

A portrait of a young man with dark brown hair and a slight smile, wearing a dark red and blue plaid shirt. The background is a soft, light blue gradient. The text 'Just Julian' is overlaid in a white, cursive font.

*Just
Julian*

MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES

When you find the one who makes you feel not alone

After years of bullying at school, Julian doesn't see any point to life and the only outlet for his feelings is his artwork. He sees a glimmer of hope after meeting the similarly out-of-place Romeo, but Romeo has always identified as straight — and he hangs out with a group of guys who harassed Julian's cousin Ty.

But Julian can't deny his attraction to Romeo, who is confused about his feelings and embarrassed by his past behaviour. As the two begin to fall in love, Julian finds strength he never knew he had, coming out from hiding behind his paintings and brokering peace between Romeo and Ty. But Romeo's old friends come after the couple, resulting in a vicious fight that puts them both in the hospital. With the encouragement of Romeo's vice-principal, the two boys decide to advocate for what they believe in.

MARKUS HARWOOD-JONES is a writer, visual artist and documentary filmmaker. He is the author of the short story collections *Confessions of a Teenage Transsexual Whore* and *Everything & All at Once*. His film, *Mosaic*, tells the story of his journey across Canada and the United States to learn more about the trans community. He lives in Toronto, Ontario.




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For you.

01 It's Over

JULIAN'S CHEEK HITS AGAINST PAVEMENT. *He takes a shaky gasp, then pushes himself up and moves forward, quickly as he can. The end of the parking lot is in sight, a sprout of yellow grass marking its edge. An engine revs behind him, but Julian doesn't spare a second to look back. The sound of his own breath drowns out his thoughts. His chest tight, knees pumping, he makes a break for it. A loud honk blares from just behind him. Try as he might, he can't gain any ground. It's like he's*

running in molasses. His pursuers are getting closer. He can feel them hot on his back.

A scream made its way up and out of Julian, shaking him awake. The sheets clung to his body, wet with sweat. He reached for the half-empty glass on his bedside table. Gulping down the water, he tried to wash away the nightmare. When the feelings refused to fade, Julian shoved off the bedding and reached for his paints.

On his feet, Julian threw colours across a busy canvas. He arched sharp turns and pulled strokes to form long, bleeding lines. One foot in the past, one in the present, he dipped his brush in crimson. He ran it across the canvas and watched heavy red droplets roll down. He traced all the times he'd been chased home, all the cruel words, all the times he'd cut the pain out from his own skin.

“It’s over, it’s over, it’s over,” he muttered, but the words were hollow. Those years of bullying would never be over. They crept into his nightmares nearly every night. Julian’s head was throbbing as he

reached for another colour. Memory after memory raked across his mind.

Darkness envelops him. Or it would, if not for the pulsing orange light from the street outside. In the endless twilight, Julian loses track of hours, even days, as he rolls back and forth in bed. Crumpled up, half-written letters to his cousin lie around his mattress beside empty canvases and unopened tubes of paint. His phone, annoying him with its buzzing, is left unanswered. Julian's mother comes with food and kind words, but all Julian sees on her face is pity and resentment.

Julian groaned and clutched his stomach as the guilt turned in his gut. Slapping a hand across his own cheek, he tried to break the cycle of those awful memories. He needed to come back to the present. He'd spent too long cooped up inside, unable to do much else but survive through the worst of his depression. Going over it again and again like this wasn't helping.

"It's over, it's over, it's over," he repeated. He doubted the words even as he said them. Yeah, maybe

he had managed to get outside again, even enroll in online courses so he could finish high school. But he couldn't shake the feeling that he was just one small slip away from falling back into the deep pit.

He dipped a wet brush in the dark blue paint, letting it slide across the canvas at an angle. The half-hearted waterfall swirled against the red, turning into whirlpools. Images flashed in Julian's mind like lightning, followed by the thunderclaps of the brush hitting against the canvas. A vision of his mother's brow furrowed in disappointment. His cousin waiting for someone to arrive during visiting hours. His friends wondering why he never returned their calls. Julian pushed them all away with the brush. Pulling pillars of white across the canvas, watching them turn grey, he painted his emptiness. His isolation. His failure.

Julian's stomach tightens as he reads the email over again. A failing grade. One comment, from the faceless online instructor: "Continues to deviate from assignment guidelines." A rush of anger pinches Julian's nose, making his eyes water. He slams the laptop shut, nearly throwing

it against the ground. He catches himself — there was no way he or his mom could afford a new one. Instead Julian just scratches his fingernails against his skin, leaving deep, swelling lines along his forearm. This is useless. He is useless. Maybe he's just not meant to finish school. Maybe he's not meant to be alive at all. Maybe everyone would be better off if he just disappeared.

Julian slammed the brush into a dollop of yellow, streaking lines like fire across the painting. His stomach was so tight he was starting to feel sick, but he couldn't stop now. He had to finish. He took the brush in his fingers and ran a fingernail along the edge, splattering black across the canvas. He let himself fall into those black holes amidst the chaos of colour. Their cool invitation reminded him of how comforting it would be to curl back up in bed, to cocoon again.

With a sigh, Julian stepped back. He put the brush behind his ear and took in the artwork. The colours on the canvas bled into one another, a mess in all directions. The brushstrokes told a story of his fears and failures — a rainbow of regret. Hands shaking,

Julian reached for another sip of water. He spit it out, feeling bits of acrylic on his tongue, realizing he had mistakenly grabbed the water for his paints. Much of the mess sprayed onto his hands. Wiping his lips, Julian was struck with a spark of inspiration and went for the brush again.

He traced the brush against his hand, up his arm. The muddy water mapped across the veins running along his wrists and back down to the tips of his fingers. The copper tone was sweet on his skin. He pushed his hand onto the canvas, leaving his mark on the piece. Stepping back, he took a moment to admire the small handprint among the mess of colour and memory.

Julian managed to make his way to the bathroom. He ran warm water over his skin. As he washed away the acrylic flecks, he glanced up and caught his image in the mirror. Julian studied the traces of his mother along the edges of eyes, the dimples in his cheeks, the curve of his round, broad face. But there was something else to the reflection, something he couldn't name, that marked him as the son of a father he could

barely remember. Julian tried to peer through the layers, hoping he might find something that was just *him*. With a sigh, he gave up and went back to bed. “It’s over, it’s over, it’s over,” he whispered, trying to mean it this time.