.

You're surprised to get the call from Jennifer, but follow her request that you drive out to the house. When you arrive the door is open, and you cautiously walk inside until you find her sitting in the kitchen. She looks like she's been crying for hours and you bend down next to her, your knees cracking a little. You know she and Brian became close, but...

"I-I didn't know," she stutters, clinging a damp tissue in her hand.  
"He...he never let me see..."

Frowning, you leave her in the kitchen and make your way upstairs. When you open the door to his bedroom - their bedroom - your breath catches in your throat.

Justin's art is on every surface.

There are paintings and drawings and sketches - most done by hand, some printed off from the computer. He was always a prolific artist, and his work is jammed together from floor to ceiling on every wall. Some are framed, others were clearly ripped out of sketchpads and plastered on the wall. You recognise some from when Justin was seventeen, and a few panels from *Rage*.

It's not everything Justin ever did - you know that for a fact, because you have a few in your own home - but it's an impressive enough testament to a lifetime's work.

You find nothing else of interest in the bedroom. You almost expect to stumble across some kind of suicide note from Brian - *Sorry, Mikey. Had to be done* - like he had a heart attack on purpose.

But then you look at Justin's art filling the room (there are so many, so many pictures of Brian) and think that maybe *\*that\** was his suicide note, and his heart really did kill him, after all.

~FINIS