

Transitus, Justine

Justine removed the X-acto knife from her secret hiding place. It was the perfect weapon. Sleek and powerful, and very, very sharp. Plus, you could get one at any art supply store. One of the few places her parents would still let her visit.

Parents. A lame word, she thought. They're not my parents. My parents are dead. Just like I wish I was.

Like I will be.

She ran her thumb along the sharp blade. It made a clean line. She played with the strip of skin that was exposed until she had to suck on it to get it to stop bleeding.

Not that she was afraid of blood. The cut-marks on the inside of her arms proved that.

She opened a window on her computer screen. Incognito this time. That way her parents couldn't do a search history and find out she'd looked up "best methods for suicide" and "navigating the dark web." One site in particular was her favorite. It was like a Facebook for teens sharing their darkest secrets, most of which were about how, when and why they were planning to off themselves.

They were the only friends Justine had in the world. The only place she fit in.

Well, not really. She didn't fit in anywhere.

"I'm doing it tonight," Emo416 wrote. "Wish me luck." A bunch of Emo416's followers cheered her (him?) on.

"I'm jealous," Justine wrote via her alias Apathy101.

"We should all do it," Iminhell222 wrote.

"Justine," her mother yelled. "Time for dinner!"

Ira kissed his wife on the top of her head as she stirred the pot of soup. "How is she today?" he whispered into her ear.

Eunice's eyes darted to the door to be sure her daughter wasn't coming down the hall. She looked in her husband's eyes. A look that said it all: Fear, sadness, concern, hopelessness. "I'd give anything for a smile. Just a smile," she whispered. Her husband nodded in acknowledgement and sighed.

After dinner, Ira and Eunice practically begged Justine to join them in watching television. "We'll watch whatever you want."

Justine shrugged.

Whatever I want, huh? While a tiny part inside her appreciated the thoughtfulness of her parents, the rest of her wrestled between wondering why they bothered (“I’m not worth it” was her favorite phrase) and hoping they’d just leave her alone and let her die. “They’d be better off without me. They have to see that,” she’d said to herself.

Besides, she wanted to check on Emo416, who had promised to share her “fool-proof” methodology. That was, if she hadn’t done it already. In Justine’s experience, a lot of the people in the group were all talk, no action. She logged in and saw the latest post, someone writing to Emo416.

“What do you think’ll happen?” A-non31 had asked.

41 minutes ago.

Justine’s heart was pounding. Had Emo416 actually done it? Justine replied to A-non31. “What do you mean? How her parents will handle it?”

A-non31 responded immediately. “I don’t think Emo416 has parents.”

Justine gulped.

A-non31 added, “I was asking what did she think would happen when she died.”

Justine didn’t know what to say; she’d never even considered what happened *after*.

Down the hall, Eunice revealed to her husband, “I almost wish I could give her a sleeping pill, just to be sure she’s asleep and safe. Is that terrible?”

“If it was only that easy. Heck, I wish I could put her in cryogenic freeze until she’s an adult.”

“Or at least through tonight. I really do wish we’d gotten one of those nanny cams, just so we can look in on her to be sure she’s alright.”

“She’d find it like she did last time,” Ira replied solemnly.

Last time. Last time was the most serious episode of all. Justine’s second – or was it her third? – suicide attempt. It depended how you looked at it. The first time seemed like an accident, or at least a cry for help, but in hindsight it was probably much more than that.

“We need to do something,” Eunice said, tears forming. “Anything.” Ira pulled her close and held her as she cried. He knew that “anything” meant anything but accepting that their daughter, the special girl with the open arms they’d seen in the adoption agency that fateful day, would succeed in her attempts.

Eunice slept restlessly, worried about her daughter. So many people wanted to qualify it like Justine was “only” her adopted daughter, but to Eunice Justine was as much her “real” daughter as she could be. She loved Justine so much. So did Ira.

Cautiously, she knocked on Justine’s door. No answer. “Justine, Sweetie, time to get up for school.” No answer. Suddenly a terror seized her. The door was locked. Ira walked up behind her, bringing the key. The skeleton key. She hated that term. Why would they call it that?

Justine looked so peaceful. That was, if there hadn’t been such a huge red stain.

The next hour happened in a blur. Justine was still alive, thankfully, and in the best facility in the world. Ira and Eunice were standing outside the room, looking through a two-way mirror on their daughter, asleep and restrained, her wrists banded. A doctor was standing with them.

“This is the third time, doctor,” Ira said.

“We’ve done everything you suggested. Everything,” Eunice begged.

“My wife wants to ask you... We want to know...”

The doctor looked at them quizzically.

“Do you think hypnosis might help her?”

“Hypnosis?” the doctor repeated.

“To help her remember... She was so young when it happened.”

“I’m not sure it’s such a good idea to bring back those kinds of memories. It could make her worse.”

“I’m not sure she can get much worse, doctor,” Ira sighed.

“She’s still alive. We need to keep her that way.”

“Restrained like that? What kind of life is that?”

Eunice sobbed as she looked in at her pale, agitated daughter with bandages on her restrained wrists. Ira put his arm around her, comforting her. As they walked down the hall, they saw a door with the sign “Grief Counselor.” Ira recoiled and pulled Eunice into him to keep her from seeing the sign. Afraid they’ll need a grief counselor someday.

Suddenly, Eunice turned around and started to knock on the counselor's door. Just as she did, the door opened and they were greeted by the warmest, most loving smile. "Hi, I'm Shirley Anderson. Are you here to see me?"

Eunice surprised herself when she replied, "Yes."

After telling Shirley the story of their daughter, Ira asked, "Please, Ms. Anderson. Do you have any advice for us?"

Shirley took a moment before replying. Whispering, she finally said, "Actually, yes. Maybe there's something I can do."

A few days later, Justine had been moved to a very private room down the hall. The security to get in the room felt like Ft. Knox.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Ira asked again for the millionth time.

"While we do like to keep this process secret, it's perfectly safe and has been tested on over 100 people."

Shirley looked at the doctor. "Do you mind...?"

"It's up to you if you want to tell them. They've signed a confidentiality agreement."

"I went through it myself. It changed my life."

Eunice and Ira looked at each other, "Let's go for it. How long does it take?"

"Not long." Shirley guided them to a nice, comfortable room. "You can wait in here."

Justine wasn't sure what was going to happen to her. She was lucid; she had been for a couple of days. And they told her they were going to try a procedure that could help her. She couldn't explain why she agreed to it. Her "parents" didn't even seem that enthusiastic. But for some reason she said, "sure" when asked.

The doctor hooked her up to an IV and a bunch of medical equipment that beeped and buzzed. She knew some of them: heart rate, blood pressure. But the others were a mystery.

What was especially odd were the expressions on the people around her. So peaceful; so loving. So *happy* for her.

Surprising herself, instead of feeling repulsed, like they were luring her into a cult, she felt... serenity.

They injected some odd, sparkling liquid into her IV. At first she felt darkness, like when you first close your eyes to sleep; then it quickly turned into a dream. But it was unlike any dream she'd ever had before.

She floated, looking down at herself. She saw the top of the heads of the doctor, nurses and technicians in the room. She looked at the machines next to her body and saw a straight, green line across the screen and heard a faint constant hum.

A flat-line.

"Am I? Could I be..."

She knew the answer.

Looking around the room she noticed that the doctors and nurses were calm as though everything was normal. Instead of alarming her, instead of the oppressive blackness she'd felt most of her life, everything and everyone was enveloped in the brightest, most uplifting light.

As soon as the thought "I wonder where my parents are" entered her head, she moved through the walls and saw them in another room, holding hands anxiously.

"Wow, they love me. Like really love me," Justine realized for the first time in her life.

"Yes, they do," a voice replied. A voice. A sound filled with so much love she was overwhelmed. She peered into the bright light above, looking for the source of that love. Slowly, inexplicably, she was drawn toward two shadowy figures. "My parents," she thought to herself.

"Yes," they replied as though they'd heard her thoughts. "We are your birth parents."

"Am I dead?" she asked.

"No. Yes. Well, not permanently. You've just been given an opportunity to see what's it's like on the Other Side. Temporarily."

Justine's father smiled and continued. "It's so good to see you. To be able to talk with you, even if it's just for a few minutes."

"But I want to stay here with you forever," Justine implored.

"Oh, Sweetie," her mother consoled telepathically. "Let's talk for a while." Her mother waved her arm and magically a beautiful park setting appeared. Flowers and trees gleamed, surrounded by butterflies dancing in the light. The whole scene emitted a harmonious prism of colors.

Her parents gestured for Justine to sit with them. Even though she didn't have a body in this place, Justine realized she could still move effortlessly and sit with her parents.

"This is a trip," Justine thought.

Her father laughed. "Yes, it is." His laughter was like music. Like a symphony of celestial sounds.

"We're so glad you were able to come here, to see us and talk with us."

"Yes. We've been trying to get through to you for ages."

"In my dreams," Justine replied; knowing. She loved those dreams. So much that she hated waking up. It was part of the reason she wanted to sleep forever.

"Justine, darling," her father started.

Her mother finished his sentence, "As much as we wanted..."

"We weren't supposed to raise you," her father finished.

"You knew you what was going to happen? That you were going to die?" Justine asked; incredulous.

"Well, our souls did," her father replied. "It was our time."

"You... left me? On purpose?" Justine pleaded.

"We had work to do here," her mother added. "We'd already worked it out with Eunice and Ira."

"What?"

"They are remarkable people, Justine. We made sure you were in the best hands possible."

Her father chimed in. "You agreed, too, Dear."

Justine started to question what he meant, but instantly knew he was right. How, she couldn't explain. She just *knew*.

"You have great things to accomplish in your life, Justine," her father advised. "Beautiful things. Important things."

“Like what?” Justine started to challenge, but she knew he was right. And that she’d have to discover it herself.

“Your time is almost up. Are you ready to go back?” her mother asked.

“No.”

Her mother leaned and held her daughter close. The hug surrounded her, infusing Justine with enough healing energy to protect her the rest of her life.

Her mother asked again, “Are you ready to go back?”

Buoyed and encouraged, Justine replied tranquilly, “Yes, I guess so. But will I see you again?”

“Oh yes. We’ll always be here. Life moves so quickly; it’ll feel like the blink of an eye.”

“Promise us you’ll try to be a little easier on your parents. Will you, Dear?” her father counseled. “It’s time you appreciated them more. They are your *real* parents, after all.”

“And no more trying to kill yourself. Alright?” her mother added sternly. “We don’t want to see you here for... 60 to 70 more years.”

“At least,” her father added teasingly.

Justine nodded and hugged her birth parents goodbye.

Instantly she was back in her body. Back in the hospital. Her parents – who she could now call her “real” parents – were there; holding her hands. She opened her eyes.

And smiled.